

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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were bad; merchants and mechanics had not yet arrived. A dense and heavy forest of hard, huge trees covered the land, to be felled and cleared away before the plow of the farmer could turn up the genial soil. Pestilential fevers racked the nerves and prostrated the vigor of the stoutest.

"Though the noblest timber trees for their buildings existed in troublesome abundance, sawmills had not then been erected. Though their lands produced the finest of wheat whenever it could be sown, it cost more than its market price to take it to the distant grist mills to be ground.

"Before the War of 1812 but few settlers had located in Orleans County.

"From Canandaigua to Lewiston, along the Ridge Road, and from the mouth of Oak Orchard Creek, along an Indian Trail to Batavia, the trees had principally been cut wide enough for a highway. A few log cabins had been erected, and the sturdy emigrants had begun by felling the trees to open little patches of cleared land around their dwellings to form the nucleus of their farms.

"War was declared. The regular pursuits of peaceful industry were broken up. The settler was summoned to become a soldier, and at the call of his country, at times almost every able-bodied man in the settlement was away in the ranks of the army, leaving their scattered, unprotected families, to risk the chances of hostile forays of the enemy, often threatened from the west along the lake. The courage and spirit of the women of those days was equal to the best examples to be found in America border warfare. Neither the frightful rumors of the massacre of their husbands and brothers in the fight, or the terrible announcements that the Indians, with murder and pillage, were sweeping down the Ridge Road or coming up the Creek, could drive them to abandon the homes they had chosen in the woods.

"Perhaps the gloomiest time in the experience of the pioneers was during and after the war, before the commencement of work on the Erie Canal. Considerable wheat was annually grown, but beyond what the farmer wanted for his own consumption it was of little value, bearing a nominal price of about twenty-five cents a bushel.

"A kind of crude potash, made by leaching wood ashes, and known as 'black salts,' was almost the only product which brought money, and became, in fact, almost a lawful tender for value in trade, and this had to be taken to market for miles upon ox sleds or hand sleds, or on the backs of the makers, through woods and swamps, following a line of marked trees. After the war, came the memorable cold seasons of 1816-17. About these years, a contemporary says, 'from half to two-thirds of all the people were down sick in the summer time.'

"It has been playfully said that you may place a Yankee in the woods with an ax, an augur and a knife, his only tools, and with the trees his only material for use, and he will build a palace. The first log houses built in the county, proved almost literally the truth of this remark. They were the dwelling places of the best families in the land, made by their owners, where the latch string was always out at the call of the stranger, and the best of their plain and scanty store was always generously shared with the weary and destitute, whoever he might be.

"The builders and occupants of those rude tenements were then probably poor, as can well be imagined, sick and suffering, with none of the luxuries, and few even of the necessaries of their former experience, but withal contented and happy.

"The policy of the Holland Land Company was to get their lands taken up and occupied as fast as possible. With this in view they gave contracts for deeds of conveyance on payment of a small portion of the purchase money, giving the purchaser some years of credit in which to pay the residue. This policy brought in settlers, and the liberality of the company in extending contracts where prompt payment could not be made, kept them on their lots.

"Since the first tree fell here under the ax of the white man, the triumphs of steam power have appeared. By help of this tremendous agent, a voyage across the Atlantic, which took the May Flower months to accomplish, is now made in a week. A trip to Boston, which once cost these pioneers a month to perform, is now the business of a day. Steam drives our mills, carries our burdens, plows our fields, warms our houses, digs our canals, and furnishes a motive power, to effect the mightiest and minutest work attempted by the ingenuity of man.

"Excelsior! Higher! is the motto of our noble Empire State, and 'Forward' is the cry of encouragement with which Young America stimulates its ardor in the race for victory."

The following article consists of excerpts from a speech given by Judge Arad Thomas to the Orleans County Pioneer Association on Sept. 10, 1859. I like the first hand account of our locale in this manner which gives a true sense of what life must have been like for our early settlers in this area.

"The discovery of America, the invention of printing, and the Protestant Reformation had roused the minds of the most intelligent nations of the world to a more exalted sense of the value of liberty, and a keen perception of those natural and inalienable rights of conscience which form the richest possession of a free people. Persecuted for conscience sake in their native country, England, they had borne for years the cruel oppression which religious intolerance and political tyranny forced upon them there, with Christian endurance, till overcome by suffering too grievous to be born, and hopeless of relief, they solemnly withdrew from their natural church and from the land of their birth.

"Soon after the Revolutionary war had ended, the settlements in New England were extended over the principal part of those States suitable for tillage. A large majority of the first settlers of Orleans County were either emigrants from New England, or descended from the Puritan stock, who traced their origin back to those who, in December, 1620, landed from the May Flower upon Plymouth Rock. It is admitted that as a class they were poor but honest, possessing strong moral convictions, of effective force of intellect and will, they determined to plant and grow up the institutions of religion, order and civilization in this wilderness, such as prevailed in their New England homes. Such views, habits and purposes, characterized the emigrants who first settled Western New York.

"The Holland Land Company had purchased the Western part of the State of New York, bounded on the east by a line extending north from Pennsylvania to Lake Ontario, known as the Transit Line.

"Before the last war with great Britain, a portion of this tract which has been distinguished as the Holland Purchase, had been surveyed by the Company and offered for sale to settlers. The wonderful fertility of the Genesee country had been reported abroad, and before the war (1812) a few emigrants had begun to make their homes among the heavy forests which covered this country, some of whom had located themselves in what is now Orleans County.

"The possibility of such a work as the Erie Canal had not then entered the great mind of Dewitt Clinton, or been dreamed of even by the great men of that day.

"The most favorable means ... for communicating with the old settlements at the east, was by wagons on the highways, or boats down the Mohawk or St. Lawrence. They expected to overcome the formidable obstacles before them by their own strong arms and stout hearts. They knew that wealth was in their farms, not perhaps in the shape of golden nuggets, such as fire the imagination of emigrants to Pike's Peak, or the other El Dorados of the West, but in the golden produce of well tilled fields, which honest hard work was sure to raise in abundance in time to come, and they meant to have it.

"Railroads and telegraphs have made communication easy and rapid between places most distant, and modern improvements in the economy and arts of domestic life are such, that most of the necessaries and comforts enjoyed by residents in older towns can readily be procured everywhere.

"Indeed, we who have not learned by experience, can hardly imagine the obstacles and difficulties to be surmounted by the first settlers of Orleans County. Roads from Albany, westward,