

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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JOHN CUNNEEN 1848-1907

On Friday evening, June 10, during the Albion Strawberry Festival at 6:00 P.M., an historic marker honoring John Cunneen will be dedicated in front of the Sheriff's Office. This is located on Platt Street directly across the street from the Orleans County Jail. In July 1989 after the former Free Methodist Parsonage had been purchased by the county and renovated into office space, it was officially named Cunneen Hall by the Legislature. This name was selected because John Cunneen is one of only two people from Orleans County to ever be elected to a State office by statewide vote. The other was Sanford E. Church for Lt. Governor in the 1860's.

This is Mr. Cunneen's story: John Cunneen was born near Ennis, Ireland, to Daniel and Rachelle Scanlan Cunneen May 18, 1848. His family lived in a cottage of sunbaked brick with a thatched roof. He was next to the eldest of seven sons, all named for the apostles. His father recognized that John had potential and felt he would have a better opportunity to achieve success in life if he were sent to America. In 1860, at the age of twelve, he booked passage alone on an ocean sailing vessel where he spent most of the trip huddled against a smokestack for warmth. He arrived in the port of New York with \$40.00 and his earthly possessions tied up in a knapsack. From there he took a train to Albany and made the rest of his trip by packet boat to Albion where he was met by a cousin named Scanlan. For the next three years he worked on a farm for his room and board and attended a district school. He later attended the old Albion Academy under Prof. Morehouse. While working on the farm he became interested in carpentry and for a few years worked at that trade. Yet, at the same time continued his quest for knowledge and self-betterment. During the early 1870's he began the study of law under John H. White and Judge Sanford W. Church in Albion. While studying for the bar in 1873, he taught at the District No. 5 Cobblestone School in Childs where he was paid \$3.50 per week. He walked from Albion to Childs every day, three miles each way. Being extremely poor at the time he kept bachelor's quarters in a room where he fixed his own meals. In 1876 he married Elizabeth Bass, a local girl, after having been engaged to her for several years. They had one daughter, Charlotte, who married John M. Hackett. They had no children. Mrs. Charlotte Cunneen Hackett died in 1971.

In 1874, John Cunneen was admitted to the Bar at Rochester and at once commenced the practice of law in Albion. He was Clerk of the Board of Supervisors from 1876 through 1880. He made two unsuccessful attempts to be elected Orleans County District Attorney. He also established a newspaper in Albion called the Weekly News. He also served on the Albion Board of Education for eight years. He helped organize the Orleans County Bar Association and served as its first secretary. His ability as an attorney marked him as one of the best trial lawyers in western New York. He remained in practice in Albion until 1893 when he had an opportunity to join a law firm in Buffalo.



When the firm failed, he opened his own law office employing several other lawyers. While in Buffalo, he became closely associated with Grover Cleveland and served in his campaign for re-election in 1892. In 1895-96 Mr. Cunneen served as Secretary of the State Democrat Committee.

In 1900, 1901 and 1902, Mr. Cunneen was chairman of the Erie County Democratic Party. In the fall of 1902 he was elected Attorney General of New York State and served on term from Jan. 1, 1903 to Dec. 31, 1904. He was defeated for his second bid to office.

He had a flair for business and finance which led him, in time, to become one of the founders of a bank that became the forerunner of today's Marine Midland Bank in Buffalo.

On Feb. 21, 1907, John Cunneen died of Lobar Pneumonia. He was buried in old St. Joseph's Cemetery, formerly known as Holy Cross, on Brown Road north of Albion, but when the new St. Joseph's Cemetery on East Avenue was opened in 1920 he was removed to the new cemetery. The Cunneen lot is the very first one on the right as you enter the cemetery. It is marked with a large black granite monument with the big letters, CUNNEEN. In small letters at the base it states "May his soul rest in peace." John's father was surely right that America is indeed the land of opportunity.

The historic marker which will be placed by Cunneen Hall has been jointly paid for by the Orleans County Historical Association and the Orleans County Department Of History. It states:

JOHN CUNNEEN 1848-1907
IRISH IMMIGRANT AT AGE 12
TEACHER, LAWYER, PUBLISHER
ACTIVE IN DEMOCRAT POLITICS
ELECTED N.Y.S. ATTORNEY GEN.
SERVED ONE TERM 1903-1904