

Doughnuts

(Zattu Cushing, Mosely Abell, and other early Fredonians)

*By Douglas Shepard
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Last year, the *Dunkirk Evening Observer* ran an interesting feature story on its “Living” page about doughnuts and their history.

The article pointed out that, originally, the doughnut was a round ball of leftover bread dough, not unlike a large nut, therefore, “dough nut.” The article went on to say that “most historians agree the doughnut did not become ‘holey’ until **1847** in Camden, Maine, when a 15-year old baker’s apprentice named **Hanson Gregory** suggested punching out the center so the doughnut would cook evenly throughout.”

Not only was that interesting in itself, but it suggested the odd historical fact that what we now call “doughnut holes” are what was originally meant by doughnut. What we would have called our doughnut before **1847** is not clear. Perhaps, “the-part-of-the-doughnut-cut-away?” Perhaps not.

However, reading that account reminded us of our own doughnut-related history, which has to do with those important early settlers **Zattu Cushing** and **Moseley W. Abell**.

We have three versions of the story, the first told by **O.W. Johnson** in a talk he gave on January 8, **1864** to the Fredonia Scientific and Historical Association. It was a memoir of **Zattu Cushing**, which he began with a disclaimer, wishing others who had known **Cushing** personally might have taken up the task. However, “long acquaintance and friendship with members of his family, and particularly with one who had so many of his qualities of head and heart, and who now sleeps beside his father in our old burying-ground” provided the details used in the talk.

***Judge Cushing** served as private in the battle of Buffalo. He was deeply indignant at the result, as he believed the enemy would have been repulsed if we had had a competent commanding officer. He went to Buffalo on horseback, and before leaving, filled his portmanteau with provisions, which he had no occasion to use. On his return, he found the family of **Moseley W. Abell** and others who had fled from Buffalo, in the wilderness, almost famished. He thought of his well-filled portmanteau. The children then, since grown to gray-headed men and women, relate now the relish with which they ate the food the judge gave them.*

The Battle of Buffalo [actually, the Battle of Black Rock] took place on December 30, **1813** when the British retaliated for our gratuitous burning of Newark [now Niagara-on-the-Lake]. The Fredonia contingent was part of the 400-man militia unit of whom only 200 responded to the call in early December **1813**. Formed into four companies, they marched to Buffalo, arriving on the **29th**. According to *Detailed Reports of the War of 1812 [1815]*, **Col. M'Mahan's** troops were standing in reserve on the 30th when the British attack on Black Rock began. They were ordered

to attack the enemy's left flank but panic had caused such a thinning of the ranks that the Colonel was unable to rally them, much to the disgust of **General Hall**, author of the report.

The "**Military History**" chapter of **Downs' History of Chautauqua County** gives a somewhat different picture.

*On the night of December 30 they [the Chautauqua militia contingent] were paraded in front of **Pomeroy's Tavern**, in Buffalo, where they remained the entire night, expecting every moment an order to move. The battle of Black Rock, on the 30th, and the burning of Buffalo on the 31st, left the army in a sad condition. Two hundred of the Chautauqua men were there, and a good degree of enthusiasm existed among them until the march from Buffalo to Black Rock on the day of battle. **General Hall** had been at the front during early morning directing the movements of the troop, but later on was returning with his staff to Buffalo as the Chautauqua regiment was on its way to the scene of action. The regiment was halted, and the general and **Colonel McMahan** in an undertone held a consultation, which was not understood by the men, but on leaving, the general said sufficiently loud to be heard by the whole regiment, 'Colonel, do your duty, but if you must retreat, the rendezvous is at **Miller's**.' This important speech of **General Hall**, with his hurried movement away, lost him the confidence of the Chautauqua men. It was evident to them that the contest was hopeless, their enthusiasm went out at once and they moved on mechanically rather than with zeal and ardor. They were posted in the rear of a battery, but as in the case of those preceding them, they were soon routed and fled to the woods in the rear of the battery... Of the battle of Black Rock, participants have said that there as little military knowledge or skill manifest on the part of the commanding officer... It was said that the Chautauqua troops behaved admirably until overcome by overwhelming numbers, but the British advanced with little opposition and the next day burned the village of Buffalo and destroyed the log quarters of the American troops, leaving most of them without shelter of any kind. A large proportion of the Chautauqua men returned home, some of them on furlough, but most of them without leave.*

Obviously there had been great confusion on the battlefield and in the debate that followed over the years as to what actually happened and why. Nevertheless, if **O.W. Johnson's** account is correct, then we have the odd picture of **Zattu Cushing**, a 43-year old private in the local militia riding, not marching, to battle with a portmanteau filled with provisions. Now, we must not imagine him astride his horse carrying a large suitcase. In those days, "portmanteau" meant a leather carry-all specifically designed for horseback. Moreover, there is corroborating evidence for the account as given by **Johnson**.

According to **Louis McKinstry**, in a historical talk he gave in **1910**, a **Mrs. Avery** of Dunkirk, **Moseley W. Abell's** granddaughter, told the family story:

*That when her grandfather fled from the burning city of Buffalo in **1813**, the family stopped with other refugees at Silver Creek, all very hungry. A man came in with a big bag of doughnuts and left the bag on the table and went out without introducing himself. Afterward when they lived in Fredonia, the first Sunday they went to the Baptist Church. **Judge Cushing** came in and **Mrs. Abell** whispered to her husband, "That's the man who brought us the doughnuts."*

The picture that emerges from all this makes some sense. **Cushing** had served on the 30th and 31st, retreating with the others when it became necessary. **Abell** packed up and fled on the 31st.

Moseley Abell, who was born on February 24, **1781**, had moved from Bennington, VT to Buffalo in **1811** where he had kept an inn at the corner of Main and Seneca Streets. The British burned the building along with many others on December 31, **1813**.

Abell left, probably in a large sleigh, with his wife and three young daughters as well as any of their household goods that they could carry. Some families fled east and south toward Batavia, but **Abell** and others chose to go west. They crossed the Cattaraugus Creek, and, **Mrs. Avery** said, stopped along with other refugee families at a tavern in Silver Creek.

Ordinarily, in most travelers' accounts, stopping at an inn or tavern in that vicinity usually meant **Mack's** tavern near the mouth of the creek where he had also taken over the ferry that made crossing a little less dangerous.

However, because **Mrs. Avery**, in repeating this anecdote, which had obviously been passed down through the family, specified Silver Creek, the location was probably **John Howard's** tavern that was meant.

From other contemporary accounts, we can be fairly sure that the **Abells** took at least one day or perhaps two to reach Silver Creek, so he and his family and the other refugees would be huddled together at the inn probably on January 2nd, **1814**.

The **Abells** went on the next day, finally reaching Mayville, and that might have been the end of it. However, **Moseley Abell's** father, **Thomas**, with another son named **Thomas G. Abell**, came to Fredonia from Vermont in **1814** and in May the father bought **Hezekiah Barker's** inn on today's Park Place. By the fall of **1814** he had replaced it with a larger framed building. Early in October the elder **Thomas Abell** died, and the property was taken over by his sons, **Thomas** and **Moseley W. Abell**. Probably because of that, **Moseley** and his family moved to Fredonia in early **1815**.

On their first Sunday in their new home, they attended services at the Baptist Church, which, in **1815**, would have meant the one-room schoolhouse on the Common. It was situated about where Church Street crosses in front of Village Hall. Of course, at the time, Village Hall was not there nor was the Academy building that preceded it. No church buildings yet (and no Church Street), only **Abell's** new inn on one side of the Common and, **Hezekiah Barker's** new framed house where the Post Office is today.

The **Abells** had settled into their seats in preparation for the service when in walked a man that they later learned was **Judge Zattu Cushing** and founder of the Fredonia Baptist Society. At which point **Mrs. Abell** leaned across to her husband (or daughter) and whispered "that's the man who brought us the doughnuts."

A few corrections need to be suggested before we leave this interesting event. **Moseley Abell** was not our first hotel keeper. That distinction probably belongs to **Thomas McClintock** whose log cabin just off Water Street served as an early inn. **Hezekiah Barker** replaced **McClintock** there and then built the inn facing the Common that **Thomas Abell** took over. So **Moseley W. Abell** was in an important line of descent, but not the first.

Mrs. Abell may well have leaned over and whispered to her husband across the heads of all three daughters, a natural enough scenario, so that her remarks would have been aimed at her husband and heard by their daughters.

The doughnuts that **Cushing** left could not have been “fresh fried” on January 1st or 2nd if he had brought them from home on December 29th in his portmanteau. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine him stopping on his way out of burning Buffalo to pick up a sackful. Of course, if the travelers were as distraught, tired and hungry as we can envision them being, the stalest of doughnuts would no doubt have tasted delicious.

Leaving all that aside, it is a pleasant picture – in the midst of wartime misery – of great generosity that really asked no thanks. We should give thanks, however, for such forebears, for **Johnson** and **McKinstry** who saved that bit of history for us, and for the *Observer* article that taught us just what is was **Cushing** offered and the **Abells** ate – fried dough nuts, the shape of things to come.