

George A. French
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2013

The anti-slavery activity of Dunkirk's George A. **French** was cited in the *Jamestown Morning Post* July 18, 1923 in a story by Palmer K. **Shankland**. George A. **French**, son of Asa and Jane **French**, was born in Massachusetts in August 1798. The family moved to Fredonia by 1810. The Pomfret census for that year lists "A. **French**" in a family of four: one male 10 to 15, one male 16 to 25, one male 26 to 44, and one female 26 to 44. The other boy is probably the Asa **French** who died on 1 March 1826, age 25.

Young's *History* (p.471) notes that Asa **French** was the first blacksmith in the village with his home and shop on the corner of today's West Main and Chestnut streets across from Richard **Williams'** inn. Jane died on 14 January 1813, age 41, and Asa promptly married Mary **Spencer** on 28 March of that year.

Whether it was a motivating factor or not, after Jane died in 1813, Asa gave up the West Hill location and moved to Sheridan. In 1814 he was in the east part of 61-6-11 (at Scott's Creek?) and in 1815 he had 100 acres in the southwest part of 54-6-11. The size of his parcel suggests he was farming, perhaps combining it with blacksmithing.

Although their property was in Sheridan, Asa and Mary continued as members of the Fredonia Congregational church, which changed to Presbyterian in 1817, at which point church discipline caught up with him. In October 1817 a pre-trial hearing was held by the Session to consider charges against Asa **French** for behavior and acts during the previous summer and fall. Specifically, he was charged with "1st an intemperate use of ardent spirits. 2nd an attempt to secure in a clandestine manner a deed of a certain building lot in the Village of Fredonia which was in the possession of James **Mullett**, Esq. 3rd Absenting himself from publick worship on the Sabbath and at other seasons. Names of the witnesses Henry **Abel**, Asa **Seymour**, Richard **Williams**, Mabel **How**, Thomas **Abel**." (It is significant that at least two of the witnesses against him had been neighbors, **Williams**, on the corner of Chestnut Street, and **Seymour**, just off Main Street on Seymour Street.)

In December Asa appeared before the group and made his confession. However, in August 1818 he again was charged and again appeared, confessing to intemperance and absence from Public Worship. In December 1818, when the same charges were raised again but without **French's** answering to them, the Session voted to have him removed. When nothing was heard from him by May 1819, the Session voted to notify the Presbytery in Buffalo. Once their reply was received, the Session met on 21 September 1819 and voted to excommunicate him.

At this point, George **French** was 21 and his younger brother 18. One would predict that with that kind of family background, their future looked less than promising. For George, that was far from the case. The assessment rolls show Asa **French** still in Sheridan with some 95 acres in 1819, reduced to 35 acres in 1820 when George is listed with the other 35 acres on Lot 54. By 1821 Asa's name disappears from all records and George has all 70 acres on Lot 54, which continues into 1826.

In addition to farming, George must have worked on or for a merchant during this period since he had enough experience to be able to join with young Walter **Smith** in opening a store in Sinclairville in 1824. **Smith**, then just 24, had been apprenticed to Jacob **TenEyck** in Cazenovia in 1815 and proved so able that **TenEyck** bankrolled him when he opened a store of his own in Fredonia in 1819, when Smith was all of 19 years old. (**Smith** had purchased the store and ashery of Joseph and Ralph **Plumb**, who had gone bankrupt.) In 1825, the Baptist minister Joy

Handy joined them as **French, Handy & Co.** (The “& Co.” was **Walter Smith**.) That partnership was dissolved in 1828.

Although the Sinclairville store was robbed in 1825, George A. **French** must have done well enough that on 23 May 1826 he and **Walter Smith** announced their new partnership in a store in Dunkirk. The assessment roll for 1827 shows George A. **French** with properties listed as 9 & 10 Front Street (1/3 acre), 1 Buffalo Street (1/4 acre), and 24 Front Street (1/16 acre). It seems to be the 1 Buffalo Street (Washington Avenue) location that was **French's** Dunkirk home, noted only as “house” or “Dwelling” in the assessment rolls through 1844. In 1850 it is referred to in parentheses as the **Pemberton House**.

George A. **French** was elected Town Supervisor in 1830 through 1833. On 14 November 1831 **French's** wife, **Sophia Risley**, died and on 25 December 1832 he married Mrs. **Sally (Hudson) Day** of Dunkirk. She had been a founding member of the Dunkirk Presbyterian Church in 1830. In 1834 he joined. In 1835 he was one of twelve leading citizens who organized the Dunkirk Academy, which opened on 23 September with George A. **French** as one of the three Trustees.

The village of Dunkirk was incorporated in 1837 with **Walter Smith** as its first president. However, the panic of 1837 devastated the village's economy, with many businesses forced into foreclosure. It was in May of 1837 that “George A. **French & Co.**” announced themselves as successors to “**J. Beggs & Co.**” which probably included the docks at the foot of Buffalo Street and Center Street.

In 1838 **French** was elected to the NY State Assembly and again in 1840 and 1841. The assessment rolls continue to show him as a prosperous property owner in addition to the important local power he had become. That was his status in September 1851, when he is recorded as receiving a telegraph message from **Silas Shearman**, an active member of the Underground Railroad in Jamestown, requesting urgent help in retrieving a re-captured refugee slave. The published account of this incident referred to **French** as “a prominent and zealous Abolitionist.” **Shearman** knew that “George A. **French** would arouse the friends of anti-slavery in the vicinity of Dunkirk and ... would give him every possible assistance.” If it were not for this one recorded episode, we would have little record that **French** had been anything but a popular, successful local businessman.

French's second wife, **Sally**, had died on 8 March 1851 some months before the dramatic incidents described. On 8 January 1852 he married **Sarah A. Stillman** of Wethersfield CT, possibly related to **The Rev. Timothy Stillman** of the Dunkirk Presbyterian Church. For some reason, **French** apparently sold his properties. His name disappears from the assessment rolls, although he is still in Dunkirk at the time of the 1860 Census. He died in Fredonia on 29 January 1865 and was buried in Forest Hill Cemetery.

The record of George A. **French's** children is not entirely clear, although there are records for at least four. The 1850 Census, the first to list all family members' names, shows a daughter, **Ann**, eight years old. The family is omitted from the 1855 Census for some reason and there is no later mention of **Ann** in any of the public records.

The Fredonia Censor of 6 January 1841 reported that **Delia French** “daughter of George A. **French**,” married **Silas Seymour** on 23 December 1840. **Francis A. French** married **Juliett Spencer** on 11 September 1843, according to *The Fredonia Censor* of 20 September 1843. According to his obituary in *The Fredonia Censor* of 13 November 1895, it was **Francis** who built and occupied the house at 504 Central Avenue. **Walter S. French** (1826-1894) is listed in the Forest Hill Cemetery records as a son of **Sophia (Risley)** and **George A. French**.

