

The **Harts** and **Starrs** of Fredonia
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2012

Aaron **Hart**, who had been a Private in the Revolutionary War, married Annice **Austin** in Barkhamsted CT on 3 December 1795. They had three sons: William **Austin Hart**, born 13 January 1797; Salmon **Hart**, born 19 September 1807; and Aaron H. **Hart**, born 19 September 1810. The family moved about 1819 to Bristol, Ontario County, NY, while William, who had been apprenticed to a gunsmith, came on to Fredonia (he had turned 21) “with his trade, rifle and pack — his fortune — and commenced business in a small way,” according to the account in his obituary.

By December of 1819 he had set up his gun shop in the newly built Cascade Hamlet, a large U-shaped building of two stories over a basement, at today’s *100 West Main Street*. His shop was at the east end of the bottom of the “U” facing West Main Street on the second floor. He was the first occupant, advertising his gunsmith business on 24 December 1819. On 11 November 1820 he advertised for an apprentice gunsmith whom he soon took on. That was young Levi **Risley**, who remained with **Hart** for some two or three years. **Risley** later wrote that he, **Risley**, “went out of business” in 1823 “about the time that old flint gunlock did” and went to work as a store clerk in Sinclairville.

Hart had married Mary Ann **Summerton** of Caledonia Springs, in Sempronius NY on 22 January 1821. (There were apartments for the craftsmen and their families in the wings of the U-shaped building at the Cascade Hamlet in Fredonia.) On 30 October 1821 he advertised for a good journeyman gunsmith, and in 1822 he added stove and tinsmith departments to his business.

In March 1823 nine occupants joined together as the Cascade Hamlet Mechanic Society with a Constitution and By-Laws published in *The Fredonia Censor* of 18 March 1823. The list is headed by the name of the builder followed by that of “William **Hart**, Gunsmith.” However, the Hamlet did not succeed and on 11 October 1823 **Hart** bought an L-shaped lot lying next to and behind the grist mill at today’s *89 West Main Street*. By 1825 he was in partnership with Seth **Parker**, which lasted until March 1827.

It was in July 1825 that **Hart** first experimented with the natural gas which bubbled up from the bottom of Canadaway Creek. An account of this venture was written many years later by Joseph **Holmes**, a student at the Fredonia Academy who was rooming with the **Hart** family at the time. As **Holmes** described it, **Hart** drilled a hole in the bottom of a washtub upended, inserted a rifle barrel in it and set the contraption at the edge of the creek. When enough gas had accumulated, he held a flame to the end of the rifle barrel and the first continuous light from natural gas in Fredonia made its appearance.

Ms. Lois **Barris** wrote a very full account of the natural gas and petroleum pioneers here and in Pennsylvania entitled “The Fredonia Gas Light and Water Works Company,” in which she summarized **Hart’s** subsequent actions: “Mr. **Hart** made three attempts at drilling — he left

a broken drill in one shallow hole and abandoned a second site at a depth of forty feet because of the small volume of gas found. In his third attempt, Mr. **Hart** found a good flow of gas at seventy feet. He then constructed a crude gasometer, covering it with a rough shed and proceeded to pipe and market the first natural gas sold in this country." *The Fredonia Censor* of 31 August 1825 wondered breathlessly, "What Village can compare with Fredonia? There is now in this village 2 stores [one a grocery] 2 shops and one mill that are every evening lighted up with as brilliant gas lights as are to be found in an[y] city in this or any other country. . . . The buildings which are now lighted have been literally thronged for several evenings past." (The first building to receive the experimental natural gas light was said to have been at today's 32 *West Main Street*.)

On 20 January 1827 **Hart** received what was described as the first U.S. Patent for a percussion lock to replace the old flintlock firing mechanism, and on 28 August he was able to advertise that he had percussion rifles and pistols at his shop. In 1829 he took his brother Salmon **Hart** into partnership (Salmon had turned 21) in what was now a gun and stove shop, and a tin, copper and sheet iron manufactory. Late in that same year he drilled for gas near Portland Harbor (Barcelona) and in 1830 piped the gas to the new lighthouse there.

In 1831 he sold an undivided half interest in the tin shop to Salmon, who had married Mary Ann (Marianne) **Starr**, daughter of Jonah and Phebe **Starr** of Fredonia. In 1832 they added younger brother Aaron H. **Hart** to the company, he having turned 21. By 1833, their parents, Aaron and Annis **Hart** had moved to Fredonia, buying two lots from William on 29 January 1833.

Although they advertised for an apprentice to the tinning business, as William **Hart's** obituary mentioned, he began to have unspecified health problems. As a consequence, on 1 March 1834 the partnership was dissolved and he turned to gardening in an attempt to regain his health. By September of 1834 he had begun advertising "**Hart's** Nursery," with fruit trees for sale, but his inventive bent continued. He devised a "new improved parlor organ," which was praised by a local music teacher. Not coincidentally, in March 1835 Salmon **Hart** added musical instruments to his gunsmith business. In February 1837, Jesse H. **Starr**, Salmon's brother-in-law, bought into the business, where he had been working for several years. It was advertised as "the old Gun Shop, one door east of E. **Risley** & Co.'s Cash Store. The co-partnership was dissolved on 22 June 1841. **Starr** suffered from tuberculosis. He died in June 1842, shortly after his namesake, Jesse **Kingsley Starr**, was born to his nephew Joseph **Starr** and Joseph's wife, Persis **Kingsley** on 15 February 1842. **Starr's** sister, Mary Ann, Salmon's wife, had died on 14 January 1839, leaving him with an infant son. Salmon then married Mary Augustus **Reddington** of Geneva NY.

William **Hart** continued to expand his nursery along Canadaway Creek leading down along today's **Hart** Street to the water's edge, turning it into **Hart's** Pleasure Garden. There were "Flower Beds, Arbors and Pleasant Walks" and "during the season "the Garden will occasionally be illuminated, and a grand gala and pyrotechnical entertainment will be given. . . . The bars [non-alcoholic] will be stored at all times with refreshments in all of their seasonable varieties. The Bath House will be open every Saturday, until the hot season commences, when it will be open every day (Sunday excepted) with hot, cold and shower baths."

That was from a May 1837 article. On 21 June *The Fredonia Censor* elaborated. “Mr. **Hart** has for three years been at constant expense in fitting up, enlarging, beautifying and storing with a great variety of flowers, shrubbery and fruit trees, the spot of ground most beautifully located upon the borders of the stream. . . assisted by a gardener who has had charge of some of the most noted private gardens in Great Britain. . . . In a sequestered part of the garden, embowered in shrubbery, is a Bathing House. . . in another part he has a pleasant little building well stored with confectionary, cooling and pleasant drinks. . . and delicious fruits in their season. He will occasionally get up a display of Fire Works, having with him Mr. **Brown**, an experienced hand at the business.”

On 22 June 1837 he opened again for the season. “The garden was beautifully illuminated with transparencies of the most picturesque appearance — the walks were in charming order — the display of fireworks was fully successful and gratifying in the extreme — the dessert was of the most palatable kind, and the balloon ascension was entirely anti-Buffalo in its character, inasmuch as it rose majestically into its destined element, and gave the most lively satisfaction.” Next to follow was the 4th of July.

That celebration at **Hart’s** Garden included “Fire Works and a Fire Balloon.” Also, “Signal Rockets will be fired during the evening” The fireworks display was called “Diamonds & Stars, . . .occupying a surface of upwards of 700 feet of fire, and ending with a Feudejoie of 40 guns of heavy caliber, and a grand flight of 100 ROCKETS. 2. A Brilliant Chinese Fountain ending with a mine of Serpents. 3. A beautiful Constellation of fixed pointed Stars ending with the explosion of a MAGAZINE OF STARS. 4. A splendid Sun, with flaming center and double glory representing the crimson beauty of the Rising Sun, gradually changing to meridian splendor, ending with reports. 5. Five Pound Rockets, with variegated Stars. 6. A FLYING DRAGON Will cross the Garden four times.

7. A Caduceus Rocket, forming in its ascent the caduceus of Mercury, the God of flight, After which there will be an intermission of half an hour, during which time a number of Rockets with Stars, Gold Rain, Serpents, and Blazing Meteors, will be fired. 8. The inflation and ascension of the largest transparent fire BALLOON ever exhibited in this country, which will carry up with it a novel display of Fire Works, with a Magazine of Stars and Serpents attached, which will explode with the force of a six pounder, filling the heavens with its report and fire.” In an addition to the account, “N.B. A few ROCKETS on hand, and for sale at the Garden.” (Mr. **Brown** was a busy man.)

Although the Pleasure Garden was an obvious success, by October 1837 **Hart** was ready to move on, as *The Fredonia Censor* of 11 October commented, “to locate where his exertions and capabilities will be likely to meet with a more ample reward.” **Hart** indicated that he would keep the Fredonia garden and planned “eventually to make this place his permanent residence,” something he never did. With his family he relocated to Buffalo, where he rented a large estate and opened it as a Pleasure Garden that included a “Circular Rail-Road.” The mansion on the grounds served as a restaurant and tea room, and as a genteel boarding house. The 1850 Census shows him in Buffalo, Ward 5, with his wife, Mary Ann, daughter Ellen, son Austin S. and Austin’s wife Anne.

According to his obituary, when oil was discovered in Pennsylvania in 1859, **Hart** soon became involved. However, very few of the earliest lease-holders can be identified. The only evidence we have is the obituary statement that “when the first discoveries of petroleum were made, he spent more than a year in the oil regions, and by judicious investments and the energetic extension of his business, laid the basis of a large fortune.” Thereafter, he continued to reside in Buffalo until his death on 9 August 1865.

His brother Salmon had continued in business in Fredonia. On 23 April 1853, Salmon’s second wife died and on 7 February he married Helen L. **Wilder** of Canandagua NY. The 1855 Census lists the family as Salmon **Hart**, 47, merchant; Helen L., 25; son Walter J., 13; son Frederick, 2; daughter Martha R., 8; and boarding next door at Levi R. **Warren’s**, four-year old William B. **Redington**, probably his second wife’s son. Also quite nearby were some of his **Starr** relatives, Sarah J. **Starr** living with her uncle and aunt, the Noah **Whitcombs**, and John F. **Starr**, grocer, with his young family.

Salmon’s former brother-in-law, Joseph **Starr**, had come to Fredonia in 1840 with his brother-in-law, N. H. **Whitcomb**. Together they “built a tannery on the stream [**Wiley** Creek] above the **Wiley** foundry [possibly about *108 West Main Street*].” They were associated some years in the tannery and shoe business; the shoe shop then stood on West Main Street, and in 1884 was “the dwelling of Mrs. **Thatcher**.”

Joseph and Persis **Starr** had two children, George W. who was a partner in the firm of **Frazine & Starr**, dry goods, from 1848 until **Frazine** withdrew in March 1857, and Jesse K. **Starr**, who began with his father as J. **Starr & Son**, grocers, at *32 West Main Street*. The front part of the building is said to have been built by the **Risleys** around 1810-1812. Barna **Robbins** had a store there for some years, and S. M. **Clement** had the building by 1851, adding the back portion. On 28 June 1865 it was sold to the **Starrs**. Jesse K. **Starr** had his grocery there into the 20th century, when he had to declare bankruptcy.

Henry **Leworthy** began as a clerk for J. K. **Starr** in 1878 and returned to occupy the same building from 1919 to 1930, selling antiques and books along with Leroy E. **Winchester**, jeweler.