

Mark Twain and his Family in Fredonia  
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2000

Mark Twain was well-known as a humorous lecturer by the time he first came to Fredonia NY in 1870. When he wrote to Olivia **Langdon**, his bride-to-be, late on the evening of 10 January 1870, he did not yet know he was to be booked to perform at Fredonia on 19 January. However, in a postscript to a letter to her of 14 January, from Troy NY, he wrote, "I talk in Fredonia, N.Y., Jan.19.— (L. **McKinstry**.)" Louis **McKinstry** was the Secretary of the Fredonia Library Association, which brought Mark Twain to Fredonia to speak in the Normal School chapel.

Although he may not have known on 10 January, his booking agent probably did. When the FLA issued its first announcement for their 1869-1870 lecture series in the *Fredonia Censor* of 17 November 1869, the entry for 19 January 1870 read "(Probably) SAMUEL L. **CLEMENS**, (Mark Twain) Subject not announced." When Mark Twain wrote again in the evening of 20 January from Hornellsville NY, he described his travels. "I left Buffalo at 4 PM yesterday, went to Dunkirk, & thence out to Fredonia by horse-car, (3 miles), rattled my lecture through, took horse-car again & just caught 9:45 P.M. train bound east. . . ." He added "We did have a most delightful audience at Fredonia, & I was just as happy as a lord from the first word of the lecture to the last. I thought it was as good a lecture as I ever listened to — but some of the serious passages were impromptu — never been written."

He must have arrived in Dunkirk at 6:20 P.M. on 19 January 1870 according to the Erie R.R. schedule for that date. The horse car was scheduled to leave for Fredonia at 6:30. He spoke, as did the others in the lecture series, in the chapel of the Normal School building. The chapel, which was situated on the first floor at the back of the center section of the main building, could hold an audience of 700 plus another 350 in the balcony. (That was the original building of 1867, which burned down in 1900.) The street railroad line (a single track at the time) ran along Central Avenue to Temple Street, down Temple Street to Church Street and then along Church Street, where it turned to run along the **Taylor** House (Park Place) to West Main Street. Mark Twain probably got off in front of the Normal School on Temple Street.

Albert B. **Paine** in his *Mark Twain* (vol.1, p.424) reports Mark Twain as having told his sister "I went in there by night and out by night so I saw none of it, but I had an intelligent, attractive audience." In other words, when he suggested that his family consider Fredonia as a place to move to, it was based entirely on how his audience had responded to his lecture on "Our Fellow Savages of the Sandwich Islands." Toward the end of 1869 he had begun to think his courtship of Olivia **Langdon** might meet with success, which led to concerns about settling down after marriage. He would have to give up lecturing and find something more permanent as well as some place closer to the **Langdon** home in Elmira NY. An early possibility was Stamford CT but his decision to settle in Buffalo with a part-ownership in the *Buffalo Express* combined with the enthusiastic reception in Fredonia caused him to suggest to his widowed sister that she consider Fredonia. His sister, Pamela (known as Pamela) **Moffett**, and her daughter, Annie, were at the wedding in Elmira, and it was there that he mentioned Fredonia. **Paine** quotes him as having said, "Prospect Fredonia and let me know what it is like. Try to get a place where a good many funerals pass. Ma likes funerals. If you can pick a good funeral corner she will be happy."

On 15 February 1870, according to a letter from Olivia **Clemens** to her mother, Pamela and Annie went to Fredonia "to see if they could find any inducements there that would lead them to move there. . . . We expect them back sometime today [16 February]." After Fredonia, Pamela and Annie returned to St. Louis to prepare for their move. While in Fredonia they had arranged to rent the former Episcopal Rectory, which stood at today's 29 Day Street. (It was available because the Rector, the Rev. Charles **Arey**, was married to Sarah **Crosby Risley** and living at his in-law's home, today's 63 *Risley Street*.) On 21 April 1870, the **Clemens** clan arrived back in western New York. Pamela **Moffett** and her son Sam left the train at Dunkirk while Mrs. **Clemens** went on to Buffalo, where she stayed until 23 May

when she joined her daughter in Fredonia. Pamela's daughter, Annie, remained in St. Louis finishing out her school year and only reached Fredonia in July.

The family remained at *29 Day Street*, probably hoping to buy it, since Trinity Church had offered it for sale at \$5,000 on 24 March 1870. On 23 April 1870, two days after their arrival in Fredonia, Mark Twain wrote to his booking agent that he would be paying \$1,000 or more toward "buying a beautiful home for my mother. . . . my sister paying the five or six thousand." Mark Twain and Livy visited the family on Day Street during the first week in October 1870. On 4 October he wrote to James **Redpath** that they would be returning to Buffalo probably on the 6th. The Day Street property was ultimately sold to a Sarah **Greene** in March 1871, and by late November of that year the **Clemens** family had moved to 65-67 Temple Street. On 8 December Mark Twain lectured here again, not successfully, as he himself admitted. He no doubt saw some of his family at that time, but since he spoke in Warsaw NY on the 7th and Erie PA on the 9th, it could not have been a long visit.

By 4 August 1874, Mark Twain and Livy had left for Fredonia, probably arriving on the 5th. They left Fredonia for Buffalo on 8 August. It was during that visit that he insulted an unnamed banker, an acquaintance of his sister's, behavior that he abjectly apologized for by letter to Pamela, not to the banker. In 1875 Annie **Moffett** married Fredonia surveyor Charles **Webster**. Mark Twain and Livy did not attend the wedding but invited the couple to visit them while on their honeymoon. The newly married **Websters** returned to Fredonia and took up residence at *65-67 Temple Street*. In February 1876 Charles **Webster** bought 36 Central Avenue, and in November all the **Clemens** clan moved there.

Mark Twain's next visit to Fredonia was in early September 1879. (He returned from Europe, landing at New York City on the evening of 3 September.) He was writing from his home in Elmira on 8 September 1879. On the 9th he wrote to his publisher asking about some money due him, adding, "I want to know whether to go and visit my Fredonia folks now or wait. . . ." His next letter from Elmira was dated 15 September 1879 to his sister, commenting twice on the "charming visit." If he waited for a reply from his publisher and took at least one day to travel to Fredonia and another day of travel back, he was probably in Fredonia at some time between the 10th and the 14th of September 1879. In the letter to his sister he says he will send \$100 "to buy the lot with." That must have been the lot at Van Buren Point, a resort area being heavily promoted at the time. Pamela **Moffett** had purchased Lot 9 at Van Buren Point for \$175 on 17 August 1878. Mark Twain bought Lot 10 for \$115 on 16 September. (The Portland assessment rolls' valuations indicate there was no structure on Lot 10 through 1884. H. W. **Rogers** bought Lot 10 on 17 November 1882 and Lot 9 on 10 August 1883. The lot numbers pertained to the Fairbanks map of Van Buren Point, but were changed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Metz map of Van Buren Point. The Metz map remains in effect at this writing.)

Mark Twain's last visit to Fredonia was in 1881. In a letter to Mrs. **Fairbanks**, he said he left Elmira alone on 12 September 1881, stayed overnight in Rochester, and arrived in Fredonia at 3 P.M. on the 13th. The *Censor* of 21 September 1881 reported on his "little visit last week" and mentioned that he had visited the Independent Watch Company, of which he was a "distinguished stockholder." (The factory was at today's *84-96 East Main Street*.) He left Fredonia on the 15th for Buffalo. He never returned.

The rest of the **Clemens** family who were in Fredonia for some period of time included his mother Jane **Clemens**, his sister Pamela **Moffett**, and her two children Samuel E. **Moffett** and Annie **Moffett Webster**. Charles and Annie **Webster** had three children: Alice Jean **Webster**, Samuel Charles **Webster** and William L. **Webster**. Samuel E. **Moffett** graduated from the Fredonia Normal School in 1878 in the Classical Curriculum. Early in 1880, Jane **Clemens** fell ill. Her son Orion **Clemens** and his wife visited from Keokuk IA for several days at the end of January. During the winter of 1879-1880, Sam **Moffett** visited in Atlanta, Virginia and Washington DC, returning to Fredonia in May 1880. He went on to California to attend the University at Berkeley, where he became editor-in-chief of the *Berkleyan*.

In early 1881 Charles L. **Webster** was put in charge of some of Mark Twain's enterprises in New York City and moved his family there. In the first week in March 1882 he stopped in Fredonia for a few days, expecting to have Annie and the children here for the summer. Instead he rented a summer place near New York City, while Orion **Clemens** and his wife moved into 36 Central Avenue, where Jane **Clemens** and Pamela **Moffett** still lived. The visitors were to remain for the summer. A decision was made for Jane **Clemens** to move to Keokuk IA to live with Orion and his wife. Pamela **Moffett** accompanied her and then went on to join Sam **Moffett** in California. In the first week of September 1882, Charles **Webster** returned to Fredonia to see them all off and to arrange for E. D. **Mixer** to rent 36 Central Avenue while the **Websters** continued to live in New York City.

Webster visited briefly on 28 September 1884 while on a book-selling trip. Finally, after some years of increasing difficulty working for Mark Twain, **Webster** and his family decided to return to Fredonia. In December 1887 he made arrangements with Thomas L. **Higgins**, then living at today's 20 Central Avenue, to have an exchange of homes, **Higgins** to take 36 Central Avenue. In February 1888 **Webster** was here to make the necessary arrangements, including extensive remodeling of 20 Central Avenue. In late Spring 1888 the **Webster** family was back in Fredonia staying at the Park House (*1 Park Place*) while the remodeling was being completed. Early in 1889, Charles Webster's parents began building a house on their land at today's 186 Temple St. (They had been living on Spring St. for many years.) It was completed and they moved in early in 1890.

Charles **Webster** died in April 1891. The children, who may have been privately tutored until then, began attending the "**Barker** Street School," District School No.8 on Center Street. The children were Alice Jean, 14; William L., 12; and Samuel C., 6. The three attended in 1892 through 1895. Their grandfather, Luther **Webster** died in 1893. Alice Jean went on to the Fredonia Normal School and graduated in the China Painting curriculum in 1894. In February 1895 Mrs. **Webster** and her son Sam went to Florida, where her mother Pamela **Moffett** was wintering. In July 1896 Orion and his wife visited, returning to Keokuk IA on 22 July. Their nephew Samuel E. **Moffett**, on vacation, also visited for a few days. He may have come after his uncle and aunt had left, because he was returning to his job in New York City on 29 July. In 1897 Alice Jean **Webster** graduated from the Normal School in the College Preparatory Curriculum and went on to Vassar.

Mrs. **Webster**, William, and Sam wintered in New York City in 1900. Her mother, Pamela **Moffett**, who had been visiting them in Fredonia, followed them there. In May 1901 William returned from New York City to put the house in order for the arrival in June of his mother, Alice and Sam. In November 1903 Mrs. **Webster** and Alice traveled to Italy for the winter, returning to Fredonia on 25 May 1904. They planned to return to Italy in the fall. In May 1904 Mrs. **Webster** sold 20 Central Avenue and moved in with her widowed mother-in-law at 186 Temple Street. In January 1906 Mrs. Luther **Webster** died. The property at 186 Temple Street was sold and Annie **Webster** moved away the following April.

There was one other **Clemens** connection after this. On April 18 1907, Clara **Clemens**, Mark Twain's middle daughter, gave a vocal recital in the Chapel of the Fredonia Normal School to good reviews. It was the new building, replacing the one that had burned, but on the old Temple Street site, where her father had begun it all on the evening of 10 January 1870.