

Naming the Village of Fredonia
By Douglas H. Shepard

As a number of writers have pointed out, the term Fredonia seems to have begun with Samuel L. **Mitchill**, legislator, scientist and public gadfly. **Mitchill** was born in New York in August 1764. He studied medicine and law and was a member of the New York State Legislature and of Congress. After the American Revolution, he had become interested in the question of what permanent name the new country should adopt and spoke and wrote about it whenever he found the opportunity.

There was much debate on the subject at the time. Constant repetition has made it so familiar that it is difficult for us now to imagine a time when "the United States of America" were heard merely as descriptive terms, not as the country's name. True, the states were now united and it was that group of united states within the Western Hemisphere, the area known as "America," that was being referred to, but what should its name be?

There were many suggestions, including America, Columbia, United States, United States of America, New England, and Anglo-America.

What **Mitchill** favored was "Fredon" and, when a poetical version was called for, "Fredonia." The earliest recorded argument in its favor is found in a broadside, printed probably in 1803, with the title *Generic Names for the Country and People of the United States of America*. The text refers to its "authors" who "are citizens of the United States, and are zealous for their prosperity, honour, and reputation. They wish them to possess a name among the nations of the earth. They lament that hitherto and at present the country is destitute of one." The piece is signed, and some of the phrases used match those in later writings known to be **Mitchill's**, so this 1803 broadside is also ascribed to him. It is impossible to tell if there really was a group for whom **Mitchill** was writing, or if that was merely a pious fiction.

Where did **Mitchill** himself get the name? The only clue is his own statement that the etymology of Fredon "is obvious and agreeable, it may mean a *free-gift*; or any *thing done freely*; or *the land of free privileges and doings*." Obviously, it is a coined word that sounds, to him, suggestive of "Free." It is certainly not derived from Latin which used *libertas* or *licentia* for the two major aspects of freedom. No source earlier than this 1803 broadside has ever surfaced.

The next significant mention of the term was by Jedediah **Morse** who had published the *American Gazetteer* in 1797. When he came to revise the work for a second edition, he included a brief discussion of the controversy in his "Preface," and in an Appendix, he provided a long entry for "Fredonia" showing what an article about the country would look like using that as its name. **Morse's** preface is dated March 1, 1804. In it he explains that "a specific name for our country has long been a desideratum. . . . Much has been said in private conversation, and some things have been written on the subject . . . Several names have been suggested. . . ."

"Columbia" would certainly honor the memory of the discoverer, **Morse** says, but it would be difficult to form the necessary variants. (**Mitchill** had already pointed out that the country itself could be Fredon or, in poetic contexts, Fredonia; the people would be Fredes or Fredonians; and the adjective form would be "Fredish.")

Morse makes clear that he is not presuming to give a name to his country, only to show by example how convenient and useful the suggested term would be. The entry in the Appendix is headed "*Fredonia*," and simply describes the country, substituting "Fredonia" wherever "United States" would have been used.

Mitchill followed up soon after with a poem celebrating the Fourth of July, 1804, printed as an *Address to the Fredes, or People of the United States*. On the title page, interpolated just after the word "Fredes" in the title, Mitchill has an explanatory sentence: "The modern and appropriate name of the people of the United States, is Fredes or Fredonians, as the geographical name of their country is Fredon or Fredonia, and their relations are expressed by the terms Fredonian or Fredish."

Morse, too, continued the effort. In the sixth edition of his *Universal Geography* (1812) he paraphrases his own *Gazetteer*: "A general name [this may be the typesetter's misunderstanding of "generic" which **Morse** may have taken from **Mitchill**, since **Morse** had earlier used the phrase "a specific name"], proper for comprehending the whole territory under the government of the United States, has long been a desideratum. The following was suggested several years ago in the *American Gazetteer*, and is here inserted for the purpose of showing the great convenience of such a name, and of prompting the proper authorities in due time to adopt this, or such other name, as they shall judge more appropriate." What follows is a shortened version of the *Gazetteer* entry describing the country and using "Fredonia" throughout.

What this tells us is that the subject of what name to give the country was still a matter of some discussion in 1812, and that "Fredonia" was a leading contender. The question then remains, how the word came to the attention of the Canadaway settlers.

Some of the sources suggested included **Spafford's Gazetteer**, "an early name proposed for the United States," and **Morse's Geography**. The two last probably refer to the same thing. When the question of source first arose in 1886, Mr. J. L. **Bugbee** wrote to Levi **Risley** asking him who had named the village. **Risley** then wrote to A. H. **Walker** in Michigan, whose family had come to Sheridan by 1804 or 1805. In his answer, **Walker** is paraphrased as saying "the name was found in a new book, called 'Spafford's Gazetteer' and that it should be received as the name for the village when it should be incorporated." **Risley** himself is paraphrased as saying that when his family returned to the village from Ohio in 1814, "he is quite sure the place was known as Fredonia, having been named some time before by a young lawyer by the name of **Price**, who left as early as 1816, and went to Buffalo." **Bugbee** goes on to say that "Mr. **Risley** says that he recollects **Spafford**, a book binder, and his Gazette, but was under the impression that Fredonia was named previous to his coming to the place. After a short residence he removed to Erie, Pa."

Let us first deal with the **Spafford** matter. There was a local bookbinder of that name in the village from 1826 through 1827. However, he was Oliver **Spafford** and, of course, he is first found here much too late for naming the village. The *Gazetteer* referred to was compiled by Horatio C. **Spafford**, not Oliver. The first edition, *A Gazetteer of the State of New York*, was published in 1813. In fact, the Preface is dated, Albany, August 12, 1813. In that edition, the village is called "Canadaway" under its own entry (p.171) and in the article on Pomfret (p.275). The second edition did not appear until 1824, and, of course, the name Fredonia is used (pp.420,614).

As we have seen, Fredonia was suggested as the name for the United States as early as **Mitchill's** broadside of 1803 and **Morse's Gazetteer** of 1804. It appeared again in **Morse's Universal Geography** of 1812, which is undoubtedly the geography referred to. It was certainly a well-known work and one that continued to circulate for many years showing up, for example, in a list of books James **Hull** had for sale at his bookstore in Fredonia in March 1819.

If **Morse's Geography** is indeed the source, how and when was the name Fredonia applied to the village? One aspect of this matter should be cleared up first, because it has caused

a good bit of confusion. There are two different “namings.” One has to do with applying the name Fredonia to the little settlement formerly known as Canadaway. Until its incorporation many years later in 1829, there was no legal mechanism for assigning a name, merely local acquiescence and increasing use. The legal “naming” had only to do with the Post Office.

In a thoroughly confusing sequence of events, the first area post office, named Canadaway, was established on June 18, 1806, except that it was located four miles east of the village in what is now Sheridan. The second post office was, in fact, located in Canadaway, opening on May 6, 1809, but it was named Pomfret. Samuel **Berry**, the first postmaster of the Pomfret office, was succeeded by Jacob **Houghton** on August 19, 1813. **Houghton** was replaced by M. W. **Abell** on April 22, 1817.

Since **Houghton** was very much involved in renaming the post office, it must have occurred between August 1813 and April 1817. **Houghton’s** daughter, Mrs. **Bradish**, wrote that her father described the event to her. The village was called Canadawa (pronounced Canadaway). “After a long discussion and the proposal of several names, Fredonia was mentioned and after many objections and arguments pro and con, was adopted.” George C. **Rood**, in two separate accounts, remembered the meeting as taking place in June 1816. Although it was later said that Judge **Houghton** suggested the name and “cast the first ballot” for adopting “Fredonia,” in a follow-up letter to the *Censor*, his daughter specifically said that her father and a Capt. **Sprague** “wished the old name, Canadaway, retained.”

At least this account supports the fact that there was a meeting of “the city fathers,” as Mrs. **Bradish** called them, and it was conducted in Parliamentary fashion. (These transplanted New Englanders would have been perfectly familiar with decision-making by town meeting.) Since there was no incorporated village, “city fathers” must mean the important men of the day. George **Rood** said the meeting was held “at the tavern on the West Hill,” (originally built by Richard **Williams**, in 1816 owned by Henry **Abell**), that is, on the north east corner of Chestnut and West Main, across from the home where Judge **Houghton** and his family lived. He also said that Asa **French** was a participant and was the one to first propose the name, Fredonia. **French**, too, lived on West Hill. Mrs. **Meacham** wrote that, according to her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Charles **Burrutt**, Daniel C. **Garnsey** chaired the meeting. **Garnsey**, a lawyer, had settled in Canadaway in 1816, although the first record of his name in the Holland Land Co. ledgers is for November 1816.

In an 1884 reminiscence, Levi **Risley** stated that the name, Fredonia, “was given by Mr. **Price** a lawyer.” This is probably a reference to Joseph **Price**, a lawyer and amateur poet, whose work appeared in the *Chautauque Gazette*. However, he seems to have been living in Mayville and there is no record of his residing in Canadaway, although there is no reason why he might not have suggested the name in conversation. A correspondent from Laona, signing himself “S.A.D.,” in 1864 wrote that the name was given by another lawyer, John **French**. That may have been a confusion between the Sheridan postmaster, John **French**, and Asa **French**, a local blacksmith, mentioned by George **Rood**.

Another anonymous writer, the *Censor’s* Chautauqua Lake contributor, pointed out that H. L. **Taylor’s** authoritative *History* (p.95) stated that the name was given at a public meeting of the citizens on January 1, 1817. The anonymous correspondent then goes on with what tradition had passed down as the events leading up to the naming. “At the Fredonia meeting above mentioned many citizens proposed to call the village Macedonia after the place made famous by Philip and Alexander the Great. There was just then a strong anti-slavery sentiment springing up, and as the pioneers in such movements are quite apt to be more zealous than wise (as witness the

prohibitionists in our own day) it was objected that ‘massa’ as belonging to the slave oligarchy was inadmissible. The contest was warm but finally a compromise was made, a ‘free’ was put in place of the objectionable ‘massa,’ and Fredonia it is unto this day.”

What must be re-emphasized about all of this, is the distinction between renaming the village and renaming the post office. It will be remembered that the post office named Canadaway was situated in Sheridan. The postmaster had been Orsamus **Holmes** from June 1806 to March 22, 1816. He was succeeded by the John **French** mentioned above. The office was closed down on August 6, 1817.

If there had been local opposition to the name Canadaway for the post office, there would have been a citizens’ meeting to change the Sheridan office’s name. Clearly, then, it was the community itself that was being renamed. No one is on record as objecting to the name “Pomfret” for the town, so renaming that post office must have been a way of certifying the change in the community’s name. It was merely a mechanism to give it official sanction.

Because he was then post master, late in 1816, Jacob **Houghton** wrote to the Postmaster General in Washington informing him that the citizens of the village had determined that the name should be changed to Fredonia, and thus the name of the post office within the village should reflect that change. This was probably intended to take effect on the first day of the new year. On January 2nd 1817, R. J. **Meigs** replied to **Houghton**, “Sir—I have changed the name of your Office to Fredonia. ———To make the change effectual, it should be noticed in your State Prints [newspapers].”

On January 25, 1817, **Houghton** sent out formal notification of the name change which was duly noted in the *Buffalo Gazette* of January 28th, the *Albany Argus* of January 31st, and the *Ontario Repository* of February 4th, 1817.

James **Hull** had begun the *Chautauque Gazette* on January 7, 1817 as printed and published in Fredonia. This too was noted in other state newspapers. The *Buffalo Gazette* which, on November 26, 1816 had referred to a new store at "Canadaway Village" (J.& R. **Plumb**, Groceries) and in the December 24th issue had referred to a petition for a Turnpike Road to the village of “Canadaway,” on January 21st noted that they had “received two numbers of the *Chautauque Gazette* printed at Fredonia (late Canadaway).” This was a week before the official notice from Jacob **Houghton**, so obviously it was understood that the *Village* had changed its name. The post office change merely followed suit.

It was pointed out by several commentators that after the formal naming of the village “months elapsed before the name was in common use.... For some time afterward, both names were in common use, and when the post office took the new name, that of Canadaway gradually disappeared and the new one came into general use.” This description is verified by the report in the *Ontario Repository* of April 29, 1817, that an act had been passed in Albany to lay out a road from “Canadaway. . .to the town of Perry.” Another source of verification is the Town of Pomfret’s road survey records. The field notes of a survey done in July 1816 still refer to the village as Canadaway. However by July 1817, the next time such a reference is made, it is to Fredonia.

Thus we see that **Mitchill’s** arguments for naming the country Fredonia found their way into **Morse’s** 1812 geography, catching the fancy of some Canadaway residents who, in June 1816, voted to rename the village. The post office was renamed as of January 1, 1817, and the name, long accepted out of custom, became official on May 2, 1829 when the State Legislature voted to incorporate the Village of Fredonia.