

Sensational Fredonia

*(The earliest homes, businesses, and roads in Fredonia, and stories of pioneers, including the **Squire White, Cushing, Risley, Williams, Woodcock, Barker, and Brigham families**)*

By Douglas Shepard / Barker Museum Newsletter (Spring, 1997)

We must begin with an apology. This is not what you think -- even though Fredonia is terrific. We are using "sensational" this time to refer to the senses. There is much we know about what happened in Fredonia in the early days, and something about why. What we do not seem to know much about is what it *felt* like here in pioneer times. What did it sound like and look like? How did it smell? If we used some of our five senses as a framework, what could we learn from those printed accounts of the events of our community's past?

Let us try the easiest one, the "look". What did Fredonia look like in the beginning? If you were magically plunked down on the Common after the arrival of the **Barkers, Cushings and Williamses, Woodcocks**, et al., say in the summer of **1807**, what would you see? Well you would have a hard time seeing anything at all because of the trees. The Common is what **Barker's** children call "that pesky black walnut grove". **Hezekiah** and his family are still living in **McClintock's** log cabin near the creek (off Water Street) except that Water Street is not there, because, for one thing, there isn't any bridge.

The nearest building to the **Barkers** (who are on the flats below the Eagle Street school location), is **Zattu Cushing's** cabin a little north of 171 Eagle Street. The old Buffalo-Erie trail runs past **Cushing's** cabin, down the slope to cross at a shallow ford, not far from **McClintock's**, now **Barker's**, log cabin, which is, of course, close to the creek, and then heads on south and west.

The **Cushings** can look over the bank and see the smoke rising from the **Barker** chimney and note the progress they have made clearing their land of trees to plant their crops.

Barker and **Richard Williams** have begun building their grist and saw mills further downstream from here. To get to them **Barker** has to walk on the flats along the creek, or make his way up the rise and along the trail called **Mr. Cushing's Road** -- now Eagle Street -- in order to be on the right side of the creek when he gets to the mill site. You can just make out the beginning signs of a trail from **Mr. Cushing's** road west toward the mill (some day this will be Main Street) through the trees along the fairly level ancient glacial lake shoreline.

That makes for easy walking except that you cannot cross where Canadaway Creek has cut a ravine on its way to Lake Erie. On the other hand, that narrow cut makes an ideal place for **Mr. Barker's** dam and the millpond behind it. **Mr. Barker** had **Colonel Bartoo** come here from Oneida County specifically to build the wooden dam. (He is a relative of **Mr. Barker's**).

Cushing and **Barker** happen to live within sight of each other because each is at the edge of his property closest to the stream and the only road. The other few neighbors are at least a lot's distance away, (a lot is about 3/4 mile on each side), so you will have to walk a mile or more to cross **Mr. Barker's** lot and get to the house on the next lot, if there is one. (There are not any houses on Lot 15 just north of **Barker's** Lot 14.) **Barker's** partner in mill-building, **Richard Williams**, is about two miles away from the mill on Lot 26. **Williams** has a log cabin about twelve feet square with some fifteen people living in it, so perhaps we won't visit today. It's off in the woods with a tiny clearing around it, of course, and everywhere there are trees and more trees. There are black walnuts on the flats near the Creek, as well as butternuts, basswoods, elms and ashes. Right now is summer, the wild onions and leeks are thick near the banks. If you walk down along Canadaway Creek, you may still see some of the temporary, bark-covered cabins, only about six feet square, that the Indians built to use in the hunting season. There's quite a rise from the creek on either side, and up there you can see oaks, chestnuts, whitewoods, cucumbers and hickories, as well as small wormwoods and sassafras which will disappear from this area in a few years.

If you come back in, say, **1809**, you'll see some differences. There is a simple wooden bridge spanning the Creek and the main trail is now Main Street. Let's start up on east hill, where the new trail comes from

Buffalo. As you walk down the hill, you can see on your right the mounds that mark the new burial ground. Poor **Hannah Woodcock**, six years old, lies there, killed by a falling tree while out nutting two falls ago, in fact in October, just after you were here last. There are a few others buried here already, with plain wooden markers that will decay in time.

Elisha Mann died last January, and the next day the **Ephraim Pease** family had a stillborn child. **Mrs. Mann** followed her husband in February and soon after **Burr Mann** died. A week after that **Veranus Cole** died. The **Benjamin Narneses** had a stillborn child in March, and just this April we buried **Jonathan Smith**, two children of **Isaac Roe's** who'd drowned and a child of **Daniel Warren's**. So there are ten already lying with **Hannah Woodcock** up here on the hill.

On down the hill on your right is the log cabin our new doctor, **Squire White**, has just put up. The turnout to **Mr. Cushing's** place is on the left, and right ahead of us is a cleared space, the Common. (**Mr. Barker** had **Simon Geer** and **Israel Loomis** chop and log it last June.)

(When he was visiting here in **1867**, **James Bellows**, son of the first Clerk of Pomfret, said that the stumps were removed by men who were paying off their fines for drunkenness that way. "The penalty for getting very drunk was to dig up a large stump, and for getting only tipsy, a smaller stump. The removal of every stump in about two months was the result.")

There is a 25 x 30 foot log schoolhouse about in the middle of the Common, and on the far side is a small, two-story log cabin or inn, the new **Hezekiah Barker** place. It is 20 x 24 feet, with an outside chimney on the Main Street end. First, walk onto the Common. You can see the marks of a good bit of travel by foot, horseback and wagon, cutting across it from **Mr. Cushing's** road to what all the surveyors call "the road from the mouth of Canadaway Creek," which will later be called Chapel and then Temple Street.

Take a minute to walk down this road just a short way. You see there off to your right that roughly cleared line cutting through the forest? That is where the surveyors, in April last year, laid out a road from the shore of Strong's Bay to this spot. (Someday it will be a real road called Lake Street, then Dunkirk Street and finally Central Avenue). It's not too bad right here, but beyond where you can see through the trees, up past where the Dunkirk line will be, it is just impossible: swampy, briar-choked, filled with vines and deadfall. No wonder everyone uses the main trail, "from the mouth of Canadaway Creek", to get to the lake and then go east on the beach.

"**Squire**" **Thomas Morton** does live up that way along the surveyors' line. (He's **Mrs. Richard Williams'** brother). His farmhouse will someday be replaced by a fancy brick home at the corner of a through street they will call Maple Avenue. Right now he's just off on the woods.

Before we go back to the Common, notice that spring at the foot of the hill to our right. It's a good spot for an ashery, which will be here in a few years. It's a reasonable distance from **Mr. Barker's** house, so he and his family shouldn't be bothered by the mess and smells.

Now back to the Common and let's go on to the Main Street edge. Across, where that faint trail leads down the hill to the water, at the corner on your right is a little log building, home and shop to the cobbler, **Charles Burritt**. (He will later move to West Main Street and become a druggist.)

Now turn and go past **Mr. Barker's** in toward the Creek. You can see the wooden bridge **Mr. Risley** has built and how Main Street, newly surveyed and laid out to take advantage of it, has to squeeze down to get between the saw mill on your left and the grist mill on your right. As soon as it is safely over the bridge, the dusty road widens out again to its full 100 feet. If you stop by the bridge a minute, we can admire the wooden dam **Colonel Bartoo** built. The first one washed away in **1807** and the second just a few months ago, but it is back up and holding. Upstream several hundred feet is where the headrace begins. All the piled up water in the millpond behind the dam goes pouring down the wooden-sided sluice, when the gate is opened and keeps the wheel turning. The longish plank building with the side open to the creek has a long pit saw, just humming up and down as the drive wheel keeps it moving, throwing sawdust everywhere.

You can't see it, because it's covered over, but the tail race from the sawmill goes right under the road (actually the road was laid over it), and turns the big grist mill wheel. Behind the grist mill the water runs on out that tail race back into Canadaway Creek.

If you're feeling energetic, let's cross the new bridge and start to climb West Hill. There is quite a bit doing on this side of the Creek, too. That 7 x 9 foot plank store that **Elijah Risley, Jr.** put up last year is on the left a short ways on. It is run by **Fanny Risley**, who is almost 15, and part of the store is a small shoe shop. Across on the right, set back a bit, is **Mr. Kapple's** tannery.

Almost to the top of the hill on the left is Uncle **Jimmy Morgan's log house** in a little clearing. He came with the **Williams** and **Woodcock** families, to whom he is related. Keep up the hill to the crest where the high road along the Creek (Chestnut and Seymour Streets) crosses Main Street to **Mr. Williams'** inn at the Chestnut Street corner. It sort of balances **Mr. Barker's** down below.

Look north along the road (Chestnut) to the first road on the left. That's the dead-straight surveyor's swath that marks the line between Townships Five, below, and Six, above. The little log house at the corner is the one the **Risleys** put up when they first arrived. It has the usual split-log floor and door, with the cross-pieces fastened with pins, wooden pegs. There isn't a nail in the place because they would have been too heavy to carry, and there's no blacksmith at work yet making them for the folks here. It won't be long, though.

Back down at the Creek, you can see how clear it is and filled with fish, as clear as the sky, even with the smoke from the trees being burned. There's just too much sky for these few people to make a difference. Wherever the sun can get through the trees, there are berry bushes, wild flowers, and vines in among the hardwoods and the many nut trees standing tall all around you.

Of course, there's also dust from the roads -- or impassable mud if it's raining. This is summer, but in winter the snow lies in drifts with no village plows. If you walk out to the farm lots you will see the snake fences to protect the crops, with animals wandering everywhere else: geese, pigs, cows, dogs and cats.

We'll make our way back down Main Street to the Common and look around again. It's not too crowded. In fact, sometimes it seems downright empty. But don't forget that this is **1809**; **Mr. Barker** doesn't yet own his land. He has a land contract on the 360-acre parcel that runs from about **Mr. Williams'** inn on West Hill to a little past the burial ground, and he is gradually paying it off. He did "sell" small plots to encourage settlement in his community such as to **Squire White** and **Mr. Burritt**, but it is a risky business for everyone. If he defaults, the entire 360 acres will revert to the Holland Land Company, but he won't.

Come back again in **1815**. Now you'll see some *real* changes. We'll start up on the east hill again. The burial ground is more used, certainly. It's too bad there is no fence, because the cows and other animals wandering in there can't do it much good. But look at what **Squire White** has done! That magnificent frame house incorporating the original log cabin is Branksome Hall, as it's jokingly called. That's in honor of **Squire White's** favorite author, **Sir Walter Scott** and the Branksome Hall in his "Lay of the Last Minstrel".

You may not realize it, but this is one of the first frame houses in the village. It was built in **1812**, when **Jacob Houghton** on West Hill and **Mr. Cushing** built theirs. Because a strong wind blew **Esq. Houghton's** roof off, **Dr. White's** was finished first. **Mr. Cushing** built his just past the old log cabin, so he's still where the old trail crosses the Creek. The trail has been officially abandoned, although, of course, you can still make it out through the weeds if you walk out that way.

Also in **1812**, three years ago, **Mr. Barker** paid off his contract and divided the land with two of his sons. This east end of the village is **Barzillai Barker's** whose log house is across from **Squire White's**. He's planning on selling up and moving to the Portland area, and the cabin won't last long after he's gone. Look down **Mr. Cushing's** road. See that path branching off? It's just on the line between **Barzillai's** land and his father's and runs down to some mills. It will be called Mill Street and later Norton Place someday.

The Village is starting to look quite built up, isn't it? Some of that is a little deceptive, because each house gets so many other buildings around it after a while; barns and stables, an outhouse, a woodshed, maybe a well house or spring house, a kitchen behind the main house, hen houses, a pig sty -- they certainly make a house yard look busy.

Our Village tanner, young **Leverett Barker**, got himself married to **Hezekiah Barker's** daughter, **Desire** (no relation). That was back in March of **1811**. They're living in that nice little house he built on the Main road to our left here, in front of the tannery. (He did quite well during the **War of 1812**, selling a lot of leather to the government).

Of course, there are other changes, bigger ones. You can see across the Common that **Mr. Barker's** inn is gone, replaced by that big frame building. That's **Abell's** Hotel which they put up last year. **Mr. Barker's** still here though, past the trees on our right in that handsome two-story house with two wings. Quite a change from the little log cabin.

William Barker is still living here too. If we walk just past the end of **Abell's** Hotel and look up the lane running behind it to the stables, straight up that way, through the trees, is **Mr. William Barker's** small plank house. It's about as far from here on **Main Street** as it is back to **Dr. White's** house.

I forgot to mention that **Mr. Burritt** still has his shoe shop on the corner over the road, but look part way up Main Street towards the Creek on that far side. That new frame building is **Elijah Risley, Jr.'s**. He moved a few years ago from the little place across the Creek and put up this place.

It's now **Hale & Risley** and a thriving enterprise. **Mr. Risley** is quite the businessman. He started an ashery just over the bridge to your right. It was being run by **Mr. James Mark**, and he had a really bad accident there a few years back. He stumbled and fell into one of the vats or something and almost died, but he's pulled through now. He doesn't know it, but many years from now, in **1901**, his son **Charles** is going to have two beautiful fountains set up on the Common in his memory. Quite a tribute, isn't it?

There are other big doings on the west side. **Judge Jacob Houghton** and his family came here in **1812** and built that fine house up the hill on our left. That's the one I mentioned the roof blew off when **Squire White** was building Branksome Hall. **Judge Houghton** is involved with a Congregationalist group who are starting to talk about putting up a meeting house some day. Some of them claim they prefer the Presbyterian form of worship, but while their visiting minister is still alive they'll probably stay as they are.

Up at the crossroads you can still see **Williams' Inn**. Poor **Mr. Williams** was so broken up by the death of his son in the battle of Lake Erie that he just went into a decline. They've moved to the Portland area and **Mr. Henry Abell** has the inn now. Look across Main Street at the new "common". We got it for the wrong reasons, unfortunately. When our population reached the necessary size for Chautauque to run its own affairs, instead of having to be part of Niagara County, which happened in **1810**, a decision on where the County Court House would be located had to be made. Therefore, the folks on West Hill completely cleared about a half an acre right by Ridge Road. (It will be Seymour Street when Mr. Asa Seymour gets here next year and sets up his tailor shop at his house.)

That half acre is as good a spot as you could ask for, right on the Main Road, but those commissioners just sailed on by without a look. People are saying that somebody probably got paid off. But you can see the land isn't going to waste. There's the **Douglass** leather store and shoe shop by Ridge Road and behind it another school house. It's an old building, used to be a stable, but it works well enough. **Elijah's** young brother, **Levi Risley**, Started there in **1810** when he was 5, but the family moved to Ohio in **1811** and only returned here last year.

Before the **Risleys** left for Ohio, **Elijah, Jr.** married young **Abigail Brigham**, (everyone calls her "**Nabby**") in the fall of **1810**. They lived with her folks a good distance north of here, but then they took that frame house further out on the Main Road on the south side. That's where **Hanson** was born last June. **Nabby Risley** has good neighbors in the **Sinclairs** on the other side a little nearer to us. There are two more

houses west of the **Risley's: Horace Risley's** and then **Thomas Kapple's**. In March **1811**, just before the big departure, **Fanny Risley** married **James Brigham** (**Nabby's** older brother), so the **Risleys** and **Brighams** are twice connected.

From where we are at the crossroads, you can't see it, but down Ridge Road a bit there's a road running southeast over a new little bridge across the stream that runs into Canadaway Creek by the dam. That road goes straight across country to hit the road to Bull's Mills [Laona] which makes it a lot easier for those folks to get here without having to go around by **Mr. Cushing's** Road and then along Main Street.

These roads are getting an awful lot of use, especially Main Street. Wagons come through all the time heading for Ohio, drovers run their animals back to market in the east, and there are just all sorts of travelers going back and forth. That's why the road is so rutted. I don't know if you noticed back by the burying ground and **Squire White's** place where all the hemlock boughs have been laid in the ruts and holes, just like here. It looks messy, but it does keep wagons from sinking in when it's muddy. But that's progress for you. You have to pay for it somehow. When you come back again there will surely be lots more to see that's new. Let's see. This is **1815**, so how about **1821**? That will give us time to leap ahead and amaze you with all the changes coming. In fact you will probably say "Why that place is sensational!"