

The Cascade Hamlet

By Douglas H. Shepard

Fredonia's Cascade Hamlet was a craft center, a shopping mart, a community within a community, and a magnificent dream. To fully understand how bold its originator, Major Joseph **Skinner**, was we must visualize what Fredonia was like in 1818 when he first looked at the land on which he would build his dream. At the time, unincorporated Fredonia was understood to consist of a small strip on either side of the Main Road all within Lot 14, the 360 acres purchased by Hezekiah **Barker** and two of his sons: from the crossing at today's Chestnut and Seymour streets to the intersection with today's Newton Street.

If we could transport ourselves back to that time and that place, our first impression would be of a forest of trees and the next, of relative emptiness. The Pomfret Assessment Roll tells us that in 1818 there were exactly 35 individuals or businesses with taxable property in Fredonia. Most homes and businesses were on the Main Road between (Zattu) **Cushing's** Road (Eagle Street) and the bridge, and a few short lanes leading off from Main.

All were dirt roads, of course, and all buildings of wood: log cabins, plank sided, and heavy framed structures. Nothing of brick, nothing of stone. Nothing above two stories. A one-room school house stood on Barker Common and another on West Hill. There were no church buildings, no Town or Village buildings, no Post Office building. The small wooden shops and homes spaced out along Main Street led to the main focus of the Village, the two mills by the bridge, the sawmill on the southeast side of Main Street, the grist mill to the northwest.

The bridge itself, a simple wooden structure, stood close to the surface of the creek. The Main Road on either side of Canadaway Creek lay some twenty feet below where it is today making the rise up West Hill that much steeper. If you stood in the middle of that wooden bridge looking upstream, you would see the wooden dam some thirty feet away holding the mill pond that powered the two mills on your left. Just to the right of the dam, between the creek and a steep, narrow trail, was the lot on which **Skinner** would build.

In 1818 the "Old Major," as Levi **Risley** says he was called, began virtually on his own. He began with an odd gesture, removing his collar pin "and he said it should not be replaced until the frame was raised." Apparently taking off his detachable collar symbolized that he was now at work and would not stop until it was time for a formal dedication of his building.

The first step was to go to the woodlots of individual farmers and select "a whitewood tree that would square sixty feet" and then give the landholder the honor of hauling it to the building site. The foundation must have been begun at least by February 1819 since a survey recorded on 1 March of a road that no longer exists, running from just west of the bridge to Chestnut Street, refers to "the large Building now erecting on the western side of the Creek," and a deed of 23 April refers to "that part of the said Dam which is now covered by the foundation of a large building erecting by Joseph **Skinner**."

Skinner designed the structure with a basement and two floors above it. One corner of the building rested on the end of the dam. Levi **Risley** in 1880, and again in 1884, wrote about it, explaining that a bulkhead was constructed to direct water from the mill pond into the Cascade Hamlet "to propel machinery in the northern rooms [i.e. the shops and work rooms nearer the creek], as no one of that day thought of using steam for that purpose." (Because the building paralleled Main Street which runs Northeast/Southwest, the "north" end of the structure is sometimes called "east" or "northeast.") There must have been a wheel of some kind in the basement to be turned by the water running down from the height of the mill pond,

and a power takeoff — leather belts and wooden shafts — to transfer the power to the front rooms on the first and second floors. A small stream, later called **Wiley's** Creek or **Scott's** Creek, ran under the building and into the mill pond. It was probably used as a tailrace to return the water to the pond. The creek is still there, in conduits underground.

Once the building's foundations and the wheel were in place, the upper structure could be raised over it. The framed units, mortised and tenoned together, would be laid out on the ground, then, with enough volunteer help as possible, raised, propped up and then fastened in place with wooden pegs. That was done in the Summer of 1819 with young Levi **Risley** present. (He wrote about it as in 1820, probably confusing the date when the framing went up with some later ceremony when the building was completely finished.) As the last pin in the frame was being driven in, four men crossed the road from Martin **Damon's** shop with a stone on which **Damon** had chiseled "Cascade Hamlet." (Darwin **Barker** remembered it as having a picture of the building as well.) It was solemnly placed "at the southwest corner of the building." The next ceremonial step was replacing the stud in Major **Skinner's** shirt collar, after which everyone "took a swig of milk punch." (This was a mixture of milk and whiskey, perhaps with a sweetener added.) After the heady toasts, the assembled men and boys (Levi **Risley** was just 15) dove into the mill pond no doubt accompanied by much tipsy hilarity.

Once the ceremonies and festivities were done, work continued on enclosing the building and completing the individual rooms. **Risley** said "as fast as the rooms could be finished they were occupied."

When the building was completed, it contained, according to *Spafford's Gazetteer of 1824*, 180 rooms, although many were set aside for apartments. At the front, the building was 150 feet long from the mill dam to "a narrow alley where now is Hamlet Street." Behind the front section where the shops and stores were located, two wings ran back to form a huge, U-shaped structure. The inner yard between the two arms was almost 1/4 acre. It was on the two floors of the two arms that the living quarters were found. **Risley** said they were "fronting on this open square," which suggests a common inner hall or outer verandah leading back from the shops onto which the front doors of the apartments would open. Although no mention of it is made, it is assumed that the wings were of two stories also, particularly because of that report (perhaps exaggerated) that there were 180 rooms in all.

What **Skinner** had had in mind all along was a kind of one-stop shopping center where craftsmen and business men could live and work, providing a great convenience for local farmers to be able to do all of their shopping and repair work in one place, since it was not only on the Main Road, but on the narrow alley he worked to have improved.

That alley, Hamlet Street, "was projected by Maj. Jos. **Skinner** for the convenience of the citizens of Bull's Mills [Laona], to get to the mechanics [craftsmen] of the great center, the Hamlet, but the hill at that time was so abrupt that goats could hardly climb it."

Because of the natural falls at Laona, it and its stream were referred to in early Holland Land Company records as the "Cascade." For example, on 28 September 1804, Thomas **McClintock** wrote a letter from "Caskade Creek" to Joseph **Ellicott** in Batavia asking for a contract for "the Cascade Mills place" which Zattu **Cushing** had already taken. That is why, when **Skinner** planned his communal center, he called it the "Cascade Hamlet," the community by the stream.

Despite all **Skinner's** work and planning, **Risley** said "but few of the rooms . . . were ever occupied." However, from contemporary advertisements and later recollections we can recreate a good bit of who was in the building and where they worked.

The first occupant was William A. **Hart**, who advertised his gunsmith business on 24 December 1819. He was at the east [north] end on the second floor along with his young apprentice, Levi **Risley**, who remained for some two to three years. **Risley** “went out of business” in 1823 “about the time that old flint gun lock did,” and went to work in the G. W. **French** Company store in Sinclairville as a “boy clerk” when he was 18.

The next advertisement (there are only random numbers of the *Chautauque Gazette* and *The New-York Censor* extant for the 1819-1823 period) is in December 1821 announcing that William **Norcott** and James M. **Willcox** had begun a blacksmith business in the Cascade Hamlet making axes, hoes, scythes, augers, shaves, mill irons, etc. They were on the first floor, at the east end, under **Hart’s** gunsmith shop. A later ad called it “No.3.” **Willcox** left the business soon after they opened. In January 1823 E. **Shepard** (or **Shepherd**) and Reuben **Buck** began a carriage making business on the first floor just west of **Norcott** and **Willcox**. Their ad gave their address as “Nos.5, 9 and 10.” (**Shepard** withdrew from the partnership in June.)

Although there are no early advertisements for some others, we know they were at the Cascade Hamlet because in March 1823 nine occupants, plus their founder, joined together as the Cascade Hamlet Mechanic Society with a lengthy and solemn Constitution and By-Laws. They were published in the *Censor* of 18 March 1823 “(By Request).” For some reason the only internal date is that of 15 March 1823 when a meeting of the Hamlet Society was “held at No.9.” It is assumed that the Constitution was ratified first, at that same meeting. The Constitution was signed by its founding members:

Joseph **Skinner**, Projector and Architect.

William **Hart**, Gunsmith.

M. **Damon**, Sculptor & Painter.

Wm. **Norcott**, Blacksmith.

U. **Wentworth**, Cooper.

E. **Shepherd**, Wagon Maker.

Reuben **Buck**, Carriage Maker.

N. **Randall**, Tanner & Shoemaker.

S. **Willson**, Tin & Coppersmith.

Sala **Todd**, Wheel Maker.

The lack of alphabetizing suggests that the names are in the order of their arrival at the Cascade Hamlet. It should also be noted in passing that, despite the celebratory hi-jinks in 1819 reported by Levi **Risley**, By-law 8 stipulated “that no Hamletteer [as they called themselves] shall on any pretence whatever, suffer the use of ardent spirits in or about the Hamlet.” A paragraph appended to the By-laws read: Every Hamletteer shall use his influence to expell inebriety, ignorance and idleness among journeymen and apprentices — these being the parents of poverty — and that every member shall use his best exertions against them, by inculcating morality, sobriety and industry. In proportion as these principles prevail, poverty will disappear.”

Other By-laws dealt with housekeeping matters, that each shop was to be kept clean and uncluttered, “the ground for storage” was to be “divided so as best to convene the several kinds of business, and no one shall encroach on another’s ground....All necessary precaution shall be taken through the day against fire; and all fires shall be entirely extinguished throughout the Hamlet on closing shops for the night, except such as have some persons to sleep in them

through the night. Most interesting is By-law No.6 that “all the principal wares made in the Hamlet shall be stamped with the name of the establishment, the maker’s name, and the number of the room. Each room shall have a sign, mentioning the kind of work done therein.”

In addition to **Skinner**, “Projector and Architect,” five of the signators for whom we do not have early ads must have had shop room at the Hamlet at least by March 1823 when they signed the Constitution. Martin **Damon**, who had made the stone sign for the building was in a middle room on the second floor carving tombstones and doing sign painting. Dr. Uriah **Wentworth** made barrels at his cooper’s shop just west of **Damon**. Sylvester **Willson** had his tin and coppersmith shop on the first floor just west of **Buck** and **Shepherd**; Nelson **Randall** made shoes and other leather goods just west of them; and Sala **Todd** made carriage wheels at an unnamed location, perhaps in connection with the carriage manufactory.

There are others who show up in advertisements in later years. J. L. **Beardsley** had his tailor shop at the Hamlet at some point, although all we have is a notice of 27 March 1827 that he was moving out. Myron **Chapin** opened a machine shop in May 1828 at the “north end” which means he took over from **Norcott**. He made wool carding and spinning machines among other devices. A week after **Chapin, Hughes & Clough** opened a meat market there. It may have been a sign of trouble to come that they moved out in September. At the same time that **Chapin** moved in, so did P. **Coffman**, chairmaker, into the “south room” at the Hamlet Street end of the first floor. In November he expanded into the “east room” which must mean the room just behind him in the wing of the building running along Hamlet Street.

E. **Otis & Co.** announced in an ad dated 28 April 1829 that they were at the Cascade Hamlet “building Douglass’ Improved Patent threshing machines.” Their ad continued only through 8 July 1829. It would seem, then, that Myron **Chapin** was the last Hamletteer holdout. His ad continued in the *Censor* through 9 September 1830. He must have moved on since his name also disappears from the assessment rolls as well.

Ultimately, the building was simply abandoned and allowed to decay. No doubt the foundations, artifacts, even the water wheel may be there yet, awaiting an archeologist’s dig.

In a letter of 3 April 1871, Darwin R. **Barker** described what he remembered. He was prompted to write by a comment by E. F. **Warren** at the *Censor* Semi-Centennial banquet. (**Barker** apparently made a mistake in referring to a letter by E. F. **Douglass**, who does not seem to have written, meaning the talk by E. F. **Warren** at the banquet.) **Warren** said, “How many are there in this audience who know where or what the Cascade Hamlet was? For the information of those who never heard of it, I will say it was a long building, extending from about the west end of the bridge at the foot of Main street, to near the bank at the intersection of Hamlet street, filled with machinery, propelled by the waters of the Canadaway. How many stories high it was I cannot tell, but to me it was a most imposing structure and one of the wonders of the world.”

D. R. **Barker’s** addition was that he could remember so many hours spent in the “old Hamlet.” “In its last years, those crazy old platforms stood on ‘their last legs’ and often nothing. . . . If two stories and a basement extending from Hamlet street to the bridge, could tell the pranks of 20 boys, and bats innumerable, your readers would have fun for a month. The old Hamlet was headquarters. Deviltry in general was concocted there. . . .”

The last memory belongs, again, to Levi **Risley**. He returned to Fredonia after an absence of ten years (1833 when he and his brothers were starting the **Risley** Seed Company) and “found the old Hamlet deserted and going to ruins, and ten years more (1843) but little was left to tell that a building had ever stood on the ground.”

Joseph **Skinner's** magnificent dream was no more.