

The Origins of the Fredonia Academy

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Although Fredonia's Academy is frequently mentioned in local histories and reminiscences, often with great pride, a clear account of its beginnings and of the building that housed it is still lacking. Authorities agree, for example, that rivalry between those living on one or the other side of Canadaway Creek played a part in the Academy's history.¹ However, exactly how that division worked itself out has never been made completely clear.

The background against which to see the drama unfolding has to do with the early settlement patterns in our area. When the first permanent settlers came to Fredonia, beginning in 1805, they took up land on either side of Canadaway Creek. Hezekiah Barker's efforts to have the community's center develop on his land, Lot 14, are well established. Lot 14, in the Holland Land Company's survey, runs from Johnson St. on the west to Newton St., and from just below Maple Ave. down to Hamlet St.

To make his land the center of the community, Barker did several things. He had Jonathan Bartoo come from Sangerfield to locate a site and build a dam for the grist and saw mills which were put up at the foot of Main St.² He donated land for a burying ground, opened the Common for everyone's use, had the Main road rerouted to run through his property and past his mills, built a new log cabin/inn on that road, and began renting and selling off house and store lots along and near Main St.

On West Hill the same kind of development was going on. Barker's partner in the mills put up an inn at Chestnut and West Main. Homes, a school building, stores and businesses began to develop on and near West Main St., and a large plot of land was cleared in expectation that the county seat might be located there.³ Besides land use, another significant element in the story of the Academy has to do with local church activities.

The early settlers very soon began to come together for religious services, at first informally. As early as 1805, under Zattu Cushing's leadership, a number of Baptists began meeting wherever they could find room. On 14 March 1807 they entered into a formal covenant, and, finally, late in 1808, they were officially formed into a church, "The First Baptist Society of Pomfret."⁴ They met in Zattu Cushing's barn, at the earliest school house (a one-room cabin on the Common), and various other places until their first meeting house was put up in 1823.⁵

The same pattern was followed by other groups. On 29 September 1810, twelve settlers met at the home of Asa French on West Hill and entered into "a Christian Covenant," incorporating as the "Pomfret Religious Society" in 1811.⁶ On January 3, 1817, they changed their form of church polity from Congregational to Presbyterian.⁷ The following year, meeting at the house of Alfred Collins, they became the Pomfret Religious Society and formally recorded their incorporation at the courthouse in Mayville. In December 1819 they reincorporated as the First Presbyterian Society of Pomfret.⁸

This group met at a school house on Chestnut St. and Berry Rd., the inn at Chestnut and West Main, private residences, a basement of a home on East Main, at Barker's schoolhouse, and at a cabinet shop on West Main St.⁹ With the formal incorporation of December 1819 there

followed a move to put up a permanent meeting house. On 15 January 1820 it was “Voted that this society build a meeting house 52 x 56 feet.” After further discussion it was voted on February 8th “that the site for the meeting house be located on the hill, nearly opposite the house of Jas. Mullett Jr., unless the proprietors should hereafter remove it to the spot opposite Henry Abell 's”¹⁰ The locations being suggested were on the north side of West Main St. just east and just west of the Chestnut/Seymour intersection.¹¹ With the question of where the village itself would have its center still in doubt, this move by the Presbyterians was met with opposition.

By 1810 Hezekiah Barker was playing less of a role in the community. In 1814 he sold his home/inn to Thomas Abell. His death soon after left the property to his sons, M.W. and T.G. Abell who put up a larger structure in its place, where 1 Park Place now stands. It is said that it was the Abells who were the main force behind the next step.¹² A number of community leaders had determined that an Academy ought to be opened in the village. For that it would be necessary to get support and donations towards putting up a building. The device they settled on was to circulate a subscription list for putting up a combined Academy and meeting house. This was not a new concept. In 1808, the residents of Sheridan had petitioned the Holland Land Company to donate five acres of land on which the community would then erect a combined school and meeting house.¹³

It is particularly interesting to realize that the Fredonia petition in its preamble, which reads “We the subscribers, having it in contemplation to build a house, which shall answer the purposes of an academy and a meeting house....” left a space Just preceding “meeting house.” A later hand has inserted “Presbyterian.”¹⁴ This strongly suggests either that the promoters were not sure whether the Presbyterians would be supportive, or that without formal action they could not properly specify which denomination was intended to share the building.

Of course, it cannot be coincidence that the first two signers were two of the nine Trustees of the Presbyterian Society of 1819. Indeed, a large number of those signing can be found in the list of Presbyterian members. Again, it must be more than mere coincidence that the three most prominent non-signers, Benjamin Douglass, Henry Abell and Jacob Houghton, had significant land holdings on West Hill and were leaders in the attempt to establish the west side as the center of the community.

There are other aspects to the 1821 petition that deserve some comment. In the first place, “petition” is not quite the right term for the document. It is not a plea to another body requesting some action, but rather a contract by which the subscribers pledge to two designees, Leverett Barker and Thomas G. Abell, who are to act for the group, certain donations in money or kind towards building an academy/meeting house.

The contract is quite detailed, which strongly suggests that a great deal of informal, preparatory discussion had preceded it.¹⁵ We can imagine, for example, community leaders like Leverett Barker and T.G. Abell buttonholing friends, colleagues and influential neighbors to find out just how much support there might be for having an Academy in the first place. Then there would need to be an understanding that if the effort were begun, enough of the Presbyterians would support the combined-building idea. The size of the structure had to be settled and at least a private commitment made as to the land the building would occupy.

The exact language of the document refers to an academy/meeting house “which shall stand on or within twenty rods of the place where the School house...now stands.” The school house referred to was the second one on the east side of Canadaway Creek, standing about in the

middle of today's Church St. just opposite the Village parking lot next to the Village Hall.¹⁶ The land on which it stood belonged to Hezekiah Barker. A circle with a twenty rod (330 feet or 5 chains) radius and the school house as its center would reach to Lambert St. on the north, Park St. on the west and half way to White St. on the east, unbuilt-on land that was still owned by Hezekiah Barker. In other words, there had probably been a tacit agreement reached already that, if the subscription effort was a success, Barker would give the land for the Academy. This assumption is further confirmed by the fact that his name does not appear as a subscriber, and he did, for one dollar, the following October, promise a parcel abutting on the schoolhouse lot, obviously his donation to the subscription effort.¹⁷

It may be recalled that the original decision by the Presbyterians had been to build a meeting house that would be 52 x 56 feet. The Academy document stipulates that "the size, plan and form of the said house [is] to be ascertained and fixed by a majority of the subscribers to this paper...provided however that the said house shall not be less than thirty six feet by fifty feet." This may have been a compromise to keep costs to a minimum without having too small a room for the other group whose support was being solicited.

There was a kind of timetable included in the text. It was stipulated that the subscribers agreed to give money, property, labor and materials for building. Building materials were "to be delivered on the place where the said house is to stand, by the first day of September next [1821]."

The material pledged included whitewood floor boards; nails and glass; shingles; six thousand clapboard; three thousand feet of floor plank; three thousand feet of lumber; one thousand feet of lumber; two thousand feet of hemlock lumber; ten dollars of lumber; two thousand feet of lumber; and sashes.

Since the signed covenant, reserving the land to the Academy corporation, was not executed until 3 October 1821, we may imagine that the delivery of material may have been begun but certainly no building started then. In fact the document says that Barker agreed to convey the land to them "as soon as they shall demand the same" suggesting the actual transfer was some time in the future. There does exist a record of costs incurred by the Trustees beginning with the entry "Oct.1821. To 1 Yok of oxen to Mr.Temple — \$50.00."¹⁸ Therefore, something was hauled to the building site in October, although the entry does not specify what. In all likelihood it was the main timbers, massive by all accounts, that had been hewn from the giant trees in the nearby forest. One later account claims that Col.Thomas G.Abell "with his own hands hewed some of the main timbers,"¹⁹ and when the building was being dismantled years later, the newspaper editor commented on its "very heavy timbers."²⁰ Fifty dollars was a very large sum of money in 1821, so the single yoke of oxen must have done a great deal of work to warrant that payment.²¹ We may also imagine that the timbers would not have been used green but permitted to season, so the actual building probably did not begin until early in 1822 with the laying of a stone foundation reaching some two to three feet above ground level.²² There is only one specific reference to when the work began. In connection with an old-timers celebration, C.F.Matteson described the first time he saw Fredonia. It was on 9 July 1822 and he well remembered the exciting day because he saw the "men of the village that day assembled raising the frame of the old Academy."²³ Another report, this one second hand, says that "twenty picked men were chosen to raise the building, and. . . to prevent the intrusion of any who might wish to

volunteer their services, those who were the select ones bore upon their shoulders peculiar badges as the marks of their office.²⁴

The record of costs referred to before has, as its second entry, “1822 To 357 feet Pine boards \$3.57,” indicating additional lumber was being purchased besides the thousands of board feet pledged in 1821. The exterior was up and the building closed in sufficiently for interior work to begin in 1823 as is seen from the subsequent entries dated June 1823: 4 bushels [horse] hair for plastering, paper [of] lampblack [for tinting], Spanish white, white lead, 8 boxes glass, to Mr. Porter for painting, to Conneroe for Mason work. It would seem, then, that the building was up and roofed by June 1823. (The deed of June 1823 by which the Baptists bought their parcel across Temple St. refers to the Academy as already up across the way.)²⁵ And that work on the interior was about to or had already begun. In fact, the Presbyterian church records of 2 June 1823 show that there was a vote “that George Hinckley circulate a subscription paper for finishing the room in the Academy for meeting.”²⁶ In other words, by June 1823 there was a room on the second floor to be finished, and, on 11 October 1823, the “session met agreeable to appointment at the Meeting House,” our first recorded use of any part of the Academy building.²⁷

The Presbyterians, of course, were meeting in the upstairs room of the new building. How many other rooms were there and just how big was the building itself? The lot on which the Academy stood was originally intended to be at least 46 feet on the Temple St. side and 50 feet on today's Church St., but when Hezekiah Barker executed a formal deed in April 1825, the frontage on the Common, or schoolhouse lot, was 99 feet, and on Temple St. just over 141 feet.²⁸ One later account says the building was about 35 x 50 feet, another that it was just half of the size it became in the 1850 renovation by John Jones.²⁹ That means, then, that it sat on the lot with a 50 foot wide gable end facing the Common but extending back only 35 feet.

One of those accounts says “the campus was some 40 feet deeper before the Academy was enlarged.”³⁰ That would have put the building's front some 90 feet back from the line of Church St. That matches exactly with the measurements that can be made using the information in the Barker deed of 1825. At the time the Academy was erected, of course, there was no Church St. In its place was the schoolhouse lot and, beyond that, the Common.

The front face of the Academy had a projecting tower, 10 x 24 feet on the inside, with a “bright-tinned dome, with lightning rod and weather vane.”³¹ In 1828 a bell was hung in the

tower and rung on Sundays to signal church services and on weekdays to call the students to class.

There were two entrances, at front and rear. The front entrance was into the base of the tower. The ground floor of the tower made a kind of entry hall and had two doors leading to each of the larger front rooms. There was a partition wall running across the ground floor forming the back wall of the two front rooms. Behind them were two smaller rooms. From the tower entrance hall as well two winding staircases lead to a matching second-floor entry hall. From there one door led into the large, undivided, upper room which was the Presbyterian church. The center of the floor was filled with pews running across the building, with a row, elevated two steps higher than the floor level, running around three sides of the room. There was a high window in the north wall and, under it, “the lofty pulpit with its green moreen cushion.”³³

The building seems, from some early illustrations, to be set on a foundation about two steps above ground level. The ceilings were each ten feet high with an attic above giving a height of roughly thirty feet at the peak, not including the tower/belfry. Later photographs and paintings show two rows of eight windows each (one in the ground floor was converted to a side entrance probably when the 1850 addition was built) and we may assume there were matching rows of windows on the other side, not depicted.³⁴ The original building probably had four windows on each level and each side of the building. At a time before gas light or kerosene, and with candles an expensive luxury, the size and placement of windows was an important consideration for functions like classrooms, print shops, jewelers, etc. We know there was at least one window, a high one, in the second story behind the pulpit. There would not have been one, or just one, at the back of the first floor because it had been designed with a central partition running the length of the building, dividing it in half, and probably serving as a bearing wall for the upper floor as well. There would have to have been windows to light the entry hall/tower and the two sets of stairs. Perhaps they were in the front face of the tower flanking the entrance door. A document of 1825 leasing the right front room, refers to the tenants keeping in repair “their part of the porch leading to the room and the outside [walls] of the Academy.”³⁵ The reference is to the tower/hall entry way itself.

A notation on the back of an 1825 subscription reads “Paid Lathrop Drake \$150.00 for finishing the academy room and \$7.50 for finishing the Porch. Paid for Painting room \$20.00. (The subscribed pledges came to \$158.00.) The room may refer to the school room, the lower right front room, which was leased in April 1825.

As we have seen, the building was to have clapboards for its siding and a shingled roof. There was the projecting tower topped “by its bright-tinned dome,” (another account refers to it as “a central dome spire”) with lightning rod and weather.vane.

The only paints mentioned in the early list of payments are Spanish white (\$5.60), and various quantities of white lead costing in all \$31.62, and the lampblack, so we may assume the building was painted white or an off-white.

If we could be transported back to June 1823, what would we see? What was the setting in which we would find our brand new clapboard Academy? In front of the Academy across the Common we would find broad Main Street running roughly from the northeast to the southwest. It is unpaved; rutted and dusty in the dry weather, muddy in the wet and always redolent from the large amount of horse traffic. It is without sidewalks of any kind. There is, as yet, no street lighting. Along the south side of West Main Street opposite the Common there are some wooden buildings housing the shops and homes of the store-keepers.³⁶ One small building, put up around 1816, houses the Fredonia Censor, then the home of Thomas Warren, set back a bit from the buildings on either side, then the drug store of Todd & Crosby, and two buildings — one at the corner of Water St. — joined to make up the Union Hotel. On the east side of Water St. — which is a dirt track leading only to the edge of Canadaway Creek but not beyond it — where the M&T Bank is now but set back from both streets is the Eliakim Crosby house, next a three-story Masonic Hall, Bosworth’s jewelry store, his house and, on the corner of Eagle St. a tavern. Across Eagle St. is a drug store, a blacksmith shop, and then nothing but timberland beyond it.

On our side of Main Street we see a two-story frame hotel facing the Common. Indeed the Common, which is a footworn grassy lot with no trees on it, runs from the doorstep of that Abell House across to the frame home of Hezekiah Barker facing it from the other side. At the end of the Common and East Main is the two year old brick home of Hezekiah Barker’s son-in-law Leverett Barker, now the Barker Historical Museum. There is no Day St., no Park St., no

Church St. The open field that is the Common fills the entire square except for the small, one-room schoolhouse near the Academy front yard. About where the old Firehall is today, we see the small frame house of Joseph Plumb, then the lot where the white wooden Baptist Church will be going up near the corner of Temple St.

For years there had been two trails, which became streets, running up Canadaway Creek on the high ground on either side. On the west is what we call Chestnut and Seymour streets. On the east side is Temple St., starting at Lake Erie and running along the ridge to the Academy corner and continuing, slanting diagonally across the Common to Main St., where it jogs slightly to become the Cushing Road, (now Eagle St.). Central Ave. has been surveyed but is still virtually impassible to Dunkirk.³⁷

That is the neighborhood in which we find our new Academy building in June 1823. Although it was up and enclosed, and apparently fit for church services on the second floor, there was still no Academy in operation. In December 1823, a special meeting for “all persons who are in any way or shape interested in the Academy and Meeting room” was called.³⁸ There must have been a real sense of desperation that the Academy would never begin to function since it was not until November 25, 1824 that the State Legislature finally granted a Charter to the Trustees.³⁹

By April 1825 arrangements had been made to let School District No.8 lease a ground floor room in place of the little schoolhouse on the Common. The lease was to run for 999 years for a yearly rent of “one pepper corn if the same shall be demanded.”⁴⁰ Perhaps because of this, another subscription list was circulated, in October 1825, to finish “the Lower story of the Academy.”⁴¹ Finally, by year’s end, the State agreed to pay something toward the Academy’s expenses, a young principal/teacher was hired and, in October 1826, Austin Smith arrived to inaugurate the Fredonia Academy, with a class of 15 young men in the lower room on the Temple St. side.⁴² At that point, another change was called for and the School District, on 7 June 1827, purchased a lot on Temple St. on which a stone building was erected, sometimes called “the jail.”⁴³ This move left all of the ground floor for Academy functions as it expanded.

Outlining the later changes is quickly done. In June 1828 a large bell was purchased and put in the tower.⁴⁴ On 17 February 1835 the Presbyterians voted to build a separate church on the adjoining lot, which was dedicated on 24 January 1836.⁴⁵ That gave the Academy needed extra room on the second story. Early in February 1840 Charles Barker deeded an additional piece of land to the Academy which put another 66 feet on to the back of the Academy lot,⁴⁶ and in 1850 the large addition to the front of the building, with the two large corner towers we see in the only extant photographs, was put on, changing forever the Academy building in which so much community effort had been invested. The Academy itself functioned only from 1826 to 1867, but the structure lasted from 1823 to 1890. After the Academy was absorbed into the Normal School, the building served as Village/Fire Hall until a new Village Hall was called for, and the massive timbers were slowly taken down. It is the massive timbers that suggest the character of those people who experienced the long, frustrating struggle to put the Academy building up and make it work, just as their character is aptly symbolized by the building itself, hopefully brought briefly to life again here, solid, strong and quietly enduring.

Notes

1. Andrew W. Young, *History of Chautauqua County* (1875), 475-476
2. D.R. Barker in *The Fredonia Censor*, 4 June 1873
3. Young, 470-471
4. *Miscellaneous Records*, Vol.1,p.90 (at Chautauqua County Courthouse)
5. Rev.C. Allyn Russell, *A History of the Fredonia Baptist Church* (1955), 30
6. *Re-union and Memorial Services* (1874),6-7; *Miscellaneous Records*,1:5
7. *Re-union*, 8
8. *Miscellaneous Records*, 5:89
9. *Re-union*, 8-9
10. *Re-union*, 10ⁿ
11. Pomfret assessment rolls for 1820 and 1821 show Abell and Mullett on Lots 24 and 33, Twp.5, and 14, Twp. 6 respectively
12. Young, 475
13. Joseph Ellicott to Paul Busti, 28 May 1808
14. Original, dated 16 March 1821, at Barker Historical Museum, Doc.#112,0
15. The full text reads: We the subscribers, having it in contemplation to build a house, which shall answer the purposes of an academy and a Presbyterian meeting house, and which shall stand on or within twenty rods of the place where the School house on the northerly side of the canadaway creek, in the village of Fredonia, now stands; do hereby, for value received, severally and respectively, & not Jointly, promise and agree to pay and deliver to Leverett Barker and Thomas G. Abell, such sum or sums of money or other thing or things as are or shall be, by us, set opposite our respective names sbscribed to this contract. The materials for the building of the said house, if any be subscribed by us, to be delivered on the place where the said house is to stand, by the first day of September next. The money or other property, by us subscribed except materials as aforesaid, to be delivered to the said Leverett Barker & Thomas G. Abell, or either of them, in the village of Fredonia, in sixty days after the same shall be demanded; provided that such demand shall not be made before the first day of December next. The size, plan & form of the said house to be ascertained & fixed by a majority of the subscribers to this

paper, who shall attend a meeting for that purpose pursuant to a notice published in the Chautauque Gazette two weeks previous to said Meeting, provided however that the said house shall not be less than thirty six feet by fifty feet. And we do hereby severally and respectively authorize & empower the said Leverett Barker & Thomas G. Abell, in their own names, to commence, prosecute & maintain suits or actions at Law against us, respectively, to compel a performance of this contract or to recover damages from a breach of it.

16. By combining the courses and distances given in a deed by Hezekiah Barker to James Hale (10 March 1815) one by Joseph Plumb to Stephen Savage (11 October 1820), and Stephen Savage to the Trustees of the First Baptist Society (20 June 1823), and references in several surveys of Central Ave.: 27 June 1817; 22 May 1854; and 19 June, 1856; it is possible to “triangulate” the schoolhouse location fairly accurately.

17. Covenant, Hezekiah Barker to the Society for Building an Academy, 3 October 1821 (*at Barker Historical Museum*)

18. Trustees of Fredonia Academy To Leverett Barker (*Barker Historical Museum, Doc.# R-87*)

19. Franklin Burritt, “He Likes the Old Name,” *The Fredonia Censor*, 12 April 1899

20. “The Academy Building Sold,” *The Fredonia Censor* 12 March 1890

21. A bushel of wheat cost 62 cents and pine boards were one cent a foot.

22. When the Village Hall was to be built, the Academy building “and the stone foundation” were to be sold (*The Fredonia Censor*, 5 March, 1890). Paintings and photographs of the Academy building, made after the front portion was added in 1850, show the foundation and the two steps necessary to reach the floor level at the doorway put into the Temple St. side.

23. C.F. Matteson, *The Fredonia Censor*, 8 February 1871

24. *Re-union*, 11

25. Liber 199, p.158; 20 June 1823

26. *Re-union*, 9

27. Presbyterian Church Records, 1811-1827, p.59

28. 12 April 1825

29. “The Old Academy Building,” *The Fredonia Censor* 19 March 1890; “The Old Academy,” 26 March 1890

30. *The Fredonia Censor* 26 March 1890

31. *Ibid*

32. *The Fredonia Censor* 25 June 1828

33. *The Fredonia Censor* 26 March 1890

34. *The Fredonia Censor* of 8 January 1850, stated that John Jones' draft for the building showed it to be 50 feet wide by 78 feet long. The Sanborn Insurance Co. map of 1886 agrees with that measurement.

35. Indenture between Fredonia Academy and Trustees of School District No.8; 12 April 1825 (Barker Historical Museum, Doc. #R-90)

36. The details here are based on an account of Fredonia in 1821 by Levi Risley (*The Fredonia Censor* 28 January 1880), supplemented by the relevant property deeds recorded at the County Courthouse.

37. See various Town of Pomfret and Village of Fredonia road surveys.

38. *The Fredonia Censor* 31 December 1823

39. Laws of New York, 1825, Ch.226

40. Indenture 12 April 1825

41. Subscription Paper; 24 October 1825 (at Barker Historical Museum, Doc.#294)

42. *Proceedings of the Fredonia Academy Reunion* (1867),13

43. Joseph Plumb sold a two-acre parcel to Stephen Savage on 11 October 1820 (Liber 3,p.441). The deed by which Savage later sold the schoolhouse lot, a small portion of the original two acres, to School District No.8 is in Liber 58, p.315.

44. *The Fredonia Censor* 25 June 1828

45. *Re-union*,10

46. Liber 103,p.66; 8 February 1840. Charles Barker to the Fredonia Academy

47. *The Fredonia Censor*, 8 January 1850,2:2; 23 April 1850,2:2.