

The Van Kleeks of Fredonia

(The parents of a child and a young adult buried at Pioneer Cemetery)

by Douglas Shepard / Barker Museum Newsletter (2000)

John M. Van Kleek was born in New York City in **1805**. When he was nine, at the close of the War of 1812 - as his obituary describes it - "he went with **Commodore McDonough** on the U.S. Frigate Constitution, and was absent eight years, during which time he visited many foreign ports in different parts of the world." He seems to have continued as a sailor since the account goes on to say that, "his last sea voyage was with **Commodore Wilkes** on the U.S. Exploring Expedition to the South Sea, when the Ant-Artic was discovered. Of the 400 men on the expedition he was one of twenty-four who survived to return to their homes." The **Wilkes** expedition was in **1838** and lasted four years, until **1842**.

Our next record of **Van Kleek** is his presence here in Fredonia in **1843** with his wife **Jean G. Van Kleek** who had been born in **Scotland**. They had no children as yet and must have rented rooms which served as a shop as well as living quarters. He then rented a store at 16 West Main Street, and made his first appearance in print with an ad in *The Fredonia Censor* of 3 July **1843**.

"**J.M. Van Kleek** [sic] presents his acknowledgements to the public for the very liberal patronage which they have given him in his line of business since his residence in this village; and now he takes this method to inform his friends and the public generally, in Fredonia and its vicinity, that he has opened a Store on Main Street....English and German Toys in all their varieties; Confectionary of a superior quality, Soda water, Pastry, Nut, Fruits." He also offered Ice Cream on Tuesday and Thursday evenings as well as fireworks "at the Buffalo prices."

He called it the The Variety Store and, in an ad of 23 January **1844**, indicated he had added Groceries, Tobacco, Ink, Quills and Steel Pens, and Matches.

He must have done well since, by June **1845**, he was planning to build his own store. On 6 September **1845**, he bought the lot at 8 West Main Street and had a wooden building put up for his store, moving in that October. At the time, there were three wooden buildings that had been made into one at 2-6 West Main Street, called the Union Hotel.

Building on his nautical past, **Van Kleek** advertised his new business with a special emphasis: Ship Ahoy. The subscriber wishes it generally know that by the side of his general stock of Groceries, no RUM is to be found. Is not this a consideration? And one other thing is that his is the only Temperance Grocer in this village; is this not worth another consideration, before purchasing your goods elsewhere?

The **Van Kleek's** first child, **Richard M.**, was born in **18xx**. [*Pioneer Cemetery records also indicate that a child **Francis A.** was born in **1825**.] A daughter, **Elizabeth**, was born November **1845**, followed by **Jean C.** in **1847** and **John H.** in **1848**. **Elizabeth** died in November **1849** at four years of age. Personal tragedy aside, certainly **Van Kleek's** business must have prospered. In March **1850** he paid a hefty \$4,000 for the entire corner parcel, comprising the large building at 2-6 West Main Street, and the land below it almost to Canadaway Street. He planned, he said,*

to build a fine, three-story brick building to replace the old hotel. Instead, in December, he sold the lot the building stood on to **Dudley & Co.** of Buffalo, retaining the land below it on Water Street.

At the same time he bought the lot on the corner of Water and Canadaway Streets, which gave him ownership of all the property covered by today's 15 through 31 Water Street. At that point, he had a building put up on the corner of Water and Canadaway Streets to be run by **Elias Wheeler** as the newly relocated Union Hotel. By **1853**, two small buildings were added to the Water Street property between the **Dudley** Block at the corner and the hotel at Canadaway Street.

Van Kleek seems to have been of two minds about his future. In October **1851** he had renovated the large second-story room over his store as an "Oyster Saloon" to be run during the winter months, obviously seeking to add customers to his business. By **1852** he and **Mr. Forbes** had purchased a 93-acre farm. However, by October **1854**, he was advertising his variety store for lease, with the house at the rear, a barn, and a large oven. In addition, he wanted to sell the Fredonia Hotel (as it was then being called). [*Pioneer Cemetery records indicate that **Francis A. Van Kleek** died in 1852.*] It would seem that **J.M. Van Kleek** intended to move on, since he was planning to lease the house as well. At any rate, none of that happened. He and **Jean** had their fourth daughter, **Catherine A.** in **1854**, and, in **1855**, he enrolled his son **Richard** in the Fredonia Academy, where he would be for eleven terms between **1855** and **1859**.

On 16 January **1856** a mid-evening fire began in the **Dudley** Block itself and ultimately destroyed that structure, a small house just below it on Water Street occupied by **John McCaslin**, **John Van Kleek's** house, standing back of his store and the store itself at 8 West Main Street. Nothing daunted, **Van Kleek** immediately took over the remaining building on Water Street, nearest to the hotel, which had escaped the fire and opened his Variety Store there.

By April **1856**, he had commissioned a three-story brick block in place of the old wooden store at 8 West Main Street. It was designed by **Robert Wolfers** who would build the first Normal School Building in **1867** and his own brick home at 178 Central Avenue, now the College Admissions Office. In addition to being the architect of 8 West Main Street, **Wolfers** also did the interior carpentry while the brick work was done by **Lewis M. Walker**.

The upper floors of 8 West Main Street served as the **Van Kleeks'** residence. Even when he built a small wooden store for himself at 6 West Main Street in the summer of **1860** and moved the Variety Store there, he rented out only the basement and first floor of 8 West Main Street to **J.B. Putnam & Co.** Grocers. Because the Buffalo owners defaulted on the mortgage after the fire, the corner property once again became his at a sheriff's sale in November **1858**, so he now had the entire block of land from Canadaway Street to Main, and west to include the 8 West Main Street location.

It is not entirely clear what happened with the buildings on his Water Street property. He had occupied the one remaining about at 25 Water Street just after the fire. But there is another building that appears about at 15 Water Street where **Elisha Norton** had a flour and feed store, In March **1861** it was occupied by **Harry Boughton**. In March **1862** **James H. Lake** leased another parcel on the **Dudley** lot, perhaps near the site of today's 13 Water Street, building a

harness shop there. By then, 15 Water Street held **Story's** Bakery (later **Caruthers & Co.** Bakery).

In **1863**, **Arthur M.** and **John H. Van Kleek** followed their brother **Richard** at the **Academy** for 7 and 6 terms, respectively, running through **1865**. **Richard** clerked at his father's store as **John** was to do once he completed his studies at the Academy in **1865**. However, even by a year earlier their father was again giving signs of wanting to move on. He was able to sell part of the so-called **Dudley** lot, 2 West Main Street, to **Harry Parker** and **John Miller**, who also intended to build a brick store there. This sale, in March **1864**, forced **J.H. Lake** to move his harness shop building off the lot. However, **Parker & Miller** very soon changed their minds and moved, instead, to the Center Block.

Once again **Van Kleek** advertised his properties for rent or sale and, in July **1865**, he quit-claimed the entire corner property (2-6 West Main Street and down to include 17 Water Street) to his son **Richard**, just turned 21, who quit-claimed, in turn, to his mother, **Jean G. Van Kleek**, thereby protecting the mother's right in the property.

The property being offered for sale included: 8 West Main, **J.B. Putnam & Co.**'s 3-story brick building; 6 West Main, the new brick building **Van Kleek** was in; the Fredonia bakery at 15 Water Street; several lots, and the "double house next to the tavern fence," about at 27 Water Street.

In July **1865**, **Payne & Reid** bought out **Van Kleek** and moved into 6 West Main Street, at which point the **Van Kleeks** moved to Elmira. Two years later, in February **1867**, **John Van Kleek** sold the 2 West Main Street property to the **Putnam Bros.** who really did build a brick store on the lot. At that point, their cousins, **J.B. Putnam & Co.**, bought 6 West Main in **1867**, replacing it with a new brick store in **1869**.

Later in **1865**, **John** and his son **Richard M. Van Kleek** set up as grocers at what was then 218 Water Street in **Elmira**, while the whole family resided at 244 Water Street. In February **1868**, **Richard** married **Miss Sarah C. Hall**, also of Elmira, taking 244 Water Street, with the rest of the family moving to 250 Water Street.

The **1869** Directory lists **John H. Van Kleek** as an artist, **Arthur A.** as a bookkeeper, and **Richard** as a clerk.

John M. Van Kleek died on 18 December **1870** and was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery. The family continued in Elmira at least through **1873**. The **1871** Directory (probably completed late in **1870**) lists **John H. Van Kleek** as a medical student. After the **1872** Directory they disappear from Elmira records.

Jean C. (Jennie) married around this time, but her husband (name unknown) died in **1871**. She later married a **Dr. George Bond** and resided in Philadelphia. **John H.** completed his medical studies and went to practice in Philadelphia beginning in **1873**. **Catherine A. (Kate)** married **F.S. Marsh** in Elmira in **1873** and later moved to Brooklyn, NY. **Arthur A.** became a lawyer and was practicing in Brooklyn in **1886** at 13th Street and 3rd Avenue. **Richard** died in Brooklyn

in **1886**. **Jean Van Kleek**, their mother, resided with **Arthur** until her death on 12 December **1897**, age 84. She was buried next to her husband in Woodlawn Cemetery.

The **Van Kleeks** were certainly not forgotten in Fredonia. Indeed, the obituary notice of **John Van Kleek's** death sounds very much like the work of an old friend reminiscing. It may well have been written by **A.Z. Madison**, a fellow member of the **Fredonia Baptist Church**, since it was to **Madison** that **John's** son **Arthur** wrote a long, chatty letter in May **1888** filling the **Madisons** in on all that had befallen the **Van Kleek** family in the intervening years. The connection may have been with **Richard Van Kleek** who was a classmate of **Madison's** daughter **Sarah** at the Fredonia Academy for four years, but it obviously included the rest of those who were, for a time, the **Van Kleeks** of Fredonia.