

## **What in the World Do We Do?**

*(Joel R. Parker [1812 – 1862] and his gardens, Fredonia's natural gas industry, the Central Avenue transportation lines, and the long process of historical research before the age of the internet)*

*By Douglas Shepard / Barker Museum Newsletter (Summer 1993)*

One of the primary functions of the Barker Historical Museum is to interpret the artifacts as well as the facts or myths of our past. This often calls for some detective work by the Museum staff and its volunteers.

There are innumerable examples. To take but one in **1925**, the late **Henry Leworthy**, who then had an antique and book store at 32 West Main, found in an old scrap book a clipping from 'the Fitchburg (Mass.) *Reveille* of the 13<sup>th</sup>' with the following observations.

*During a recent tour through Western New York, we came across a phenomenon, a description of which may be interesting to your readers. It is natural gas. [...] It is under the beautiful village of Fredonia [...] All that is necessary is to dig a bell-shaped hole where the bubbles rise, put a metre over the excavation and collect the gas. An enterprising individual has been engaged for some months in developing gas springs, and has succeeded in obtaining more than sufficient to light the entire village, (nearly 3000 inhabitants.) One Spring, nearly completed, will supply three thousand average burners. The dimensions of this spring are, depth forty feet; diameter at the top six feet; at the bottom about fifteen feet; rock formation, slate and limestone. One thousand feet of lateral and perpendicular holes, from twenty to forty feet each in length are drilled in the rock at the bottom of the hole, from which the gas rises copiously. The heat of this gas flame far exceeds the common gas flame, and some ingenious Yankee could turn this great natural treasure to valuable account, in manufacturing substances requiring intense heat.*

*[...] Any one can take an omnibus at Dunkirk and go to Fredonia, a distance of three miles, and the visit will be remunerative; for aside from this peculiar feature, the place is one of the handsomest in the state; has a fine common, fountains, shade trees, magnificent residences, good schools, a large Academy, & c. A visit to the large gardens around the village is worth a journey. **J.R. Parker, Esq.** the celebrated garden-seed man, has one of the most extensive gardens in the world.*

When we ran across the item in the *Censor* of July 22, **1925**, of course we wanted to know about it. Unfortunately the scrapbook had no dates so how could we find the original *Reveille* issue?

The first step was to search the article for internal clues and narrow down the date. The first clue was the fact that someone had been digging a gas well and found a good supply of natural gas. The second clue was the reference to an omnibus that ran between Fredonia and Dunkirk. The third, was that the Common had fountains on it. The fourth,

that the Academy was still standing. And the fifth, a reference to **J.R. Parker**, garden-seed man.

So we set out to date each one of the clues. Since we have a clipping file on a whole range of topics as well as biographical and genealogical collections, we went to the subject files first. Under Natural Gas we found that work on a deep gas well had begun in **1857**. A December 15, **1858** article in the *Censor* said “The pipes of the Gas Co. are now laid and burners have been already introduced in the Grocery of **Barmore & Bro.**”

So the date of the writer’s visit was probably around **1858**. Now what about the omnibus? That called for a search of the Street Railroad file. There we found a clipping from the *Censor* that omnibuses (large, horse-drawn street cars) had begun running on April 16, **1852**. The line between Fredonia and Dunkirk was later improved by putting down a set of rails in **1866**, turning it into a street railroad. So around **1858** the omnibus would certainly have been running.

A great deal of research has been done on the Common, and we also have paintings and photographs showing it in its various stages, so it was relatively easy to learn that Fredonia’s municipal water works were begun in **1858**, and the fountains were in place and running by June 12<sup>th</sup>. That dated the article as June **1858** at the earliest.

Was the Academy standing then? That was even easier, since the Museum has a large collection on the Academy, including the Trustees’ records, catalogues, student work and innumerable clippings, photos, etc. The Academy was built in the **1820s**, enlarged in **1850**, and it continued until its work was taken over by the Normal School in **1867**. So that fit also.

Now what about **Parker** the seed-man? In our Seed Company files, filled with material on the businesses of **Thomas Warren, E. Risley & Co., Dodge & Hinckley**, Erie Seed Co., Good Seed Co., Fredonia Seed Co., and the **Card Seed Co.** we found an **1857** reference to **J.R. Parker** who “has cultivated a seed garden the last 17 years”. In our copies of the Town’s assessment rolls, we found **Mr. Parker** with a 6-acre garden beginning in **1842** and lasting through **1861**. The **Births-Deaths-Marriages** files told us that **Parker** died in February **1862**.

Everything seemed to fit, but there were still several more steps. First, did anyone have copies of the *Reveille*? That called for a trip to Reed Library on the College campus. In a printed bibliography of old newspapers, we found that there had been a Fitchburg (Mass.) *Reveille* from March 27, **1852** appearing semi-weekly, on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

The next step was looking in the printed directory of historical societies and museums for an address of a Fitchburg historical society. Luckily one exists, but before we could write, one more step was called for: determining which “13<sup>th</sup>” was the one. Obviously, we would have a much better chance of someone agreeing to search their files if we could narrow it down to reasonable proportions. That meant we turned to our Perpetual Calendar, a chart showing the days of the week for all years between **1776** and **2000**.

Four **1858** Wednesdays and Saturdays that were the 13<sup>th</sup> fell in October and November; in **1859**, in April, July and August.

Off went a letter to Fitchburg and back came a response. Sorry we have only a few issues for those years. Try the American Antiquarian Society, which we did. They too had only a few issues. Very discouraging, but back we went to the old newspapers list to find that the Boston Public Library had some *Reveille* copies. Again a letter went out, and this time successfully.

In its files, the Barker Historical Museum now has a long article about the Village of Fredonia from the second page of the Fitchburg (Mass.) *Reveille* of August 13, **1859**, and you are one of the few people in the world who knows exactly how it got there.