

A Freedom Meeting in Dunkirk, 1856

By Douglas H. Shepard, 2017

During the United States presidential campaign of 1856, the *Westfield* (Chautauqua County) *Republican* of October 1 announced a meeting to be held in Dunkirk (Chautauqua County) NY. The announcement read as follows: “**Fremont** meeting. A mass meeting will be held at Dunkirk on Saturday the 4th, at 1.P.M. Hon. E. D. **Culver** of Brooklyn, Hon. Martin **Grover** of Allegany, and Hon. Geo. W. **Patterson** of Westfield are engaged as speakers.”

The *Westfield Republican* of October 8 followed up with a brief account of the meeting. “The friends of freedom held a large and spirited meeting at Dunkirk on Saturday last. The meeting was organized by electing Judge **Crane**, of Fredonia, Chairman; Rev. Mr. **George**, of Fredonia, was then introduced and made a brief and hap’y speech. The meeting here repaired to one of the large halls of the **Loder** House, having been organized in the open air, and Judge **Culver**, of Brooklyn, the announced speaker of the day, came forward and spoke in a convincing and stirring manner. . . .

"Mr. **Culver** is a forcible speaker and understands well his subject and the point upon which the public mind needs enlightenment. He took it for granted that all viewed Slavery and its workings in the same light, and that the only question with the voters of the North was whether the Constitution and policy will warrant them in restricting it to its present limits. This they have to settle for themselves, and upon them will rest the consequences. . . .”

The **Loder** house had been built in Dunkirk by Walter **Smith** on the southwesterly corner of today's West Third Street and Central Avenue. **Smith** named it for Benjamin **Loder**, the president of the New York and Erie Railroad, which had opened its line to Dunkirk five years earlier.

The presidential candidates in 1856 included John C. **Fremont** (Whig Party or Republican Party), James **Buchanan** (Democratic Party), and Millard **Fillmore** (Know-Nothing Party or American Party). The *Fredonia Censor*, always a Whig/Republican-leaning newspaper, also reported on the Dunkirk meeting, but they chose to give a more brief summary of **Culver’s** talk. The *Censor* also declined to identify by name any other persons at the meeting.

Culver, Grover, and Patterson

The individuals named in the Westfield newspaper make an interesting group, illustrating the variety of attitudes that led each one into the **Fremont** camp. Erastus Dean **Culver** (1803 – 1889) was an attorney, politician, judge, and diplomat from New York City. He was active in the anti-slavery movement and, while in Congress in the 1840s, opposed the extension of slavery to Texas and the territory of Oregon.

As an attorney, **Culver** was part of a team that defended eight Virginia slaves in a freedom suit, *Lemmon v. New York* (1852), successfully gaining their freedom in New York City's Superior Court. **Culver** was later elected judge of Brooklyn's City Court, serving from 1854 to 1861. In 1857 **Culver** decided the well-known freedom suit of a fugitive slave named "Jeems" and set him free by ruling against the people who had detained him, including police officers who hoped to collect a bounty under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

Martin **Grover** (1811 - 1875) was an attorney in Angelica (Allegany County) NY. He was in practice with his uncle-in-law and mentor William G. **Angel**. **Grover** was elected to Congress as a Democrat and served from 1845 to 1847. However, he differed with his fellow Democrats over the issue of slavery's extension into the Territories.

In 1857, **Grover** was elected as a Republican to the New York Supreme Court, to fill the vacancy left by James **Mullett's** resignation. After the Civil War, he re-joined the Democratic Party, pleased that it had acquiesced in the termination of slavery. He was elected to the New York Court of Appeals, and died in office.

George Washington **Patterson** (1799-1879) was born in New Hampshire, but established successful fanning mills in Livingston County, NY. In 1832 he was elected to the New York State Assembly, and served through 1840. In 1841, he moved to Westfield (Chautauqua County) NY, where he ran the Chautauqua Land Office formerly operated by William H. **Seward**.

Patterson was elected as a Whig to the position of Lieutenant Governor of the State of New York, but continued as the land agent in Westfield. He campaigned for **Fremont** at several meetings. For example, the *Westfield Republican* of 29 October 1856 reported that a meeting four days earlier was held in “**Hinckley** Hall, under the shadow of a magnificent flag. Gov. **Patterson** made the address --- an able one.”

Crane and George

John **Crane** (1791 – 1860) was born in Connecticut, later lived in Oneida County, and graduated from Yale in 1812. He came to Fredonia (Chautauqua County) NY in 1817, became a law partner of Daniel G. **Garnsey**, and later a partner of James **Mullett**. **Crane** became a county judge in 1822. He attended the annual meeting of the Chautauqua Anti-Slavery Society in Fredonia on 29 August 1839, where he was elected as a vice president.

Crane and his wife joined the Fredonia Presbyterian Church in 1834, and he was active as the church clerk until the mid-1850s. However, he was then reprimanded by the congregation after mingling some of his clients' estate monies with his own. In March 1856, he made a full confession and his church membership was restored.

Crane's wife was Priscilla J. **Eddy Crane** (1809 – 1878), whose sister was married to Dr. Benjamin **Walworth** of Fredonia. **Crane** lived on today's Church Street in Fredonia, in a house that was once owned by Ralph and Joseph **Plumb**. The house was located in the vicinity of the education wing of the present Methodist Church, and in fact, the house was used after **Crane's** death as a Methodist parsonage until a more modern, Italianate structure replaced it. Neither house remains at this site.

Isaac **George** (1818-1882) was born in Gainesville (Wyoming County) NY but grew up near Springville (Erie County) NY. He attended the Springville Academy. In 1840 he became a Universalist clergyman. In 1841 **George** married his first wife, Mary **Brewer** of Cuba (Allegany County) NY. He served as a minister in both Dunkirk and Fredonia.

George had moved to Chautauqua County in 1854, and at the time that he spoke at the Dunkirk meeting, he was a candidate for the New York State Assembly. He was elected to the 2nd E.D. of Chautauqua County as a Republican. His second wife was Caroline **Robertson**, and his third was

Alice **Town**, who died nine days after giving birth to Isaac, Jr., who died at two months of age in 1881.