Alonzo and William: The Locally Infamous Cushing Boys
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2015

Alonzo Hereford Cushing was named after his uncle Alonzo Cushing (1810 – 1877) and his Uncle Alonzo’s wife Margaret Hereford Cushing (1805 – 1888). William Barker Cushing was named after his uncle William Barker (1786 – 1858), who was married to the boys’ aunt Lucinda Cushing (1794 – 1868). Uncle Alonzo and Aunt Lucinda were two of the seven siblings and four half-siblings of the boys’ father Milton Buckingham Cushing. Milton and his siblings and half-siblings were children of Fredonia’s Zattu Cushing.

After the death of their father, the boys, their mother, and their full siblings were in Fredonia (Chautauqua County) NY about ten years, from 1847 to 1857. The earliest account of the boys during their time in Fredonia was written by Eliza M. Hatch (also known as E. M. H. Edwards) (1835-1914), the second wife of Congressman Francis S. Edwards (1817-1899). According to Hatch, it was Congressman Edwards who helped get Alonzo into West Point and William into the Naval Academy. The anecdotes are found in her biography Commander William Barker Cushing of the United States Navy (New York, 1898).

The book contains a prefatory note by the boys’ sister, Isabel Cushing Bouton, dated Chicago, 17 November 1898: “As the only surviving member of the family, I write to testify to the fact that your history of my brother is perfectly authentic and could only have been written by one who knew him personally and loved him.”

Hatch herself wrote, “The writer had personal acquaintance with Commander Cushing and with his mother, his brothers, sister, wife and daughters and other relatives and intimate friends.” Other sources named by Hatch in passing were letters from William to his cousin Mary Buel Edwards, letters to Hatch’s stepdaughter, and anecdotes from the boys’ sister Isabel.

Hatch also commented about Alonzo’s and William’s father Milton and about Milton’s abolitionist sentiments. Hatch said, “He was a conscientious and active anti-slavery man and gave liberally of his money, and his time, and thought to assist in bringing freedom to the colored man.” Hatch’s own husband had been elected to Congress as a “Know-Nothing,” the party that railed against “foreigners” and “Catholics.” Although an abolitionist herself, the boys’ mother Mary apparently shared the “Know-Nothing” view, unaware of its conflicting prejudices.

The next account of the boys’ time in Fredonia was Theron W. Haight’s Three Wisconsin Cushings (Madison WI, 1910), which included some details about the young Cushings before their father’s death, and also included information following their move to Fredonia. Haight also included information about the boys’ brother Howard Cushing, who worked in the Censor printing office, then in Boston, then in the office of The Farmer’s Advocate in Chicago, all before enlisting in an Illinois artillery regiment in 1862. However, at least one of Haight’s anecdotes about William came from Hatch’s book.

The next account of the boys’ time in Fredonia was David B. Parker’s A Chautauqua Boy in ’61 (Cambridge, 1912), which was primarily about Parker’s own experiences in the Civil War. However, it also included anecdotes about Alonzo and William from the days when Parker
knew them as “a boy of ten or twelve years of age.” Since Parker was born on 25 December 1842, he was most likely writing about events between 1852 and 1854.

The modern biographer Kent M. Brown’s Cushing of Gettysburg (University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1993) provided a summary of the major events in the lives of Alonzo and William Cushing during their ten years in Fredonia. Brown was informed not only by the accounts by Hatch, Parker, and Haight, but also by primary sources found in various repositories in scattered locations.

All accounts indicate that William was full of mischief as a child, but according to Brown, Alonzo was “almost a model child.” Although Brown’s sources are not always clear, he said that Alonzo “was attentive and worked hard from the start; if he was ever in trouble with his mother or anyone else, it was rarely. Lon grew up looking after the interests of his mother. He became, as well, a kind of father figure to his younger brother and sister even as a very young child.

Brown continued, “Lon worried about his brother. He fretted about his [brother’s] pranks and his punishments. The older he grew, the more his concern became evident. Lon never wanted Will to do anything but what made his mother proud. Often he would lecture his brother in an effort to get him to behave, but to no avail.”

Julian R. McQuiston’s William B. Cushing in the Far East (McFarland & Company, Inc., Jefferson NC, 2013) utilized the personal papers of the Cushing family to summarize William Cushing’s life after the Civil War. Additionally, McQuiston provided a wealth of interesting details about William’s often aberrant behavior as a grown man, actions that were reminiscent of the pattern of William’s childhood pranks.

In fact, William’s escapades were mentioned as early as the Hatch book. She wrote, “The following incidents of Commander [William B.] Cushing’s childhood, which are related by his sister, who obtained some of them from her mother, are illustrative of his adventurous spirit and his utter ignorance of fear at an early age.”

Then follow several stories, the first about William at age 3 in Chicago, when he put on his father’s top hat, made his way to Lake Michigan, and walked in. To a sailor who had rescued him, William said his name was “Bill Coon,” a nickname given him by his older half-brother Edward. His older half-sister Rowena finally found him after 36 anxious hours of searching.

On New Year’s Day a year later, William decided to shoe one of his father’s unbroken colts. He was knocked unconscious and lost all his front teeth. In Fredonia when he was ten, he was made the captain of the “Muss Company,” a group of most of the small boys in the village. He attended Miss Julia Moore’s select school but had developed an animus toward her, so he had his band trained to rush out of school whenever he gave the signal.

At one point he was given money to visit his aunt Fanny Cushing in Silver Creek. He spent the money for his fare on a gift. During the train ride he sweet-talked a man into paying for his ticket.
When his pal and neighbor Hartwell Dickenson had smallpox, fearless William kept sneaking visits every day. The 1860 census does verify that Hartwell was a son of the blacksmith Rasselas Dickenson, who lived next door to the Mary Cushing family. By 1860, when the Cushing boys were away from Fredonia, Hartwell himself was listed as a corset maker.

Also according to Hatch, William’s sister wrote, “Will was the ringleader in all the berrying, nutting and fishing frolics.” When sent by “Cousin George White” to take a horse to Arkwright. William harnessed it to an old wagon and had a number of local children ride along to go berrying in Arkwright.

He loved playing jokes on his older brothers. When Alonzo took Julia Greenleaf on a rowing excursion at the mill pond, William got there first and set the boat adrift. At another time one of his brothers invited Julia to a Methodist prayer meeting, and she accepted, spurning William’s offer of his own company. In revenge, he seated himself behind the pair and shouted “very personal remarks” to the tune of the hymn.

Further antics of William were described by Parker, who wrote, “William was the same age as myself, and we were fast friends and playmates, sitting together at the district school. He was very active, full of mischief and humor, but studious. He led and I followed, and we had many escapades. One I remember:

“We had committed some prank in the schoolroom that attracted the attention of the teacher, and he ordered us to remain after school, but we ran out, and the teacher quickly ordered some of the older boys to catch us and bring us back. We ran for the board fence, and by jumping upon it and striking on the breast, had a way of going over head first and landing on our feet.

“Cushing, however, was not satisfied to escape. The nearest boy was close upon us, and Cushing hesitated a moment so that he could kick him with both feet before going over, which however, spoiled Cushing’s fall and he fell upon his hands, breaking one arm. The arm swung limp and he was very pale, but we went on to Dr. White, a relative of his, who set it.

“Cushing was very pugnacious, good-natured generally, but very quick to resent an insult, and he would fight any boy or man without the slightest hesitation. On one occasion in front of a grocery store, we came upon a man who had had some difficulties with Cushing and who turned upon us and said, ‘I’ve got you now and I’ll give you a good spanking.’ Will jumped up on a raised platform in front of the store where there was a barrel containing axe helves, hoe handles, and other things of that sort, and seized an axe helve and struck the man a heavy blow on the side of the head, felling him to the ground.

“He was not a bully, but he was perfectly fearless, and yet had very few accidents, not as many as boys usually. His dash and audacity were coupled with such good judgment in his movements that he seldom broke or hurt anything or injured himself.”

Zattu Cushing: the Locally Infamous Grandfather
The earliest biographical sketch of Zattu Cushing (1771-1839) appeared in a memoir by O. W. Johnson, which was read before the Fredonia Historical Association on 8 January 1864, and then printed in the Fredonia Censor a week later. Johnson had never met Cushing, but knew at least one of his sons. Johnson’s account was later reprinted in his Addresses, Essays, and Miscellanies (Fredonia NY, 1890), and some of it found its way into the Centennial History of the Fredonia Baptist Church in 1908 and into many other local histories.

According to Johnson, and other sources, Cushing’s parents were Nathaniel Cushing (1724 – 1788) and Nathaniel’s third wife Lydia Cooke Cushing (1736 - 1790). According to a letter of 12 April 1846 from Sarah Buckingham Sprague of Pomfret (Chautauqua County) NY to her nephew Benjamin H. Buckingham of Zanesville OH, Zattu was born in Plymouth MA.

Zattu’s half-siblings by his father’s first wife Jemima Ford (1729-1755) were Sarah Cushing (1748-1763), Stephen Cushing (1749-1825), and Jemima Ford Cushing (1751-1832), who married Jonathan Sprague (1744-1841), son of James Sprague (1715 – 1759) and Patience Ford (1723- 1800).

Zattu’s half-siblings by his father’s second wife Anna Turner (b.1735) were Nathaniel Cushing (1752-1824) and Hannah Cushing (1759-1837), who married John Spooner (b. 1745).

Zattu’s full siblings were Margaret Cushing (b.1759), who married Constant Viall or Vails (b. 1759), John Cushing (b.1761), Sarah Cushing (1764-1837), Molly Cushing (1766-1804), another Zattu Cushing (1768-1771), Elisha Stetson Cushing (b.1773), and Joseph Cushing (b.1775).

According to Johnson, Zattu was apprenticed to a ship-builder in Boston Harbor, then moved to Saratoga County (NY) to do farming. He was reputedly ill for several months, and then walked to Paris or Paris Hill (Oneida County) NY, where he and someone called “Mr. Cowan” worked a large farm in the wilderness for two years. Johnson said that in 1795 at Ballston NY, Zattu married Rachel Buckingham (1773 - 1816), whom he had met while in Saratoga County.

However, the 1846 letter from Sarah Buckingham Sprague said that Zattu and Rachel were married at Ballston NY in 1792, and that they then moved from Ballston to Paris NY, “40 miles east of Otsego.” Both Sprague and Johnson agree that in 1805, Zattu moved to today’s Town of Dunkirk (Chautauqua County) NY, which was then known as part of the Town of Chautauque (Genesee County) NY.

According to Johnson, Zattu lived and worked in today’s Erie PA before moving to western NY, and the Judah Colt Daybook, Greenfield, 1798 - 1799 transcribed by Beth Simmons verifies that Zattu was in fact in Erie PA from 1798 through at least 20 May1799.

According to Johnson, Zattu had been hired to build a boat at the Erie harbor, but the Daybook suggests that he may also have been farming. Johnson’s account indicates that Zattu was alone in Erie, but the Daybook suggests that at least part of his family may have been there with him, because one of his regular purchases was flour. Johnson stated that Zattu was traveling “home”
from Erie when he discovered the area along today’s Canadaway Creek that he decided to
purchase.

In fact, evidence indicates that at some time, Zattu must have gone home to Central NY from
Erie, with any members of his immediate family who may have been with him in Erie. Holland
Land Company correspondence on file at Reed Library in Fredonia indicates that Zattu rode to
the company office in Batavia in 1804, then traveled back through today’s Chautauqua County,
staying for a time with early settler Thomas McClintock (1768 - 1838).

Because he was ill, McClintock could only describe some of the locality to Zattu, instead of
escorting him around as was the custom. On 28 September 1804, Zattu left for his return trip to
Batavia, carrying with him a letter from McClintock to the Holland Land Company’s agent
Joseph Ellicott. In Ellicott’s land office, Zattu took a land contract for property in today’s
Dunkirk, and also took an option on a mill site in today’s Laona NY, which was then known as
Cascade.

According to Holland Land Company records, Zattu then handed McClintock’s letter to Ellicott
and left. As soon as Zattu was gone, Ellicott read McClintock’s letter and discovered that
McClintock had wanted the Laona mill site. In a letter dated 1 October 1804, Ellicott wrote to
McClintock, as follows:

“Mr. Cushing having contracted for the refusal of the Cascade Mill place…previous to his
handing me your letter, which was at the instant he left the office, it is out of my power….There
is something in this transaction a little mysterious to me, otherwise I should have supposed that
he would have presented your letter on his arrival. However, under present circumstances you
will easily see I am unable to do anything in the business.”

Johnson said that in early 1805, Cushing sold his farm in central NY, packed up his household
goods and four cows, and left with his wife and their five children in two sleds drawn by oxen.
With them came two men Zattu had hired to help in chopping at the new home in Dunkirk. Also,
Seth Cole (1750-1810) and his family accompanied Zattu’s party.

After three weeks they reached Buffalo NY, and from there drove out on the ice and encountered
a terrible storm. According to Johnson, Zattu blew on a dinner horn to summon help. About one
in the morning, two men heard the call, brought lanterns to the shore and guided Zattu’s party
onto land near Eighteen Mile Creek, several miles south of Buffalo.

Nothing ever came of Zattu’s mill site in Laona, and he eventually relinquished it. Johnson’s
account and the Holland Land Company records both indicate that Zattu farmed in
Dunkirk a couple of years, and then in 1807, around and near today’s 171 Eagle Street in
Fredonia NY, Zattu purchased 550 acres of land and built a log cabin. The Eagle Street property
was located near a ford on the Old Erie Road, and had been relinquished previously by
McClintock back to the Holland Land Company.

Hezekiah Barker, later the father-in-law of Zattu’s daughter Lucinda, owned the farm containing
the ford itself. Reputedly, Zattu lived in a cabin above the ford, at the intersection of the Old Erie
Road with today’s Eagle Street, which was then a major north/south trail or highway through today’s Chautauqua County. Zattu lived there about five years, then about 1812, built a frame house next door, part of which may be part of the home at today’s 171 Eagle Street. In 1818, he expanded the home to more closely resemble today’s appearance.

Johnson’s memoir and early records of the Fredonia Baptist Church indicate that Zattu and a handful of other families founded that church in 1808. The congregation originally met in Zattu’s barn. According to Johnson and according to Andrew W. Young’s History of Chautauqua County (Buffalo NY, 1875), Zattu was appointed the first “First Judge” of the county when it was organized in 1811.

According to Johnson, Zattu served in the War of 1812 “as a private in the battle at Buffalo.” He had prepared a large supply of provisions, which he took with him when he rode into the city for battle. The provisions were not needed after all, so when Zattu returned home and found a starving family who had fled from Buffalo, he handed them a large sack of doughnuts and went on his way. The Mosely W. Abell family, who had been saved by the gift, settled in Fredonia and re-told the story many times.

In 1817, New York State passed legislation encouraging agriculture and requiring that any agricultural society should be organized at the Court House of the particular county. A group at the county seat in Mayville NY called a meeting to establish a society under that law. Zattu along with Abell’s brother Thomas made their way with a few others to Mayville on the day before the meeting. However, they had secretly recruited many others to appear at the last minute.

At the meeting, their superior numbers meant that the Chautauque County Agricultural Society was established with Zattu as its President, and that the first County Fair was held in Fredonia instead of Mayville. This was some retribution for Zattu, since Mayville had earlier become the county seat in spite of lobbying by Fredonia.

After the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, Zattu designed a canal boat and built it on his farm with the help of Joseph Sprague. Johnson said they named it The Fredonia Enterprise and towed it to Dunkirk using a hundred yoke of oxen. There it was filled with “Todd & Douglas” flour, towed to Buffalo, and launched onto the canal. Reputedly, that was the first wheat ever sent from Chautauqua County to the New York City market.

In 1829, Zattu was involved in a serious division in the Fredonia Baptist Church related to Freemasonry. At a meeting of 24 June 1829, both Zattu Cushing and longtime church member Loring Crosby were admonished and questioned. The upshot was that the church “withdrew the hand of fellowship” from the two men, meaning that they were expelled. It was not until 1837 that Cushing was readmitted to the church. When he died in 1839, he was referenced in the church records as “Hon. Father Cushing.”

Zattu’s children of record are Lucinda Cushing (1794 – 1868), who married William Barker (1786 – 1858), son of Fredonia’s early settlers Hezekiah Barker (1757 - 1834) and Sarah Wood Barker (1764 - 1851); Walter Bradley Cushing (1796 – 1856), who married Eloise Ransom (born 1797) and died in WI; Lydia Cushing (1798 – 1886), who married Fredonia’s Douglas
Houghton (1788 – 1825) and then Fredonia’s Squire White (1785 - 1857); Milton Buckingham Cushing (1800 – 1847), who married Abigail B. Tupper (1804 - 1833) and then Mary Barker Smith, mother of Alonzo and William; Zattu Cushing, Jr. (1802 – 1869), who married Mary A. Cushing (1805 - 1840) and then Ann White Smith (1818 – 1894); Catherine Putnam Cushing (1808 – 1887), who married Fredonia’s Philo Hull Stevens (1803 – 1865); Alonzo Cushing (1810 – 1877), who married Margaret M. Hereford (1805 – 1888); Rachel Cushing (1813 – 1854), who died in OH and may not have married; Judson Elderkin Cushing (b. 1818), who may have died in CO; Addison Cary Cushing (1820 – 1891), who married Elizabeth King (1824 – 1848) and Ellen Cumming (1832 – 1884) and Esther Pritchard (1841 – 1929); Sarah Margaret Cushing (1821 – 1824); and Frank Cushing (1825 – 1858), who died in Fredonia.