

Barker Common

By Douglas H. Shepard, 2013

In December 1803 Thomas **McClintock** took up articles (land contracts) from the Holland Land Company for Lots 8, 14, and 20 of Township 6, Range 12. These are three 360-acre lots in an east-west row. At the center of the middle lot, which is Lot 14, would be located the park that we call Barker Common. (Lot 14 runs roughly from Chestnut Street at Main to Newton Street, and from just below today's Maple Avenue down to Hamlet and Water streets.)

There was an ancient Indian trail using the beach of the glacial lake that preceded Lake Erie. This trail ran from Buffalo Creek southwest to Erie and beyond. Because Canadaway Creek had cut such a deep channel, the trail, about where Route 20 is today, had to leave the "beach" somewhere in West Sheridan and drop down to cross Canadaway Creek as a shallow ford in the southeast corner of Lot 14, on the flats below where Union Street now intersects Eagle Street. It was at the juncture of the Creek and the trail that **McClintock** built his first home here, a log cabin. By 1806 he had decided to move on and Hezekiah **Barker** took over his article for Lot 14 and moved his family into the cabin, which **Barker** also used as an inn for travelers and new settlers. At the time, the community was defined by the location of that single trail and the creek — the two avenues of transportation in and out of the tiny settlement.

The creek, Canadaway, an anglicized version of the Native American name meaning "running through the hemlocks," was first called "Cascade," referring to the falls at today's Laona, a natural site for the mills that were so important to every early community. Because **Barker's** Lot 14 did not include those falls, he looked about for a mill site on his land and found it where today's Main Street crosses the creek.

Whether he had a village plan in mind from the beginning, we do not know. Certainly one developed very quickly. **Barker** brought in a man to construct a dam just south of today's Main Street bridge and, in partnership with Richard **Williams**, another early settler, built a grist mill and a saw mill. The tailrace from the saw mill, just south of Main Street, became the headrace for the grist mill across the way. (It is still there, under a much higher West Main Street's pavement.)

Once the mills were up and running, early in 1808, a well-worn trail must soon have developed leading from outlying farms to today's Main Street and to the mills. By coincidence, or design, when the first death took place in the new community — a little girl killed by a falling tree in the Fall of 1807 — **Barker** offered a burial site at the northeast corner of his Lot 14, just where the trail crossed his land (today's Pioneer Cemetery). Also in 1808, he built a log cabin/inn at the corner of today's Park and Main streets and moved there with his family.

Pioneer reminiscences make clear that it was understood very early that the land in front of **Barker's** cabin was to be used in common by the other settlers, although the legal transfer did not take place until many years later. Of course, **Barker** couldn't have deeded it at first because he was still paying off his land contract. In 1809 a crude bridge was put across the high bluffs of Canadaway Creek just between the two mills and the main road was moved to run directly across the center of **Barker's** land, past the burial ground he had donated, his Common, his inn, and his mills, permitting easy access from both sides of the creek.

At the time, there were two major trails or roads running northwest to southeast on either side of the creek. The one on the east, now Temple Street, ran from Lake Erie at the

mouth of the creek along the high ground parallel to it. (Originally, its last leg ran somewhat west of today's location, ending in front of **Barker's** log cabin/inn.) Access from the south was via today's Eagle Street. What is now Water Street was just a stub of a trail to the creek's edge, since there was no bridge across until the 1830s. That meant the natural route to the south was down Temple Street, then angling across the Common, a slight jog on Main Street, and then continuing down Eagle Street.

The Common originally was as heavily wooded as the surrounding land. An account by **Barker's** granddaughter says that when Hezekiah discussed dividing his lands among his children, they let him know they would under no circumstances accept that "pesky black walnut grove" which was the Common. Another, often repeated account, explains that one way convicted drunkards could work off their fines was by removing stumps from the Common.

In 1808 **Barker** had hired two men to chop and log the Common and, in that same year, had the first school house put up about where the driveway from the Village Hall parking lot runs into Church Street. There are references to it as a simple log structure and as a framed building. It is likely that the simpler one of 1808 was replaced, in 1812, by a frame one, since a survey of a change to part of Temple Street, dated 25 January 1813, begins at a point 33 feet from "the new schoolhouse."

In 1812 **Barker** finally paid off his debt to the Holland Land Company and received a deed to his land. His son William took a 100-acre piece in the western part of Lot 14, and son Barzillai 100 acres in the east, leaving their father with the center strip, which included the Common. **Barker** had been leasing house and store lots before this time, especially along the Main Road. By 1814 he had built himself a fine new home where the Post Office is today and sold his tavern lot to the **Abells**. (It was one of the **Abells** who is supposed to have had the Common plowed for the first time and seeded in 1818.) Within the year, the **Abells** had removed the 20 x 24 foot log tavern, 1½ stories high, and replaced it with a 2-story framed building (approximately at today's 1 Park Place). In 1815 **Barker** sold off the lot now defined by Temple, Church, Center and Barker streets. In 1818 Joseph **Plumb** put up a frame house next to the lot where the old Fire Hall building stands today, just west of the Methodist Church building, usually referred to as "the **Crane** house."

The earliest organized religious groups here, the Baptists and Presbyterians, had been meeting at any convenient location until such time as their numbers and finances permitted their construction of permanent meeting houses. The Presbyterians were formally incorporated in December 1819 and the following January voted to build. Two sites were suggested, both on west hill near today's Chestnut and West Main streets where another, a rival, cluster of homes and shops had been developing.

To help guarantee that the center of the village — and therefore the more valuable real estate — remained the area around the Common, the **Abells** came up with a plan to build an Academy (where today's Village Hall stands), with the second floor being deeded to the Presbyterian Church.

A petition/contract was circulated during the Spring and Summer of 1821. Hezekiah **Barker** must have agreed to provide the land, because the location is referred to in the March 1821 document, although he did not formally covenant to give the land until the following October. (By that time, by agreement, all the material for putting up the building was on the ground.) In the same year, 1821, Leverett **Barker**, Hezekiah's son-in-law, began building his

brick home at the southeast corner of the Common facing Main Street (today's **Barker Museum**).

It is significant that although Leverett **Barker** had purchased the parcel, which took in land from his father-in-law's home lot across and south of Main Street, in 1816, he then built a tannery and small frame home on the south side of Main Street, waiting five years before committing himself to the expensive brick home in its permanent location. By then, where the "center" of the small community lay, must have been quite clear.

Early in 1822 the Academy building began to go up and was closed in and roofed by June 1823. The Academy lot was measured as 99 feet on "the schoolhouse lot" and just over 141 feet on Temple Street. The building itself was about 35 x 50 feet, set back some 90 feet from today's Church Street line.

In 1823 the first Baptist Church building was put up across Temple Street from the Academy, and the Presbyterians were in the second floor of the Academy. In April 1825 the local school district arranged to lease a ground floor room in the Academy building, abandoning the old one-room schoolhouse on the Common, which was probably moved off or taken down soon after.

On April 12, 1825 Hezekiah **Barker** formally deeded the Academy Lot to the Academy Trustees. There must, at the same time, have been protracted negotiations about regularizing the status of the Common, but the only sign of that is the record of the annual Town Board Meeting of 7 April 1825, which "voted that the Trustees of the Common for the town of Pomfret be authorized to rectify any mistake in the former survey of H. **Barker** to the town of Pomfret."

There does not seem to be any "former survey" extant, however the errors, if any, must have been corrected, because 11 days later, on April 18, 1825, he deeded the Common to Zattu **Cushing**, Leverett **Barker**, William **Barker**, Moseley W. **Abell** and Oliver **Barnes** "in Trust, for the inhabitants of the said town of Pomfret as a Public Square or Common." Since only two of those named were elected officials, they must have constituted the "Trustees of the Common," appointed to act for the town.

The description of the property lines of the Common begins at the corner of the old Fire Hall lot and the north line of today's Church Street, then runs South 54°20' East 5.48 (chains) to the south east side of Main Road, North 51° East along the road 6.35, North 39° West [now the east line of Day Street] 6.75, South 40°30' West [the north line of Church Street] 7.88, encompassing 5 34/100 acres. In other words, the Common — the center of the young community — as Hezekiah **Barker** had defined it was a five-acre parcel, an expanse of grass, crisscrossed by human and animal traffic, touching the doorsteps of **Abell's** tavern, the Baptist Meeting House, the Academy Lot, **Barker's** own home lot, the side yard of Leverett **Barker's** brick home and the front doors of businesses and some small houses on the south side of Main Street.