

“Anniversary Meetings” and the Anti-slavery movement  
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2014

When Alexis de Tocqueville was studying the young American nation in the 1830s, he was particularly struck by one aspect of American life. That was the tendency to form associations, as he called them, in response to interest in a subject or a desire to make changes in society. That was certainly the case for Chautauqua County. Once past the pioneering years of 1804 through the 1820s, settlers in Chautauqua County had time to form groups that were involved with improving agriculture, performing music, or discussing literature, for example. Although not all these groups survived for too long, there was one subset of these groups that deserves special attention for various reasons. That subset consists of the gatherings called “County Anniversaries.”

In his 1845 series of lectures on Chautauqua’s early history, S. A. **Brown** noted that in 1829 “the Chautauque County Temperance Society, auxiliary to the State Society, was organized.” In the same year the Chautauque County Bible Society, the Chautauque County Sabbath School Society, and the Chautauque County Missionary Society were formed. Every year from that date, the four groups (and sometimes others like them) met together in late August or early September. They often met in one of Chautauqua County’s Presbyterian churches.

Apparently the goals of these groups set them apart from the “special interest” associations as redounding to the good of all of society, not just a portion of it. The phrase that was always used in reference to the meetings is “benevolent and philanthropic.” It is significant that the Chautauqua County Anti-Slavery Society, begun in Dunkirk in 1836, was added to the “Anniversaries” group in August 1838. That year, Rufus **Jones**, Secretary, advertised in an August issue of the *Fredonia Censor* that the Anti-Slavery Society would meet at Westfield, where the “County Anniversaries” were being held, and that “abolitionists are respectfully invited to attend, and all who feel an interest in this glorious cause.” A report of the meeting appeared in the *Censor* on 5 September 1838, as follows:

TO THE EDITOR:

Sir,—Having been a gratified spectator of the proceedings at the anniversary meetings held at Westfield last week, I feel unwilling they should be suffered to pass off entirely without notice. The first meeting was that of the Chautauque County Sunday School Union, Rev. Washington **Winsor**, President. The reports from the different towns exhibited an encouraging prospect of the success of these primary seminaries for forming good citizens and good society, and the

speeches of several individuals present were well calculated to prompt to further exertion and more ardent zeal in so good a cause.

The Chautauque County Bible Society—Hon. Elial T. **Foote**, President—next held their meeting. The resolution adopted some two or three years ago by the society to furnish every family in the county with a Bible, it was discovered had involved the society in a debt of between seven and eight hundred dollars; and the great anxiety of the friends and supporters of the society was that this debt should be immediately concealed; and the spirit manifested on the occasion, and the measures proposed by the preserving [*sic*] president, and adopted, gave earnest that such would soon be the desirable result.

The Chautauque County Anti-Slavery Society—R. P. **Johnson**, Esq. President—next presented their claims to the community. Comparatively little has been done in this county in this cause of philanthropy and right; but the resolutions introduced and ably sustained by several individuals gave assurance that it was henceforth to take rank with the most benevolent institutions of this reforming age.

The Chautauque County Temperance Society—Joseph **Waite**, Esq. President—next claimed attention. This society it was apparent had done much good in lessening the evils of intemperance and abolishing the hitherto almost universal custom of using ardent spirits in the domestic and social circle; but it was apparent that much remained yet to be done to gain a complete victory over this monster vice. The absurdity of the license system was brought under especial notice, and a resolution adopted to use all laudable means to have amended or done away a law granting a *bounty* for the sale of ardent spirits—a law that would disgrace even the dark ages.

The several objects of these different societies having been passed upon during the day and evening of Wednesday, on Thursday an interesting exhibition of the scholars and teachers of the Sabbath Schools of Westfield and those in its immediate vicinity took place; an exhibition well arranged and executed, with the single fault (and a fault altogether too common) of keeping the children, after marching, in a standing position for an hour or more to hear addresses.

The ceremonies were closed by a discourse in the evening upon the subject of anti-slavery, by the Rev. Mr. **West**, of North East, Pa. a gentleman who had done much to give interest to the several topics discussed, having taken part in each of the discussions. To show that this subject is beginning to receive the attention its importance demands, we have only to state that the house was more completely filled upon this occasion than any other with an attentive audience. And this is one great point gained in this cause—the days of mobism [mob-ism] are in a measure over—people are now willing to hear upon this as well as upon other subjects—are willing to *discuss* it, which is more than half in achieving a victory over oppression. The subject of the speaker was the sin of *neutrality* in this cause of benevolence which he illustrated and enforced by bible arguments, in a manner which I doubt not produced no very agreeable sensations among some of his reverend and moral professing brethren present; several of whom though acknowledging the great evil and sin of slavery, and *professing* a great desire for its being done away, are too deeply imbued with what one has aptly termed an “irredeemable shinplaster morality” to stem the popular opinion and act in accordance with their better feelings and sense of duty.

The good people of Westfield are deserving of much credit for their hospitality to strangers, and their exertions to give satisfaction to all.

AN OBSERVER.

Rev. **West's** discourse was of particular significance, because although the anti-slavery society had been the third of the four sessions, the anniversary groups as a whole concluded the day with a return to the question of anti-slavery. Ironically, it may have been this very emphasis on abolitionist causes that later caused the anti-slavery group to cease attending the annual event. By 1840, when the "Religious and Benevolent Societies in Chautauque County" met at Jamestown on the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of August, the abolitionists met in Fredonia on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>. One intention of the conveners was to establish "an abolitionist party in politics."

This must have raised enough eyebrows to challenge the make-up of the anniversary meetings. The point was made very clearly in a letter of 5 August 1844 from Rev. Samuel G. **Orton** to the anti-slavery activist Judge E. T. **Foote**. In response to a letter from **Foote**, **Orton** wrote, "As you say, the Antislavery cause was in former years connected with our anniversaries but it [anti-slavery] had not then assumed as it has since a political attitude. It was at the time discussed in its moral bearings. And we desire to keep our county anniversaries as far removed as possible from giving any pretext to the charge of political maneuvering."

**Foote** and **Orton** were discussing something that had already occurred a couple years earlier. The annual meetings of most of the groups had continued to be held jointly, but the anti-slavery society seems to have been meeting separately. In August 1842, the anniversary meetings included the Bible Society, the Temperance Society, the Foreign Mission Society, and the Sabbath School Union. Also on the agenda, as the last item of business, was the consideration of forming a "County Home Missionary Society" and a "Tract Society." In 1843 a "Temperance Society" was once again included. Yet, the anti-slavery society was not included in 1842 or 1843.

According to an announcement in the *Censor*, an anti-slavery "county convention" met separately at Sinclairville in 1843 "to nominate suitable candidates for the Elective offices of the County at the ensuing election. Patriots – Friends of the equal rights of all men, rally in your strength from every town in the county to this gathering of Liberty-men." From then on, anti-slavery activists in Chautauque County worked both publically and underground for their cause, right up until the Civil War.

Also, as seen in several subsequent announcements in the *Censor* over the years, the other benevolent societies that made up the “County Anniversaries” were still meeting together at least until the Civil War, but attendance at those anniversaries may have been waning. For example, the announcement for the 1859 anniversary meeting had a plaintive postscript: “Will ministers call the attention of their congregations to this subject?” The next meeting was to be in Sherman, and a report in the *Censor* of 26 September 1860 sounded an ominous note: “It is to be regretted that there was not a more full attendance from abroad. Those who were there felt that these Anniversaries must not be given up. The people of Sherman determined that they should not die there. If they die anywhere, it is to be feared they will die on the lake shore.”