

Major John Joseph Skinner  
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2000

In our last newsletter we told the story of the rise and fall of the Cascade Hamlet, Joseph **Skinner's** dream. That account focused on the building and its occupants. In this follow-up article, we want to tell you more about the builder himself and the legal and economic difficulties he went through.

John Joseph, son of John and Sarah (**Kennedy**) **Skinner** of East Windsor CT was born on 25 March 1772. On 24 April 1794 he married Phoebe Maria **Bull**. A daughter, Sally Paine **Skinner**, was born in 1796 and a son, St. John Bull Lawrence **Skinner**, on 4 December 1797. After Phoebe's early death, Joseph (as he was known) married Amelia **Richardson** on 14 January 1805. Of that marriage, Phoebe Bull **Skinner** was born in 1805; Eugene Franklin **Skinner** in 1807 (he lived only eight months); and another Eugene Franklin **Skinner**, born 13 September 1809. (He later founded the city of Eugene OR.) By 1809 the family was living in Essex NY. Amelia (**Richardson**) **Skinner** died in March 1810 leaving Joseph **Skinner** with four children aged from their teens down to six months. They were still living there when the War of 1812 broke out.

During the Battle of Plattsburgh in September 1814 Major **Skinner** fought as part of the militia while his older son, St. John, 16, served with **Aiken's** Volunteers. This was a group of some 20 boys who scouted the woods to report on British troop movements. They constituted a rifle company, fighting at the village bridge on 6 September and, in what was probably the most significant battle of the war, a major engagement on 11 September. Major **Skinner** was briefly captured by the British at one point, but managed to escape.

At what point Joseph **Skinner** came to Fredonia, why he did so, and whether he came alone or with the children — or some of them — is still unclear. He first appeared in local records in 1818, although he may have arrived earlier. On 19 March 1818 Hezekiah **Barker** sold what became the Cascade Hamlet lot just west of the Main Street bridge to Joseph **Skinner** of Pomfret for \$20.00, so he was legally resident here by that date. On the following 27 June he mortgaged his half interest in another lot to Richard **Sanger** of Whitestown, Oneida County, for \$200 (although there is no record of **Skinner** buying the half interest in the first place).

That second parcel was known as the Still Lot. It was a triangular piece on the north side of Main Street, west of the bridge, directly opposite the Cascade Hamlet lot, with a frontage of 165 feet on Main Street. Around 1812 it had an ashery on it run by James **Mark**. By 1816 it had a distillery run by Daniel **Warren**. **Barker** sold the lot with the distillery to its operators, Jesse **Holly** and Daniel **Warren** in May 1816. However, **Warren** defaulted on his payments and by May 1817 the distillery was gone. It was after that that **Skinner** acquired his half interest.

We know that **Skinner** had been building the Cascade Hamlet during this period, with the frame going up in August 1819. On 4 October he mortgaged the property for \$300 to "Walter **Smith** and Jacob **Ten Eyck** Merchants," payment with interest due in April 1820; on the 14th he sold it outright to "St. John Bull Lawrence **Skinner** of Plattsburgh" for \$440. St. John was then 21 years old.

It was almost three months later, December 1819, that the first occupant William **Hart** took up residence in the Hamlet. Although Joseph **Skinner** apparently paid off the mortgage on the Cascade Hamlet lot, courtesy of his son, he was not able to do so for the Still Lot. On 24 January 1820 Richard **Sanger** advertised that **Skinner's** half interest was to be sold at auction in Whitestown. In the following September, St. John **Skinner** took a one-year mortgage for \$350 on the Cascade Hamlet lot.

Since St. John **Skinner** is consistently described as "of Plattsburgh," these must be his father's plans that he was carrying out as the nominal owner of the property. However, Joseph **Skinner** must have been doing more than just trying to find tenants for his Hamlet. The records of Fredonia's Masonic Forest Lodge show a payment to him of \$22.50 "To 18 Days work in finishing Hall," that is, some interior

carpentry on the new Masonic Hall at today's 9 East Main Street. The entry adds "Endorsed **Porter & Skinner** a-c July 3, 1820."

Whatever the Major was doing turned out to be not enough. By May 1821 he had been imprisoned as an insolvent debtor and his creditors were notified by the required newspaper advertisements that his "estate" would be "assigned" pursuant to the Act of 7 April 1819. Following the standard procedures of the time, **Skinner** petitioned to have his "estate" assigned for sale to satisfy his creditors and free him from jail. On 8 August 1821 Judge Zattu **Cushing**, presiding over the hearing, accepted the testimony offered and freed him. Joseph **Skinner's** name, which had disappeared from the assessment rolls, once again appeared paying the taxes on the Cascade Hamlet in 1822 and 1823. The assessed valuation went from \$200 to \$300, an impressive increase indicating things seemed to be going well for the Hamlet enterprise. It was early in 1823 that the occupants and their leader, Joseph **Skinner**, felt confident enough in their status to form the Cascade Hamlet Mechanic Society. Another sign of confidence was St. John **Skinner** "of Plattsburgh" buying from Hezekiah **Barker** a small lot just below the Hamlet lot, giving **Barker** a mortgage for the purchase price of \$72.00. That was late in September 1823. Joseph **Skinner** built a tannery there. A description of the property in a later deed indicates that the tannery was built onto the Hamlet, which means it was attached to some of what had been intended as living quarters: "being the same lots on which the Cascade Hamlet and the tannery attached thereto stand. . . ."

This all suggests a growing sense of confidence in the Major's enterprise. Indeed, according to **Young's** History, **Skinner** was elected to the vestry of Trinity Episcopal Church in April 1823, which certainly argues for a sense of permanency. That leads to the question of whether he had any family with him. A standard biographical sketch of Joseph's younger son, Eugene F. **Skinner**, says he "was favored with particular attention by his father, and when he attained the age of fourteen years was taken to Albany, Green county, Wisconsin, among relatives who were all interested in his welfare."

Eugene turned 14 on the 3rd of September 1823. If he had been living with his father, we might have expected this greater involvement in the community and positive economic signs to guarantee his remaining here. We do not know, but the move to Wisconsin strongly suggests that he had been left in someone else's care since 1818, perhaps St. John's. Eugene's older half brother had married in 1820 and he and his wife had three daughters born to them. If this is an accurate picture of the state of affairs in 1823, why would not Eugene's father, a vestryman and an involved local citizen, have taken his son, no longer a baby, to live with him, unless he still had concerns about his financial future? If that was Joseph **Skinner's** motivation, he was right. No matter the apparent signs of good times ahead, in May 1824, St. John and his wife Phoebe **Mooers**, had to sell the Cascade Hamlet and tannery lots to David J. **Matteson** of Fredonia for \$925.00 plus the mortgage with interest still due Hezekiah **Barker**. Whatever the positive signs had been, they had failed to materialize.

That should have been the end of Joseph **Skinner** in Fredonia, but it was not. The new owner, David **Matteson**, paid the annual taxes on the Cascade Hamlet in 1824 and 1825. There is no mention of the property in the 1826 or 1827 assessment rolls, which merely means that the assessor, or clerk, didn't bother indicating the name of the property next to the name of whoever was paying on it. In fact, The *Fredonia Censor* of 25 May 1887 reported that the Hon. David M. **Bennett** of Watertown had been a student at the Fredonia Academy "over 60 years ago" [1826-1828] and that his father had been "one of the owners" of the Cascade Hamlet. The Assessment Roll for 1826 does show an Alden **Bennett** paying on a lot of the appropriate size in the appropriate place (Lot 14, Twp.6, Range12). The A's and the beginning of the B's are missing for 1827, but the property reappears in 1828, assessed to "**Lester & Skinner** - Hamlet." **Skinner** may well have continued to manage the operation in the intervening years and, perhaps for a time after 1828 as well. There is no entry in the 1829 or 1830 rolls; David **Matteson** is back in 1831; and thereafter, nothing. When Levi **Risley** returned to Fredonia in 1833 he found the Hamlet "deserted and going to ruins," so we may imagine that Major Joseph **Skinner** had left Fredonia

somewhere between 1828 and 1831. The Old Major died in Hawkesbury Mills, Canada, on 4 January 1844, in his 72nd year, leaving us with the memory of a brilliant though flawed venture, and a street whose name is the only permanent memorial to his Hamlet.

(Note: Most of the essential information about the **Skinner** family was generously provided by Keith A. **Herkalo** of Plattsburgh NY.)