

Street Wise in Fredonia

*(The history of Fredonia's earliest streets, which were named after pioneers such as **Barker, Risley, Cushing, Berry, Seymour, Hart, Davis, Forbes, Newton, Glisan, Gillis, Norton, Dunn, Howard, and Leverett**)*

By Douglas Shepard / Barker Museum Newsletter (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2005)

In the 14 May 1959 issue of *The Fredonia Censor*, **Miss Elizabeth Crocker** discussed the naming of Mechanic Street and touched on the later controversy over its renaming, as well as that of Center Street. (The column was reprinted in Vol. I of her pamphlet series, also titled *Yesterdays*, on pp. 5-6. There were minor typographical changes in the later version as well as two spelling changes. Her original "impliments" was corrected to "implements," and "latter" was changed, in error, to "later." This suggests that anyone consulting one of her columns would want to check both versions. In this case, the substance of the original stayed the same.)

Although she does touch on others in some of her columns, this was the only one devoted to one particular street, although there are many interesting aspects to the stories of other early streets in the Village.

For the 21 years before the Village was incorporated, the location surveying and upkeep of all roads, paths, lanes and alleys were done by the Town of Pomfret. Unfortunately, in the Town records only the official designation was used and that was always a brief description of where a road started, or ended, or what it passed by, not its name as it was commonly used at the time.

A good example is the survey done by **Samuel Berry** on 16 April 1822 of a road across or through private property: "Survey of a private Road from the village of Fredonia on the East side of the Creek down the same to a little below the House of **Hezekiah Turner** on the west side of the creek. This Road...[runs] to the Eastwardly end of the Bridge that crosseth the Creek near **Mr. H. Turners** thence...to the public Road on the Westwardly side of the Creek." The road's measurements begin "25 links North East of the North East corner of **Capt. C. Burritt's** village lot."

That northeast corner was the intersection of the center line of Main Street with the new street being laid out. The "Bridge that crosseth the Creek" near **Mr. Turner's** is what we now call the **Risley** Street bridge. The "public Road on the Westwardly side of the Creek: is today's Chestnut Street. The survey itself was of the Mechanic Street **Miss Crocker** wrote about: today's Forest Place.

It is impossible to imagine that anyone intending to walk or ride along such a road used the cumbersome surveyor's formula of "the road that runs from...." Surely the locals had some kind of shorthand, such as the **Turner Road** for Chestnut Street and, perhaps, **Burritt's** Road or the Mechanic Road.

There are some small bits of evidence to that effect. In an advertisement of 2 July 1827, **J. Crane, Esq.** of Fredonia and **S. Russell, Esq.** of Buffalo offered for sale a two-story house "corner of **Cushing** and Main Streets." That is, East Main Street.. and Eagle Street (where **Zattu Cushing** lived). Obviously, then, the surveyor might call it "the road from Buffalo to Erie," but the locals just said "the Main Street." We can imagine this was true of most if not all of the other streets in the Village which finally were given their official names once the Village was incorporated, and that was on 18 September 1830.

There were eight streets all within the new Village's limits, which were very different from today's. The Village bounds were roughly rectangular, with the east end about at Newton Street, the west end near Chestnut Street, with Main Street center line. The long sides of the "rectangle: were each 80 rods or 20 chains (for the mathematically challenged, 1320 feet) from the Main Street center line. That means the Village's northern limit on Temple Street, was just past Terrace Street, the southern limit on Water Street just past the Liberty Street intersection.

Within those confined bounds, the eight streets were: Main, Hamlet, Mechanic, Temple, Eagle, Water, Factory and Lake.

We have seen that “Main” had been in use for some years. “Hamlet” referred to the Cascade Hamlet on West Main Street. The road had been roughly cut through by **Joseph Skinner** to give easy access for “the citizens of **Bull’s Mills** [Laona] to get to the mechanics of the great center, the *Hamlet*.” Therefore it would seem it made sense for the street to be named according to the location it was designed to reach. However, the Cascade Hamlet was, by September **1830**, abandoned. It is more likely that the road had been called “the Hamlet Road” for so long, the name was maintained simply because of its familiarity.

“Mechanic,” the name given to the street we call Forest Place, had been its nickname, according to an account of its early history by **Franklin Burritt** in the *Fredonia Censor* of 12 April **1899**. In fact it is parts of **Burritt’s** account that **Miss Crocker** repeated in her **1959** column on the subject. **Burritt** explained that the Trustees decided to make the nickname official, first, because there was a large foundry and an accompanying blacksmith shop, both of which employed many “artisans and craftsmen,” that is, mechanics. The second reason was that “two thirds of the denizens of the street were mechanics.” He then listed a sampling of the names: **Harts, A. Barnaby, T.G. Abell, Wm. Tappan, Cyrus Grannis, P. Crosby, W. Stevens** and **Jesse** [i.e. **Joseph**] **Starr**.

When **Miss Crocker** repeated **Burritt’s** account she reversed the order, giving the impression that the primary reason for the street’s name was the people who lived there in **1830**. Probably her strong interest in local individuals and their family histories caused her to see it that way, but **Burritt’s** sequence was the right one. For one thing, some of the mechanics he lists as living on the street were not there in **1830**, when the name was agreed on. For example, **Barnaby** had died in **1829**, **Sennett** didn’t join the foundry operation until late in **1831**, and **Starr** only arrived in **Fredonia** in **1840**, so the workers at the foundry must be given the credit for making the Mechanic Street nickname official.

The next name to be considered is “Temple.” This could have referred to a family of that name living on the road at the time, or to a religious building. There is only a single record of such a personal name, a “**Mr. Temple**” who was paid \$50 for supplying a yoke of oxen in the building of the Academy in October **1821**. However, it’s clear “Temple” meant “church,” although it not clear why the latter name wasn’t chosen. There is good evidence that, after the Baptist Church building was erected in **1823**, the nickname, as **Burritt** called it, was, in fact, “Chapel Street.” An advertisement of May **1841** for **D.D. Franklin’s** Cabinet and Chair Shop: -- the ad was still running in December **1843** -- describes the shop as on Chapel Street. It seems odd that the most grandiose of the three possibilities was chosen, but at least it is clear what the street name referred to.

The reason for the next name is not so clear. What had been the **Cushing** Road for a long time -- It was referred to that way as late as the 24 September **1828** issue if the *Censor* -- suddenly became Eagle “Street.”

One reason for not continuing with “**Cushing**” is that most of Fredonia’s pioneers, such as **Hezekiah Barker, Zattu Cushing** and **Elijah Risley**, were still alive. There were not enough streets to honor all, so the decision was probably made to avoid trouble by honoring none -- for the time being. But why “Eagle”? Did it refer, patriotically, to the American Eagle? If patriotism was the motivation, Washington, Liberty, Union or Columbus seem to be more obvious choices. Perhaps someone saw -- or shot -- a particularly fine eagle in the vicinity. We may never know, but it has been Eagle Street ever since **1830**.

The next one, “Water Street,” is straightforward. This was a little stub of a street giving easy access to one bank of Canadaway Creek (The Water Street bridge was not built until **1833**.) As a convenient watering place for horses and oxen, it probably was called Water Street from the beginning.

Near Water Street was the next one, today’s **Norton** Place, then called “Factory Street.” This was a very early access road, leading from the **Cushing** Road (Eagle Street) to a mill on the bank of Canadaway Creek. It was probably not named Mill Street because, in **1830**, the mill was on West Main Street at the bridge. (In fact, although “Factory Street” was still its official name according to the Village Trustees’ Minutes of 18 June **1849**, by the time the 1851 map of Fredonia appeared, it had indeed become Mill Street, which it remained until **1919**.) The only real oddity about Factory Street has to do with the language, not the street. “Factory” is a short form of “Manufactory,” a word formed from Latin meaning hand-made.

Why that was used for a building containing machinery is probably to be explained only by those who understand the difference between flammable and inflammable, or ravel and unravel.

We have now arrived at the last of our **1830** Village streets, Lake Street. That referred to the few feet of today's Central Avenue then lying within the Village bounds. Technically the name should have gone to either Chestnut Street (but in **1830** outside the Village limits) or Temple Street, since those had always been main roads to Lake Erie. What we call Central Avenue had been surveyed in **1808** from Dunkirk Harbor, at the time known as Strong's Bay, but it was not used as a through road until the **1850s** because parts of it were virtually impassable. Apparently without any formal action, it was being called Dunkirk Street by **1849** and by **1863**. When Dunkirk was agitating to name its street "Central Avenue," the *Censor* editorialized that Fredonia should do the same. There is no record of when the change was made official, but the *Censor* used "Central Avenue," in an article of 14 October **1865** as though it were now the correct name. The Trustees must have agreed because a Village survey of 28 May **1866** of Newton Street, and all later references, from that time to this, as the old tales say, call it Central Avenue as well.

Of course, that is not the end of the story. The Village bounds were increased twice more, and streets were altered, added and had their names changed, sometimes in odd wondrous ways. Spinning off of **Miss Crocker's** article entitled "*Mechanic St. Named by the Trustees*" originally published in the *Censor* and republished in her *Yesterdays*, our own historical research has concluded those eight streets were existent in Fredonia in **1830**, but many more were soon on the way.

We should understand that these eight streets were not created by the Village but, in a sense, inherited. Until the Village was incorporated, all the thoroughfares were Town of Pomfret roads, and each one was designed to lead from one fixed point to another. The act of incorporation defined the outline of the new Village and the parts of the roads within those new boundaries became our streets. It was not until two years later that the first street created just for the Village appeared. Canadaway Street, laid out on November 15, **1832**.

The most significant fact about the first street to be created by the Village was that it led nowhere; there was as yet no Water Street bridge. **Isaac Saxton** and **Alanson Buckingham** had petitioned the Trustees to lay out the street through their property, solely so that they could sell off building lots to prospective home owners. A notable "first" in the history of the Village, but a practice that was to become the norm.

Three years later on May 18, **1835** the next street was recorded as **Barker** Street. Since **Hezekiah Barker** had died on July 5, **1834**, it would seem this was the first opportunity to honor one of Fredonia's pioneers who was safely departed, unless it was named for **Leverett Barker**?

It is worth pointing out here that there is almost no record of the deliberations that must have gone into choosing each street's name. Except for an extended article such as the one by **Burritt** or chance remarks in other sources, we have no way of being sure what the namers had in mind. We are forced to guess as with **Barker** Street. On the same date as **Barker** Street, two others were also added to the list, Nassau and Green. Green for a local family? For local trees? Unfortunately, we don't know.

For Nassau Street we are told the source. In the April 12, **1899** article in the *Censor* in which **Franklin Burritt** objected to changing Mechanic Street to Forest Place, he mentioned in passing, that Nassau Street "had been suggested by the **Risleys** in honor of a great historical personage and a street in New York City." Nassau Street in lower Manhattan was named in honor of **Maurice of Nassau**, Prince of Orange (**1567-1625**) who first freed the Netherlands from Spanish rule. However that does not explain why either a short New York City street or a Dutch prince was something a short Fredonia street should honor. Our Nassau Street only ran as far as **Barker** Street. For that matter, why the English chose to change Pye-Woman Lane, its name at least until **1696**, to honor a Dutch prince is equally mysterious. Nevertheless, they did and the **Risleys** did. Where Nassau Street was to run had been an alleyway from Main Street giving access to the rear of a large, wooden hotel – in **1835** it was **Abell's** hotel – where the trash bins, outhouses and horse stables were located. No wonder when Nassau Street was opened, the local wags referred to it as Nasty Street. Unfortunately, there were other unpleasant aspects to the street yet to come, but that we will get to soon enough.

In May **1837**, the Village of Fredonia enlarged its bounds. The new configuration was a square 1 ½ mile on each side with its center at the west side of **Barker** Common. That meant the eastern bounds along Main Street moved from today's Newton Street out to Clinton Street and the north bounds from Terrace Street to today's Cottage Street. What that meant was more roads within the Village jurisdiction. So by March **1839**, the Board of Trustees were ready to name the roads and paths it had recently acquired: Ridge (later **Seymour**), Chautauque, Chesnut (it was frequently spelled that way), Garden (the street from Mechanic to Temple, i.e., **Risley**), and **Berry** (where **Samuel Berry's** home stood).

In **1846** Ridge Street changed to **Seymour** and in **1847** the Nassau Street troubles began. The three **Risley** brothers had built their packet seed business into the largest enterprise in Fredonia at the time. To put things into perspective, in **1847** when each field worker in the **Risley** concern earned \$6.00 a month, property taxes ranged from \$1.00 to \$4.00 and up to \$10.00 for those with homes and businesses. **Charles Burritt** the druggist, **Franklin's** father, paid a respectable \$11.87 that year, and **Henry Frisbee**, owner of the *Censor* \$11.87. The **Risleys** paid a total of \$71.01! Their closest competitor was **Leverett Barker** for whose brick home (the Barker Historical Museum) and tannery he paid \$53.57. Clearly, the **Risleys** were very important. Another sign of their standing in the community was having the architect **John Jones** design and build their three Greek Revival mansions at the northern edge of their seed gardens.

The three were spaced out along Garden (now **Risley** Street); **Elijah, Jr.'s** near the Creek, **William's** in the middle and **Levi's** near Temple Street. It was **William Risley** who took the next step. On April 7, **1847**, he presented an "Application" to the Village Trustees proposing that Nassau Street be "extended across **Barker** Street to Garden Street." A two-man committee was appointed to go with a surveyor to look into the matter. The committee consisted of **Suel H. Dickinson** and **Thomas Warren**. **Warren** had married a **Risley** sister, **Philena**, in **1810** and, in the **1840s**, with a small seed company of his own, had used the **Risley** Seed Co. wagons to distribute his seeds country-wide. We could not call him entirely disinterested, so it is not surprising that the committee returned at 7 PM that same day with a report in favor of extending Nassau Street according to a survey already completed.

The survey itself is a very peculiar document. The center line of the proposed street began at Main Street and ran northwest 1,160 feet to today's Terrace Street. There it stopped abruptly, made a right angle turn some 60 feet, left 97 feet, left again 60 feet, and then northwest on its original course some 1,115 feet to Garden Street. The odd jog was to avoid running Nassau Street extension through a building that happened to be standing in the way, a building owned by the other local power, **General Leverett Barker**. So the evening meeting concluded with instructions to the Clerk to "draw [up] a notice & serve [it] on **L. Barker** tomorrow that the street is laid according to the same [survey]."

In May **1847** **Barker** took his case to the Court of Common Pleas, claiming that the Nassau Street extension crossed his land, which had been improved and cultivated. The court decided in favor for **Barker** and declared the Trustees' action reversed and annulled. (At the same time, **Barker** had his own street, Terrace Street surveyed, although it was not officially opened until August **1851**.)

The Trustees – **Thomas Warren** was the one to make the motion – agreed that no work was to be done on the stretch of road between "Garden Street & the South line of **Gen. Barker's** Land" and that nothing was to be paid to **William Risley** for work on that section. **Risley**, for his part, appealed the decision, lost his appeal and then requested and was granted permission by the Board "to bring a Writ of Certiorari in the name of the Corporation" provided he execute a bond of \$500 "to save and keep harmless the said President [Mayor] & Trustees & their successors in office from all costs and expenses in the prosecution and determination of said suit." The Writ of Certiorari was to ask a superior court to review the lower court's decision. The Trustees had said "you're on your own" and **Risley** had answered "I haven't given up yet."

There is no further record in the Trustees' Minutes of the outcome of all this, except that Nassau Street did go through. Perhaps the issue became moot when **Gen. Barker** died on May 11, **1848**. The next mention of the street, on April 5, **1851**, is that its name was to be changed to **Center Street**.

That too raised a fuss, according to **Franklin Burritt**.

*I remember distinctly the clamor that was raised over the changing of the name....It was a question for some time whether the name, **Center**, should stick or that of **Nassau** be restored....The questions were pertinently asked. Why **Center Street**? Center of what?*

Of course, the answer, as **Burritt** knew perfectly well, was the center of **William Risley's** Greek revival mansion standing midway between those of his two brothers. No longer would one have to go down Mechanic or Temple streets and then in on Garden. There was now a single, grand avenue going directly from Main Street to the heart of the **Risley** enclave.

There is another set of Village streets that came about through a lawsuit. **Hezekiah Barker's** son **Charles** died intestate on July 7, **1840**. The estate was probate, but a dispute between some of the heirs caused the whole matter to end up in the courts. Ultimately, **William Barker** brought suit against his brother, **Samuel Barker**, "and others." The outcome was that three Commissioners in Partition were appointed to settle the matter. They determined that **Charles Barker's** property, a large rectangular parcel on the east side of Central Avenue with a kind of blunt arrow shape at the south end, should be surveyed into building lots and the lots auctioned off with the proceeds divided among the heirs. The formal survey was dated October 18, **1852**. It had taken twelve years to settle the matter.

The lots along Central Avenue were immediately accessible, but to reach into the rest of the land required laying out some new streets. Therefore, **Day** Street was to run from today's Church Street northwest to Dunkirk Street (Central Ave.), while Free Street (Lambert Avenue) was laid from Temple northeast to a corner, then north parallel to Central Avenue. Those two streets gave access to the lots on the south and east. To do the same for interior lots, another street was laid across the middle of the land dividing it roughly into two halves. It was called Division Street, today's Curtis Place.

Day, Division and Free were officially admitted as public streets in November **1852**. The fact that Day Street began at Church Street calls for some explanation. The **1851** map of Fredonia shows **Barker** Common with **Day** Street running from East Main Street to Church, and Church Street from **Day** almost to Center Street. However both are outlined with dotted lines meaning they were proposed streets, not yet officially accepted by the Village, because the Village did not own the land. On April 18, **1825 Hezekiah Barker** had finally deeded the Common he had long promised to the Town of Pomfret. In November **1852**, it still belonged to the Town, which meant that Village residents, when walking along the paths they called **Day** Street and Church Street, were legally walking on the edges of the Town Common. For the same reason the Village's **Day** Street as laid out in **1852** could only begin at the edge of the Common and run down to Central Avenue.

It was not until some twenty years later that a transfer was made. On May 6, **1878 M.M. Fenner** Supervisor of the Town of Pomfret appeared before the Board and stated that he did not feel authorized to expend the sum usually ordered by the Board of Trustees for Care and Keeping of the Parks [the two halves of the Common]. He therefore offered in behalf of the Town of Pomfret to place the custody of the Parks in the hands of the Board of Trustees – until the Voters of said Town at the next annual meeting shall have an opportunity to take action. The offer was accepted, and on March 17, **1879**. The following communication was ordered on file and the proposition accepted.

*Fredonia N.Y. March 17, **1879***

To the President and Board of Trustees of the Village of Fredonia.

Gentlemen:

The following is a correct copy of a resolution adopted by the electors of the Town of Pomfret at noon of Tuesday February 18, 1879 in town Meeting assembled.

Resolved – That the Public Parks belonging to the Town of Pomfret but located in the Village of Fredonia be placed in the custody of the President and Board of Trustees of said village.

I have the honor as present custodian of the public property of the town, to tender you the custody of the public parks, in accordance with this Resolution.

Respectfully yours
Milton M. Fenner

That is when Fredonia's **Day** Street was finally allowed to begin at Main Street.

Church Street had a similar history that adds to our understanding of how Fredonia's streets developed. Its presence on the **1851** map makes clear that there was *de facto*, a street named "Church" long before it became official. The first Baptist meeting house on the corner of Temple and Church streets was dedicated on December 4, **1823**. Earlier that year the Presbyterians had purchased the second floor of the Academy building on the opposite corner of Temple Street. There can be no doubt where the "Church" street name came from. The name for Free Street appears first in the survey of **Charles Barker's** estate in **1852** and must be related to the furious debates then raging over the Fugitive Slave Act and all the other free vs. slave states issues. The same is probably true for Liberty and Union streets, which appear, like Church and Day, within dotted lines, as proposed streets on the **1851** map.

It seems odd that in a self-consciously patriotic place as Fredonia there are so few "patriotic" street names other than Washington Avenue (**1891**). There was a Ludivici Street established in February **1904**. Some speculate that this was the early Link Street, given the name Link in **1914**, and others might have proof of a different story. Also, there was Pulaski Street in **1947**. Both apparently honoring foreigners of note, but otherwise no Adams, Jefferson, Franklin or even Lincoln.

By far the most frequently used source has been personal names, either to honor those who were gone or commemorate the owners through whose lands the streets were laid. We have already noted **Berry**, **Seymour**, **Hart** (for a while, then **Davis**, then **Hart** again) **Barker**, **Leverett**, **Day** and **Lambert**. To these we could add **Risley**, **Newton**, **Forbes**, **Glisan** (the original name of the **Newton** Street leg at East Main Street), **Gillis**, **Clinton** (originally **Ball Street**), **Cushing**, **Norton**, **Dunn**, **Howard**, and many more.

There is one other class of streets we should touch on before we close. That is Fredonia streets of record that never existed. The compilers of certain kinds of reference books, for example biographical directories such as *Who's Who* or city directories, work very hard gathering and verifying the accuracy of their listings. An unscrupulous competitor could easily copy the whole thing – claiming to have done the research himself – or abstract a group such as Doctors and Dentists of Western New York to make a separate publication and an easy profit. To fight this kind of piracy, compilers build in fake biographies and, more important for us, fake streets.

Fredonia residents in **1972** were probably quite surprised to find their Village streets included Dresden Avenue, which ran from Nellie Lane south to Pasture Street. Or that Griffin Way reached from La Bonte Avenue to McCormick Lane, and Pepper Road went from Nellie Lane, at least according to *Manning's Dunkirk and Fredonia Directory*. By the time of the **1979** Directory, Nellie ran from Dresden to Hill Road, while Hill Road didn't seem to run anywhere. Griffin Way survived into **1980** as did Nellie, Pepper and Emily. In addition, Sand Hill Drive was added, running from "Gansett easterly" although, according to this listing, Gansett didn't run anywhere either.

There are a multitude of ways we can look at our Village streets, past, present and non-existent, but as we have seen, the one consistent theme that links them all is that each has a story to tell.