

Zattu Cushing arrives in Chautauqua County: The rest of the story

By Douglas Shepard (August, 2006)

The arrival of Zattu Cushing, Sr. to the Fredonia area was described in the "Centennial History of the Fredonia Baptist Church," among other documents. The story goes that, "As Zattu traveled back home [from his work at Presq'Isle, PA] he was overwhelmed by the exceptional beauty of the landscape he discovered accidentally when he lost his way [in our familiar Fredonia-Temple Street area]."

The road Cushing used was a very crude one running about where an ancient Indian trail had gone from Buffalo Creek west. Today's Rte.20 (Main St. in Fredonia) pretty much follows its natural contours from Buffalo to West Sheridan. There the trail dipped sharply south to avoid the deep cut where today's West Main St. bridge spans Canadaway Creek. The trail angled down towards Webster Rd. crossing today's Eagle St. where Union St. intersects. Below the crest of that hill the Canadaway was wide and shallow, a natural fording place.

Cushing came east on that trail with a saddle and a pack horse, camping somewhere past Fredonia. During the night his pack horse escaped and began the trek back so that, in the morning, Cushing had to mount up and retrace his steps. By the time he had found the runaway and turned east again, dusk was falling, so he camped on the rise above the ford. In the morning, when he awoke, as the article says "he was overwhelmed by the exceptional beauty of the landscape" and he determined to have it for his own. That was in 1799.

The account of his coming here with his family on the ice of Lake Erie dates to February 1805, but he visited here before that. Cushing was a hard-headed New Englander who would hardly have sold his holdings, packed up his family and worldly goods and traveled all those miles just on the chance some land might be available to him.

What happened was that in September 1804, Cushing traveled here and stayed with Thomas McClintock who already had a contract from the Holland Land Co. on the lot Cushing wanted. (McClintock had contracted for Lot 14, the 360-acre lot that is the center of Fredonia as well as Lot 20 to its west and Lot 8 to its east. Lot 8 is what Cushing had his eye on.)

He stayed for several days looking at various sites, including Laona with its natural falls, the Cascade, suitable for a mill. When he left McClintock and rode to Batavia, he carried a letter from McClintock to the Holland Land Co. agent, Joseph Ellicott. At Batavia he signed up for parts of lots 26 and 27 (straddling the Dunkirk line) as well as taking an option on the Laona mill site. McClintock had requested the same mill site in a letter dated 28 September which he had entrusted to Cushing to deliver. In his reply of 1 October, Ellicott described what had happened: "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."

As Holmes said to Watson, "These are deep waters."

Four months later, in February 1805, when the Cushings came on the ice of Lake Erie, he knew which land was to be his. Despite his efforts the Laona mill was never built although he continued to hold on to the rights. That may have helped discourage McClintock sufficiently that he, in effect, traded his Fredonia land for some lots in Westfield. The old contracts reverted to the Holland Land Co. so that Hezekiah Barker was able to take up Lot 14 instead of the land he had originally wanted in Portland, and Zattu Cushing finally got his Lot 8, building a log cabin on the heights at his old camping spot next to the Indian trail. From there, he could look down and see the smoke rising from the chimney of McClintock's log cabin, home now to Hezekiah Barker and his family. Fredonia was about to be born.