

Interesting Tale of Hannibal Told by D.P. Morehouse

Copied from the Oswego Daily Times, Thursday Evening, June 5, 1924

At Founder's Day, Oswego Lawyer Recounts Fascinating Story of Early Days

D.P. Morehouse of this city delivered an interesting address on "Founder's Day," last Thursday at Hannibal high school in which he gave much historical data of interest to residents not only of Hannibal but of Oswego city and county as well.

The Times today publishes the address in full, as follows:

"We meet to celebrate 'Founders' Day'. Founders are those who lay the foundations, and in a sense there are many founders. But the founders whom we are to talk about are the men and women of the generations that cleared the wilderness, that built the houses and the bridges and the roads, and created the farms that we are enjoying today.

"One hundred and twenty-five years ago the site of this village was a part of a vast unbroken, pathless wilderness. Its dense solitudes stretched from the mouth of the Oswego river westward along the shore of Lake Ontario to Big Sodus, thence to the Seneca river, down that river to River Point, and thence down the Oswego to its mouth. In all that territory there were only two or three families and they were located at Three River Point or Oswego Falls. There were no roads and no bridges. If at that time a boy had been set down upon the spot where we are now assembled he might at any moment have met a bear, a wolf, a panther or possibly a hunting party of Iroquois Indians. He would have been lost in the tangled woods and would probably have died from starvation.

Hannibal a Military Township

"During the Revolutionary war congress promised 100 acres of land to all soldiers who would volunteer, and the state of New York promised an additional 500 acres of land to all volunteers who should become soldiers from this state. Later the legislature of New York assumed all unredeemed obligations of the general government to New York soldiers, thereby becoming obligated to give up each of the soldiers from New York 600 acres of land.

"After the war was over the legislature of this state caused the vast wilderness I have described, with other lands, to the westward, to be surveyed into military townships, and the townships in turn divided into lots of 600 acres each. One of these townships was named the military township of Hannibal and it extended from the Oswego river west to the Cayuga county line, and from the lake southerly into what is now the county of Onondaga. The present town of Hannibal is a part of the old military township of Hannibal.

"These 600 acre lots were allotted to the soldiers entitled thereto. The names of the soldiers were put into a large wheel like the jury wheels of the present day, and an equal number of lot numbers were put into another wheel. One man drew from one wheel the name of a soldier, and at the same time another man drew from the other wheel the number of a lot. This present village of Hannibal consists of the whole of Military Lot 67 and a part of Lot 58. Lot 67 was drawn by John F. Vacher, surgeon.

“The purpose of the state was two-fold, to pay its obligations to the soldiers who had done the fighting and had endured the hardships and privations of the war which established this nation, and at the same time wished to bring about the settlement of this great tract of forest.

Asa Rice Early Settler

“Asa Rice, who entered the Revolutionary army from New England, but who had rendered most important military service in this state, purchased from a New York state soldier the title to Military Lot 2. This lot consisted of 600 acres of land fronting upon the lake about four miles west of Oswego at the mouth of the Unionville Creek, and extending back to include the present hamlet of Union village.

“In 1797 Asa Rice with his wife and eight children came by boat through Oneida lake and Oneida river to Three River Point; thence down the Oswego to Lake Ontario, and thence out upon the lake to his lot, where the family landed October 6, 1797, alone on the bleak shore of Lake Ontario, on the edge of this vast wilderness, and nearly at the commencement of winter. One of his boys, Arvin, at the time of his landing 11 years of age, about 1809 came into the present town of Hannibal and built a log house where the house of Charles Sayer now stands in Oswego street and cleared a farm. He later built the present Sayer house and lived there until his death at the age of 92. I knew him for many years. He was “Uncle Arvin” to all his neighbors. He has two grandchildren now living in the village, and possibly they may be in this audience. Ernest W. Rice and Mrs. Maria Rice Clark. He was a strong man, broadminded and progressive, and full of courage, a natural leader.

Hannibal at Defense of Oswego

“Half a mile further north on Oswego street from the home of Arvin Rice lived two other pioneers whom I remember, Abram Watson and his wife. He also bought a considerable tract of land in the town in 1808 from which he carved three farms. He took part in the defense of Oswego when it was captured by the British in 1814. His widow gave me an account of that occasion. She said the first news they got of the coming of the British was the booming of the cannon. Her husband mounted his horse and rode to Oswego where the battle was in progress, and then rode back to arouse the militia with whom he hurried back to the defense. She told me that his horse was of a dark color, but when he got back from his ride you could not tell the color of the horse because of the foam that covered him. I suppose if he had been of the fibre of some of the members of the peace societies we read about, instead of seizing his rifle and hurrying to the defense of his country, he would have fled to the wood and crawled into a hollow log, and let his neighbors defend his country. But he was not made of that kind of stuff.

Lives of Toil and Hardship

“The lives of those first pioneers were filled with the hardest of toil. Their rule of work was sunrise to sundown. The land was heavily timbered. The chief instruments for the clearing of the forests were the axe and the oxen. In the early days the trees were felled, cut into logs which were rolled together and burned. When the first settlers came into the town of Hannibal, matches were unknown. They depended for fire upon the flint and steel and tinder box. Sometimes when a tall tree had been cut down fires were built at different places along on top of the trunk and these fires would be tended and replenished by the children until they burned through and the tree thus made into logs. Money was scarce. Only a few products would bring cash. Potash was one of them. Asheries were established, ashes were leached and the lye boiled down into potash. Mrs. Abram Watson told me that cherry

lumber was sometimes drawn from Hannibal to Albany. To the winter the farmers also sometimes hauled wheat as far as Albany on sleighs.

A Self Reliant People

“The people learned to depend on themselves. They raised the sheep, spun the yarn wove the cloth and made the clothes. In the later years in a way that was typical of the industries of the villages. Even the small communities had the tailor, the tanner, the shoe maker, the wagon maker, the hatter and the casket maker.

“Naturally it was only men and women of the stoutest hearts that had the courage to leave their old homes and face the dangers and endure the hardships of accident and disease, and the privations of a life in the wilderness. That natural courage was developed by their pioneer lives.

“I cannot quite understand it, but the figures show that I have been an actual witness of a generous half of the developments and the changes of this long period of 125 years in the town of Hannibal. Since I came with my mother and father into this town in 1850 I have seen the building of the present Presbyterian church, the Methodist church and the building of many of its houses and I have seen the coming of the radio, the telephone, the telegraph, the electric light, the railroad, the good roads, the rural delivery, and the automobile.

The Railroad

“Let me say a few words about the railroad. The railroad running from Oswego to Lewiston on the Niagara River was built because the city of Oswego felt the need of a direct rail route to the west, and because of the demand for railroad facilities of the people living in the very productive stretch of territory lying between the New York Central on the south and Lake Ontario on the north. Public meetings were held, newspapers agitated the question, and finally a railroad company was organized called the Lake Ontario Shore Railroad Company. The road was built with bonds, bonds issued by the city of Oswego and the various towns along the line, as well as bonds issued by the company itself. As the law then stood, any city, village or town through which a project railroad was to run, might issue its bonds and exchange them for stock in the railroad company. Oswego city issued bonds to the amount of half a million dollars for this road. The town of Hannibal issued its bonds in the sum of \$60,000 and the village for \$6,000 more, all bearing seven per cent interest. Those bonds were exchanged for an equal amount of the stock of the railroad company. The village bond, and I think the town bonds, were issued on the condition that the railroad should pass within half a mile of the store of Silas W. Brewster now owned by John McFarland. Those bonds with interest were bitterly opposed to the bond – neither town nor village received anything for the stock, barring possibly one or two cents on the dollar, for the mortgage upon the railroad company was foreclosed, and upon the foreclosure sale the property was bid in by the Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg Railroad Company.

“Of course some of the taxpayers were bitterly opposed to the building, but the investment was a good one. To quote one of the old men, there was never a time when the town would have traded the road for bonds.

Locating The Railroad

“The location of the railroad was practically determined by the executive committee of the company. Whether it should run through the town of Hannibal or run farther to the northwest, was a question that was in suspense for many weeks. The influence of Alanson S. Page of Oswego, a member of the executive committee, finally prevailed and settled the question in favor of Hannibal. The road thereby secured a larger patronage than if it had run nearer the lake. The surveyors run different tentative lines, one of them crossing my father’s farm, crossing the Fulton Road near the William Stock house. The present line was finally adopted, and about mid-summer 1872 the rails had been laid as far as the present depot and an engine with a car came up with a delegation from Oswego.

An Earlier Railroad

“But there was another so-called railroad which passed through the town and the village long before the coming of the present line. There were at least three stations in the town, each with its agent. I have seen passengers traveling by that road, and I knew these three agents very well, but I never saw the rails of the road. It was called the Underground Railroad. Its only passengers were black men and women fleeing from slavery in the southern states and hurrying on by night to the Dominions of Great Britain across the lake. One of the agents in the village was Silas W. Brewster, who lived in and owned the house which is the present residence of Raymond Shutts. Another agent was “Uncle Arvin” Rice and another was Eli Watson.

The Lincoln Campaign

“The most enthusiastic political campaign the town ever saw was at first election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. The Republicans organized marching clubs called The Wide Awakes with blue oil-cloth caps and capes and flaming torches, and the Democrats, also with torches and uniforms, paraded as “Little Giants” named after their candidate Judge Stephen A. Douglass, called the Little Giant. Rivalry in pole raising caused the Republicans, after one failure, to raise a pole on the corner where Quinn Farnham’s house stands, which was a little over 209 feet in height and without doubt the tallest ever erected in Oswego County.

Hannibal in the Civil War

“It is my good fortune to see this town enact the most glorious chapter in its history. That was between April, 1861, and April, 1865. The war was commenced by the firing upon Fort Sumpter in Charleston Harbor on the 12th day of April 1861. On the 14th of April, President Lincoln issued his first call for troops. On the morning of April 26, 1861, Oswego county had the honor to send out a company of volunteers under Captain John D. O’Brien. He was the first officer to receive a commission from the State of New York in that war, and his company was the first to reach the state rendezvous at Elmira. It was quickly followed by other companies. They constituted the 24th New York Infantry. The town of Hannibal furnished a part of that splendid regiment. I was not present but I well remember that on the morning when that first contingent of boys left the village square for the front, Uncle Arvin Rice was there and made a patriotic speech to them. Hannibal contributed her full quota to each of the five regiments that went out from this county, the 24th and 81st in 1861, the 110th and 147th in 1862, and the 184th in 1864, and she also sent more men who became members of other organizations, sending in all more than 380 soldiers. The days of the war were stirring times. The raising of the 110th regiment in the midst of the gloom of the summer of 1862 was most inspiring. One great meeting was held upon the old camp ground at Hannibal Center. Many years after the war Col. Dewitt C. Littlejohn, who raised that regiment, gave me an account of that meeting. Of course there was a great gathering. The woods were

lighted up by fagots in kettles hung from the trees. He told me that they enlisted almost a whole company that night.

“With such a history it is well that the citizens of the town of Hannibal should occasionally pause to recall the lives of its founders and to think about and to talk about their courage, their hardships, their labors and their great achievements. It is well to remember that we are now in the possession and enjoyment of the fruits of their efforts.

“May this generation and the generations to come be worthy of this great heritage.”