

TURNPIKE TALES

by Jim Ford

"TURNPIKE TALES" #13

(Historical items from the "Madison Bouckville Antique Week" region)

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The Madison-Bouckville area has been rich in history from the arrival of the first settlers to the present day. As an addition to the website, we have decided to share some of that history in order that the patrons who travel to the Madison-Bouckville Show will have a better understanding of our truly unique region.

GEN. ERASTUS CLEVELAND – PIONEER AND PATRIOT – PART 1

Following the close of the American Revolution, settlers began moving into the area that was to become the Town of Madison. Some had been soldiers in the Continental Army and had seen the fertile soil of the "western lands." Speculators quickly bought huge tracts of land and began to offer it to citizens living in New England. Settlers began to arrive as early as 1792 from Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Maine.

One of those early settlers was Erastus Cleaveland. The Cleaveland family had immigrated to America from England. The Cleaveland surname means "land of the cliffs" and is unique for the extra "a" inserted in the surname, as opposed to our city of Cleveland, Ohio.

Erastus Cleaveland was born at Waweekas Hill, Norwich, Connecticut on June 20, 1771. He was one of eight children in a family that was considered to be quite poor. An ambitious and highly motivated youngster, he struck out on his own at age 14. Traveling to New London, Connecticut, he became a carpenter's apprentice and continued his apprenticeship until he was "of age" at 18 years old.

After having lived in Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia and Savannah, Georgia, working in the mercantile trade, Cleaveland returned to his home in Connecticut. In 1790, Cleaveland traveled to Whitestown, New York from Norwich, Connecticut and worked as a lumberjack. He continued in this occupation for two years. During this time he contracted a very bad case of smallpox, even though he had inoculated himself by using a penknife before he left Connecticut.

The newly-opened lands of the "Chenango Twenty Townships," of which the future Town of Madison was designated as #3, proved to be an enticement to young Cleaveland. In 1792 Erastus set out from Whitestown with a friend to "look land." Using marked trees, they made their way to the area called "Indian Opening," a short distance north of what is now the Village of Madison. A family, who had themselves recently arrived, directed them south to the home of Jesse Maynard, near what was to become the community of Madison Center. Being favorably impressed by the land that he saw, Erastus returned to Whitestown and worked as a carpenter and joiner before returning to his original home in Norwich, Connecticut.

On the way home in the fall of 1792, he stopped to visit a friend near Southwick, Massachusetts. Southwick was the home of John and Lucy Berry, who would soon become an integral part of Cleaveland's life. The friend invited him to a social event being held at a nearby singing school. The two friends agreed that Cleaveland was to select what he believed to be the best looking girl at the event and offer to take her home. He immediately spotted Miss Rebecca Berry and made her acquaintance. Their relationship soon grew and the two would be married on January 8, 1795.

In the meantime Mr. Cleaveland returned to the Madison area in 1793. He purchased a parcel of land on the Oriskany Creek, one mile below what would become the community of Solsville. The parcel was 280 acres and was purchased for \$1.50 per acre. Even at that time period he had made a very good deal.

Following his purchase of land, Cleaveland built a small log home and a saw mill on the site and by 1794 had the saw mill running.

This proved to be his first profitable venture as many settlers were moving into the area and the need for sawed lumber was growing. The boards from this mill were sold for \$5.00 per thousand feet.

Returning to Southwick, Massachusetts in the fall of 1794, marriage plans were finalized and the ceremony took place on January 8, 1795. Rebecca returned with Erastus to their home site during the early spring. He now had a person who provided the support and encouragement that carried him through the highs and lows of his many commercial endeavors.

During the summer of 1795 Cleaveland built a grist mill near his home and saw mill. For many years this area, on the Oriskany Creek, was known as Cleaveland's Mill. This would certainly be enough for many enterprising young men but Erastus was just beginning his business career. Over the next few decades he would have as many as a dozen saw mill and grist mill sites along the creek, including one that was located in the new hamlet of Solsville.

During the ensuing years, Cleaveland also operated a carding mill, woolen factory, satinet cloth factory, distillery and brewery in the Solsville area, as well as a mercantile establishment in the brick building which he constructed, c.1820, on the new Cherry Valley Turnpike at Madison Four Corners. (the early name for the Village of Madison) This building is now home of Peavey Realty.

In addition to these business enterprises, Cleaveland also dealt in the buying and fattening of cattle for the New York City and Philadelphia markets. There is a fascinating account in the History of Madison County by Luna Hammond, that General Cleaveland, Major Clough and Captain Seth Blair, all veterans of the War of 1812, frequently traveled together taking their cattle to market.

With his business success, Erastus Cleaveland was able to build the lovely brick home that graces the top of the hill at the southern end of South Street (the former name of this street was Hamilton Street) in the Village of Madison. The home, built c.1805 continues to be in wonderful condition and has been included in a number of historic articles and journals.

In Part 2 of this story we will look at the family of Gen. Cleaveland and his role in the War of 1812, the State government and the Madison community.