

**HISTORY OF THE SETTLEMENT OF
STEUBEN COUNTY, N.Y.
INCLUDING NOTICES OF THE OLD
PIONEER SETTLERS AND THEIR
ADVENTURES**

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History of the Settlement of Steuben County, N.Y. Including Notices of the Old Pioneer Settlers and Their Adventures by Guy H. McMaster

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[R. S. 1893]

PREFACE.

This collection of the following annals was undertaken at the request of the publishers of this volume. While of course it was not expected that the general public would feel any interest in the subject of the work, it was yet believed that to the citizens of Steuben County a chronicle of its settlement would possess some value. The task was entered upon, not without misgivings that the historic materials to be found in a backwoods county, destitute of colonial and revolutionary reminiscence, and possessing an antiquity of at most seventy years beyond which there was nothing even to be guessed at, would prove rather scanty; and, while it cannot be pretended that the vein has been found richer than it promised, it is nevertheless hoped that something of interest to citizens of the county has been rescued from the forgetfulness into which the annals of the settlement were fast passing.

All the facts set forth in the pages ensuing, except those for which credit is given to other sources, were collected by the Editor of the volume, by personal inquiry in most cases, from the surviving pioneers of the county. He has been unable to enrich his collection by any ancient documentary matter—letters, diaries or memoranda. The early history of the county rested in the memory of the few pioneers who are living, and in the traditions handed down by those who are departed. The appearance of Mr. O. Turner's timely History of "Phelps and Gorham's Purchase," after this work was prepared for the press, has enabled the editor to correct the results of his own inquiries in several important instances.

Those whose memory extends to the period of the settlement, will find this but an unsatisfactory chronicle of the old time. Individuals who merit notice as early settlers of the county have probably been passed over unnoticed; many facts of interest and importance have doubtless escaped the researches of the editor, and serious inaccuracies will undoubtedly be discovered in the statements recorded. A fair degree of diligence in searching for facts, and a sincere desire to preserve honorable among those who shall hereafter inhabit this county, the memory of those plain, hardy and free-hearted men who first broke into its original wilderness and by the work of their own hands began to make it what it now is, are all that can be offered in extenuation of the meagreness of the results of the editor's labors. The collection should have been made twenty years ago. Many pioneers of note—men of adventure, of observation and of rare powers of narration, have gone from among the living since that time. Much of valuable and entertaining reminiscence has perished with them.

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It is well enough, perhaps, to add in explanation of vagaries of divers descriptions which may be encountered in the following pages, and for which the reader may be at a loss to account, that this volume was written nearly two years ago, and at a period of life when such a lapse of time happily brings great changes of taste and feeling.

The editor takes pleasure in acknowledging his obligations to citizens in various parts of the county to whom he had occasion to apply in the course of his inquiries, for the readiness with which he has in all cases been assisted in the prosecution of his restarches.

Bath, Dec., 1852.

NOTICE OF THE TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY OF STEBEN COUNTY.*

STEBEN COUNTY occupies the summit and eastern slope of that ridge which divides the waters of Seneca Lake that flow to the Susquehanna, from those that enter the Genesee. The course of this ridge is northeast and southwest; its breadth from base to base is from forty to fifty miles; the elevation of the eastern base is about nine hundred feet, and that of the western base (the valley of the Genesee,) nearly eighteen hundred feet above tide water; while the highest intervening uplands attain an elevation of twenty-five hundred feet above the same level. The summit of the ridge follows the curve of the Genesee at the distance of about ten miles from that river. The streams flowing down the brief western slope are, therefore, but inconsiderable creeks, while the waters collected from the other side supply the channels of three rivers, the Tioga, the Canisteo and the Conhocton, which uniting form the Chemung, and add essentially to the power of the noble Susquehanna. The region composing this dividing range is an intricate hill country, consisting of rolling and irregular uplands, intersected by deep river valleys, by the beds of several lakes, and by the crooked ravines worn by innumerable creeks. Few rocks are presented at the surface of the ground, and the whole land was originally covered with a dense forest—as well the almost perpendicular hill sides, as the valleys and uplands. The river valleys are bounded by abrupt walls from two hundred to eight hundred feet high, which sometimes confine the streams within gorges of a few rods in width, sometimes grant a mile, and sometimes at the meeting of transverse alleys enclose a plain of several miles in circuit.

The dividing ridge curves from the western along the northern boundary of the county. The waters of the principal northern towns run to the Conhocton, while those of the counties adjoining, flowing in an opposite direction, feed the central lakes of New York and find ultimately Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence and the foggy bays of Newfoundland. But that the abrupt gulf of Crooked Lake pierces deep into the hills from the north, and carries off the meagre brooks of two towns seated upon its western bluffs, our county would contain within itself a complete system of waters. The streams would pour down on all sides from a circle of hills and escape only by the narrow gate of the Chemung, at a depth of sixteen hundred feet below the springs upon the bounding summits. A wall would enclose a complete province, and the scientific citizen hovering in a balloon above the single gateway in the south would behold, fifty miles to the northward, blue ranges

* Gathered chiefly from the State Geological Reports.

sweeping in a splendid curve, to the Seneca, then bending southward to complete the perfect ring of highlands. The Crooked Lake is an intruder and sadly mars this scheme of uniformity. Breaking through the barrier which separates the northwestern tributaries of the Susquehanna from those nomadic waters that wander to Canada and the ocean of icebergs, it lies in a dark and deep bed sixteen miles within the county, while the southern extension of its valley pierces through to the Conhocton and forms, by its junction with the channel of that river, the broad and pleasant valley of Bath. But few streams, however, have been carried captive by this great robber to the shivering seas of Labrador. Two or three unfortunate brooks are compelled to send thither their unwilling waters; and, aside from these resources, it subsists upon secret springs and the rains that fall upon the bluffs and pour into the lake by a thousand short ravines or gutters.

The hills of Steuben county are irregular blocks cut out of a plateau of clay, rock and gravel, by the action of the elements. Of the forces and elements by the action of which this original plateau was created, and of the later forces which afterwards hewed it into its present form—forms like those of a block of ice shattered by the blow of a hammer—we have a singular account from men of science.

That the regions we now occupy, and indeed this whole western region, even to the Cordilleras (or rather the foundations upon which they are built,) were, in time past, at the bottom of a vast ocean; that certain continents which in the earliest ages sat in the East, were broken up violently by convulsions of nature, or were gradually dissolved by forces milder than the arms of those rude slaves dwelling under the earth which are of old reported by Geologists to have overturned mountains, and cloven in twain fast anchored islands, and that the currents of the ocean flowing like steady rivers towards the setting sun, were laden with the dust of continents thus destroyed, and strewed it over the submerged plains of the West: that after these rivers of the ocean had labored silently and without ceasing for many ages, the whole bed of the Western deep was covered to the depth of many thousand feet with the materials of which the ancient Eastern world was built, till at length peaks, then islands, then a new continent, appeared upon the face of the globe, while the waters by many channels ran down into the vast hollow of the uprooted continent to form a new ocean;—all these things State Geologists seem to believe established—or at least they feel at liberty to surmise substantially to this effect.

Further than this, we are invited to see the builders at their secret labors. Sluggish rivers of mud roll through the deep like enormous serpents, and waste themselves before they reach the valley of the Mississippi. Brighter torrents of sand following spread a gay carpet over the brackish trail of the mud-snake; then streams of pebble and shattered rock and of all the powders of an abraded world deposit, now Niagara Groups, now Chemung Groups, or when stirred by tempests and water-spouts settle into coarse conglomerate. We are shown, also, periods of a wonderful life. Millions of those brilliant

"shells and crinoideans and crustaceans," whose fantastic images are stamped upon the rocks, dwelt in numberless nations among the waters, while those hideous monsters whose names were only less formidable than themselves, prowled through the depths below, or floundered in elephantine antics among the billows above. Once a part of the floor of the ocean, which seems to have been the roof of a cavern occupied by certain "secret black and midnight" powers, sinks downward, arouses the horrible Pluto of Mud from his slumbers in bottomless volcanoes, who, rising in towering anger through the rafters of his broken house, overwhelms coral forests, the empires of the gorgeous fossil tribes, and all the beautiful mansions of the deep with a tremendous flood of mire. Other atrocious giants come forth from the volcanic furnaces into which the waters have fallen, and heat the ocean with spouts of steam, while certain angry chemists, drenched in their subterranean laboratories by the sudden inundation of brine, let loose their most poisonous gasses, and catching the unfortunate nymphs, dose them with deadly physic. All creatures perish. Even the gigantic and roaring monsters, choked with mud and suffocated by the poisons that rise from the reservoirs of death below, flounder in dying agonies. Their carcasses are drifted to and fro for a time, and thousands of years afterwards, men digging in mines lay bare their huge white jaws and their mighty shanks, and fasten up their skeletons with wire in National Museums. All these, and many other strange things, showing how at last the region we inhabit was built, we see, from the happily settled times of the present, into the troubled times far away—times truly of "agitation and fanaticism."

Let us now leave greater speculations, and look homeward. That tract of land now occupied by the five western counties of New York in the southern tier, appeared above the waters in the form of a regular plateau with a mean elevation of two thousand feet above the level of the present ocean, overlooking the sea which covered the northern counties, the Canadas, and the Great Western Valley. The detritus from which this plateau was constructed, had ripened into a series of shales, flagstones and sandstones, which from the difference of the organic remains of the upper and lower ledges, have been divided by geologists into two groups,—the upper or Chemung group, and the lower or Portage group. The maps represent these as first appearing near Chenango County in this State, thence running westwards through the southern counties, with a breadth of some fifty miles, and a thickness of about 2,500 feet, thence continuing along the shore of Lake Erie, and toward the western extremity of that lake, making a bold curve southward. Their course, however, appears not to have been carefully followed in their wanderings toward the far west; for we hear of them as being "probably" in Indiana, in reduced circumstances, with a thickness of less than 400 feet.

But this matters not at present. We are shown then at the period of our deliverance from the deep, a fine plateau, extending from Lake Erie far toward the east, and from the foot of the Pennsylvanian mountains northward about sixty miles, to a great bay of the ocean. How did this become a

labyrinth of hills? The waters that fell from the clouds, or that issued from the grounds wandered this way and that, under the guidance of their restless instincts seeking the ocean. Many combining, formed rivers, and furrowed for themselves deep and curving valleys; the creeks conquered crooked but triumphant passages through ledges of sand stone, and beds of shale, wearing their channels by industrious labor through many centuries; while the brooks, the runnels, the spring torrents, and all those lesser hydraulic tribes, slashed the fair table land, in all directions with gorges and ravines.

Work like this would have hewn the plateau into abrupt blocks. It would have left a multitude of isolated and inaccessible tables, islands divided by perpendicular gulfs. Neither man nor beast could have ascended to the uplands. The river valleys would have been broad halls enclosed by walls of rock: and the lumberman roving up the beds of the tributary streams, would find himself involved in hopeless defiles, with precipices jutting forth on either side, while hundreds of feet above his head the pine and the fir swayed their princely plumes in derision, like savage kings jeering the Spaniard from inaccessible cliffs.

But observe how the judicious elements, with rude and uncometrical but kindly labor, prepared the new made region to be a habitation for man. The frosts with powerful wedges cracked the precipitous bluffs, or with mighty hammers, as it would seem, shivered to atoms rocky pyramids. The rains rounded the edges of the cliffs, here pushing off great masses of earth, there sweeping loosened ledges into the ravines, while the invisible powers of the air working many centuries with those more bolsterous slaves, which hollowed the water courses and broke up the rocks, wrought at length the rolling ridges, the broad knobs, the blunt promontories, and all the curiously designed mountain-figures that now cover the land. The work was thus made perfect. Forests cover the hills, and republicans coming after many days with plows and axes, find a land made ready for them. After many days, too, civil engineers, with their glasses and brazen instruments, appear at the foot of the ridge dividing the Susquehanna from the Genesee, and find that the rivers and industrious brooks have been laboring at this gravel rampart for many thousand years, guided, indeed, by very rude trigonometry, hired by no pledge of public stocks and undisturbed by loans or rumors of loans, but have yet done the labor of myriads of miners, and have pierced the ridge with such admirable cuts, that the locomotive, instead of dragging its weary wheels up an abrupt ascent of fifteen hundred feet, winds swiftly through mountain halls, (at the risk, it is true, after the equinoctial rains, of encountering in certain places, a sliding hill-top or an avalanche of cobble-stones, which is quite alpine but unpleasant,) ever finding a gorge cloven through the broad bulwarks that seem to bar the valley; ever finding some crooked but deep defile through the bristling promontories that crowd together as if expressly for the discouragement of railroad directors.

It will be remembered that at the deliverance of Steuben county, with its four western neighbors, from the water, a large tract of land in the North,