

**HISTORICAL
SKETCHES OF
WESTERN NEW YORK**

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Historical sketches of western New York by E. W. Vanderhoof

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E. W. VANDERHOOF

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WESTERN NEW YORK**



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THE SENECA INDIANS
PHELPS AND GORHAM PURCHASE
MORRIS RESERVE AND HOLLAND PURCHASE
MARY JEMISON
JEMIMA WILKINSON
JOSEPH SMITH, JR., AND MORMONISM
MORGAN AND ANTIMASONRY
THE FOX SISTERS AND ROCHESTER KNOCKINGS

BY
E. W. VANDERHOOF

*I have here only made a collection of culled
facts, and have brought nothing of my own but
the thread that ties them together.*

— MONTAIGNE.

MCMVII

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PREFACE

(Written in 1887)

I ONCE asked an old friend, whose income was ten times greater than any personal use to which he could devote it, why he speculated in stocks? His reply was that he did so in order to keep his mind active. Upon reflection, I saw there was sound philosophy as well as Yankee shrewdness in the old gentleman's answer. He did not wish the world to go by him, but was determined, so long as he lived in it, to be of it, to keep abreast of the times and in the swim, and he knew the best way to accomplish this was to dabble a little in Wall Street, for the stock exchanges of the world are mirrors which reflect every light and shadow upon their surfaces. He might have set down and hugged and reinvested his income, might have grown into a moldy nuisance, as most men do who have money only, and whose only resource is to talk about it; but he wisely preferred to take a hand in the enterprises going forward around him, and wear out rather than rust out.

Having given up business some years ago on account of ill health, and determining upon my recovery not again to take an active hand in the dizzy games that are played on the stock exchange and the board of trade, yet at the same time wishing, like my old friend, to keep my mind active, I determined to look into the early history of that section of the State where I was born and jot down such things as might be of interest to myself and possibly to others resident in the Genesee Country.

Although my memory goes back to the tales of my grandfathers, who were pioneers of the eighteenth century, I found myself lamentably ignorant of many important and prominent facts connected with our early history. Phelps and Gorham I had indeed heard of, but did not know that their purchase was made from the State of Massachusetts, and not from New York. Robert Morris was a familiar name in connection with Revolutionary history, but I was unaware that he had ever owned a

rood of ground in this section.* The London Associates, Sir William Pulteney, William Hornby, and Patrick Colquhoun, I had never heard mentioned in connection with pioneer affairs. "The Holland Purchase" had a familiar sound in my ears, but of the details of that important transaction I knew nothing. Now, the fact that I was ignorant of local history would be of no consequence, and discreditable to me only provided means of ready information on the subject were at hand, and that a fair proportion of those around me possessed such information. But they do not, for the simple reason that no comprehensive history of Western New York is now in existence. Turner's volumes never had a general circulation and have long been out of print. It is doubtful whether one in five hundred of the present residents on the Massachusetts Pre-emption ever saw them. They are becoming rare books. Occasional copies are advertised for sale at three to five times their original cost. A dealer had my order more than three months before he was able to procure for me a copy of the "History of the Holland Purchase." "The Phelps and Gorham Purchase" is equally scarce.

Big and bad as those volumes are, devoted as they are to almost every subject except the one announced on the title-page, if they were in free circulation this history would not have been undertaken. For no one knows better than I that I do not possess a literary faculty or a good "style," and am not well equipped either by nature, study, or practice for the task I have set myself. But something needed to be done, and done promptly. Our early annals were fast slipping away from the minds and memories of men. The pioneer is no longer here to recount the story of struggle and privation. The ring of his axe and the crack of his rifle died away as the twilight began to gather round the declining years of the nineteenth century. Not one remains whose farm was "articled" to him by Phelps and Gorham, and probably none who remembers when William and James Wadsworth settled in the Genesee Valley. I found that the young men and women growing up about me, the generation that has come upon the stage since the outbreak of the Civil War, were, like myself, sadly deficient in their knowledge of our early history. They seemed to think that handsome, commodious farm houses, substantial, gaily-painted out-buildings, thriving towns, and busy, populous cities had always existed here. To correct

* Written at Clifton Springs.

such impressions, to tell the younger generation of Western New Yorkers that there may be now living a few men and women who were born before any white habitations existed west of Seneca Lake, that a century has hardly elapsed since this highly cultivated and populous region was an unbroken wilderness through which the Seneca Indians roamed at will, and to give them some notion of the resolute purpose, the patient toil, and the cheerfully-endured privations which, after the lapse of a century, have made that wilderness to blossom like the rose, is the object of this compilation. And now a word or two regarding it.

In the preface to his translation of the *Iliad*, Pope tells us that "Homer is universally allowed to have had the greatest Invention of any writer whatever. The praise of Judgment Virgil has justly contested with him, but his Invention remains yet unrivaled. Nor is it a wonder if he has ever been acknowledged the greatest of poets who most excelled in that which is the very foundation of poetry. It is the Invention that in different degrees distinguishes all great geniuses—the utmost stretch of human study, learning, and industry, which masters everything beside, can never attain to this. It furnishes Art with all her materials, and without it Judgment itself can at best but steal wisely, for Art is only like a prudent steward that lives on managing the riches of nature."

History affords little room for the exercise of Homer's wonderful faculty. It deals with a world of events and facts, and ceases to be valuable when it ceases to be veritable. Its dignity, its philosophy, and its lessons are worthless if not drawn from its truth. Invention has no place in its framework. Unless it be contemporaneous, it must to a great extent be based on pre-existing records. The ratiocinations of the author, his comments, inferences, and conclusions may or may not be of value. A good narrator may be narrow, unfair, and partisan as a commentator. It is generally conceded that the most eloquent historian of our time was a prejudiced man.*

In this volume I have invented nothing. Those who read it must decide whether I have had the Judgment "to steal wisely."

The *Spectator* says: "A great book is a great evil. Were all books reduced to their quintessence many a bulky author would make his appearance in a penny paper." Bearing this in mind, I determined from the outset that my work must be limited to

* Macaulay.

giving an outline of the principal events in our pioneer annals. To have gone into details, to have attempted even a meagre sketch of the early history of localities and of the lives of those pioneers whose prominence might entitle them to mention, would have taken half a score of volumes rather than one. It is better to be incomplete than tedious, to set forth a few prominent facts which may fix themselves in the reader's mind, rather than present a vast mass of detail which he rejects at sight. The history of an adjoining county was carried on through two volumes of more than four hundred pages each, and left in an unfinished state on account of the ill health of its author. By shunning his voluminous error I hope to escape its consequences.

It has been my endeavor herein to avoid tediousness, elegant writing, and impersonal dignity. My work is too frank and amateurish for the editorial "we," hence it is composed in the first person. "We" is falling into desuetude even in newspaper work.

My compilation is put forth in the hope that it may be of value to my neighbors of the present and future generations, and while I do not expect from it either fame, profit, or applause, may I not comfort myself with the reflection that though

"The letters Cadmus gave"

have not been employed with literary skill, they have not been devoted to an unworthy purpose?

E. W. V.

Clifton Springs, New York, 1889.