

**A Sketch of
JAMES McCLURG,
PIONEER**

**Written for the
Chautauqua County Historical Society
By His Grandson,**

**Prepared by
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Westfield, N.Y., 1916**

29-G-74

**“His blood was Saxon, Celt and Gaul,
A combination rare,
It makes the grandest men of all,
A race beyond compare.”**

Among my earliest recollections, are those of my happy childhood days passed in Westfield in the late fifties at the home of my maternal grandfather James McClurg. He was at that time several years beyond three score and ten, and his slight figure was yet unbent, and the fire in his eyes apparently unabated. It was my boyish pleasure to induce him to relate tales of his early life when wilderness reigned almost supreme in Western New York. He told me this ancestors were members of the McClurg clan in the Scottish Highlands, and strict covenanters; that his great grandfather emigrated to the north of Ireland, near Coldrain about 1650; that his father Joseph McClurg had incurred the displeasure of the British government and was suspected of being one of the leaders in the Irish Rebellion, so that he was sought for by a detachment of Troops and for some weeks had been hiding in the secret places in the hills. Realizing he could never again be safe at home he determined to emigrate with his family to the New World.

Under the circumstances this was a matter of some difficulty, but it was solved by collusion of the captain and carpenter of the schooner to which the family had been conveyed and my great grandfather was secretly headed up in an empty water barrel and

brought on board shortly before sailing time, with some twenty or more other barrels forming the schooner's water supply. The authorities searched the vessel and he was nearly betrayed by the persistent interest a small terrier belonging to the family displayed in one of the barrels, but fortunately the searchers did not suspect, and allowed the schooner to clear.

After a stormy passage of five weeks the vessel made port in Philadelphia with my great grandfather, his wife and three sons, the youngest my grandfather, was then a boy of twelve and it was early 1789. They remained in Philadelphia some weeks, and during that time George Washington was pointed out to the boy one day on Chestnut Street. After considerable deliberations my great grandfather decided to cross the mountains and settle in Pittsburgh, a small but rapidly growing town in the then almost far west.

James McClurg must have been a man of considerable wealth in those days, for he soon built a brick mansion and with his two older sons established Pittsburgh's first iron foundry, the parent of now mighty children. I quote a portion of the obituary of his eldest son from a Pittsburgh paper: "On Saturday last, Mr. Alexander McClurg, after a brief illness, died. He was in the 87th year of his age, and at his death probably left no survivor who can date his citizenship so far back as he. Mr. McClurg was with his father's family an emigrant from Ireland in 1798 and has during all the years since, nearly three quarters of a century, been identified in many various ways with the interests of Pittsburgh. For

more than forty years he was the most prominent, extensive and enterprising of our citizens, largely engaged in commerce and manufacturing. His father Joseph McClurg and he established our first iron foundry in the Mexican war. The site of this old foundry is now covered by the post office and municipal hall. During his long and busy life, Mr. McClurg was noted for persistent energy, enterprise and great tenacity of purpose. Sons and daughters have risen to call him blessed."

When my grandfather became of age, his father and brothers desired him to become one of the firm with them, but the youthful James had desired to paddle his own canoe and make a home in an even new section. So he begged his father for his birthright and received it with a blessing. I do not know how much his father gave him but it must have amounted to several thousand dollars, quite a fortune in 1809. He then started out to found a house in the wilderness, working his way up the Allegheny River into Conewango Creek and Chautauqua Lake and over the Portage trail to the cross roads, the site of the future Westfield. Here he remained for some time, a guest at the home of David Eason a settler that had recently taken up a tract of land from the Holland Land Company. The History of Chautauqua County states the deed to this land was the first recorded title in this County. David Eason became the first sheriff of our County. My grandfather was much pleased with the country here, but I imagine the presence of Martha Eason a young sister of his host was a potent attraction.

He told me he had made up his mind to settle somewhere on the south shore of Lake Erie, but was determined to look well before deciding where.

Accordingly he worked his way east to the little village of Buffalo, and west to Presque Isle and beyond into the Western Reserve perhaps as far as where Cleveland now is. All this region at that time was an almost unbroken wilderness of dense forest occupied by the bear, wolf and red man, and many a mile between the log cabins of the few brave pioneers who hoped to establish a home in the wilderness.

Several months were necessarily consumed in this investigation. Finally my grandfather decided in favor of the Cross Roads, thinking the future gateway to trade with the southern country must be the little port that lay at the Lake Erie end of the Portage Road where schooners could take on or land freight going South.

We must remember at that period nearly all transportation where possible was by water; much of the country owing to dense forests was swampy, and the roads merely blazed trails. Such things as railroads and steamboats were undreamed of.

This reasoning of James McClurg was proved correct for up to the advent of trains and steamboats Barcelona held the trade, and Westfield was the most important place in the County. It is not given to any one mind to foresee the epoch making inventions and discoveries that man will in time achieve. Having selected the situation of his future home James lost no time in going ahead. He first married Martha Eason, then purchased from her brother, David Eason, most of the land Mr. Eason has acquired from the Holland Land Company. This extended on the south of what is now Main street from Chautauqua Creek to about where the Union school stands. This with a later purchase

comprises a large part of the present Westfield. The consideration named in the deed was \$1800.00, a large sum in those days.

Having secured his wife and land my grandfather at once began his house. Then all buildings were of logs. The few settlers were oppressed and dwarfed by the mighty forests that surrounded them. This was such a densely wooded region the pioneers claimed they had trouble finding standing room. He erected on the southwest corner of what is now the park combined store and house of logs, and at once opened trade with the few settlers and more numerous Indians. There was little or no more in use; a system of barter chiefly. The settlers exchanged pearl ash and maple sugar, and the red men furs, for such crude articles as they were able to make. It was a period of hard work and close economy but James was ever in the van. Then came the War of 1812, and unwilling to expose his young wife and baby to Indian danger, he took them to Pittsburgh till the risk was over when he returned and resumed his trading, land clearing, and selling portions to incoming settlers.

Life moved along in this fashion until the awful summer of 1816 caused many a brave soul to falter. That year was long spoken of by those then living as "Eighteen hundred and froze to death". Ice formed and snow fell with slight intermissions all summer and the settlers were unable to raise even the hardier grains and vegetables. Much of their livestock perished the following winter and their own lives were imperiled. There was no tradition recalling such a season among the oldest of the red men, and certainly nothing similar has occurred in the century since elapsed. But all things pass, and the following

year grandfather began to plan a more permanent home. He selected a site some distance back from the road on the southeast corner of Main and Portage Streets, and presented the Village with a plot of land in front for a permanent open public meeting ground.

Afterward donating land on the west for a Presbyterian Meeting House and on the right for an Episcopal Church. He determined to build a large brick mansion such as his father had when he was a boy in Pittsburgh. Many in the neighborhood regarded such an undertaking as absurdly quixotic, and one of his friends wrote a long poem over "McClurg's Folly". The verses were quaint and clever but have escaped my memory. It is difficult for us today to conceive of what our forebears accomplished. There were no labor hours then; work began and ended with light. My grandfather burned his lime, made and baked his bricks, got out his timbers, prepared woods for the interior, went to Pittsburgh and secured skilled brick layers and carpenters, brought them up the river and to Mayville by boat, and in about a year and a half completed his house. It may be of interest as an illustration of the relative value of money then, to state that these skilled mechanics received fifty cents per day of twelve or fourteen hours duration. This house is my home today. It is a wonderfully well planned, convenient dwelling of sixteen rooms with twelve foot ceilings and hard wood floors, and after a century of use is as good as the day of its completion. He took much pride in this home, sending away for rare trees and shrubs, which he trimmed in ornamental shapes to adorn the grounds, and conveying water in pipes from springs half a mile distant to operate a large fountain in which gold fish were kept. Deer were also kept on the grounds. Such places have been more or less common for forty or fifty years, but in the second and third decades of the last century in Chautauqua County it was not so. In order to protect his house from strong west and

northwest winds, prevalent in the fall and spring, my grandfather erected a block of brick buildings on South Portage St., from Main Street to near where the Patterson Library now stands. Early realizing the importance of a good hotel to the community he built the Westfield House on the northwest corner of Main and Portage Streets. This was a large brick hotel of three stories and sixty-five rooms. No pains were spared to make this hotel equal to the best then prevailing. It was about the year 1827. I remember my grandfather once telling us that he brought from Philadelphia a special skilled mechanic to construct the stairs. At the period of its completion this hostelry was said to have so superior west of Albany. The history of Chautauqua County states "The first Town Meeting in Westfield, after its formation, was held in the Westfield House on April 7th, 1829". About 1831 James McClurg in partnership with Judge B. Campbell and George Hall built the Westfield Flour and Grist Mill to supply the growing vicinity with better milling facilities.

In addition to these building operations my grandfather interested himself in every practical way to help advance, develop and build up the best interests and life of this locality.

I may safely requite for him what was written of his elder brother in Pittsburgh, that "For more than forty years he was the most prominent extensive and enterprising of our citizens."

James McClurg while neither a large or muscular man was noted in his youth for surprising quickness and dexterity. He ran short races with the Indians and generally won

them, and was in the champion class as a hand ball player, a game much in vogue in early days. As an evidence of this quick strength I will quote what Jonathan Cass once told me. "Your grandfather used to be a marvel of quickness; in our early days he never walked round the counter in his store but always jumped over it." I would like here to pay a slight tribute to the memory of Jonathan Cass, one of my childhood's admirations. He was among the most prominent and respected of Westfield's pioneers; a man of sterling worth, God-fearing, conscientious, and grandly strong in all the details of noble character. He kept Westfield's first tavern where the Spencer Block now stands, directly opposite my grandfather's first store and they were lifelong friends.

This sketch is of early times, and the later life and activities of James McClurg I shall not describe further than to state that he interested himself in buying land and building operations in Chicago, Rock Island, and Racine; that he became in politics a Republican as soon as that party was formed and an enthusiastic supporter of the Union and Abraham Lincoln. He was brought up in the strict tenets of the early Scotch Presbyterians, and was as exact in his observance of the Sabbath, as he was methodical in his business transactions. It was his custom to draw his own deeds and mortgages and I am told his name is the one most frequently found on the records of early Westfield transfers.

I should say absolute, unfailing, strict JUSTICE was the keystone of his business life. He died full of years and honor in 1872. The pioneer or formative history of our County may be said to have terminated about 1850 with the appearance of steam in its relation to transportation. The pioneer's day is over, his labor ended, his faithful wife's work is

done, but this beautiful land for which they labored is our heritage. May its future ever be worthy of its past.

The snows of many a winter have fallen on his grave; while over it for centuries a granite boulder marks the last rest of

JAMES McCLURG, PIONEER.