

The Risley Brothers

FREDONIA SEEDMEN 1833 TO 1853

(The following paper was read at the annual meeting of the Chautauqua County Historical Society in Fredonia, September 10, 1915 by LOUIS McKINSTRY)

Ladies and Gentlemen of the County Historical Society:

My friend, Mr. F.A. Hall, chairman of your executive committee requested me to write for this meeting a sketch of the three Risley Brothers, who first made Fredonia famous by growing garden seeds and sending them all over the United States. The Risleys were our first seedsmen; started the business in 1833. The seeds went in wagons painted in bright colors and labeled in large letters upon each side, RISLEY BROTHERS, GARDEN SEEDS, FREDONIA, N.Y. These wagons had a body shaped like a hearse and took out full loads. At every considerable town they would leave a box containing an assortment and the next year the storekeeper would pay for what he had sold and receive a fresh supply. The business proved quite profitable. Great fields of onions were in the rear of the Risley homes on the Risley flats and it used to be said that there was "a sixpence in every onion top."

When they sold out to U.E.Dodge & Co. in 1853, the three Risleys were the wealthiest men in Fredonia. Unfortunately they caught the fever for buying real estate and erecting buildings in Dunkirk when the Erie Railroad was opened from New York City to Dunkirk in 1851 and the speculation was disastrous.

Elijah Risley senior, father of the Risley seedsmen, came here with his large family in 1807. He had been in business in Cazenovia, Madison county, this state, and failed at the age of fifty. Then his oldest son, Elijah Risley junior, gave heart to his father by saying: "Father, let's all go out to the Holland Purchase. We boys will stand by you and help you carve out a home in the woods." So they all came with ox teams, arriving here in April 1807, and started their home on West Hill, where Berry street has since been opened. Zattu Cushing and Hezekiah Barker, founded Fredonia in 1805, and including these two only six settlers has located land prior to Mr. Risley. He was a man of energy. Built our first mill and gristmill at the foot of Main street. He died in 1841, aged 84.

Elijah Risley senior was followed by our first physician Dr. Squire White, in 1809, our first lawyer, Jacob Houghton in 1812.

The Holland Land Purchase was the haven of poor men because they could get land here without paying cash down. If they had money they went on to Ohio where they could buy government land at \$1.25 per acre; here as I heard Mr. John M. Edson express it at our Old Settlers Reunion, it was \$2.50 per acre but with what seemed to them like "eternal trust." Each settler took what was called an Article, which was simply a contract for a deed and when those contracts came due in 1835 there was serious trouble in the land for the panic of 1837 was approaching and money was not to be had.

But Mr. Risley, senior, met his payment; he took out his article located his land and erected a cabin on what is now our Berry street. His son, William, wrote for our Old

Settlers' Reunion in 1873, a description of that cabin which was floored with large flat stones from the creek, to save splitting and smoothing logs. There was a hole in the roof to let out smoke, and when the fire was built upon the stones under it, the stones began to crack and pieces began to fly, driving everybody out of the cabin. Subsequently a stick chimney was made above the fireplace. There was no brick to be had, no nails, no hardware, everything was secured by wooden pins.

It was in such circumstances as these that our Risleys began life here in the woods and it must have been gloomy enough. Horace Greeley in his Recollections says that his mother, a wonderfully bright woman, never recovered from the gloom of the primeval forest in which she and her husband made their home in the town of Clymer, this county. Mr. Greeley says, "The shadow of the great trees oppressed her." But it was not for long here. Settlers came in rapidly, and Judge Emory F. Warren in his county history printed 65 years ago, says of the year 1812:

"But little more than eight years had elapsed since the first white inhabitants had located within the limits of the county. The change that had marked the features of the country during that period was probably as striking at that time as at any subsequent period of equal duration. The sense of solitude which had pressed upon the minds of the pioneers had in a great measure been removed and the evidences of industry and cultivation were on all hands obliterating the traces of savage life and lifting the gloom which had hung over it since creation."

The population of all Chautauqua County at that time was 2,381.

Elijah Risley, junior, was out fist store keeper, opening a small grocery in 1808 west of the creek on the east side of Main street, where the hill begins to rise. Yet when he was married to Nabby Brigham a few years afterward, his wedding journey consisted of a trip with some young people walking through the woods down to the shore of Lake Erie where they skipped stones on the water and had a picnic. His bride at that simple wedding lived to see her husband sheriff of the county, Major General of the Militia of this region and in 1848 he was elected our representative in Congress. If you should see a large engraving of the scene in the U.S. Senate when Daniel Webster delivered his wonderful and famous reply to Senator Hayne of South Caroline closing "Liberty and Union now and forever, one and inseparable," you will se the portrait of Elijah Risley, Jr., standing in the foreground of the picture.

When General Lafayette, passed through Fredonia June 3, 1825, the account in the Fredonia Censor said: "It was a pleasure to see Major General Risley with a part of his staff, and Brigadier General Barker, contributing as on all similar occasions, greatly to the fine appearance of the military. Col. Thomas G. Abell was also complimented on the elegance of the banquet he provided at his hotel on the site of the present Hotel Columbia. The officers on that historic night were all large men and Gen. Lafayette who was short like most Frenchmen, expressed great admiration. "The finest looking company of military officers I ever saw," he said. Gen. Leverett Barker's uniform worn on that

occasion, you have seen in our Library historical room. Re. David Brown, who delivered the eloquent address of welcome to Gen. Lafayette, was the Rector of our Trinity Episcopal Church and some of his descendants reside here now, namely Mrs. Harriet Brown Putnam, granddaughter, wife of Jesse A. Putnam who lives on Matteson street, and her children, great grandchildren of Rev. David Brown – Howard M. Putnam, William D. Putnam, (associate editor of the Dunkirk Observer) and Mrs. Alice Putnam Eddy, wife of Ernest M. Eddy, residing on Temple street.

Hon. Hanson A. Risley, Gen. Risley's older son, became a graduate of Hamilton College and a lawyer also County Clerk and Clerk of the Assembly at Albany. When William H. Seward became President Lincoln's Secretary of State in 1861, he sent for Hanson A. Risley to come to Washington and do the honors of the State Department. Educated as a boy here in the woods, Mr. Risley immediately became noted for his fine address and polished manners in that city to which the world's most accomplished diplomats are sent. Mr. Risley was afterwards Solicitor of the U.S. Treasury.

All the Risley Brothers were fine looking and men of high character. I worked in the Fredonia Bank soon after the Civil War and one day General Risley, then quite aged, sent up a note to be discounted. The Teller said to S.M. Clement, the strictest banker I ever knew: "Here is a note from Gen. Risley without any endorsement, shall I discount it?" President Clement answered very promptly and it made a great impression on me: "yes sir; some men's honor is better security than other men's property."

I once heard the late G.D. Hinckley who had years of dealing with the Risleys speaking highly of all of them,, saying: "I would as soon hand money to Levi Risley in the dark, without counting, as to give it to other men in daylight and take a receipt."

Mr. John Jones, an accomplished builder and architect, originally from England, then from New York, moved here from Westfield about 1837. His daughter, Miss Anna Jones, resides here. To him is largely due the many residences that early distinguished Fredonia. He built the Episcopal and Baptist churches, also the former Presbyterian church, also the Johnson House which is part of the Hotel Columbia. He lost his life by a fall when he was building the present Baptist church. Mr. Jones first suggested planting maple trees on the lines of the streets, and when he and the late William Risley were village trustees they secured an ordinance allowing a tax rebate for those who planted such trees. This had much to do with beautifying Fredonia.

Mr. Jones also made plans for public buildings and fine residences in various towns in other parts of this county and Cattaraugus. His death was a great loss to this community. He found a liberal patron in the Risley Brothers. He was fond of the classic style, especially of Grecian pillars, and he built three stately homes with tall pillars in front, for Elijah, William and Levi Risley, on Risley street. Two of those homes remain; Levi Risley's was destroyed by fire. In front of all three in the row elaborate flower beds were laid out, with box borders and serpentine walks between and my father used to drive his carriage loads of company through Risley street last, to hear their exclamations of

admiration. It was a new thing then to beautify homes with flowers and shrubbery and the example of the Risleys had great effect in developing the beauty of our village.

The Risley Brother also set out many of the trees which now adorn our village parks. When Hezekiah Barker donated the land for those parks, it was full of stumps of the primeval forest trees. Tradition has it that those stumps were removed by our Justices of the Peace sentencing every man seen uproariously drunk in a public place to dig a stump out of the park. This was provided for by village ordinance. With nine distilleries in the town of Pomfret and whisky selling over the bar at three cents a drink it did not take long to find enough drunks to dig out the last stump.

And when the three Risley Brothers had our skilled carriage makers of those days make them each a fine standing top carriage and drawn by well groomed horses with silver plated harness they drove in procession to church every Sunday morning, the sight filled my boyhood's eye with feelings akin to awe. I would not be more thrilled now at seeing the Lord Mayor's annual pageant in London.

But alas, the Risleys are all gone. Not a descendent remains in Fredonia. Of their numerous children only one survives, a daughter of Mr. Levi Risley, Mrs. Susan Risley Weare of Los Angeles, California. Sic Transit Gloria Mundi. So passes the Glory of the World.