

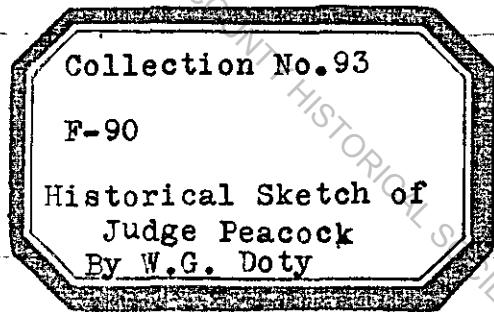
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Historical Sketch of
Judge Peacock

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By W.G. Doty



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Historical Sketch of Judge William Peacock.

Read at the Annual Meeting of the Chaut. Co.
Historical Society at Mayville, N.Y. 1886
By W.J. Dety. Sept 18, 1886

We are coming to a realization and appreciation of the beauties and attractions of Chautauqua. The past season has seen the banding together of our public spirited men and women in a movement that has for its purpose the education of our own people to an understanding of the natural advantages that they possess, and with becoming modesty, to also make these facts known to the outside world.

We have reached a point where we can look back with satisfaction and content over a period of a century and a quarter, which is long enough to make a respectable background, at the good work wrought by our pioneer empire builders. We may point with justifiable pride to the development and completion of the projects the foundations of which were provided by their remarkable vision and forethought.

There were many strong characters and outstanding figures among them whose work has left an impress upon those who have followed them and which will continue for many generations yet to come, but there was no one among them more worthy of our honor and tribute of respect than was Judge William Peacock.

The friend and associate of those who became national figures, the confidant and adviser of those entrusted with most important and constructive matters and missions, his natural leadership, patriotic principles, sagacity and breadth of vision gave him an opportunity for a strong influence in shaping the early affairs of not only our own county but may also have had an influence in the larger affairs of state and nation that we but little realize and cannot determine.

BRED by a soldier of the Revolution and born near New York city amid the scenes of the storm and strife of that long and sanguinary struggle, there was instilled into his veins that deep and lasting patriotism that was exhibited during his long and useful life that spanned the period from the darkest days of the REVOLUTION in 1780 to the year following the centennial celebration of our independence; almost rounding out the whole century that carried this nation from its infancy to a position of power and prosperity equalled by no other nation.

His portrait shows a striking similarity of face and features to that of Washington indicative of the strong will and breadth of character; like Washington he too was born on February 22 and carrying the likeness still farther his first work was also as a surveyor of remarkable ability engaged in the pioneer mapping and plotting necessary in making new territory ready for settlement.

During his infancy we find his family moving up the river to Newburg and some years later to a farm near Geneva, N.Y., where he received his education, which was a liberal one for that time and included a knowledge of French and Spanish. Impelled by that common and restless desire to move westward, we find him starting for New Orleans at the age of 23, a fine specimen of well trained and virile young manhood. Stopping at the office of the Holland Land company at Batavia for information as to routes and ways of travel he was induced by the officers of that company, who recognized in him a valuable asset to enter their employ. In the year following he was sent to the head of navigation on Chautauqua lake to survey and map out what was expected to become one of the future great cities of the country and now shown upon the map as Mayville village, being two miles wide and extending northerly to the two Chautauqua creeks at the point of their joining in the village of Westfield, a distance of seven miles from its southern bounds. This work which had to be carried out in a trackless and primeval forest and was so accurately done that no corrections have had to be made and has been a marvel to those making subsequent surveys. One of the prized possessions of this society is the instrument used by him in his work.

At this time he writes of the naming of the new city to be at the home of Paul Busti, in honor of Busti's young daughter, May. The work of surveying the vast and unbroken wilderness was a difficult and exacting one and for seven long years ~~had been done~~ Peacock with the other surveyors was engaged in it having charge of many of its important sections, working for months at a time away from touch with civilization, sleeping in the forest under the stars, annoyed at times by unfriendly Senecas, whose title to the land had not been entirely relinquished, we can picture his physique being built up to withstand the ravages of a life of 97 eventful years.

In his visits to Batavia he must have found some time and opportunity for love making, for on October 3, 1807, he married Alice Evans, the daughter of one of his employers and a niece of Joseph Ellicott. So well had his work been done that when the time arrived in 1810 for the company to establish an office in this county he was made the resident agent and placed in full charge. The prospects were bright for a rapid settlement and a prosperous business, but the paralysis of business caused by the War of 1812, Indian troubles and other causes almost completely stopped the tide of western emigration and we find whole months at a time passing without a settler taking ~~up~~ articles of purchase. Those who had already settled found it almost impossible to meet their payments because of the extreme scarcity of money. Taxes on the unsold lands were rapidly mounting; roads had to be extended and built by the company in order to get settlers in under any terms and the thrifty and thick skinned Dutchman in Holland, who were the controlling stockholders in the enterprise were insistent upon dividends. All of these matters combined did not tend to make the life of the resident agent a rose one. There seems to be an inherent prejudice among our people against so-called police corporations so that when the accumulation of debts and interest brought by the passing of time reached a climax and a committee of land owners called upon Mr. Peacock in 1835 to ask for more favorable terms they were coldly received for he was aware that the company would not consent to a remission.

The desperate financial straits of the debtors caused them to lend an attentive ear to a few hot headed leaders and the celebrated raid on the land office was made. Warned by a friend that the raiders were on the way Mr. Peacock took refuge from the mob by going to the home of his friend, Donald Mackenzie, which is yet standing. Suspecting his presence there some of the boldest raiders went to Mackenzie's home and said that they had come for the agent. His host who weighed over 325 pounds quite effectively blocked the doorway, and who from a long service as factor at Fort Garry was not entirely ~~unversed~~ unversed in the matter of dealing with roughnecks, very politely but forcibly informed them that if they got to Peacock they would first have to climb over him; the ~~steep~~ ascent appeared to be too difficult and they reluctantly withdrew. Mr. Peacock went to Erie and remained long enough to allow the hot heads an opportunity to develop cold feet and quiet down. After the destruction of the records the land office ~~was~~ was permanently closed at Mayville, but was opened at Westfield three years later by the new purchasers, Seward and his associates. This terminated Mr. Peacock's services as agent, which was one of the most important of his various useful activities.

He received his title of ~~judge~~ judge by the appointment of the governor and council as one of the judges of the county, which position he filled with distinction and dignity. He was the first treasurer of Chautauqua county, serving when the office was created in 1821. He was one of the commissioners that had charge of the construction ~~of~~ of the new courthouse in 1834 and which stood for three fourths of a century. His engineering skill and work as a surveyor was recognized by ~~Governor~~ Governor Clinton, who called upon him to plan and survey the western section of the Erie ~~canal~~ canal; the economy and efficiency of this work bringing his ~~awed~~ laurels as a surveyor. To him was also given the important task of making the original survey of the port of Buffalo.

When Daniel Webster came to this county during the Harrison administration to visit Mackenzie on a secret mission in order to obtain information in regard to the northwest boundary controversy Judge Peacock was one of the few that was taken into the conference and knew the secrets. He was the county leader of the Patriots War movement in 1837 and 1838 and was chairman of the meeting called at Mayville in January, 1838, for the purpose of raising and organizing volunteers.

He was made a Free and Accepted Mason in 1803 and had the distinction of having been a member of the craft for 74 years which is probably the longest term of membership ever attained by anyone in the county if not in the state.

His wife was a worthy helpmate to so worthy a spouse, and the devoted couple lived together to celebrate their golden wedding. Many were the errands of mercy and charity that she performed in sharing their bounty with those that were less fortunate. They had no children and her death on April 19, 1859, left him lonely and desolate for 18 years until he followed her to their lasting resting place in Mayville cemetery having died on the day of the completion of his 97th year on February 21, 1877.

It is a privilege and an honor to even review briefly the life and history of so worthy and valuable a founder of our county. The Inn that was once his mansion and the lodge that he was so loyal to, bear his name and will help to perpetuate his memory, but beyond and more lasting than these are the traditions and memories that have come to us of this splendid man.

THE END

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