

This Week in Saratoga County History

Joseph Henry: A Summer Respite in Galway

Submitted by Stephen Williams July 17, 2024



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Some people may recognize the name Joseph Henry as that of an eminent scientist of the 19th century, who helped establish the fledgling United States as having experimental and theoretical scientists just as skilled and serious as those in Europe.

Others may know he was the first secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, the Washington, D.C. organization that oversees the nation's federal museums and research centers. His scientific work was so important that a measurement of electromagnetic induction – the henry – is named for him.

But maybe the most common recognition of Henry's name is attached to the town of Galway's elementary school, which seeks to instill Henry's passion for knowledge and self-education into its students. While Henry was born in Albany, completed his education, and started his career there, he spent formative pre-teen and teen years in Galway, where a grandmother and other family members lived.

In Albany, the family was poor (his Scottish immigrant father worked as either a “cartman” or laborer), and that probably contributed to the decision to send young Joseph to live with maternal relatives in Galway. His father died in 1811, when Joseph was 13 year old; it is unknown whether William Henry suffered prolonged ill health before his death. However, many years later Joseph Henry told a Smithsonian friend that his father was an alcoholic.

Less well-known is that during the time he was conducting scientific experiments at the Albany Institute and teaching mathematics and natural philosophy at the Albany Academy, his Alma Mater, marrying his cousin Harriet Alexander and starting a family – he occasionally returned to Galway, though for that era, it was a significant journey.

By the summer of 1832, Henry had taught and experimented with electromagnetism in Albany for nearly a decade. He had built a powerful electromagnet for a mentoring colleague at Yale University, with more electromagnets in demand. His reputation had spread far beyond Albany; he was in the process of being considered for a professorship at the prestigious College of New Jersey – the institution that is today Princeton University.

But that same summer, there was an outbreak of cholera in Albany – the sort of deadly intestinal disease outbreak that happened before public sanitation was common. Henry chose to take his young wife and newborn son William out of the city toward the end of August. They went back to his childhood home to live with an uncle in rural Galway.

“The pure air of the county has an almost magical effect in restoring our prostrated strength,” Henry wrote to his cousin (and brother-in-law) Stephen Alexander on Aug. 27, adding a mention of the “pestiferous air” in Albany.

Two days later he wrote Alexander again, recounting a trip north into the Sacandaga River valley – the region that was flooded nearly 100 years later to create the Sacandaga Reservoir, now Great Sacandaga Lake. His observations offer a contemporaneous glimpse of how that area was viewed.

He and another cousin, Hugh Alexander, took a “jaunt” north on Aug. 28, to the community of Fish House. “We found it a very pleasant little village surrounded with mountains and apparently on the verge of the inhabitable portion of this state,” Henry wrote. “To the north beyond as far as the eye could reach only mountains on piles of mountains met the view.”

That would have been a common sentiment about the Adirondack Mountains in 1832 – it would be decades before it became common for recreational visitors to travel into the Adirondacks. The region

north of the Great Sacandaga – which lacks dramatic high mountain peaks but offers dozens of heavily forested low peaks and hundreds of remote lakes and ponds – remains the least-inhabited part of the Adirondacks.

Today, Fishhouse is underwater -- but its memory lives on as the name of a county road in Providence and Broadalbin.

Henry also wrote of visiting John Fay, whom he identifies as “a former member of Congress from the county of Montgomery” as well as a friend of Alexander’s father, a grist mill operator from Schenectady.

Fay’s occupations included land surveying (which Henry had also done as a young man), agriculture, and milling. He served as postmaster in Northampton (which at the time was part of Montgomery County) and represented Montgomery County in the New York State Assembly from 1808-1809 and in 1812.

Fulton County, where the town of Northampton is now located, didn’t become a separate county from Montgomery until 1838.

Fay was elected to Congress for a single term, from 1819 to 1821. He later moved to Jefferson County, was elected sheriff, and was a presidential elector for Democrat James K. Polk in 1844.

The community where Fay lived became known as Fayville. It is also underwater now, but the name survives on Fayville Road, another county highway in the town of Providence.

At the time he wrote, Henry was hoping that the cholera outbreak would lead to the cancellation of in-person classes at the Albany Academy, though that hope was in vain.

He also remarks in the Aug. 29 letter on learning of the death from cholera of Hugh Fraser, who was an Albany superintendent of the Schenectady-Albany rail line. “(Fraser) was the last acquaintance I parted with in Albany and the unexpected news of his death affected me more unpleasantly than any death that has occurred by the cholera,” he wrote.

The outbreak subsided, and Henry returned to Albany to teach. By the end of September, he had formally been offered the position at Princeton. He accepted. His cousin Stephen, a graduate of Union College who was primarily an astronomer, joined him at Princeton that year. In 1846, they would go on to the new Smithsonian Institute together, where Henry served as its first secretary for 32 years.

The author is indebted to the late Galway town historian Phyllis Keeler, who served the town for 52 years, for the gift of Volume 1 of The Papers of Joseph Henry, a publication of the Smithsonian Institute, from which the material in this article is drawn.

Also "Joseph Henry: The Rise of an American Scientist," by Albert Moyer, Smithsonian Press, 1997.