

The Development of Prattsburg, New York

By Marian S. Henry

A [previous article](#) discussed the Phelps-Gorham Purchase, which began settlement of the Genesee country in western New York State. In this article we concentrate on the settlement of one small part of this tract, the town of Prattsburg.

Briefly, Oliver Phelps of Windsor, Connecticut and Nathaniel Gorham of Charlestown, Massachusetts obtained title to land east of the Genesee River on November 21, 1788. Because of financial difficulties they transferred the lands they had not disposed of to Robert Morris on November 18, 1790. In less than a year after Morris took possession of the tract, his London agents sold it, at more than double the price, to three Englishmen, Sir William Pulteney, William Hornby, and Patrick Colquhoun.

The Phelps-Gorham tract had been divided into ranges, each a strip six miles wide running from north to south. Range 1 ran along the eastern border, the so-called preemption line. Range 7 ran along the western border, the Genesee River. The ranges were divided into townships, each a strip six miles wide running from east to west. Township 1 lay on the Pennsylvania border, while township 14 bordered Lake Ontario. The standard parcel was thus 36 square miles. On June 16, 1802, Capt. Joel Pratt, of Spencertown, Columbia County, N.Y. and William Root of Albany County, N.Y. contracted with the Pulteney group for township 6, range 3, on the northern border of Steuben County.

¹Advertisements at the time assured the public that "the soil was fertile; the forests abounded with game, the lakes with fish; the climate was delightful and healthy." Other promotional materials highlighted the possibilities for "easy communications with different markets" and encouraged "those who wish their estates in a few years to increase in extent and value" to consider settling on the Steuben Frontier. ²

Captain Joel Pratt, of Colchester, Connecticut, journeyed to the present site of Prattsburg as early as 1799 and built a log cabin. He returned in February 1800 with his son Harvey, four ox-teams, and six men (including subsequent settler Uriah Chapin). That season they claimed to have cleared 110 acres of heavy forest and sowed it to wheat in the fall. They then returned to Columbia County. Jared Pratt, nephew of Capt. Joel Pratt, and his wife arrived with the others next season. They built a barn to store the harvest, and threshed the wheat throughout the winter. They then sent it the short distance to Bath on ox carts and ground some of it to flour. In the spring of 1802, the wheat was floated to Baltimore on arks and sold for \$8000. ³

This easy communication with "civilization" accelerated the process of transforming frontier land into an established community. In contrast to the first settlers on the east coast of North America, whose supply line stretched across the Atlantic Ocean, settlers in the "Steuben Frontier" faced a half-day journey to Bath and, as Joel Pratt's wheat crop demonstrated, a river journey of a few days to reach large commercial centers like Harrisburg, Columbia, Baltimore, and other Atlantic coast ports. Irvin W. Near writes in his *History of Steuben County* (Chicago, 1911), "During the high water season in the early years of the settlement of this valley this river was navigable for arks from Liberty in the town of Cohocton, this county [Steuben], where they were built, and in which the products of the vicinity were shipped to markets in Pennsylvania and Maryland. At Bath and other places on this river storehouses were built and yards established for the accumulation and keeping of property awaiting shipment by these river crafts." ⁴

Prattsburg's most famous citizen is Narcissa Prentiss, who migrated west to Oregon with her husband Marcus to establish a mission for Native Americans in 1836. Prentiss was born in Prattsburg in 1808, the daughter of Stephen Prentiss, one of the earliest settlers. During her lifetime Prattsburg was transformed from a forest to a thriving community of several thousand people. Stephen Prentiss was born in Grafton, Mass. in 1777. ⁵He married Clarissa Ward January 3, 1803 in Onondaga County, N.Y.

Children of Stephen and Clarissa Prentiss:

Stephen Turner Prentiss	b.1804	organ builder, mar. Jane Holbrook
Harvey Pratt Prentiss	b.1805	

Narcissa Prentiss	b.1808	mar. Marcus Whitman, moved to Oregon
Jonas Galusha Prentiss	b.1810	dry goods store in Angelica, N.Y.
Jane Abigail Prentiss	b.1811	unmarried; kept house for brother Edward
Mary Ann Prentiss	b.1813	mar. ___ Judson, a minister
Clarissa Prentiss	b.1815	
Harriet Prentiss	b.1818	mar. John Jackson, moved to Oberlin, Ohio
Edward Warren Prentiss	b.1820	minister

II. Early History of Prattsburg

Most settlers came to the "Steuben Frontier" from the eastern counties of New York and from the state of Connecticut. Capt. Pratt, a devout Congregationalist, was a significant force in the religious life of the new community. New settlers were required to pay to the trustees of the Religious Society an annual fee of \$15 for each 100 acres. Pratt induced the Reverend John Niles to come by offering him 80 acres of land. Rev. Niles arrived in the autumn of 1803 and held the settlement's first religious services at the home of Jared Pratt. William P. Curtis, Samuel Tuthill, Pomeroy Hull, and Salisbury Burton arrived in 1804. Settlers present by 1806 were Enoch Niles, Rufus Blodgett, Jesse Waldo, Judge Hopkins, John Hopkins, Dea. Ebenezer Rice, Robert Potter, Dea. Gamaliel Loomis, Samuel Hays, Dea. Abiel Lindsley, Moses Lyon, Uriel Chapin, Asher Bull, Rohan Hills, and Stephen Prentiss.

In 1806, Ira Pratt and Joel Pratt Jr. opened a general store in the village of Prattsburg. The first post office opened in 1807 with Joel Pratt Jr. as postmaster. Post riders traveling weekly between Geneva and Bath now stopped in Prattsburg. The first public schoolhouse was built near the church in 1812. Below are some of the services that became available in Prattsburg during Narcissa Prentiss' early childhood.

Moses Lyon	built first tannery
Aaron Bull	opened the first tavern/hotel in 1806
___ Bidwell	blacksmith
Henry Allis	blacksmith, manufactured iron farm implements
Noah Niles	physician, farmer
Israel Skinner	tanner, harness and saddle shop
Samuel A. Johnson	cabinet-maker
Stephen Prentiss	sawmills and gristmills, carpenter
Henry Pomeroy	cloth dresser
Cyril Ward	farmer, sawmill
Jesse Waldo	wagon maker
John Hopkins	shoe maker
Robert Porter	first gristmill built 1807

William P. Curtiss	erected a distillery with Stephen Prentiss
Timothy Skinner	shoe maker

Over 300 families and more than 2700 people resided in the township by 1820. Framed houses, orchards, and gardens flourished where forests once were, and many types of mills were in full operation. The 1825 state census indicated that only 18 percent of Prattsburg families owned unimproved land. Stephen Prentiss owned more improved land than eighty percent of the town's citizens, with 67 acres of such land and 2 mills to his name.

In 1822, plans were put forward to build the Franklin Academy for Advanced Studies, ("advanced studies" meaning beyond elementary school). Named for Benjamin Franklin, the Academy was funded by local subscription. The \$2000 pledged for construction and \$4000 for maintenance, all from town residents, was a sure indicator that Prattsburg could no longer be considered a frontier outpost. The first Academy building, a two-story structure adorned by an ornamental cupola, was erected on land purchased from Judge Porter. The first students were admitted in 1824 and the school became so successful that in 1827, a "female department" was added. Narcissa Prentiss, then aged 19, was one of the first female students to attend.

III. Epilogue

In June of 1834, Stephen Prentiss moved his family about 40 miles southwest of Prattsburg to a new community in neighboring Allegany County called Amity (since changed to Belmont). Presumably this new community had ready work for a carpenter and joiner. Shortly afterward they moved again to nearby Angelica where his son Jason operated a dry goods store. Narcissa Prentiss married Dr. Marcus Whitman on February 18, 1836. They both fulfilled long held dreams to become missionaries and were sent to Oregon. Marcus eventually went back to the East Coast but soon returned, leading the first large migration to the West via the Oregon Trail. Unfortunately, the mass migration triggered a deadly measles outbreak that decimated the population of the Cayuse tribe that the Prentisses labored for. Surviving members of the tribe, enraged by the loss of nearly all of their children, took revenge and killed the Prentisses along with 12 other pioneers on November 29, 1847.⁶

The Prentiss family is illustrative of the history of many of the early settlers of Prattsburg and Steuben County. They came from New England bringing with them their Congregationalist faith, their belief in the value of education, and their strong sense of community. They built a new home on the frontier, and then, in a generation or two, moved on. Some families, however, stayed and put down roots. Their history is imprinted on the very names of the streets in the village of Prattsburg. Pratt Street crosses Main Street, appropriately enough, by the acre of land that Joel Pratt donated in 1806 as a cemetery. Waldo Road recalls wagon maker Jesse Waldo,⁷ and Porter Street commemorates Judge Robert Porter.⁸

On February 28, 1923, the Franklin Academy was destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt as Prattsburgh Central School. The house in which Narcissa Prentiss was born is now preserved as a museum and leases space to the Prattsburg Community Historical Society, which shows the house to visitors during the summer.

¹. Joel Pratt would later buy out William Root's share.

². *Converting the West*, Julie Roy Jeffrey, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK, 1991, Chap. 1, pp 3-4.

³. With the given price of \$2.50/bushel, one may calculate that the 110 acres yielded 3200 bushels or 29 bushels/acre.

⁴. *History of Steuben County*, Irvin W. Near, Chicago, 1911, p. 3.

⁵. Stephen Prentiss' paternal lineage: Stephen (1777-1862), son of Stephen (1744-1831), son of Stephen (1719-), son of Solomon (1673-1758), son of Solomon (1646-1719), son of Henry, who emigrated from England and settled in Cambridge, Mass before 1640. Source: *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the Opening of Old Oregon*, Glifford M. Drury, Glendale, CA, 1973, vol I, pp. 97-114.

⁶. An article on the Prentiss family was published by Rev. Levi Fay Waldo in *Whitman College Quarterly*, I (1897): 3: 27 ff. Whitman College, named after Marcus Whitman, is in Walla Walla, Washington. Mary Prentiss, sister of

Stephen Prentiss, married Levi Fay; Levi Fay Waldo was the nephew of Prentiss Fay and relative of Prentiss family.

⁷. Jesse Waldo was b. Mansfield, Conn 1761, d. 1770. He married Martha Hovey, b. Mansfield, Conn. 1770. Their sons were Otis (b. 1794), Lucius (b. 1802), Charles (b. 1805).

⁸. Robert Porter was b. Farmington, Conn., 6 Oct. 1773, the son of Noah and Mary (Lewis) Porter. He married Roxana Root, of Litchfield, Conn. on 28 Nov. 1799.