

Getting to Know the Lay of the Land Using New York State Gazetteers

By Richard "Dick" Hillenbrand

In the early 1960s I interviewed an elderly native of Baldwinsville, New York, about his knowledge of some of the town's early families. He was about 90 years old and, as my mother had been born near there, I thought he might know something about her relatives.

He was not too knowledgeable about my ancestors, but he still told me something that continues to resonate for me. At the time I was living near Cicero, New York, and when I mentioned that fact he became quite agitated. "Cicero?"

"Yes."

"King's Hotel?"

"Yes." (King's Hotel was a local landmark, now gone.)

"Filled with ruffians and thieves; I would never go near Cicero."

It turned out that, as a lad in the 1890s, he had had the task of driving a herd of his father's cows to market in Utica, New York. Syracuse would have been much closer, but evidently the price was a little better in Utica. On his return trip, he lodged at King's Hotel in Cicero, and was beset by "ruffians and thieves" who stole his father's money. Imagine the shame he must have endured when telling his father the money was lost.

You can be sure that this old man had told the story all of his life whenever he heard the dreaded word Cicero. Well, our traveling ancestors – from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries – would have been swayed by such informal tale-telling.

How did our colonial and post-Revolutionary War New England ancestors decide to just hitch up their wagons and go into the vast unknown spaces of the far west (as most of New York beyond Schenectady was viewed in this period)? At times they would have been influenced by word-of-mouth, as above, and some times by itinerant ministers and travelers who had visited these far-off places. There are untold numbers of reasons, but one was most likely decisive. It was the land; always the land.

As New York State was opening up for settlers in the 1790s, New England had already been peopled for 150 or more years: the lands had been divided and sold – or handed down to younger generations through the estate process – more than once. New York State had a large quantity of excellent farm land, many fast-running streams and rivers, and raw building materials so plentiful that all one needed were a few hand tools and a poke of supplies to become established in a new home.

Other than word-of-mouth, what else might have been available to early settlers to describe the new country? Gazetteers.

I like to use gazetteers of the time period I am studying to understand the local environment as it appeared to our ancestors. These little books are full of geological and natural history facts, describing the topography, the waterways (superhighways of the day), and the lakes and settlements as they were at that time. Believe it or not, these books were not created for genealogists! The data would have been gathered at some great expense and from myriad sources by the compiler and then set into book format for the purpose of making money for the publisher.

And what was the audience for these gazetteers? It was composed of surveyors, land agents, attorneys, land speculators, ministers, government offices, and libraries, as well as individuals contemplating a move to a new town. A few gazetteers were created for the state of New York. Some later ones were specific to one or two counties, and most of the nationwide gazetteers also hold clues to the lands of New York.

The following list is of some New York State gazetteers that you should find useful:

(1812)

Spafford, Horatio Gates, *A Gazetteer of the State of New York; Carefully Written from Original and Authentic Materials, Arranged on a New Plan, in Three Parts: Comprising,*

First – A Comprehensive Geographical and Statistical View of the Whole State, Conveniently Disposed Under Separate Reads;

Second – An Ample General View of Each County, In Alphabetical Order, with Typographical and Statistical Tables, Showing the Civil and Political Divisions, Population, Post-Offices, &c.;

Third – a Very Full and Minute Topographical Description of Each Town or Township, City, Borough, Village, &c. &c., in the Whole State, Alphabetically Arranged; as also its Lakes, Rivers, Creeks, with Every Other Subject of Topographical Detail; Forming a Complete Gazetteer or Geographical Dictionary of the State of New York, with an Accurate map of the State (Albany: H. C. Southwick, 1812).

(1824)

Spafford, Horatio Gates, *Gazetteer of the State of New York* (Albany: B. D. Packard, 1824).

Similar subtitle to the 1812 edition with updates to the text.

(1836)

Gordon, Thomas F., *Gazetteer of the State of New York : Comprehending its Colonial History, General Geography, Geology, and Internal Improvements, its Political State, a Minute Description of its Several Counties, Towns, and Villages, Statistical Tables, Exhibiting the Area, Improved Lands, Population, Stock, Taxes, Manufactures, Schools, and Cost of Public Instruction, in Each Town: with a Map of the State, and a Map of Each County, and Plans of the Cities and Principal Villages* (Philadelphia: T. K. and P. G. Collins, printers, 1836).

(1842 and 1843)

Disturnell, John, *A Gazetteer of the State of New York: Comprising Its Topography, Geology, Mineral Resources, Civil Divisions, Canals, Railroads and Public...* 1st edition (Albany: J. Disturnell, 1842); 2nd edition (Albany: Printed by C. Van Benthuysen & Co., 1843).

(1860)

French, John Homer, *Gazetteer of the State of New York: embracing a comprehensive view of the geography, geology, and general history of the state, and a complete history and Description of Every County, City, town, Village and Locality, with Full Tables of Statistics* (Syracuse: R. P. Smith, 1860).

French's Gazetteer, as it is commonly called, has a comprehensive list of all of the then known early newspapers published in each county, with dates, titles, and publishers. The footnotes of each county, town, city, village and hamlet, contain a goldmine of information: names of the first settlers, the number and types of churches for each locality, the manufacturers and industries. From these descriptions you will gain a very good feel for the communities, where they traded, and what life would have been like from the earliest settlement up to the middle of the 19th century.

This book is probably the most used of all of the books in my arsenal of data tools. When I teach classes on genealogy I usually start out by telling the attendees to "Read French's Gazetteer from cover to cover, twice, and then start your family history research." It's a joke, of course, but by the time the classes are over they will have heard me extol the value of French's Gazetteer many times. How in the world did this man gather so much minutia in the 1850s, most of it is verifiable today, when he had no computer, no Internet, no cell phone, and no Google Books?

The book has a subject index in the front and a geographical index in the back. A modern, all- personal-name index was created about a hundred years later by Frank Place of Cortland, New York, and it is still available for purchase at the Cortland County Historical Society. Original copies of French's Gazetteer are still found in used and antiquarian book dealers' inventories, and it has been reprinted several times; some of those reprints include the all-name index within, and I believe you can find it on CD-ROM as well as online through an easy search engine query. I own originals, reprints, and keep a digital version on a thumb drive that I carry around my neck when going out into the

field. I don't leave home without it.

There are also county-level gazetteers, created during the 19th century, that are invaluable as research tools – they will help you discover some little detail that you might otherwise overlook utilizing a 21st century approach.

Other research tips:

One excellent online catalog to search is WorldCat.org, but be creative. Use the Internet search feature and come up with some fabulous online discoveries. Visit your local genealogical research library and dig deep for any titles with the word gazetteer in them. Buy reprints or CD-ROM versions or download digital versions to your own computer, but by all means remember the word “Gazetteer!”

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