

THE UNMADE HOUSE CALL

by

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EDITORIAL NOTE: This article is a slightly revised and expanded version of a talk given to the Erie County Historical Society in March, 1976 by Dr. Walsh. Dr. Walsh has made a very valuable contribution to Erie County History by delving into the life of Seth Reed as a physician.

“And there the embattled farmers stood, and fired the shot heard round the world”. Emerson was using poetic license when he wrote these memorable words. Of course they were not literally correct. The sounds of battle in Lexington were not heard in Concord nor were the musket and rifle shots in Concord audible in Lexington. Yet, eventually the causes and effects of these skirmishes were to resound in Boston, England and the European continent.

Now we know that our knowledge of the important events leading to the American Revolution was not originally obtained from the text books of history, but rather from letters, manuscripts, local publications and other writings of the times. These documents were made by the actual participants and others, and handed down from one generation to another. In addition there were tales and stories told by parents to their children and then put down in a journal or a diary and thus preserved for our study. One of the most important functions of the Erie County Historical Society and similar organizations is to collect and preserve such valuable material which will be so useful so many centuries from now. Dr. Walsh’s effort here reflects his research at the Massachusetts Historical Society and the Uxbridge Public Library. We hope the readers of the **Journal** enjoy the results of his research and his attempt to capture the spirit of the age.

Early morning, June 17, 1775, outside of Boston, and across the river, Charlestown, and those two hills dominating the locality, five volunteer physicians and surgeons were already there when Colonel Seth Reed of the Massachusetts Militia led his weary regiment across the neck of land to the camp site. On the long march up from Uxbridge he often wondered whether he should remain with his regiment as their leader or be of more use as a physician to help with the battle casualties, in case there would be a battle. There were two events which gave him an answer.

While still some distance from Boston a message reached him requesting that he prepare a plan for the care of the casualties, and advising that another Colonel Reed from New Hampshire would assume command of his men. The orders were signed by Dr. Joseph Warren, Major General of the Massachusetts Militia and the ranking officer in the area. As a friend and Lodge Brother Reed welcomed the opportunity. He knew that he must follow the orders. Explaining the situation to his men he walked around the base of the smaller hill and introduced himself to the group of medical men who were busily examining papers and booklets spread on a small table in front of a marquee tent. Dr. William Eustis, younger than the others, said that he understood that Dr. Reed would head the unit. Working in their shirt sleeves

they began to formulate methods and means for the care of the injured because it was now certain there would be a battle. Three medical students from Harvard College and two of their Professors soon joined the meeting.

A copy of the book "Dr. Ranby's Instruction For Military Surgeons" had been smuggled out of the lines from Boston and Dr. Reed, after a quick study, mentioned the pertinent portions to his colleagues, "Wounds to be cleansed with dry or moist lint, bandage firmly, remove in 3 days and if infected apply bread and milk poultice. Use a finger to remove a rifle ball as some instruments could be dangerous. Before operation give soldier a grain of opium and 3 ounces of Rum, if obtainable. The concluding sentence was emphasized, "In all manner you are not to be affected or distracted by the cries, groans and complaints of your patients".

It was decided to erect the Main Field Hospital at the foot of the smaller of the two hills, Bunker's Hill, as most of the fighting would take place on the larger Breed's Hill. Arrangements were also made for the occupation of several houses in nearby Cambridge, and here the surgical treatment would take place. The thirty-one year old soldier surgeon realized that this would take him further away from his friends from Uxbridge.

Ascending Breed's Hill he noticed how furiously the men were digging entrenchments, farmers, tradesmen, laborers, shopkeepers, clerks, and many others, now united to give battle to the world's greatest army. Halfway up the hill a voice called. As Reed turned, there was Dr. Joseph Warren, a Lodge friend and colleague, but also Major General of the Massachusetts Militia and the ranking military officer on the site. A physician patriot, beloved by patients and greatly admired by the Sons of Liberty, he was a resplendent figure, tall, slim, wearing a handsomely tailored blue coat, white waistcoat, white satin breeches and gleaming black boots. He was of about the same age as the fellow officer from Uxbridge. He told Reed that he too had to make an important decision earlier in the day. Colonels Prescott and Putnam had offered him command of the forces because of his superior rank. Instead he had chosen to serve with a soldier's rifle under their command. The friends shook hands. The one went back up the hill, never to descend alive, the other on to Cambridge, to help make medical military history.

In that little town, three suitable houses were obtained, the occupants readily agreeing to vacate in order to make them into rude hospitals. Beds, chairs, tables and stretchers were quickly found, as well as small stoves and cut wood, pails and pans for boiling the water.

It was not quite noon, but the hot summer sun beating down from a clear blue sky made the work an increasing burden. Although the boom of cannon on the British warships could be clearly heard for some hours, it was midafternoon before the first patient was carried on a litter to the nearest of the little houses. One look at the limp soldier and Dr. Reed knew that the trip here was in vain. Aaron Barr was already dead. There was time for the Chief Surgeon to again review the outlines of treatment which should be followed. Remove every tourniquet and attempt to locate the bleeding vessel, if not possible reapply the tourniquet loosely and apply a small padding over the area. In every case remove the constricting leather thong at frequent intervals. Never apply lard or similar substance to open wounds. Never bleed where the patient is pale and the pulse is poor. It would be over a century before the tourniquet rule would be a worldwide standard procedure.

Soon more casualties began to arrive. First a few and then in increasing numbers, some walking, or on litters, or draped across the backs of oxen or horses. Clouds of dust obscured the length of the line of wounded. Various types were distributed according to the location and gravity of the injury. Soon, along with the others, Dr. Reed was actively engaged in the surgical work which would save many lives. Without his skill and directions more would have been lost. The intense heat of the stifling small rooms was withering and soon the patients, attendants, orderlies and the medical men were soaking hot. The other Doctors were inspired as they hastily looked at the leader, the solidly built man, with stained apron, brown wet, curly hair and the perspiring handsome face, working in the middle of the room, giving orders, while at the same time suturing and bandaging.

All through the steaming New England night, with the feeble light of a few lamps and candles, the heroic Medical Corps worked ceaselessly. Propped up doors, and furniture made into crude beds for the operative cases, those on the bare wideboarded floors, some on the porches or on tents outside. The smell of spent gun powder was everywhere. The shrieks, cries and moans would haunt the physicians for years.

General Wahington's report to Congress, dated July 10, 1775, Cambridge, Massachusetts, is as follows: killed or missing in action 145, wounded 304. These figures are a real indication of the task Dr. Reed and his assistants faced.

Historical authorities on Erie County history are generally in agreement that Colonel Seth Reed was the first settler in what is now the City of Erie in 1795 or twenty years later. What had happened from the close of the Revolutionary War in 1783 to 1795 when he became the first settler in Erie?

We are not certain as to the exact date that Colonel Reed settled in Central New York State at Geneva, but we do know that he was living there in 1788, five years after the signing of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the American Revolution. Turner, in his book, **The Phelps & Gorham Purchase and Morris Reserve**, refers to Seth Reed and Peter Ryckman as Indian traders.¹ Conover, in his history of Ontario County, says, "...² in the fall of 1788, Geneva became a village of some note and was the center of operations for land speculators, explorers, the Lessee Co. and its agents and the principal seat of the Indian trade."

Peter Ryckman and Colonel Reed had good relations with the Indians as they were able to persuade the Indians to go to Albany and confer with the New York State Land Commissioners in 1788 and enter into a treaty for the sale of some of their land. Reed and Ryckman received a grant of 16,000 acres along the lake near Geneva from the State of New York for their services. Reed was also owner of some 2,000 acres to the north of Geneva. Unfortunately these land titles were based on the old incorrect Preemption Line surveyed in 1788 and 1789 instead of the new correct Preemption Line of 1792 and became valueless. New York State and Massachusetts, in order to settle conflicting land claims, had agreed to a Preemption Line from Sodus Bay through Seneca Lake to the Pennsylvania border. Massachusetts received the lands west of Seneca Lake and ten townships lying between the Owego and Chenango

¹ O. Turner, **Phelps & Gorham Purchase & Morris Reserve**, p. 245.

² George J. Conover, **History of Ontario County** (New York, p. 260.

Rivers. New York won title to all land east of the line and eventually political sovereignty over the area in dispute

Jared Boughton,³ an inhabitant of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, who traveled from Stockbridge by sleigh in February, 1790 to Vistor in Ontario County, tells us that part of the time he and his family traveled with Colonel Reed's family.

"We traveled thirteen miles the day we left Col. Hanforth's. Col. Reed's family and mine, fourteen in number, camped that night under a hemlock tree, built a camp of hemlock boughs, had a warm brush fire - made chocolate - and although my wife had a young child, we had a comfortable time of it."

The morning of the third day following he reports " . . . we went home with Mrs. Reed and family - found Col. Reed at home, waiting for the arrival of his family. His house stood on the bank of the lake in Geneva; the place then contained ten or twelve families."

Joshua Fairbanks⁴ who resided at Lewiston made his first visit to Western New York in the winter of 1791. He had recently been married to Miss Sophis Reed, the daughter of Col. Seth Reed, at Uxbridge, Massachusetts. In February, 1791, Mr. Fairbanks set out with his wife to join Col. Reed. He remained at Geneva until the fall of 1793.

Mr. Fairbanks had brought along with him a few goods to trade with the Indians. An old bill of a part of the goods he brought to Geneva indicated they were bought of "Reed & Rice, Brookfield". A few of the articles and prices are noted below:

"11 yds. Ratteen, 4s pr. yd.
30 yds. Cotton Cord, ribbed, 8s 4d.
7½ yds. Corduroy, 5s.
63 yds. Shalloon, 2s 4d.
25lbs. Bohea Tea 2s 8d."

Until 1795 Northern and Central Ohio, as well as Erie County, Pennsylvania were not safe for American settlement. The Western Indians had twice defeated American armies under General Harmar and St. Clair in Ohio in 1790 and 1791. The British still had possession of six forts on American soil and encouraged the Indians to resist the advancing American frontiersmen as well as furnishing them with guns and ammunition from their forts.

General Anthony Wayne decisively defeated a force of some 2,000 Indians which included some Iroquois as well as Canadian militia from Detroit at the Battle of Fallen Timbers (near Toledo) in August, 1794. The Battle took place on the banks of the Maumee River and near the British Fort Miamis. Wayne's forces destroyed or burned all houses and corn fields above and below the Fort including the houses, stores and property of Cola McKee, the British Indian Agent. The British garrison were unwilling spectators to this devastation.

Wayne's victory caused the six nations to enter into the Pickering Treaty with the Federal Government at Canandaigua, New York, in November, 1794 by which Pennsylvania's claim to the Erie Triangle was acknowledged. Moreover, the British in the same month signed Jay's treaty by which they

³ Turner, O. F. *Pioneer History of the Holland Land Purchase of Western New York*, pp. 378 and 379.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 319, 320.

agreed to give up all of their six forts on American soil by 1796. In November 1795 the Western Indians finally gave up their claim to most of Ohio at the Treaty of Greenville.

Most of Ohio and Erie County were now relatively safe for settlement. The settlement of Erie was made doubly sure by the sending of a detachment of the American army to Erie under Captain Bissell and the building of an American Fort on Garrison Hill in the spring of 1795. Additional safety was provided when a detachment of Pennsylvania militia under Captain Grubb was sent to Erie to protect a group of surveyors under Andrew Ellicott and General Irvine to survey the town of Erie.

Colonel Reed, along with other frontiersmen of his day, immediately grasped the possibilities offered in the opening of Erie County for settlement. Reed had apparently been successful as a trader and merchant at Geneva, but had been unfortunate in his dealings in land. As the first settler in Erie he would become its first trader or merchant and hotel keeper.

The Warner & Beers 1884 **History of Erie County** was the first Erie County History to be financed by the publication of a short biography of prominent individuals or their families. We are indebted to the biographical sketch⁵ of the Reed Family - probably prepared by them - to be found for the events which brought him to Erie.

Becoming impressed in some way with the favorable location of the new town of Erie, and believing that it would grow to be an important place, he sold out his Ontario Co. estate, and, with his wife and sons — Charles John and Manning — left for the frontier. At Buffalo he fell in with James Talmadge, who had fitted out a sailboat to run between that place and Erie, with whom a contract was made to bring the party and the few goods they had along to their destination. They reached the harbor of Erie on the evening of the last day of June or first day of July, 1795, and camped on the peninsula for fear of the Indians. Thos. Rees and a company of State militia under the command of Capt. John Grubb, with some friendly Indians, were quartered upon the Garrison ground. On seeing the fire in Mr. Reed's camp they were greatly alarmed, thinking a hostile band had landed there, preliminary to an attack. Sentinels were kept on watch all night, and the troops were ordered to be ready at any moment to meet the expected foe. In the morning a boat, with men well armed, carrying a flag of truce, and accompanied by a canoe-load of friendly Indians, was sent over to the peninsula to ascertain the cause of alarm. On landing, which they did with extreme caution, they were surprised to find a white man and his family, who were, if possible, worse scared than themselves. Mutual ex-

⁵ Warner, Beers & Co., **History of Erie County**, pp. 941 and 942.

planations ensued, and both parties were agreeably disappointed to find that those they had mistaken for foes were in reality friends. Soon after his arrival, Col. Reed proceeded to the erection of a place of shelter for his family. This, the first building on the site of Erie, was a one-story log cabin, covered with bark, and located at the mouth of Mill Creek. It had no floor, and strips of bark were used for carpets. Col. Reed concluded to open a public house, and labeled his cabin the "Presque Isle Hotel." Martin Strong, who visited Erie about this time, says the house was provided "with plenty of good refreshment for all itinerants that chose to call." In Sept., Col. Reed's sons — Rufus S., and George — came by way of Pittsburgh, with Mrs. Thos. Rees and Mrs. J. Fairbanks. The Colonel remained at the mouth of Mill Creek until the ensuing season, when, after putting up another and better building, which he placed in charge of Rufus, he moved to a farm that he had located on the flats of Walnut Creek, on the present site of Kearsarge. Here he remained, in a rough cabin, until his death on the 19th of March, 1797, at the age of fifty-three. His house was about forty rods west of the Waterford road, in the rear of Capt. Zimmerly's brick residence. The body of Col. Reed was buried on the farm at Walnut Creek, there being no regular place of internment in the county. The remains were removed three times — first to the United Presbyterian graveyard, at the corner of 8th and Peach streets; second, to the Episcopal graveyard, and lastly, to the family lot in the Erie Cemetery. Hannah, his wife, died Dec. 8, 1821, in her seventy-fourth year.

Less than a mile away from the Reed compound in 1796 was Fort Presque Isle, and in that Fort in November and December of 1796 the Ranking General of the United States Army was in a critical medical condition. General Anthony Wayne, bedfast, suffering the agonies of acute Osteomyelitis, and later Peritonitis from Appendicitis, was dying. What had brought him to Erie?

As commanding officer of the Army of the United States, General Wayne returned to Ohio in late spring of 1796 to finish the work of assuming command of the British posts, Fort Miamis and Detroit, soon to be given up by the terms of Jay's Treaty. On August 7 he received the official surrender of Fort Miamis. On August 13 he arrived at Detroit and received a warm

⁶ Richard C. Knopf, *Anthony Wayne*, p. 478.

welcome. On September 29 he notified the Secretary of War McHenry that "official and complete possession of all the posts on the American side of the line of demarcation" had taken place.

Knopf, in his book, ***Anthony Wayne: A Name in Arms***, has this summary in the Preface to Wayne's correspondence for 1796 of the events from his last official letter written from Detroit, November 12, 1796 to his death on December 15, 1796.

Wayne's last official letter was written from Detroit, November 12. In it he mentioned his plans to make his headquarters at Pittsburgh for the winter. The next day, on board the Detroit, he sailed out into the broad waters of Lake Erie, bound for Presqu'ile where he arrived on the eighteenth. Tired from the journey, he planned to spend a few days here before going on to Pittsburgh. Then, the recurring gout struck again. He suffered in agony for nearly two weeks. No physician was at hand and, when the general's condition appeared critical, Dr. John Wallace was summoned from Fort Fayette. Dr. George Balfour, a long-time army doctor, also came.

There in the Presqu'ile blockhouse, Major General Anthony Wayne, commander-in-chief of the Legion of the United States, died on the morning of December 15, 1796. His mission was accomplished and Wayne had truly won for himself "A Name in Arms".

Benjamin Whitman,⁷ the main author of the Warner & Beers History of Erie County, has a slightly different version.

Gen. Wayne's mission being fulfilled, in the fall of 1796 he embarked in a small vessel at Detroit for Presque Isle, now Erie, on his way homeward. During the passage down the lake, he was attacked with the gout, which had afflicted him for some years, and been much aggravated by his exposure in the Western wilds. The vessel being without suitable remedies, he could obtain no relief, and on landing at Presque Isle was in a dangerous condition. By his own request, he was taken to one of the block houses on the garrison tract, the attic of which had been fitted up as a sleeping apartment. Dr. J. C. Wallace, who had served with him as a surgeon during his Indian campaign, and who was familiar with his disease, was then stationed at Fort Fayette, Pittsburgh. The General sent a messenger for the doctor, and the latter started instantly for Erie, but on reaching Franklin was astonished to learn the news of his death, which occurred on the 15th of December, 1796. During his illness every attention was paid to the distinguished invalid that circumstances would permit. Two days after his death the body was buried, as he had directed, in a plain coffin, with his uniform and boots

⁷ Warner, Beers & Co., *History of Erie County*, pp. 210 and 211.

on, at the foot of the flagstaff of the block house. Among those who helped to lay out and inter the remains was Capt. Daniel Dobbins, long one of the best known citizens of Erie. The top of the coffin was marked with the initials of his name, "A. W.," his age and the year of his decease in round-headed brass tacks, driven into the wood.

As a medical doctor of the 1970's I do not accept the diagnosis of gout as the cause of General Wayne's death. Instead I believe that the main cause was appendicitis.

I also fail to understand why couriers were dispatched to Fort Detroit and Fort Pitt for medical help when Col. Reed, a physician in his own right, was less than a mile away or at most a few miles away in Kearsarge. It would seem that an old army surgeon could have opened the increasing abdominal swelling on the lower right side and evacuated the deadly infection and possibly saved the General's life.

Certain reasons may have existed for Dr. Reed not being called.

1. It was not the policy of the army to call in civilian Doctors.

2. Dr. Reed's presence was not known.

3. Dr. Reed was not near his trading post, but in failing health he was probably in his warmer, drier cabin in Kearsarge.

The third theory seems the most likely. Captain Bissell, the commander of the American fort, must have been aware of the existence of Col. Reed and that he was a physician. Col. Reed followed General Wayne in death some 3 months later. This is undoubtedly the reason Dr. Seth Reed did not make a house call on General Wayne in the blockhouse.

In beautiful Erie Cemetery, in Reed Circle C, beneath a towering granite monument, and shaded by a wide-spreading colorful cut leaf maple tree is the marker: Colonel Seth Reed 1744-1797.

And close beside it that of his wife, Hannah, together now as they were two centuries ago.

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