

GEORGE CLINTON LATTA
CHARLOTTE, N.Y.,
1795—1871

PIONEER
MERCHANT
ENTREPRENEUR

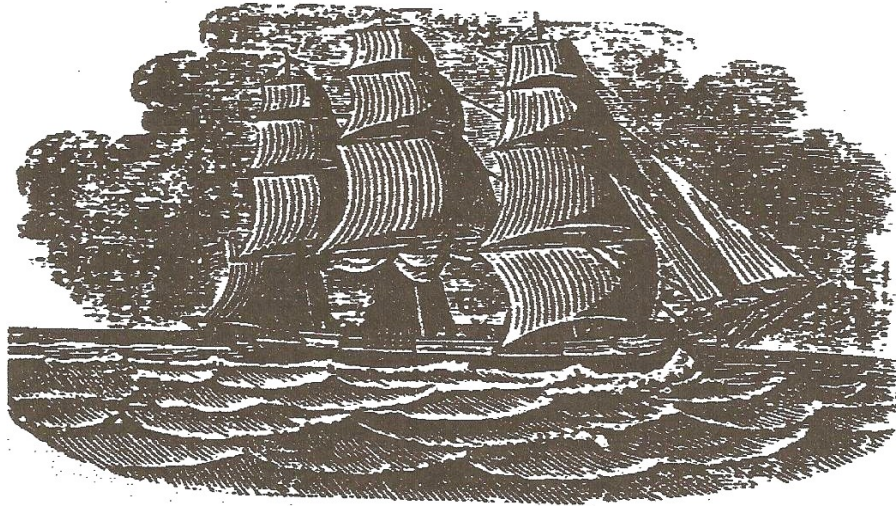
BY JOAN SULLIVAN

In a letter written on April 1, 1855, George Latta sent Charles H. Greene a draft* for thirty dollars (\$30.00) and offered Greene the following advice for success.

"-----if the small sum means starting you again on life's journey. I will feel pretty satisfied in what I have done. In traveling through the world of trouble we are not to look back but look a head and step forward believing that with common prudence and economy and the helping hand of health we can get a good living and that is all we can have in this world. Still it is desirable to have a reasonable amount of property above one's daily living. -----"

*A draft is a bank note similar to a check.





Before the Revolution in America, forts such as Fort Niagara were linked by the waterways of Western New York to the eastern ports such as New York City. Raw materials like potash, lumber and animal skins were shipped east from the Port of Genesee in ships similar to the one seen here. They were exchanged for finished goods needed such as cloth and clothing, tools, spices and other goods that could not be produced by the settlement.

Lake Ontario soon became an important link in the chain of water routes. The forts were trading centers and required couriers for the exchange of goods. George Latta, his brother Samuel, their father, James Latta, and their uncle, Benjamin Bartlett were very involved in establishing trade in the Genesee frontier. George was born in Geneva, NY in 1795.

James and Sarah Latta, with their six children, arrived in Geneva, Ontario County, on September 14, 1789 to settle land Mr. Latta had previously purchased.

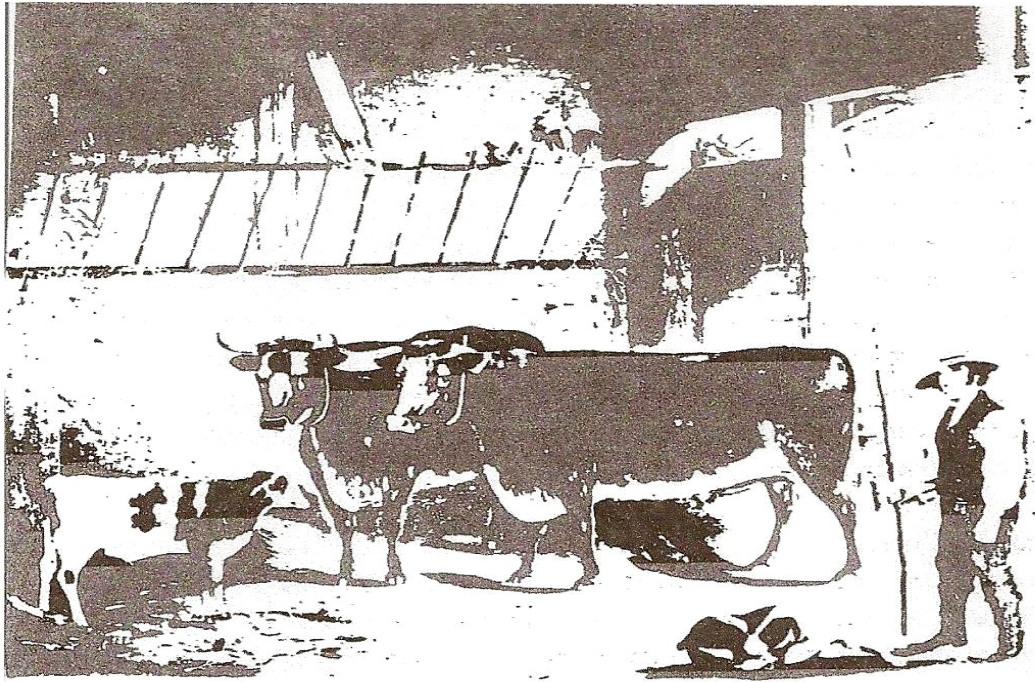
“They came up the Hudson River to Albany in a sloop, crossed over to Schenectady in wagons, then went by way of the Mohawk River to Fort Stanwix (now known as Rome, NY), hauled their small boats over land into Wood Creek, down that into Oneida Lake. It was a clear moonlight night when they arrived, and my father being anxious to cross the lake, paid his men extra wages to pass over the lake to Fort Brewerton during the night, fearing storms would arise in the late morning and detain them several days as was frequently the case. They went down the Oneida River to Three River Point, then up the Seneca River to the outlet of Seneca Lake, then up that to Geneva. The voyage took 17 days during the greater part of which time it rained.”

Latta's family came to know many of the land speculators of western New York, such as Oliver Phelps and Charles Williamson through their past explorations of the wilderness. Latta's brother, Samuel, worked as a drover, and a surveyor for the Pultney Estates, a land company. New settlers often worked as surveyors. While surveying required great physical endurance for long forays into the wilderness, it also gave the participants the advantage of discovering and choosing prime land for their own use. Gaining title to land however, was not always easy. New York Governor George Clinton was called upon to intercede on behalf of Benjamin Barton's land claim in Geneva.

Latta's father James, and his future brother in law, Benjamin Barton, Jr., had had practical experience in Great Lakes trading. James had been a merchant, and in both families the adult males had worked as drovers to bring cattle to the British soldiers at Fort Niagara prior to the Revolutionary War. Though there was abundant game in the forests surrounding the fort, the soldiers preferred the Familiar domestic meat. It took a great deal of courage and daring to drive cattle through such a hostile environment for there were no roads, and there was the danger of Indian hostility. In 1792 there were three Indians to one white person.

"It was a difficult matter wading through mud after the droves and slow traveling for if the sheep were hurried they 'dropped' or lost control of their forelegs and had to be killed on the spot. Many a time a drover had to pay for his own lodging and pasturage with fresh mutton or pork. It might have been one of these drovers who sat in a Ridge Road Inn and sang what he called "The Song of the Genesee Bushman."

*I sing of the great Ridge Road,
Of a highway our children shall see,
That lies like a belt on Ontario's shore,
Carved out in the wisdom of ages before,
For the races that yet are to be.*



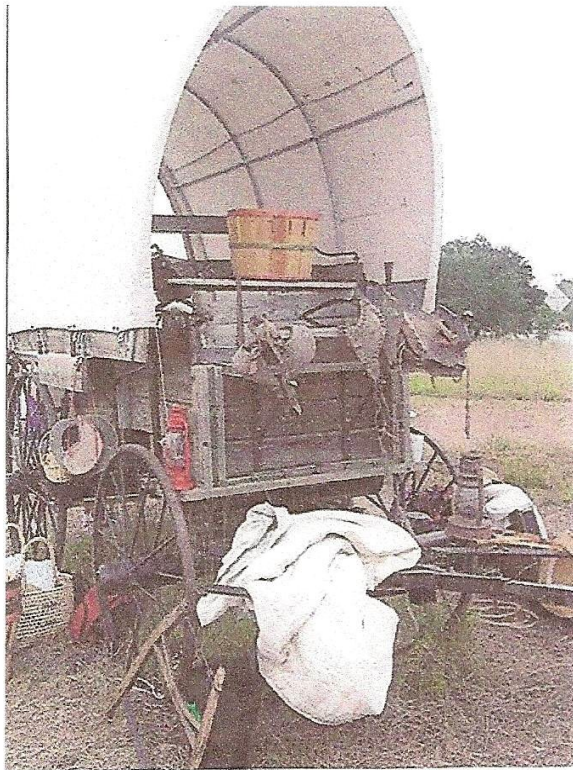
Drover with Team of Oxen, circa 1850, Livingston County
Anonymous

The Pickering Treaty of 1794 settled land disputes between the Indians and the United States government, finally clearing the way for settlement in the Genesee Country. It is written that by February 28, 1795:

“Five hundred emigrant sleighs passed through Albany between sunrise and sunset. It was estimated that 1200 sleighs, freighted with men, women, children and furniture passed through the city in three days from the east to settle in the Genesee Country - the treaty with Great Britain and with the Six Nations, having dispelled every apprehension of danger.”

Emigrant wagons were generally covered with white canvas tops, *“with children’s heads sticking out of them on all sides . . . (and) a lot of cooking utensils always dangling from the axletrees, while a codfish or a ham or a piece of smoked beef kept them company.”*

Costs for travel were not high. One family’s entire expense from Vermont to Ridge Road was three dollars and fifty cents (\$3.50) for the purchase of one meal.



A covered wagon at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Expo 2007.

Photo was created by Larry D. Moore. (He has given permission for its use.)

Samuel Latta's commission read:

Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States of America, to all who shall see these present, greetings: Know ye that reposing special trust and confidence in the integrity, diligence and discretion of Samuel Latta of New York, I have nominated, and by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, do appoint him Collector for the district and Port of Genesee, and do authorize and empower him to execute and fulfill the duties of that office according to law, and to have and to hold the said office with all the rights and emoluments thereunto legally appertaining unto him, the said Samuel Latta, during the pleasure of the President of the United States for the time being. In testimony whereof, I have caused these letters to be made patent, and the seal of the United States to be hereunto affixed. Given under my hand, at the city of Washington, the seventeenth day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and six, and of the independence of the United State of America, the thirtieth.

*Thomas Jefferson
By the President
James Madison
Secretary of State*



Realizing the potential for Charlotte's development as a port at the mouth of the Genesee River, James Latta bought land there in 1706 for \$175.00, and built a warehouse. A British traveler visited the Genesee Country in 1811 and said he:

. . . . gave a man a half a dollar to row me from thence a mile upto the lower falls of the Genesee There were half a dozen men and boys catching fish close to the falls. They had caught, in about two hours before I came there, three sturgeon, a few large pike and about twenty perch-bass. Four miles to Latta's at the mouth of the Genesee. When I was here in 1796, there was only one house or cabin. There is now another building of the same description where Latta lives, a frame building is also putting up.

On May 12, 1806 Samuel Latta married his second wife, Lydia Arnold, and on May 13th they journeyed to Charlotte. (His first wife, Mary Jackson, died at an early age.) They resided in a house on what is now the corner of Lake Avenue and Latta Road. (The house still stands.)

George Latta wrote in his memoirs:

"Mr. Bushness came to the mouth of the Genesee River with a small stock of goods and commenced merchantile business . . . In January, 1811, he made a bargain with my brother, Samuel, and took me into his service as a clerk until spring of 1821 "

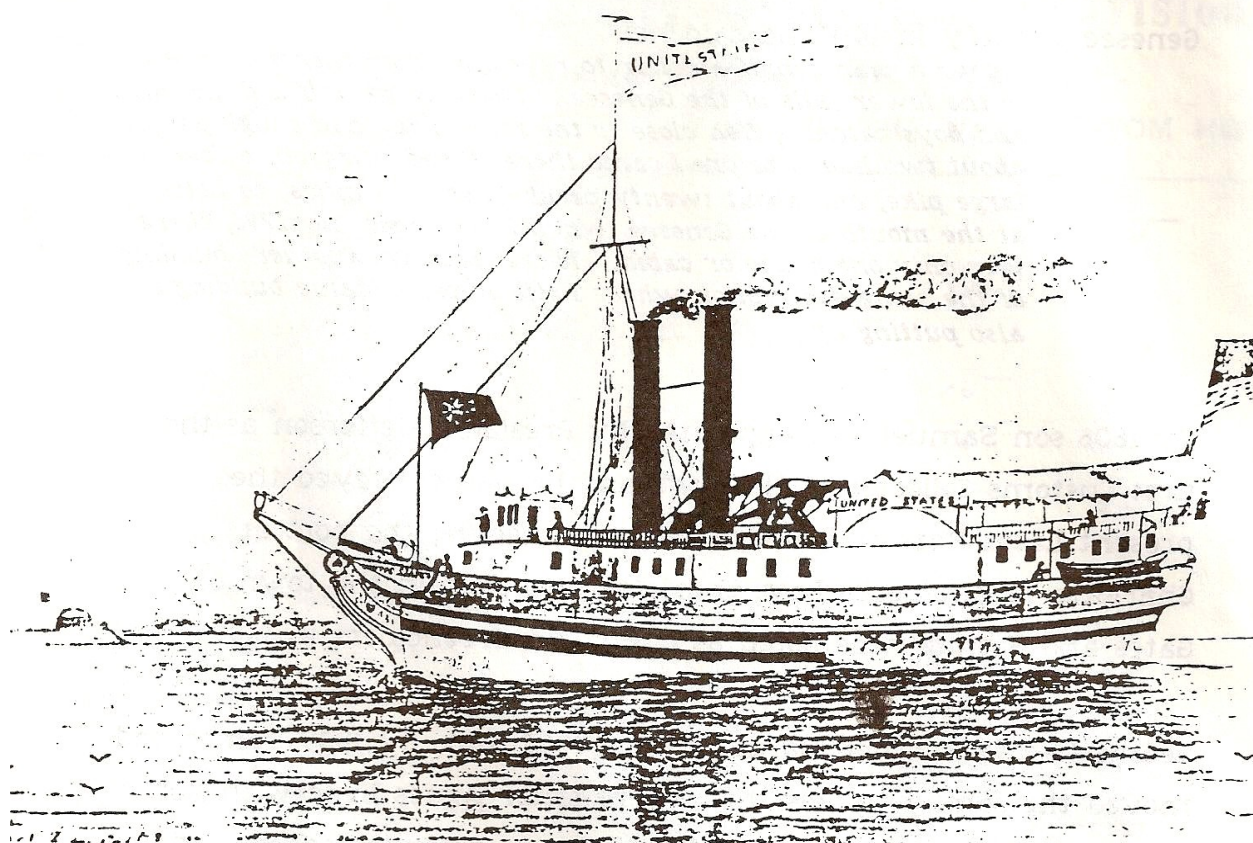
Samuel Latta surveyed the present Latta Road in anticipation of connecting the port at Charlotte with Braddocks Bay. Charlotte and Greece were then part of the town of Gates in Genesee County. Monroe County had not been formed as yet. Samuel was listed as one of ten freeholders in 1809.

When George became ill with the ague, or "Genesee Fever", his brother sent hi along on a cargo voyage on the schooner "Ontario", sailing to Kingston and Ogdensburg in Canada. The voyage took about three weeks but on the return trip bad weather forced them to turn back and put in at Presque Isle.

"We were at this time rather short of provisions and the next morning the captain, Oliver Culver, Fredrick Bushnell, Samuel Sheldon, other passengers and myself went on shore . . . and called at the house of widow Sellick to get some bread, but could not get any, as she was out of flour. She said she had a grist to mill, and if we would wait until they returned she would let us have some. Some of the party discovered she had a loaf at the fire baking. They purchased of Mrs Sellic, or she gave us half a loaf and we purchased some turnips and went on board. At evening the wind came around fair and the captain, feeling anxious to get out, as the ice begn to make in the bay, we got under way again for the Genesee River.

George's health did improve with the voyage and he made important business connections that secured his first job. From 1811 to 1821 her was apprenticed to Fredrick Bushnell in the forwarding business at Charlotte. Forwarders functioned as middlemen on the frontier, transferring frontier products out and bringing manufactured goods in from Montreal and points south and east. The port was a busy one. In six weeks in 1813, the canal commission of New York counted 630 vessels, an average of fifteen a day, that passed down the St. Lawrence River.

Shipping was a very important part of the local economy, made all the more urgent because winter weather conditions limited the shipping season to about six months. The War of 1812 also temporarily put a halt to the port forwarding business, forcing it to be moved to various locations. George volunteered to serve in the militia after receiving word that the British troops had taken Fort Niagara in the winter of 1814.



Early Lake Steamer United States as painted by James Van Cleve
in his History of Ontario Lake Shipping.
From: Ships of the Great Lakes by Jmaes P. Barry

WASHINGTON'S BIRTH-DAY.

Centennial Anniversary.

THE COMPANY OF

No Capt G Latta

Is respectfully solicited at the EAGLE TAVERN, on Wednesday Evening, February 22, to Celebrate, by a PUBLIC BALL, the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Birthday of him who was "first in War, first in Peace, and first in the hearts of his Countrymen."

COL. R. MEECH,
COL. G. W. PRATT,
LT. COL. F. WILKIE,
LT. COL. S. STONE,
CAPT. J. WOOD,
CAPT. D. N. SPRAGUE,
CAPT. S. DRAKE,
LIEUT. M. PARSONS,
LIEUT. WM. BROWN,
LIEUT. S. S. ALLCOTT,

MR. ISAAC HILLS,
MR. WM. MCKNIGHT,
MR. H. O'REILLY,
MR. A. S. ALEXANDER,
MR. H. STAUNTON,
MR. GEO. R. GRISWOLD,
MR. WM. SMITH,
MR. J. F. SRIENER,
MR. S. BASCOM,
MR. WM. W. ALLCOTT,

MANAGERS.

Officers will appear in uniform.

Proctor's July 13. 1832

"I concluded that if my country ever needed my services it was then. I was then nineteen years old. I immediately went about preparing and the same evening bout 10 o'clock I left the Genesee River with about one week's provisions in my knapsack and my rifle on my shoulder, steered my course for the Ridge Road afoot and alone and arrived at Parma Corners next morning where I met a great number of the militia going on to meet the enemy."

George joined a group of about 300 American militiamen at Hardscrabble, eight miles from Fort Niagara, where he remained for three weeks. Since they did not engage the enemy in that time, George got *"tired of stopping in the army and got a pass and returned to the Genesee River."*

As merchant and forwarder in Charlotte, in association with partners or on his own, George eventually owned a fleet of seven schooners (1821-1835). The schooner was the favorite cargo ship of small carriers because of its speed and *"surety in working narrow channels and confined waters."*

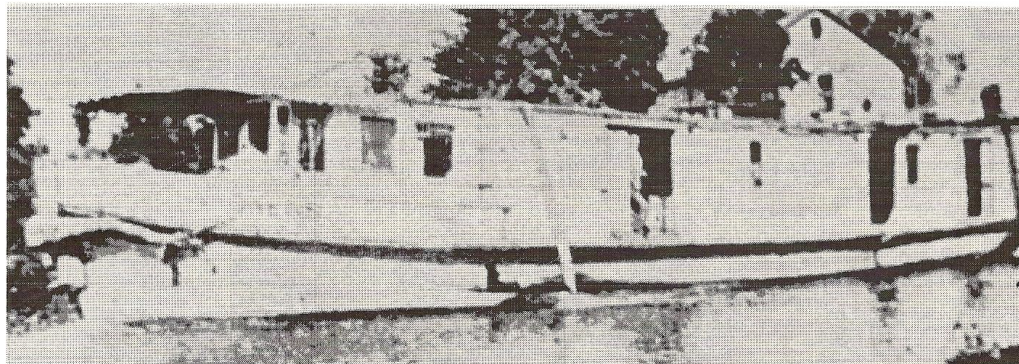


Small steamers and schooners typical of the early 1800's on the Genesee River.
Albert Stone Collection; Monroe Co. Library

There was no standardization in ship building, each builder adding their own improvements or adjustments for lake travel. Each harbor presented a new set of challenges, including Charlotte. Mrs. Latta remembered that:

“When we first came to Charlotte, there was no lighthouse. The vessels came up the river on the opposite side, on account of the west side of the river continually filling up with sand. They steered their course by the light of a strong lamp up in the top of our hotel, and an immense tree called the Pilot Tree. When the vessels arrived at the tree, they commenced whistling and ringing bells, and continued all the way to the landing place.”

Improvements in the channel in 1829 and the addition of stone piers in 1838 allowed the largest vessels to travel up river. By 1835, though Latta owned shares in the steamship “Cobourg” in association with Canadian and American investors, he had sold his fleet of schooners. The advent of the steamship and the building of the Erie Canal had changed the nature of trade and cargo transport in New York State. Those improved forms of transportation though, could not change winter weather which continued to force the closing of river,



The “John Owens” at Henpeck, from Gladys Buell’s original.

A packet boat on the Erie Canal at the port of Henpeck (South Greece)

APR. 30, 1866

Constantine April 20th 18.66.

Mr Latta I have
written to you four weeks ago tomorrow
and haven't had any answer from you
I have waited patiently for an answer
concerning your land in Township of Fabius
near Charles Casemans Mr Caseman told
me about the land you have here and
gave the address Mr Latta I want to buy
me a farm and I want to know what you
you will take for what land you have here
I can pay \$600 hundred down and want
to know how long you will wait for the
balance I wish you to write how many
acres there is of the land and how much
you want an acre for it I heard that
Mr Harry had sent for the land a week
after I had, but he died and is buried
since that of no more at present
Write soon and oblige Henry Moyer

Address Henry Moyer Constantine

St Jo County

Michigan

George Latta was more than a broker buying, selling, and shipping frontier products. He was a successful entrepreneur whose operation encompassed the entire process from raw to finished products, and from wholesale to retail sales. His customers included individuals from such a wide area as Rochester, Niagara and Pottsdam as well as such businesses as ships, banks, schools and hospitals. His business associates were his counterparts in Canadian and American ports along the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario and in cities as far west as Ohio and Michigan. Over his business career in the Genesee Valley area he owned farms, asheries, warehouses, graineries, a tannery and a grocery/drygoods business. He even grew nursery stock, predominately fruit trees, on property next to the Rochester-Charlotte Plank Road. In addition, he bought 179 acres in Michigan and 74 acres in Cuyahoga County (now Cleveland) in Ohio. Because of his access to available capital, Latta was a money lender as well. An 1855 inventory shows that he held the lien on 21 mortgages worth \$13,243.91. In short, he fostered a mini-monopoly of supply and services in the emerging community. In his memoirs he writes:

"In 1821, I commenced business with J. K. Guernsey, Frederick Bushnell and U. R. Hawkins, under the form of G. B. & Co. In the spring of the same year, we established an ashery for manufacturing pot and pearl ashes in connection with James Currier, one mile west of the Genesee River on the Latta Road, and at the same time purchased of G. & B, a small stock of goods which they had in the village of Gaines in Genesee County and built an ashery there in connection with James Mather of that place. In winter of 1832-33, I had built the schooners
"Guernsey"

LATTA HOUSE *and* *"Cleveland".*

GEO. C. & M. D. LATTA, Prop'rs,

CHARLOTTE, N. Y.

This house has lately been improved and neatly furnished, and being centrally located, offers superior accommodations to all who are desirous of visiting one of the most beautiful summer resorts in this State.

The Latta House is a neat structure, erected on the most improved modern plan. The tables are supplied with all the delicacies of the season, and cannot be excelled outside of the large cities. The bar is stocked with choice Wines, Liquors, Ales and Cigars. The very best accommodation for all our patrons, at very moderate charges. Your patronage is solicited.

Debit Chase in a/c with the R. & L. P. R. Co			
1857		By stock sold on the main road	9475 00
1857		By whole amount of stock sold	2600 00
Feb 22		By cash Borrowed of J. Shaw to pay freight of way	300 00
March 1		By " " " G. C. Latta	1000 00
" 23		By " " " G. C. Latta	1000 00
April 29		By " " " Hiel Rowley	150 00
May 24		By " " " Rochester City Bank	400 00
June 7		By " " " Willard Murkham	200 00
July 1		By " " " G. C. Latta	1000 00
Sept 1		By " " " G. C. Latta	500 00
" 10		By " " " G. C. Latta	500 00
1857		June 10 By " " " Humphrey D. Lakin	400 00
		Whole amount of cash Borrowed	5450 00
1857 Oct		By fine received from black collected by J. Pastner	10 00
1857		By fine " " Skutt " " H. Rowley	5 00
1857 Feb 14			15 00
		Tolls collected by Cyrus Leely up to date	3357 53
1857 Jan 1		" " " Jacob Smith " " "	1943 41
" " 1		" " " Simon King " " "	2352 54
		Whole amount of tolls up to date	7663 68
			25203 65
		By hemlock Plank sold G. C. Latta	33 62
		" " " " To Sherman & Burdell	5 54
		" " " " To C. Lewis	5 85
March 15		" " " " To Burton	4 00
" "		" " " " To James Upton	6 30
			55 41

Page from the Rochester-Charlotte Plank Road ledger.

To ensure the growth of business at the mouth of the Genesee, particularly in the face of competition from Carthage and Rochester, Latta with other Charlotte businessmen petitioned the New York State Legislature in 1832 for permission to build a railroad to the port. When permission was delayed, the Rochester-Charlotte Plank Road was built in 1849, running from Mc Cracken Street (now Driving Park Avenue) to Latta Road and the docks, a distance of eight miles. George Latta was the primary stockholder in the company and his farm supplied the bulk of the hemlock logs used for the road. Tolls collected for the year 1852 were an impressive \$7,663.68.

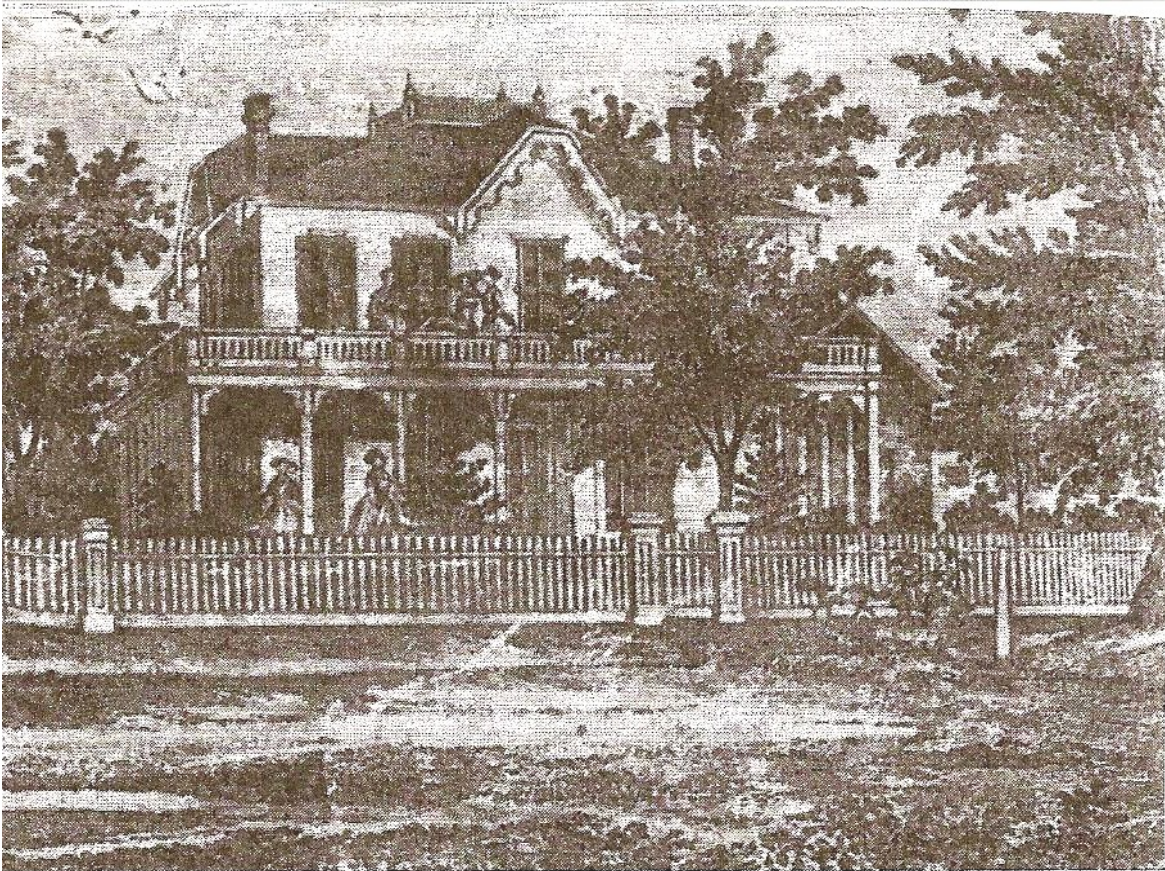
By 1852, permission had been granted to build the railroad. When ground was broken in August 25, 1852, the **Rochester Daily American** said:

Little Miss Charlotte ... styled on Wall St. begins to get ready for company. . . She talks of wharves . . .the shipping interests and Other maritime matters . . .evidently takes great airs from the fact New York is only an instance of what a small but well located seaport may become in the process of time.

When the first run from Rochester to Charlotte was made on May 12, 1853 in thirty minutes, the same newspaper said of the arrival the train:

. . . Was something of a surprise to the citizens of the village, but the event was hailed as one of no small importance to their interests. . . . With a direct and speedy communication with Canadian ports (freight and) passengers can be taken from Charlotte to New York in 12 hours and from Canadian ports in 24 to 30 hours.

It was hoped that in addition to trade, recreation and the increasing Niagara Falls tourism would greatly enlarge the business activity of the port. For that reason the Rochester-Charlotte Plank Road, with Latta as the primary stockholder, built a hotel at the railroad terminus. When it failed as a business, Latta bought the “Lake House” for his home. It was located where Spanish Garden Apartments are located now on Latta Road. It was destroyed by fire in the 1960’s.



The Latta House from an 1858 engraving.


Like the Rowe Family, George Latta was also instrumental in providing the opportunity for the growth of social institutions in his community. In 1833, he donated a small parcel of his land on the north side of what is now Stutson Street for a school. The meager size of the lot barely afforded room for the school building much less a privy in winter:

“It took time to get warm when the cracks in the floor were large and numerous.. . .Jack Frost held a mortgage on the toes which he was loath to release.”

In addition, as trustee of the First Presbyterian Society, Latta encouraged the building of their first church on land sold to the society by Samuael Latta's widow.

George Latta married Frances Mann in 1839 when he was forty-four years old. Frances had come to Rochester from England with her family in 1826, where they bought and operated the Commercial Hotel.. They had ten children born between 1840 and 1859. One of the sons, George, Jr., worked with his father and eventually took over the family mercantile business at Charlotte. Another son, six year old John William, "Playing on the wharf with two companions", slipped and fell into the Genesee River in 1862. His friends sounded the alarm and help soon arrived but to no avail. He drowned in the force of the water in the spring freshet.

Charlotte, N.Y. Sept 6th 1867



Wm. G. Latta

Bought of **GEO. C. LATTA, JR.**

DEALER IN

Choice Family Groceries, Provisions,

AND GENERAL SEA STORES.

UNDER THE U. S. CUSTOM HOUSE.

Aug 1	5 th Corn Meal		15
	2 th Coffee	30	60
	or dev. to ellips hull for Flour.		84
	6 th blackbird	15	90
2	4 th Church clois	10	40
	2 Bars Soap	15	30
	1/2 th Tea	24	75
	Cash in Store		694
	Exchange		278
3	2 th Cracker	16	32
	2 th Cheese	20	40
5	1 Bar Soap		30
	1 Bar of Soap		15
	1 Paper 1/2 pair		15
	2 1/2 th Vinegar	32	16
	2 th Coffee	45	90
	2 th Sugar	14	28
	Cash on ap		4300
6	5 th Sugar	15	75
	5 th "	7	85
	1 Bag Salt		25
	1 Paper of Sarsaparilla		18
	2 th Cracker	16	32
	2 th Cheese	20	40
	Discount with John Marshall		500
7	1 Barley 1/2 pair		125
	2 Paper of Sarsaparilla		32

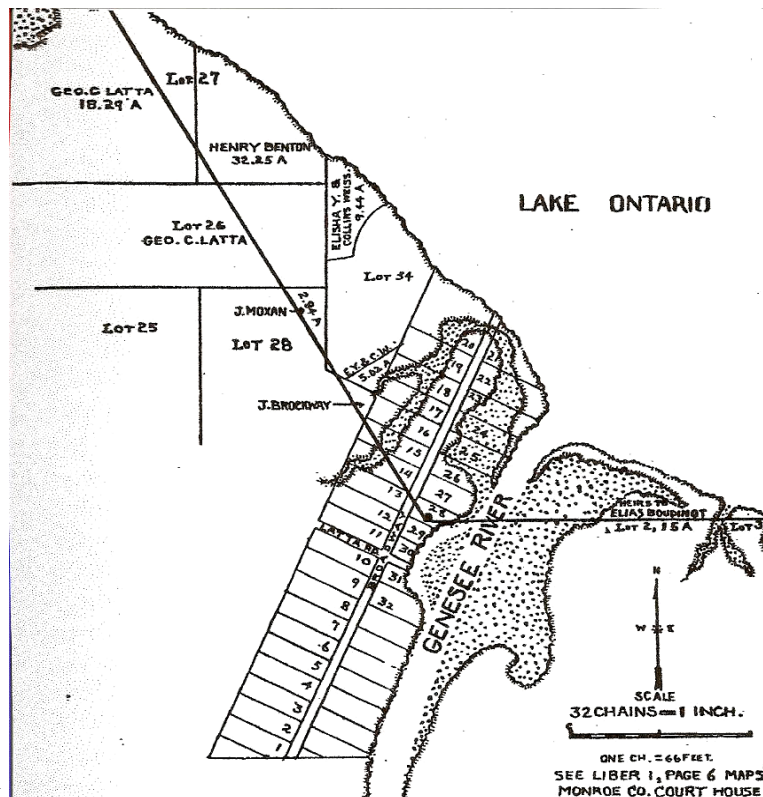
Latta's extended family included Samuel Latta's widow, his nephew John A. Latta (who was in charge of Latta's tannery and shoe store in Brockport), and Benjamin Barton family in Lewiston. As with business associates, George was often called upon by family members to rescue them financially or make outright gifts of money. A poem from "poor cousin" F. A. Barton on December 30, 1836 ended in this postscript:

**And now, I hope you will be willing
For Christmas sake, . . . To send a shilling,
Unless I am such a nuisance found
That you would rather give "the pound".**



Benjamin Barton

George Clinton Latta was a successful business man because he was practical and flexible in his choice of enterprises, adjusting his interests to the tremendous changes taking place, especially in transportation and technology. Part of that success was due to his being involved in the entire supply process from raw materials to finished goods. His activities on behalf of his business were also of benefit to his community. He accomplished this by maintaining close association with those in power and by taking calculated risks on his own behalf and that of his community,

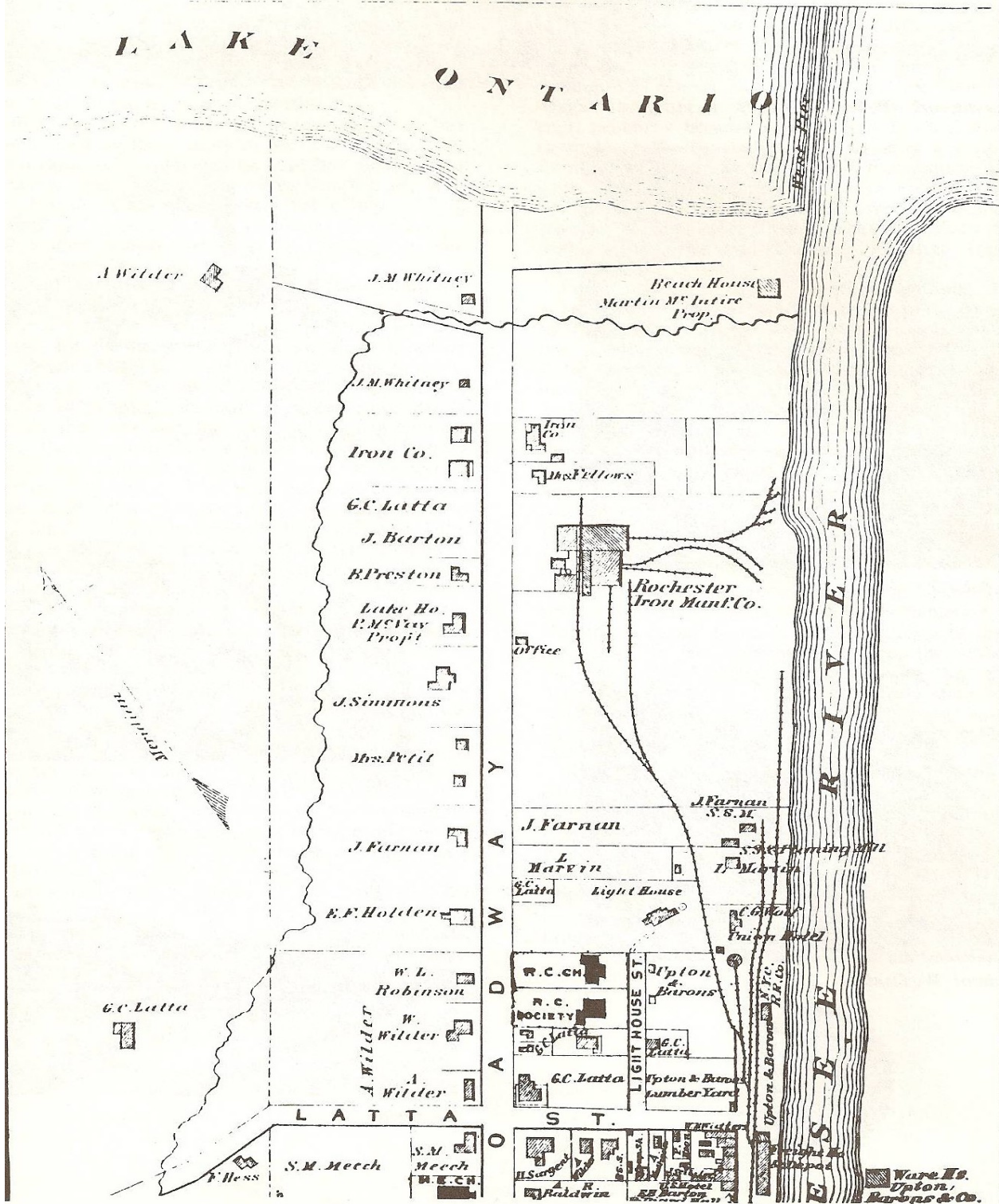


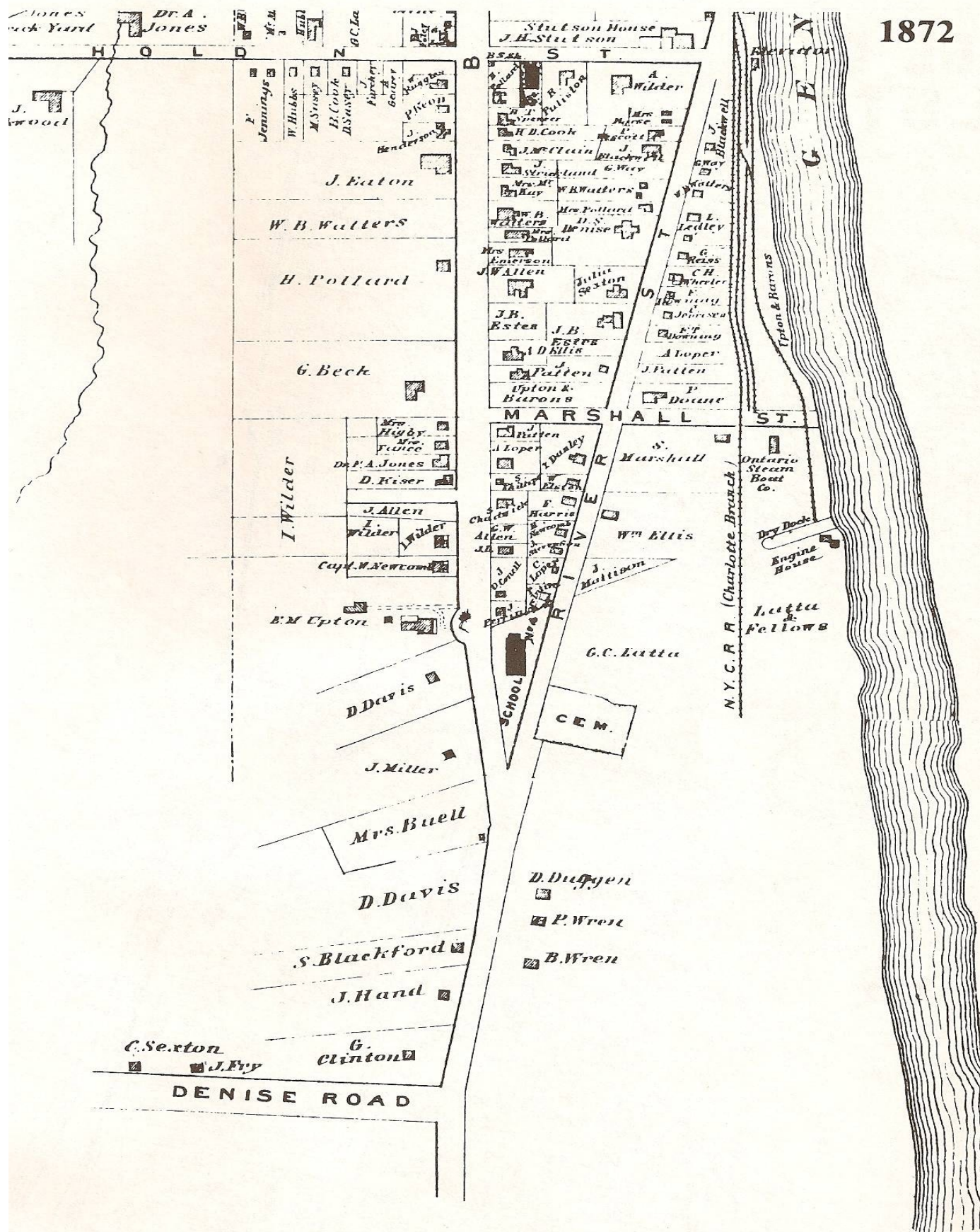
CHARLOTTE

TOWN OF GREECE

Scale 20 Rods to the inch

1872





GLOSSARY

1. APPRENTICE, n. One bound by legal agreement to serve another for a certain time for the purpose of learning a craft or trade.
2. ASHERIES, n. A furnace to reduce wood to ashes for various uses, such as soap making.
3. 'CAUSEY' (OR CAUSEWAY), n. A street or area paved with cobblestones.
4. DROVER, n. One who drives sheep, pigs or other cattle to market.
5. FETTERLOCK (OR FETLOCK) n. The tufted, cushioned protection on the back side of the horse's leg above the hoof.
6. FRESHET, n. The overflowing of a stream.
7. HAWSER, n. A large rope for towing or mooring a ship.
8. INTERCEDE, v. To act between parties for the purpose of settling differences.
9. LOATH, v.t. To dislike greatly.
10. MONOPOLY, n. Exclusive control of the supply of any commodity or service in a given market.
11. 'NAPSACK" (OR KNAPSACK), A case of canvas or leather for carrying necessities on a soldier's or traveler's back.
12. PORTAGE n. The carrying of boats, goods, etc. overland between navigatable waters.
13. PRIVY, n. A toilet, outhouse or the lake.
14. SURVEY, v.t. To determine, by mathematical principles, the form, extent and position of a tract of land.
15. TERMINUS, n. The end or final goal.

SOURCES

Latta reminiscences, archives of the Greece Town Historian
Rochester Historical Society Publication Series, Vol. IX
Rochester Historical Society Publication Series, Vol. XVIII
Rochester Daily American, August 25, 1852, Rochester Public Library
History of Charlotte, Emma M. Pollard, Charlotte-Genesee Lighthouse Museum
Latta Files, Un. Of Rochester, Rush Rhees Library, Rare books.