

Early Builder's Name Forgotten But His Courthouse Remains

The following story of local interest regarding the Old Courthouse in Fonda was compiled by Willis Barshied, Jr., Town of Palatine, an authority on early Mohawk Valley and Civil War history.

Present plans to remodel the old Montgomery County Court House at Fonda combined with information recently found have called attention to an early resident of the Town of Palatine.

Do you know who Lawrence Marcellus was? If you are not able to answer the question no one will condemn you for not learning your history lesson. Just as so many others now long gone, Lawrence Marcellus was a common man who stepped forth from the rank and file to serve his fellow man and faded into oblivion. Some scraps of paper help to show how Marcellus served as a public official and a craftsman.

The early documents, yellowed by age, and an old day book inscribed on the fly leaf, "Lawrence Marcellus—Day Book for the Montgomery County Court House", were discovered while the writer was pursuing a favorite pastime of examining an example of early architecture. The building, an old summer kitchen, so common in days gone by, was located at the farm of Iren Saltsman on the New Turnpike and near the north boundary of Montgomery County in the Town of Palatine. The old building proved to be a common type, but these early documents long stored in an upper room, were of great interest.

Some were receipts indicative only of everyday transportation and business dated from the mid 1830s to the 1870s. Several railroad receipts from the earliest days of this type of transportation in our area bore the well known signatures of J. R. Simms as station agent at Fort Plain and Webster Wagner, agent at Palatine Bridge, who later distinguished himself as inventor of the sleeping car.

Also among the records were Town of Palatine justice of the peace dockets in which Lawrence Marcellus recorded in longhand the proceedings of those cases held before him for over 40 years beginning in the mid-1830s. The justice dockets have already been given to the Montgomery County Department of History and Archives, located in the Old Court House at Fonda.

Other documents of even more historical importance to Montgomery County will soon be deposited there. These include the invoices, correspondence and day book that Marcellus kept in connection with the erection of the very building which now is being preserved, our first Montgomery County Court House erected in 1836 and 1837. Marcellus' name is still recorded on a plaque in the Court House.

After considerable research in connection with the papers, it was discovered that Marcellus was not only a justice of the peace in Palatine for 40 years, but also served as overseer of the poor for Montgomery County and member of the State Assembly in 1841.

He assumed the position of boss carpenter in charge of the erection of the Court House when the county seat was moved from Johnstown to Fonda in 1836. The building was completed in May 1837 and much of the history of its erection is recorded in these documents. Some of those of particular interest include a detailed stone masons' diagram of the front steps, penciled notes indicating the size of the

rooms as originally built before early renovations in 1869-70 and 1910, contracts for materials of all types, complete lists of all masons, carpenters and painters employed on the building.

The names of some of the workers are still represented in our area. These include Countryman, Vosburgh, Fisk, Harris, Cook, Norton, Vrooman, Shaver, Keyser, Clute, Yourdon, Failing, Shults, Snell, Farley, Yauney, Flanders, Fuller and Waygoner. The total list of workmen includes five masons, 18 painters, and 49 carpenters. Many of these workmen were doubtlessly hired for small jobs as the amount they were paid was very small. Lawrence Marcellus himself received the largest amount on the statement, \$530. The total paid for labor was \$3,862 and the daily wage ranged from 75 cents to \$1.50.

The invoices for materials and letters regarding their procurement were numerous. There were several letters from a Mr. Dobbs of Cohoes who was under contract to furnish blinds for the Court House. It seems that Mr. Dobbs fell victim to the severe depression known as the panic of 1837. His business and inventory were sold at foreclosure sale to an A. and E. Brown. Later letters from Dobbs show he was still reluctant to give up the contract. Naturally the Browns also wanted to make the blinds. Eventually the Browns won out and their receipt for payment of \$123.50 for the 19 sets of blinds dated January 1837 is among the papers.

Evidently the pillars in front of the building were made at Fort Plain. Several letters from Charles Rivers of that village indicate that he had a man identified only as "a hand from Otsego County" do the actual woodwork. Rivers bid to make the columns was \$100 for the four. The condition of the pillars yet today attests to the quality of the workmanship. Other invoices indicate that 700 pounds of nails were purchased at seven cents per pound and sheet lead at 10 cents per pound from Martin Van Alstyne and Son of Albany. Mahogany lumber and banister were also shipped from Albany at a cost of \$32.29 and the cost of labor for tinning the dome was \$52.

Much of the material, including an iron vault door and at least some of the brick was shipped from Albany by Erie Canal boat. One letter from an Albany supplier stated that the iron door was to be unloaded at a store in Fultonville since the boatman said "it would be easier to unload on the heel path side."

In searching for further information in early Montgomery County history books it is evident that much of the information found in these documents was already forgotten when the books were written. On the last sheet of the daybook are the names of the two commissioners in charge of erection of a courthouse in Chenango County. Just what connection Marcellus had with the building of this courthouse is unknown. The county seat for Chenango County was at Norwich. An early photograph of that building, which was also built in 1837, has been obtained from Robert Elliot, a native of Norwich who now resides in Fort Plain. The letter to Bob from Albert Phillips Norwich states that the old Chenango County Courthouse was built at a cost of \$16,000 and that the building was stone instead of brick as in the case of the Montgomery County building.

Otherwise the two buildings were considerably similar. It is possible that some of the specifications were near enough the same that the same plans were used or Lawrence Marcellus also may have had a part in erecting this building.

Lawrence Marcellus is now a part of history. The only information about him in addition to that learned from these old papers was found in Beers History of Montgomery County. This book states that Lawrence Marcellus was born in Schenectady in 1795, and moved to the Town of Palatine in 1816. His father, John N Marcellus, was a minuteman in the Revolution and at one time was on duty at Fort Paris in Stone Arabia. Lawrence Marcellus passed away in November of 1880 and thus ended the final chapter in the life of an early resident of the Town of Palatine whose career reached from his state to acting as boss carpenter in building a courthouse for his county in 1836 and 1837.

Written sometime in the 1960s