

*Lewiston
History
Mysteries*

Lewiston Newspaper Smuggled to Lockport

Local residents outraged over midnight caper in 1821

In 1820, Niagara County was a big county. At the time, it included today's Erie County and the county seat was located in Buffalo. But in 1821, Niagara County was split in two. The northern part remained Niagara County and the southern portion became Erie County.

But what community would be selected to become the new county seat for Niagara County? (A county seat is where the county government offices and court system operate, and in general, is where the county jail is located.)

Lewiston and Lockport were the favorites, each promoting its advantages and reasons why each should be chosen.

Lockport supporters said their town was closer to the geographic center of the county and the soon-to-open Erie Canal would make it the commercial and business capital of the county.

On the other hand, those advocating for Lewiston claimed that it was the oldest and largest community in the county, was home to the county newspaper, and that the county government was already meeting in Lewiston at the stone schoolhouse on a temporary basis until a permanent location was chosen. Besides, all of the newly elected county officers, including the Sheriff and Judge, were from Lewiston. Lewiston citizens were confident that their town was going to get the prize. How could Lewiston lose?

The Governor appointed a commission to determine the preferred site. Three men were selected — Jesse Hawley who favored Lockport, Erasmus Root who favored Lewiston, and William Britton. Mr. Britton died which left the commission deadlocked. A new commission was appointed and finally voted to designate Lockport as the county seat in July 1822. Lewistonians were not happy!

Bitter and Heated Rivalry Between Lewiston and Lockport for County Seat

Part of the controversy over where the Niagara County seat was going to be located, involved Niagara County's first newspaper, called the Niagara Democrat. It began publishing in Lewiston in 1821, just at the time when the discussions about the county seat became a hot topic. The battle lines were drawn between the eastern and western portions of the county.

The people of Lewiston thought that the "power of the pen" would help them in their cause to have Lewiston chosen as the permanent county seat. With the paper, they could spread the word about the advantages Lewiston would offer to everyone in the county.

But soon after the paper began, Bartemus Ferguson, the publisher, was beginning to have second thoughts. He wasn't getting the support from the Lewiston villagers he had expected and the idea of Lockport being the town of the future captured his imagination.

Two of Lockport's leading citizens, Dr. Isaac Smith and Otis Hathaway, conspired to seize the opportunity and convince Ferguson to move his paper to Lockport. A historian, Laura Smith Colton wrote in 1873, "They left one afternoon with two lumber wagons, reached Lewiston just after dark, found the printer, bought the press, and engaged him to go back with them and run it. It must have been a small affair for they packed it and the household goods, himself and his family, into the two wagons and were back in Lockport before morning the next day."



Carts Pulled by Oxen Scurry Publisher and His Presses to Lockport on Winter Night

In December 1821, in the middle of the night, two Lockport citizens convinced Lewiston newspaper publisher, Bartemus Ferguson, to move his operations to Lockport. Two oxen pulled the printing press and Ferguson's family along the bumpy and muddy roads to their new home. By the end of the next day, a new edition of the paper had been printed and delivered to Lewiston.

Lewiston residents were furious to read about how their newspaper had vanished overnight and had set up shop in the rival town.

When the publisher began printing in Lockport, the paper's name changed to the Lockport Observatory. There are no known copies of the Lewiston edition of the Niagara Democrat in existence.



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