The Docile Contender of the Finger Lakes

"He trusted in God and loved his neighbor." This is the simple tribute on the monument in Section G, a granite shaft erected by the "Liberty Party of the United States of America" to Myron Holley, one of its founders. It was paid for by popular subscription, a penny a piece from the members of the party. The eulogy was delivered by the combustible abolitionist, Gerrit Smith, at the dedication of the monument on June 13, 1844. It was a large funeral, 6,000 people climbed the hill at Mt. Hope Cemetery to pay their respects to this amiable dissenter. Myron Holley was a man besieged by controversy and discord. This courteous gentleman, who loved children, books and flowers was a non-conformist, a crusader and a reformer.

He was born in Salisbury, Connecticut in the Housatonic Valley on April 29, 1779 of English decent; he was the great grandson of one of Salisbury's first settlers. He was by family tradition a direct descendant of Sir Edmund Halley, the English astronomer.

In 1803, at the age of 24, he came to the chosen spot of the frontier, Canandaigua, New York, the county seat of the then large and spreading Ontario County. He was a handsome man, fluent and well educated. He had graduated from Williams College in 1799. He attended the law school of New Haven and studied law in Cooperstown, New York.

Century-Old Sculpture Unveiled

For more years than anyone can remember, the George Ellwanger monument in Mt. Hope Cemetery has been covered by a glass-and-wood structure that largely obscured the fine marble sculpture underneath. On a hot July afternoon this last summer, this cover was permanently removed. It had deteriorated to the point of being hazardous. And since there are no relatives in this area to repair it, the cover was dismantled. -- the cost of removal being paid for by the Friends of Mt. Hope Cemetery. (continued)
The brilliant career he was destined for never materialized. It ended with his first case in Ontario County. He refused to defend a man indicted for murder who he was convinced was guilty.

In Canandaigua he purchased the stock of Bemis, a local merchant. He became the book seller for the village and the surrounding county. His public career began in 1810, when he was elected County Clerk. In 1816, he was elected to the Assembly and fought beside Sen. DeWitt Clinton to get the Erie Canal Project underway.

Myron Holley and Samuel Young were designated acting commissioners and devoted all their time to canal affairs. The efficiency with which the commissioners acted was remarkable. They were divided by party affiliation. Holley and Young served as salaried acting commissioners and as members of the legislature at the same time, the former in the assembly and the latter in the senate, without issue being made of their dual functions. Their annual reports reveal able and impartial service to the state in positions of political pressures and personal friction.

Holley was appointed the Treasurer of the canal commission and bought a home in Lyons, New York to be near the canal. For eight years he rode on horseback from place to place, sleeping in shacks and in backwoods inns. His accounts were worked by candlelight and his saddle bags were his office. He ate with the Irish diggers and nursed the malaria victims in the Montezuma Swamps. He buried a Negro victim of cholera with his own hands in Lyons, after others refused to become involved.

He handled two and one-half million dollars in public funds and was found to have a $30,000 deficit in his final accounting. At least half of that amount was in notes he himself had signed to keep the project going. He asked the state to allow him the $30,000 shortage as a commission. His request was refused and he was forced to make over his Lyons property to the state.

Myron Holley and the Clintonians fought hard to clear his name. An investigation absolved him of any misconduct and in 1828 the state restored his property to him.

Myron Holley joined the anti-masonic movement after studying the evidence following the disappearance of William Morgan. Holley was chosen to draft the platform when the Anti-Masons met in Albany in 1829 and he played a prominate role as a delegate to the national convention in Philadelphia in 1830.

He sold his Lyons property in 1835 and bought 120 acres at Cathage, three miles north of Rochester and settled there with his wife, the former Sally House, and his children. He was the father of twelve, six boys and six girls.

The quiet life in Cathage soon came to an end when he became involved heart and soul in a new cause, the abolition of slavery. He lectured throughout New York State fighting for the settlement of the abolition issue at the polls.

Not for Myron Holley was the dogma of hellfire and damnation that blistered the earth and rent the air of western New York with the revivals of Charles Finney and William Miller. His God was a God of love, fairness and humility. He held his own simple services in his home in Lyons and conducted Sunday meetings in the Court House attended by the common folk, the fashionable, drunkards and outcasts. All were welcomed.

He was said to be an early riser who never smoked nor drank. He was always the courtly gentleman, never losing his temper or forgetting his manners.

Myron Holley, the genteel warrior, a frontier grand in a beaver hat and britches. A meritorious gentle man, who lived in a less then gentle age.

Shirley Stephens

References:

Eric Water West - Ronald E. Shaw
A History of the Erie Canal - (1792-1854)
Pioneer Profiles - Arch Merrill
Ellwanger Sculpture Unveiled

Originally, the cover was used for winter protection. Every spring, the Ellwanger-Barry staff, who had the appropriate equipment to handle it, would remove the cover for the summer months. Finally, one spring long ago, the cover's summer removal was overlooked, and so it has remained over the sculpture ever since.

Removal of the cover unveiled an enormous, handsome, marble statue of St. John the Divine with the sculptor's inscription: "N. La Cantalense Papotti, Roma, 1874." Papotti was a respected Italian sculptor in his time, and his works are represented in such distinguished places as the Vatican. Mt. Hope Cemetery also has another Papotti sculpture, the Weary Pilgrim on the Erickson-Perkins monument in Section G.

Papotti's St. John sits writing while an eagle is poised at his left side. (St. John is the patron saint of writers.) The inscription on the base reads, "I heard a voice from heaven."

The sculpture is now clearly visible from Mt. Hope Avenue in Section V, but in its remarkably pristine condition, it is really worth a closeup visit.

Dick Reisem

Life Members

Life members of the Friends of Mt. Hope Cemetery are those members who have made contributions of $500 or more. We would like to recognize these generous contributors who enable us to accomplish much of our major projects.

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Reminder: the annual meeting for the Friends of Mt. Hope Cemetery will be held December 6, 1987. We hope you will all be able to join us at the Garden Club Headquarters in Castle Park.
Mt. Hope Prose

All day long the clouds draw up
Sorrows from the earth's full cup:
At night they loose their folder pain
And drop it on the world in rain.

Would you go where naught appals
Find some plane where no rain falls-
But think before you seek repose,
Where no rain falls, there no grass grows.

Take Care!

When we lived together
Our days were sharp and bright.
But now I've handled them so much
That they are smooth and white:

Whenever I go out to walk
I carry them about:-
The days we had, they were so few!
I must not wear them out.

Elizabeth Hollister Frost
buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery
119 G

Deteriorating portrait of Myron Holley on his monument in Section G. In the background, the monuments for General E. G. Marshall on the left and Henry O'Reilly on the right, are visible from this strategic point.

FRIENDS OF MT. HOPE CEMETERY
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Rochester, New York 14620

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