

Rebecca Hendy Culp

(1778-1851)

When I was ten, I became the first white girl to set foot in Chemung County. My name is Rebecca Hendy Culp and I was born in 1778 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, to John and Polly Hendy. In April 1788, my father became the first white man to plant corn in what is now Elmira. He and his indentured boy, Dan Hill, came up to plant crops and build a house. In the fall, once everything had been built and the crops harvested, he came back to Willkes-Barre to pick up my mother, my younger siblings, Samuel and Sally, and I. He and Dan rowed us up the river to our new home along with everything we owned.

We arrived on October 25, 1788. I was so excited, I leapt from the canoe and raced up the shore. I'd had such fanciful ideas of the grand house we'd be living in, I burst into tears when I saw the shack my father had built. That night, we bedded down on hemlock boughs instead of proper beds, listening to the howling of wolves outside the door and the crack of my father's musket as he shot at them.

That first winter, our nearest white neighbor lived all the way in Tioga Point. There were still plenty of Indians around, though, mostly Seneca. They got on well enough with Father, but Mother was terrified. During the Revolution, several tribes allied with the British had attacked settlements in Wyoming Valley, Pennsylvania, and afterwards Mother couldn't even think about Indians without feeling afraid for her life. In those early days, it wasn't unusual for travelers, white or Seneca, to stop by our cabin and sleep on the kitchen floor for the night. Whenever we had Indian visitors, Mother would drag us up to the loft and make Father stand watch with his musket. There was one fellow called Yawbuck, who made trouble, but most never did.

Those early years were hard. In our second year, a terrible early frost throughout the region killed all our crops, grains, fruits, vegetables, all of it. We had to make due on hunted meat, wild roots and greens, and dairy. Some of us got so sick from malnutrition, Father worst of all. Finally, a neighbor's winter rye came up and we ate it half-green. Some got sick from that, but Father pulled through. Luckily, we never had a year that bad again.

There was lots of work to be done around the cabin. As the eldest daughter, I had to help Mother mind the little ones. She had seven more after we moved. I also helped care for the cows and chickens, tend the kitchen garden, churn the butter, prepare the meals, and make and repair the family's clothes. In 1795, I married John Culp and did all that for my own husband and children.

By then, things were already quite different. We had a store, first opened in 1790, selling cloth and all sorts of dry goods. We had a church too, established by the Presbyterian Minister, Rev. Daniel Thatcher. In those early years, services were held in the parishioner's homes, including my own. My mother Polly was the church's first official member.

By the time I died in 1851, the village my family and I helped found had grown from a few subsistence farmers living in crude log huts, to a prosperous little town. It was everything I had dreamed of at ten and more.

Joseph H. Pierce

(1855 – 1932)

As an architect, it pleases me to know that long after we leave this world, the buildings we designed live on. Indeed, before you meet me this evening, you should know that you've already met some of my work.

I renovated the Chemung Canal Trust Company Building (now the Museum you drove from) in 1903, and designed the gates you entered the cemetery through in 1890. My name is Joseph Hart Pierce, and though I have been gone for 90 years, I rest happily knowing my creations live on here in Elmira.

I was born in 1855 in Dundee, New York, where my father was a builder and an architect. Though I could have stayed with the family firm, I decided to try my luck in Elmira, a growing city at the time, and so I moved here in 1880. In time, I was working under the respected architect Warren Hayes, the first graduate of Cornell University's School of Architecture. Hayes was a great mentor and must have trusted me a lot. Within a year of working with him he put me in charge of the Elmira office, which I bought from him two years later. I then had my own architectural practice and a new partner, Otis Dockstader. Otis and I built homes

and churches throughout Chemung County, including the First Baptist Church and my own home at 308 W. Clinton St. here in Elmira.

After close to a decade, our offices on Lake Street had doubled in size. In 1890, however, Otis and I had a disagreement...I won't go into the details as to what it was about. Suffice to say, we ended our partnership and I went into business with a draftsman in our firm, my colleague Hiram Bickford.

Hiram and I would go on to design buildings even more ornate and innovative than those Otis and I had created. As architects, we loved combining elements from different historical periods in one building, and experimented with new materials like concrete and terra-cotta in our structures. At the end of the 19th century, the city was growing in population and business was booming.

In our 40 years of business together, Hiram and I designed homes for both the very wealthy and the middle class. In 1895, we won a competition to design City Hall, which ended up even more ornate than we had originally planned! We designed schools like Southside High School, and fire-proofed factories, including the Elmira Knitting Mills and the American La-France Company Factory. We designed Elmira's Central Fire Station, the Steele Memorial Library and Y.M.C.A Building, and the Country Club House. We designed structures at Rorick's Glen, Eldridge Park, and Arnot Ogden Memorial Hospital, as well as stores including Iszards Department Store and Gorton Coy.

Hiram and I both believed in ethical business practices, and because we held ourselves to high standards, we gained the respect of our clients. We were also among the first members of the Chemung County Historical Society when it was founded 100 years ago in 1923. After Hiram died in 1929, I continued our work right up until my own death in 1932. On your way out tonight, be sure to notice the Mortuary Chapel at the cemetery's entrance – yes indeed, I designed that too! I was an architect until the day I died, and today, I remain one in this city's memory.

John W. Jones

(1817-1900)

I came to Elmira on foot, struggling through 300 miles of rough terrain, pursued by slave catchers. My name is John W. Jones and I came here seeking freedom. I had been born into slavery on the Elzy plantation in Leesburg, Virginia in 1817. In

1844, old Missus Elzy was dying and her heir was planning to split my family apart and sell us. My brothers Charles and George, two of our friends, and I escaped in early June and arrived in Elmira on July 5. I shall never forget the Pennsylvania farmer who fed and sheltered us for the night before. A little human help and kindness can go a long way.

People helped me here in Elmira when I was first getting settled. Mrs. Rebecca Culp, you might have met her earlier, she was the first person to hire me as a free man. Judge Ariel Thurston helped me get an education. In 1847, I was hired as sexton of First Baptist Church. I also was sexton of the Second Street Cemetery, and, eventually, Woodlawn as well. Even as I bettered myself, I was determined to give back and help people as I had been helped.

I became a conductor on the Underground Railroad. From 1845 to 1861, I ushered hundreds of men, women, and children to freedom and safety. Of course, it wasn't just me. I was the Elmira point-man for a whole network of people, some local, some not. Here's how it all worked. As fugitives came up from the south, the conductor at their last stop would write, letting me know to be on the lookout for some loose horses. My main contact was fellow by the name of William Still, who ran operations out of Philadelphia, but sometimes it was Quakers in Pennsylvania and Maryland who were sending folks up.

Once they were here, it was my job to see them safely fed and housed until they could be passed north. Sometimes I had as many as 30 hiding in my tiny house beside the First Baptist Church. Rich folks like Jervis Langdon and J.M. Robinson helped with funds, while area farmers like Mrs. Culp would hire and house the ones who wanted to earn some money for themselves before they left. A young mixed-race man on my team forged free papers so people could hide in plain sight.

In the early days, I mostly passed fugitives on foot to Big Flats. From there, they went to Hornell, then Genesee to Niagara. In 1854, the railroad came through. It was a straight shot from Elmira to St. Catherine's in Canada. Working closely with the railroad workers, I would smuggle the fugitives onto the baggage car of the 4am to Niagara. All told, my team and I helped some 800 people to freedom.

As I said, I was the sexton of Woodlawn Cemetery. It was my work here that would make me the richest Black man in upstate New York. In the spring of 1864, the Civil War was raging and Elmira had been designated as the site for a new prison camp. The army rented a plot of land at Woodlawn and hired me to bury any of the prisoners who died at the camp. They originally offered to pay me a flat

rate of \$40 per month, but I renegotiated to \$2.50 a burial. 2,973 men died at that camp. Once, we buried 43 in a single day.

Now those men were fighting to keep Black folks like me enslaved, but they were all still men and I was determined to treat them with all the dignity men deserve. While the burial details at other camps were heaving the dead into mass graves, I made sure everyone had a coffin. I recorded each soldier's name, rank, and regiment so they could have a proper headstone. At first, it was just a wooden marker, but later the government came through to put up stone ones using my records.

A little human kindness goes a long way. It can help the enslaved people to freedom, give men dignity in death, and make the world a better place.

Margaret Stephens

(1838-1919)

Welcome all! I'm so very happy you've stopped by Stephens Memorial Chapel. Before I invite you inside, I shall introduce myself.

I am Miss Margaret Stephens and was the last Stephens of my immediate family to be buried here. For those of you uninformed, let me remind you of who we were.

Our story begins in 1825, when my father arrived from Pennsylvania to join the blacksmithing business of his sister's husband. Business was prosperous in the early days of the village, and my father was a handsome man in his early twenties. He soon caught the eye of a local girl, Lydia Gregg. They married and settled in to a good life, buying a home on Lake Street next to the courthouse and across the street from the Arnots.

Father was always busy, restless even. He was active in the community, appointed fireman in the village's First Fire Company, belonged to many social and civic clubs, held important leadership positions, and ended up taking over his brother-in-law's business.

Mother was busy too, raising five children: my older siblings Mary Ann, and John, then myself, followed by Harriet, whom we called Tut, and my younger brother Robert. We were a close family.

Perhaps it was too much for some.

It was 1849 when I was eleven that father left his business and family behind to travel west in search of gold.

He returned a year later quite a wealthy man. I think mother was relieved. His new wealth opened doors and gave him influence and power. It was enough money for him to pursue politics and along with neighbors that included Judge Thurston, General Diven, and the Robinsons, was part of the group known as the *Lake Street Regency*.

My sister Mary Ann married and moved out. Robert married too and was appointed district attorney before he resigned and left with John for California to search for gold. They had no luck and Robert then John returned to Elmira. Tut and I continued to live with mother and father until they died.

They all died.

First Mary Ann, then mother and father, dear Harriet, and Robert. It was 1893, when John, the last of my siblings died. I inherited the family home and quite a bit of money but I was left there all alone. Oh, I had cousins, and numerous acquaintances but it wasn't quite the same. I missed my family dearly.

When my younger sister Tut died in 1889 I had this statue erected in her honor. Like this Chapel I had commissioned a few years later, it's made from blue and pink granite from Rhode Island. I spent \$15,000 on this and when it was finished, I moved my parents, brothers and sisters here to rest. When I died in 1919 I joined them at last, here, at the Stephens Memorial Chapel. We're watched over by Tut, our own dear angel.

It was just me and Elmira was growing. The rascals in City Hall wanted to expand the courthouse on Lake Street. They came after my home, my dear family home which I refused to sell. But they continued to pester me right up until my death.

I died a wealthy woman, and my wishes should have been kept. But when I died, the City took over my home and expanded the court house as they always wanted.

Now I invite you to enter in and look around, and keep your own family close.