

Stories about what made our communities great

HURON
 In the Town of
 Huron
 Wayne County, New York

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A Local Suffragent?

Connections to 19th Century Suffrage and Political Reform

James Madison Cosad (1810-1893) was born in Somerset, New Jersey. As a young boy, Cosad's family moved to Junius, in Seneca County, New York. Just prior to the Civil War, in 1856, at the age of 46, Cosad moved from Junius to the Wayne County town of Huron. Cosad bought considerable acreage near Lake Ontario and East Bay at what is now Chimney Bluffs.

In 1858 Cosad bought additional property in Huron at Rice's Mill on Lummissville Road. He retained the lake property to farm. At Rice's Mill, Cosad built a fine two-story home. In 1876, Cosad completed construction of another two-story building located across the road from his home. This building was referred to as "Liberal Hall". Both Cosad's home and Liberal Hall still stand today, however, the second stories have been removed from both structures.

Cosad's activities in Huron occurred during the time of the abolition movement, women's suffrage, and spiritualism. One could surmise that Cosad, being a liberal Republican, well read, and having moved north from the reform Quaker territory of Junius, may have been involved in the Underground Railroad due to the proximity of his lake property and the creek that ran by his home inland to East Bay near Chimney Bluffs. An avid reader, Cosad was engaged in the thinking of many liberal leaders of the time.

There is not a wealth of information about Cosad, but a study of the people Cosad was connected to - those who spoke at Cosad's Liberal Hall - may provide a better understanding of this local political reformer. The speakers Cosad brought to Huron were invited to share their political, social, and spiritual platforms. A December 7, 1876 Newark Courier newspaper article reads: "Mr. G. B. Stebbins, of Michigan, gave a course of lectures at Cosad's Hall, commencing on Friday Evening, December 1st and giving four lectures." Giles Badger Stebbins (1817-1900) was invited to deliver several talks at Liberal Hall between 1876 and 1877. So - who was Giles Badger Stebbins?

Stebbins attended school at the Northampton Association of Education and Industry, a Fourierist colony in Florence, Massachusetts. This colony was modeled on the philosophy of Francois Marie Charles Fourier (1772-1837). The guiding rules of Fourierism were: importance of productive labor as a duty, enjoyment of the fruits of labor, self-improvement, racial equality and equality of the sexes, freedom of worship, individual dignity, and strong family relations. Fourierism

condemned the war, poverty, and ignorance. Nearly 300 Fourierist communities were established during the 1840s from the Northeastern coastal states to as far away as Wisconsin, and were referred to as communes, socialist societies, or phalanxes. "Phalanx" can be translated from the French - phalanstere - the word coined by Fourier combining the French words phalange (phalanx - an ancient Greek military formation) and monastere (monastery). The Northampton Association of Education and Industry began in 1842 as an experiment in transcendentalism and Fourierism - attracting worldwide attention. The Northampton Association of Education and Industry's life was short - dissolving after only four years in 1846. Massachusetts was a hot bed for these groups. Gifted individuals involved in these New England communities were - Amos Bronson Alcott - father of Louisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sojourner Truth, and Margaret Fuller.

In 1844, at 27 years of age, Stebbins left Northampton and traveled west to Rochester, New York, where he became acquainted with abolitionists and women's suffrage advocates Isaac and Amy Post. Through the Posts, Badger met Catherine Ann Fish (1823-1904). In 1844, 21-year-old Catherine was living with her fa-

ther, mother, and sister at the Sodus Bay Phalanx - a Fourierist community very similar to Northampton. Catherine's father, Benjamin Fish, was president of the Sodus Bay Phalanx. This community was composed primarily of Rochesterians and members from the Farmington and Genesee Quaker Communities. Operating between 1844 and 1846, the Sodus Bay Phalanx was located on the western shores of Great Sodus Bay at the former site of the Sodus Bay Shaker Community. (From 1924-2011, this property was known as Alasa Farms, and since 2011 as the Cracker Box Palace.)

In February of 1826, the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (aka Shakers) purchased 1400 acres on the shores of Great Sodus Bay. This tract included Second and Third Creeks, Hunters and Thornton Points, Shaker Tract, and Shaker Road, covering an area from the bay at the north to Ridge Road at the south, and from the bay's west shore (Shaker Heights) to Route 414. The Shakers built a community comprised of seventeen buildings including a gristmill, saw mill, and blacksmith shop. The Shaker community farmed orchards and other crops, sold packaged seeds, fruit, vegetables, salted fish, and brooms. The Shakers sold the property to Sodus Canal promoters in 1836, who hoped to connect

the Erie Canal to Sodus Bay and Lake Ontario. When the canal project failed, the property was sold in 1844 to Benjamin Fish, a leader in the Fourierist movement in the Rochester area.

As a young girl growing up in Rochester, Catherine Fish gathered signatures for anti-slavery petitions. Catherine and her sister Mary kept anti-tobacco pledges on the parlor table of their house in Rochester, which they asked young male visitors to sign. Educated in Quaker schools, Catherine later became a teacher. She also served as secretary for the Rochester Anti-Slavery Society. The Fish family worked for peace, equal suffrage for African Americans and women, prison reform, temperance, and Indian rights. Catherine's parents were key members of the Western New York Anti-Slavery Society - serving in various capacities in the early years of the organization. Actively involved in this organization, and through her work with this anti-slavery group, Catherine was introduced to the women's rights movement and became involved in organizing events for women's suffrage.

Drawn together by mutual service to the causes of abolition and equality, Giles and Catherine were married August 17, 1846 (Catherine's 23rd birthday) - on the grounds of the Sodus Bay Phalanx overlooking Great Sodus Bay. In 1846, shortly before the Sodus Bay

Phalanx disbanded, Catherine's father left his position as president of the group. It is thought that Benjamin was forced out of his post, perhaps because the marriage of Catharine (a Quaker) and Giles (a Unitarian) was not an acceptable practice at that time. Other reports relate that arguments about philosophy, poor living conditions, and lack of work effort led to inner discord, so the phalanx fell apart. It is also possible the Fish-Stebbins family returned to Rochester to continue their reform efforts. Sodus Bay was quite a distance from places where political reform activities and connections were occurring.

Catherine and Giles' reform efforts included:

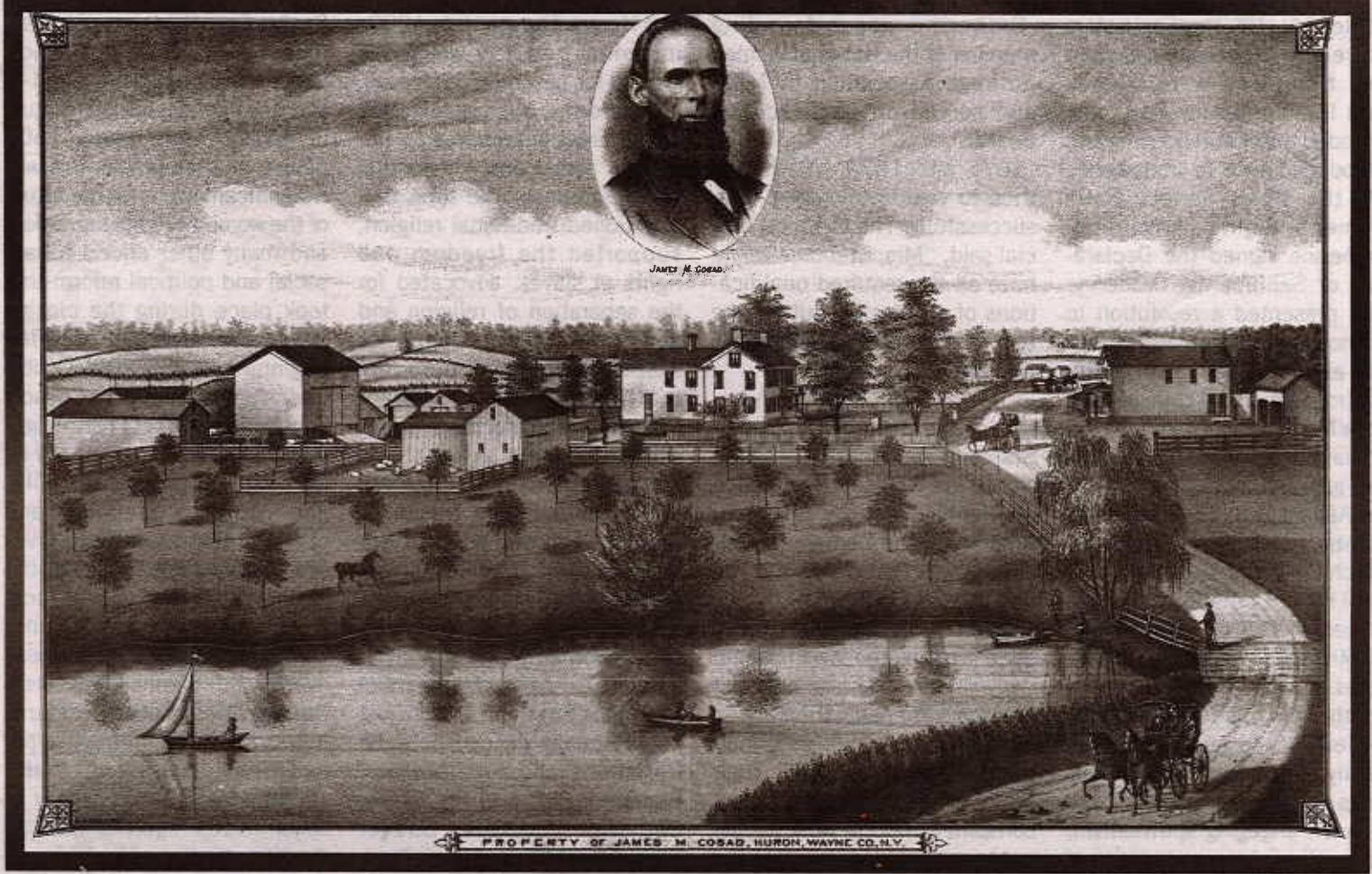
December of 1847 - Catherine and Giles, with the Fish family, helped organize the "Great Anti-Slavery Meeting" of the Western New York State Anti-Slavery Society held in Rochester.

The Fish-Stebbins family worked closely with Underground Railroad activists in Rochester, including Frederick Douglass, Amy and Isaac Post, and cousins of Susan B. Anthony - Asa and Huldah Anthony.

Giles began local lectures on abolition.

In 1848, the Stebbins met and became strong believers/

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advocates of the spiritualists - Leah, Kate, and Margaret Fox. From Hydesville, a hamlet north of Newark, NY, the Fox sisters moved to Rochester around this time, and were friends with Isaac and Amy Post, who provided them with housing and introduced them to "followers".

At the 1848 Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention, Catherine signed the Declaration of Sentiments. Catherine also presented a resolution to acknowledge Elizabeth Blackwell as the first woman to graduate from a medical college - Geneva Medical College (Hobart & William Smith). That resolution was adopted two weeks later at the August 2nd, 1848 Women's Rights Conference in Rochester, which Catherine organized.

In 1849 - Catherine and Giles moved to Giles "home" state of Michigan, living in Detroit. Giles and Catherine made a number of trips from Michigan to New York to visit Catherine's family. Giles made use of his visits creating a powerful lecture circuit - engaging spiritualism, women's rights, and political reform as subject matter. Cath-

erine was not a great speaker, so Giles became her voice for women's rights.

Catherine was a founding member of the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869 and served on its Executive Board.

1871 and 1872 - Catherine tried to vote in Michigan - unsuccessfully. The electoral official said, "Mrs. Stebbins would have all the required qualifications of an elector, but for the fact of her being a woman." (Willard & Livermore)

July 4, 1876 (100th Anniversary of the Birth of the United States of America) - Catherine signed the Women's Declaration of Rights - read by Susan B. Anthony at the Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia - The first official World's Fair.

1898 - At the age of 75, Catherine was invited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton to be an editor of Stanton's Woman's Bible.

Catherine and Giles were married from 1846 to 1900. Their life of 54 years together was a constant of reform work for the rights and freedom for all in the

United States of America - and it all began on Great Sodus Bay.

Back to James Madison Cosad and Huron. The mid-late 1800s in Central New York was fertile ground for new religions, ideas, and reforms. An organization called Freethinkers was an important social and intellectual reform group of the time that questioned traditional religion, supported the freedom and rights of slaves, advocated for the separation of religion and government, and fought for women's rights - including the right to vote. Important Freethought reformers were: women's rights advocates - Matilda Joslyn Gage, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony; agnostic political lecturer - Robert Green Ingersoll; writer - Mark Twain; abolitionist - Frederick Douglass; and anarchist, women's rights activist - Emma Goldman. Members of the Sodus Bay Phalanx were just about equally divided between Christians and Freethinkers. Benjamin Fish and his family, Catherine and Giles Badger Stebbins, Isaac and Amy Post, and the cousins of Susan B. An-

thony, Hulda and Asa Anthony, were all Freethinkers.

The first Western New York State Freethinkers Society meeting was held at Cosad's Grove on Lummisville Road in the Town of Huron in August of 1877 - with nearly 1500 people in attendance! This was a significant event for the future of the women's rights movement and many other efforts toward social and political reform that took place during the closing decades of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th Centuries. James Madison Cosad's connection to the Freethought movement and the company he kept with individuals like Giles and Catherine Stebbins, and others of that movement, gives one pause to ask: What was the general thinking of the local Northeastern Wayne County community at the time to these events and reforms? What were the activities of other residents in this rural area during this period in relation to reform efforts?

Continuing a family legacy of social reform - James Madison Cosad's son Samuel, a Wolcott resident, served as school su-

perintendent for Wayne County's Eastern District No. 1 (Wolcott) from 1893 to his death in 1901. Following her husband's death, Samuel's wife, Ida Smith Cosad, was appointed to take over his post. In a time women were still fighting for the right to vote, Ida continued as school superintendent. Through nominations by the Wayne County Republican Party, beginning in 1902, Ida continued to be elected as the superintendent of District No. 1, serving until 1936. Ida also served as a delegate to the State Republican Conferences in 1918 (the first year New York State women voted) and 1922 - furthering the historical recognition that Cosad family members were important models for social reform, women's service in leadership roles, and women's right for equality.

Many thanks to Ruth and Jim Chatfield of Wolcott, N.Y. for introducing me to James Madison Cosad. Ruth and Jim's research and generous historical contributions were the genesis of this historian's quest to find out more about Huron's local political reformer.