

The Roof Hatch Latch

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote about the roof hatch on the back of LeRoy House. It blew off in the wind and Tom Frew came over and we pulled it back inside and Tom was able to put it back in place and nail it from beneath and seal it to keep out the water. We will replace it this summer. I have thought about that roof hatch and I think I might have another reason why it was put up there when Jacob LeRoy enlarged the house in 1822. But I also am wondering who made the two little wrought iron latch hooks. One of the earliest blacksmiths in LeRoy was John Gilbert, whose blacksmith shop was “on the hill” on the west end of the village. Gilbert Street is named for John Gilbert. There’s not a lot in the history books about John Gilbert. Some books mention that he came to LeRoy about 1813 or 1814 and was a blacksmith and axe maker. A brief note mentions that he had been in the Buffalo area, but when hostilities broke out during the War of 1812 he moved to LeRoy. I knew that his son, Grove Gilbert, went to school at the Middlebury Academy in Wyoming, New York, and became a well-known artist in Rochester. I searched our genealogical files and couldn’t find much more about John Gilbert, so I started searching on the internet. I was amazed to discover that John Gilbert’s grandson was the famous geologist, Grove Karl Gilbert who was one of the founders of the National Geographic Society. Craters on the moon and the planet Mars, are named for Grove Karl Gilbert. He was the son of Grove Gilbert the artist. In 2012, while celebrating the 125th anniversary of the National Geographic Society, an article was published by the Smithsonian Magazine about Grove Karl Gilbert. In 1923, the National Academy of Sciences published a biographic report about him. He was born in Rochester in 1843 and graduated from the University of Rochester in 1862 and

studied under Henry Augustus Ward. (Founder of Ward’s Natural History Establishment in Rochester.) From the 1923 article I learned that Grove Karl Gilbert’s grandfather, John Gilbert, was born in New Hartford Connecticut in 1782. He moved to Clinton, New York where he married Eunice Barnes in 1803. Her father was a bell and clock maker. The Gilberts had eight children. Their son, Grove Gilbert - the artist, was born in Clinton in 1805. John was no ordinary blacksmith. In 1824, he was tinkering with a rotary steam engine which he hoped to manufacture. I tried to find out about the steam engine and found John Gilbert of LeRoy listed in “Elliot’s Patent Manual of 1790 to 1830”. John filed his idea with the United States Patent office on November 17, 1824. (It is interesting that another man from LeRoy, Anthony Cooley, also filed for a patent on an improvement for a steam engine on July 29, 1824.)

Unfortunately most of these early patents and drawings were destroyed in the huge fire at the Patent Office in Washington in 1836, so there are no drawings of John’s machine. Apparently he went to New York City where he hoped to put his patented engine into production but he contracted typhoid and died on April 6, 1825. His son, Grove was only 19 and became head of the family. I think that there is a probate record for John Gilbert in Batavia, and hope to follow up on that when I have time. It also appears that at least two of John’s other sons, lived in LeRoy after their father’s death. I found one bit of information that indicates that John’s wife, Eunice, remarried, but so far that lead hasn’t panned out.

So did John Gilbert make the two little hatch latches? There’s no way to know. And why did Jacob LeRoy have a hatch built on the roof of his house in 1823? Well at first I thought it might be just a way to access the roof, but now I am wondering if it wasn’t a way for



Jacob LeRoy to check on the rare nesting flamingoes on the chimneys. Perhaps the readers aren’t aware that in the old days, when the flamingoes returned to LeRoy on April 1, some of them built huge big nests on the chimneys in LeRoy. People believed that the nests brought good luck to the houses. The problem was that the nests clogged the fireplaces and caused a fire hazard. The LeRoy family was lucky, because they had four chimneys that connected to the nine fireplaces in the house, so if the flamingoes nested on one or two of the chimneys, they just didn’t use those fireplaces for a couple of weeks, until the flamingo eggs hatched. For many people, who had only one chimney, it was a real problem. But one year, the flamingoes nested on the southeast chimney on LeRoy house. That was the chimney that had three fireplaces connected to it, including the basement kitchen fireplace. The LeRois needed to have the kitchen chimney clear, so that nest had to be removed. It dawned on me that Jacob LeRoy had to have the hatch built

so he could check on those flamingo nests. In fact, the LeRoy children made up a tongue twister - - “The LeRoy flamingo hatch roof hatch latch.” To welcome the flamingoes back , LeRoy House will be open on Saturday April 1 from 10 to 4 for the third annual flamingo scavenger hunt. Count the flamingoes and win a prize. There will be plenty of chocolate flamingo eggs to enjoy, and the old fashioned games will be set up in the parlors for everyone to enjoy. No fooling.



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