

# The Man Who Saved LeRoy House

by Lynne Belluscio

Allen Seymour Olmsted was born July 2, 1856. He was the second son of John R. Olmsted and Elizabeth Allen Olmsted. His father was a lawyer and his mother was one of the first graduates of Ingham University. Allen went to school at the LeRoy Academic Institute (behind LeRoy House) and then attended Williston Seminary in East Hampton, Massachusetts.

In 1879 he graduated from Cornell University and returned home and went into business with Orator Woodward. The two young men, who were born within a month of each other, came from completely different backgrounds. Olmsted was born to one of LeRoy's wealthiest families, but Woodward's father had died in the Civil War, and young Woodward never completed high school.

Yet the two men were destined to gain individual success after their first joint business venture, manufacturing Plaster-of-Paris target balls. (These were forerunners of the clay pigeon.) Apparently they sold the target ball patent and then went their separate ways – both in the patent medicine business. Woodward started the O.F. Woodward Medicine Company, manufacturing a wide variety of cough medicines and laxative teas. Olmsted moved into the second story of a building on Main Street and began manufacturing Allen's Foot-Ease. (Woodward went on to buy the rights to Jell-O and the rest of his story is history. But he died in 1906, when he was 49.)

In the meantime, Olmsted's patent medicine business was doing pretty well. In 1903, he moved to Buffalo and lived with his sister, but he retained his legal residence in LeRoy. Eight years later, in 1911 he decided to buy the old LeRoy Academic Institute building behind LeRoy House and renovated it into a factory for the medicine company. He offered the Union Free School \$10,000 for the property and with it came the historic LeRoy House.

For several years the house had been used as a home for the principal of the Union Free

School. Before that, for nearly forty years, the house had been a boarding house for the faculty and students of the LeRoy Academic Institute. During that time, eighteen people lived in the house and the dining hall was in the basement.

The house was in pretty rough condition, yet Olmsted recognized the historical significance of the house that had been the home to Jacob LeRoy. There was some talk in town that perhaps the LeRoy House should be torn down. Allen Olmsted put a stop to that, and declared that he intended to give the old house back to the Union Free School, with the provision that it would continue to be the home for the principal of the school, until such time as a historical society be formed and the house would become a museum and a repository for historical papers and artifacts important to LeRoy. Olmsted also insisted that he would make an on site inspection each year to verify that the house was being maintained and preserved.

It would be thirty years before the LeRoy Historical Society was chartered by the New York State Board of Regents. Olmsted was in failing health but in 1942, he deeded LeRoy House to the newly formed LeRoy Historical Society. He died in November.

The Olmsted family presented the Historical Society with family heirlooms and objects with historical significance to LeRoy. Other members of the Olmsted family donated objects to the Historical Society which included the portraits of Allen's parents, by Antonio Barone which now hang in the front hall. His mother wears the white Ingham rose on her dress. In the back parlor hang the portraits of Allen's grandparents by Phineas Staunton. The huge Ingham Steinway concert piano is in the back parlor – another donation by the Olmsted family. And the brass andirons and fireplace fender that once graced the Olmsted home on East Main Street are in the back parlor.

When they were given to the Historical Society, it was



with the provision that once a year, a fire would be laid in the fireplace in memory of the Olmsted family. Unfortunately, all of the main floor chimneys are closed now, but recently, for the ghost program this weekend,

I purchased a "faux" fire, which will once again remind us of the generosity of the Olmsted family and the foresight of a man who wanted to preserve for posterity, the grand old LeRoy House.

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