

Remarks about Zadock Pratt, father of George Watson Pratt

On winter weekends when the snow lies deep on the cold lands of the Catskills, thousands of people brave wind and storm to climb the mountain known as the Colonel's Chair. These people are not paying their respects to the memory of Colonel Edwards, and they climb sitting down, for they have come to the mountain to ski and do their climbing on a chair lift. If you mention William Edwards to the gay young people gathered in the Hunter Mountain ski lodge or in the barrooms of the village of Hunter below, you are likely to get a blank stare. For the skiers know the old tanlord only as "the colonel" -- few have ever heard of William Edwards. Some of them sleep in the A-frame houses known as The Colonel's Chair Estates, and they may eat at a restaurant called The Colonel's Table. William Edwards, the man with the two-story head, has become transformed in their minds into a title without a man.

In Prattsville, some thirteen miles to the northwest, another tanlord once reigned. He was also a militia colonel, and, although born in New York, was of Yankee antecedents. He was Zadock Pratt. And today if you ask anyone you may meet on the streets of Prattsville who Zadock Pratt was, you will get a pleased smile and a torrent of enthusiastic anecdotes and information. Some will even call Pratt "old Zadock." Pratt slew more hemlock trees than Colonel Edwards; his tannery stank just as much as any other; the debris his men left on mountainsides gave rise to as many destructive forest fires as Colonel Edwards -- yet he is remembered with affection and as a human being. Why is there so great a difference in the way the two tanners are held in remembrance? Was it because Pratt had a remarkable talent for getting favorable publicity while Edwards, the puzzling bankrupt, kept to the shadows through much of his life and dreaded publicity? This is part of the explanation. But it is by no means all. Pratt was as eager as Edwards to spend his enormous energy in a relentless search for profits and power over others. Yet his character had another side. This side of Zadock Pratt was beguilingly simple and even childlike and helped him become a folk hero. Pratt gloried like a ten-year-old in his physical strength and agility he liked to boast of his feats of marksmanship; of jumping; of running; of horsemanship; and he purred loudly when he was praised. He was not conspicuously religious, yet when he dealt with hemlock trees he did it in something like a religious spirit. It was almost as if a hint of the spirit of his ancestors of the damp woods of northern Europe had come down to him and caused him to beg the pardon of a tree before he cut it down.

On the surface, Pratt's story conforms very closely to the standard legend, so beloved of older Americans, of success through hard work and self-denial. There were the poor but honest parents -- his father was a struggling handicraft tanner. There was the instance of precocious industry -- Pratt's first earnings came from picking and peddling wild huckleberries. There were the years of apprenticeship marked by long hours, devotion to duty, and the saving of a tiny bit of capital which was to become the nucleus around which great wealth would eventually gather. Pratt became a skillful saddler. He kept a country store and slept under the counter. By this and a myriad of similar economies, he hoped to increase his savings. At last he was able to enter into partnership with a brother in a small tannery in the Catskills. Shrewdly, he

wound up the tannery just in time to avoid being ruined by the depression in tanning which followed the peace of 1815. In 1824, with fourteen thousand dollars in his pocket (derived partly from fur trading and the making of his hundred thousand ash oars), he drove a one-horse wagon to the hamlet then known as Schohariekill. He announced that he had come "to live with the local people and not on them."

Pratt may have made his statement of purpose in order to assure the people of Schohariekill that he would not operate in the manner of William Edwards and suck the substance from his part of the Catskills primarily for the benefit of the rich men of the Swamp. It is likely, too, that he had something else in mind, for Schohariekill people had a very good reason to feel suspicious of tanners. There was already an old settlement by the standards of the region; strangers had come from time to time among the descendants of the Palatine refugees who had settled there before the Revolution. Not long before Pratt's arrival two strangers set up a tannery at nearby Devasego Falls. By 1824 they were gone but they had left behind them debts and a wild tale of piracy on the high seas and of buried treasure.

The tale began on board a ship bound from Philadelphia to the West Indies on a trading voyage. It carried thirty-five thousand dollars in coin. This money, it was rumored, belonged to Stephen Girard, the Philadelphia financier. The presence of the cash proved too great a temptation to crew members, who killed the captain with an ax and the mate with an oar, and took command of the ship. They turned it around and headed for New York. The men landed on Coney Island, buried a chest of loot, and took off for the nearest tavern. There liquor opened their lips and the tales they told drew the attention of the police. Two of the sailors were taken and eventually hung on Bedloe's Island in New York harbor. The rest escaped. Two crew-men turned up in Schohariekill not long after with plenty of cash. They had been Philadelphia tanners and now took over the old tannery at Devasego Falls. The Swamp firm of Cunningham and McCormick supplied them with raw hides. After a year of operation the tannery burned down; the two tanners collected the insurance and vanished. Local suspicions had been mounting since the men first came to the Schohariekill Valley, and their disappearance touched off an investigation. It was concluded to the satisfaction of the people of Schohariekill at any rate that their vanished neighbors were "pirate tanners." They had retrieved the treasure buried on Coney Island and used it to finance their tannery.

Zadock Pratt had little difficulty convincing Schohariekill people that he was no pirate tanner. He quickly bought a tract of land which had once belonged to the heirs of Johannis Hardenbergh's brother-in-law Alderman Leonard Lewis. It had passed into the hands of speculators, one of whom was Lucas Elmendorf; a more active one was Robert Dorton, a Catskill lawyer. By November 17, 1824, Pratt's tannery dam was finished. Ice was forming in the Schohariekill, yet Pratt celebrated the completion of the dam by swimming its length.

The next spring Pratt began construction of his huge tannery building, and eighty-three days later the first hides were placed in its vats. Pratt knew that the settlement of Schohariekill had one decided disadvantage as a site for a tannery. It was located farther from the Hudson than any other large-scale tannery in the Catskills. That meant that transportation costs would be high.

On the other hand, the growth of hemlocks that almost filled the valley from mountain crest to mountain crest was remarkably dense and far easier to harvest than in many places closer to the Hudson. But most favorable of all was Pratt's ability to keep a cool realistic eye on every aspect of his tannery's operations. He maintained remarkably detailed records of costs and at the same time kept his men satisfied with lives of hard work and small pay. Unlike many other tanners, Pratt proved able to resist the efforts of the Swamp to dominate him. He tanned hides for Gideon Lee, for Jonathan Thorne and Charles Leupp, who were among the biggest of the Swamp bigwigs, and yet he never yielded his independence to them. While most tannery settlements in the Catskills were shantytowns where buildings were run up hastily with no hope that they would last longer than the time it would take to use up the neighboring hemlocks, Zadock Pratt made his town one in which the lowliest worker could take pride.

An elegant pictorial map of Pratt's town, made to the colonel's order in 1835, preserves the appearance of the village at the height of its tannery prosperity! At a discreet distance from the huge tannery stands Pratt's mansion with its two-story porch and its outbuildings. Ranging on either side along the village's main street stand the hundred houses Pratt built. They are mingled with the less pretentious ones he found on his arrival in 1824, and have an air of simple refinement in their proportions and ornament. By means of such details as pilasters and sunburst gable windows, they share the classical taste of the 1820s. A covered wooden bridge 130 feet long crosses the Schohariekill. Pratt boasted that it was built in eleven days "without the use of ardent spirits" while the snow lay three feet deep on the ground. The Albany Argus of July 10, 1839 was so completely carried away by its enthusiasm over the Pratt marvels that it claimed "the bridge is believed to be the longest bridge for a single arch in America" and that it was 224 feet long. A pair of circular fishponds are shown across the road from the Pratt mansion. They were stocked with the unstable combination of trout, sunfish, suckers, and bullheads. A man who could well be intended for Pratt himself is seen trying his luck in one. Pratt planted one thousand hickory, maple, and elm trees along the streets of his town -- many of them appear on the map, and some are still alive. Two churches, one of the Reformed Dutch believers and the other of the Methodists, appear on the map. Later they were joined by an Episcopalian structure and a three-story school run by Dr. Wright; a little later a brick and verandahed academy was established, largely at Zadock Pratt's command. Small Pratt-financed industries began to appear -- a woolens factory, another which produced oilcloth, two match factories, a rubber-goods factory, a chair- and cabinetmaking factory, a hat making establishment, machine shops and foundries.

For three years Pratt supplied rent-free quarters in which eccentric preacher-printer-daguerreotypist Levi L. Hill turned out Baptist religious publications and maintained a bookshop. But in 1850, when Hill startled the photographers of the world by announcing that he had invented a method of color photography, Pratt's realistic judgment of men led him to withhold endorsement of Hill's claim. Samuel F. B. Morse, president of the National Academy of Design and inventor of the telegraph, might visit Hill in his Westkill workshop and leave to hail him as one of the great geniuses of the age; senators and congressmen by the dozen might give Hill their enthusiastic approval, but Zadock Pratt realized that Hill's invention was either an attempt at fraud or the result of an honest mistake. No one knows to this day which it

was. Once Hill made his announcement, photographic studios were deserted as people everywhere waited to have their pictures taken when the Hillotype could come into use. Angry photographers besieged Hill in his Westkill parsonage and demanded that he either patent his process or admit that he hadn't any. It was characteristic of Zadock Pratt that at this point he lent Mr. Hill one of his watchdogs to protect him against the photographers, but he continued to keep his opinion of Hill's process a secret.

Once it was obvious that Colonel Pratt's tannery was a success, a bustling village came to life around it and people began predicting that unlike other tanning centers, Prattsville (for so Schohariekill had been renamed) had come to the Catskills to stay. Pratt himself shared in this belief and did all he could to make it come true. He liked to tell the world that by removing hemlock trees from his town he was performing an act not only profitable to himself but of lasting benefit to future generations of Prattsvilleans. He often said the "old tanners" claimed that when "hemlock land" was cleared of its trees and converted to pasture, the cows grazing upon it produced the finest butter in the world. It was equal to the famous Orange County butter which was so fine that the United States Navy would buy no other to place aboard its ships leaving for warm-water cruises. It was Pratt's hope that as tanning died out following the exhaustion of the supply of tanbark, Prattsville could live on as the center of a prosperous dairy farming region. Such crops as hay and potatoes were raised and sold profitably closer to the Hudson, but to the farmers of a place as distant as Prattsville, transportation costs ruled these out as important cash crops. It cost half a cent to get a pound of butter to the Hudson by team as against fifty cents to move one hundred pounds of hay the same distance. Butter with its more concentrated value was the better crop, Pratt reasoned. In order to demonstrate the advantages of butter production on hemlock land, Pratt set up a dairy farm at Prattsville across the Schohariekill from his tannery.

In all his business activities Pratt was a model to hold before the ambitious young men of America. His industry and determination, his attention to the smallest detail of his business, his early rising, his thrift -- these made him the kind of hero whom Horatio Alger was to celebrate some years after Pratt's career was over. Yet Pratt could not help puzzling the businessmen who admired him, for it was clear to every observer that Pratt was decidedly odd. James Powers of the Greene County bar scorned Pratt as "almost illiterate." A writer in Orson Fowler's *American Phrenological Journal* for 1848, having studied Pratt's head, found that the great tanlord was "extravagantly organized. He is from these causes, consequently eccentric; each action and motion bears the impress of his mind, which makes him somewhat peculiar, isolated and detached from his species." Whether a man believed in phrenology or not, he would have to conclude that never before had the Catskills known a man like Colonel Pratt -- a man who cared for the look of the landscape he controlled and who took into consideration the effect of his actions upon future generations. Fellow tanners viewed Pratt with unbelieving eyes. For in a trade filled with secrecy about working methods, Pratt made public the minutest details of the way he ran his tannery; other tanners, without the payment of a cent, could learn and put to use the results of the Pratt shrewdness and energy. Then too there were the odd practical jokes Pratt liked to perpetrate. One Fourth of July he donned a fur coat, jumped into a sleigh, and drove into the Village of Catskill, to the amazement of the citizenry. Was that any way for a rich tanner to behave? Pratt's love of military trappings

led him into some curious byways of behavior. He liked to take to the field with his militiamen and the artillery under his command and blast down barns -- for which he paid more than the full value to their owners. One historic day on the bridge at Windham, he re-enacted the battle of Lodi with fireworks. He liked more and more to boast of his feats of strength and skill. He competed with his men in jumping and -- at the age of thirty-six -- beat all comers in the running broad jump. When he set up a bank in a pillared little building by the side of his mansion house, Pratt puzzled bankers as much as he did tanners, for when a stranger asked for a loan, Pratt often brushed aside the applicant's proffers of collateral. Instead he studied the man's face and then asked to look at his hands. If the hands showed evidence of hard manual labor, the man got the loan -- and Pratt boasted that no man who passed his hand-and-face test ever failed to repay the money advanced. Once when he met a deserving but broke young man, Pratt couldn't give him help because he hadn't a cent in his pockets. He picked up a flat stone from beside the road and with a rusty nail scratched a check on the stone. "Take that to my bank in Prattsville and they'll give you the money," the colonel said. And his cashier did. For he recognized the authentic Pratt touch.

Like many other men of limited education, Pratt saw a kind of magic in the printed word. When hard times struck the tanning business in the 1830s and the price of leather dropped, he reacted in his own way. He had a number of his favorite mottoes printed in letters of gold and distributed about Prattsville. "Be just, and fear not," "Honesty is the best policy," "Do well, and doubt not," were among the mottoes with which Pratt tried to battle economic turmoil. And his village weathered the storm better than most.

In his domestic life, too, Pratt puzzled orthodox thinkers. His first three wives died after relatively short experiences of married life. The fourth did not die -- she got a divorce. In his late seventies, the colonel took his fifth bride. She was a mere twenty years old and an office employee of the trade paper of the leather industry, the Shoe and Leather Reporter, whose editor observed with pride that it was in his office that the final Mrs. Zadock Pratt had "acquired that amiability and flavor of The Swamp that made her attractive to the old tanner."

"The Gem of the Catskills" was what Prattsville was called in the days when it was under the guidance of Zadock Pratt. For neatness and rural charm it was without a rival throughout the Hardenbergh Patent and beyond. It had no poor, Colonel Pratt liked to say. Its streets became well shaded as the trees planted by the old tanner came to maturity. Miles of sidewalks were laid down. People in mountain towns like Windham took notice and followed Pratt's example. Colonel Pratt was sent to Congress and there he labored to bring to the national scene the same kind of cheerful neatness, efficiency, and eccentricity he had made part of life in Prattsville. His passion for accurate record keeping led him to found the National Bureau of Statistics. He enthusiastically worked toward the planning of a transcontinental railroad. His admiration for George Washington gave him added zeal in pushing for the completion of the Washington Monument. When a group of mechanics proposed that a stone be built into the monument with an inscription praising Pratt himself, Pratt was pleased. But a storm of protest arose. Horace Greeley's New York Tribune which had opposed the construction of the monument anyway, sarcastically upheld the mechanics' proposal in the hope that it would lead to the plastering of the monument's sides with advertising for

"quack merchandise" to such an extent that the "awkward monstrosity" would be pulled down. What gave additional spice to the affair was that Pratt was president of the Mechanics Institute of New York, which had a hand in trying to maneuver the Pratt-praising stone into Washington's bosom.

For twenty years the hemlocks of the vicinity of Prattsville held out against the assaults of Pratt's barkpeelers. San Juan, Orinoco, and Laguirra hides; Metamoros, Montevideo, and California hides; hides shipped from Buenos Aires, Rio Grande, and Honduras made their way up the Hudson and were then carried by wagon from the wharves of Catskill to Pratt's tannery on the Schohariekill, to end as leather in the warehouses of the Swamp. As his hemlocks vanished, Pratt grew in wealth and power. And like many another man who has risen far above his fellows in worldly success, he was not satisfied. He craved further successes and an even higher position. It was then that Pratt entered Congress and took to delivering lectures at county fairs, at schools, and before audiences of workmen, farmers, and capitalists. He began taking keen pleasure in sitting for his portrait to painters, sculptors, and photographers -- some said he looked like Henry Clay. Portraits of Pratt ornamented the periodicals in which laudatory accounts of his life and works appeared. When Freeman Hunt of the Merchant's Magazine compiled a book of biographical sketches intended to inspire young Americans to strive toward success, Zadock Pratt became Hunt's prime exhibit. Men like John Quincy Adams, Washington Irving, and Henry Clay took back seats in Hunt's book. Dr. Samuel Latham Mitchill, that other fine eccentric, had once published what he called his Chronological Biography in which he listed the most glorious achievements of his life. Pratt followed Mitchill's example and dictated his own story to a reporter for the Shoe and Leather Reporter and had it printed at his own expense in a number of editions. But all this was only a minor part of Pratt's effort to keep himself before the eyes of the world -- even after death.

It is easy for a poor man, unused as he is to adulation, to believe without questioning that he is mortal and will some day disappear from the earth. But for a rich man it is much harder. And such men often try to achieve at least the shadow of immortality by arranging to have their names and perhaps their deeds and features live on in the minds of the humans of the future. Long ago, Egyptian and Persian monarchs ordered tombs hewn for themselves within rocky cliffs and saw to it that the tombs were ornamented with their own likenesses and a variety of symbols of their achievements. Zadock Pratt, too, so managed matters that his personality still broods over his former kingdom of Prattsville from the high cliffs which hang over the site of his tannery.

Just when Pratt decided to "let the rocks tell the story" of his life is uncertain. But the notion probably did not enter his head until after a day in the 1840s when a wandering and penniless stonecutter or sculptor turned up in Prattsville and asked for help. The man was quickly set to work carving a likeness of Zadock Pratt on a large boulder at the entrance to his village. But the boulder happened not to be on Pratt land. It's owner, John Brandow, did not like Pratt. According to one contemporary, Brandow remarked that he did not want Pratt "to haunt him as he passed by," so he ordered the sculptor to pack up his tools and leave. It was then that Pratt set the man to carving what are known to this day as Pratt's Rocks. Not only did a bust of the great tanner emerge from the rocks but symbols of his deeds also took their places over a period of years to form a kind of biography in stone of Zadock Pratt. There is a

bas-relief of his tannery building, and a strong arm with rolled-up sleeve symbolizes Pratt's belief that he succeeded "by hard knocks." There is a bust of his son George who was a Civil War casualty, as well as other carvings which record his children and his achievements as a congressman. And the hemlock tree is given its share of credit almost as if it had been a conscious partner in Pratt's career. The coat of arms Pratt adopted shows on the cliff-with a hemlock tree as a crest. A horse carved in bold relief pays tribute to the horses who hauled hemlock bark to the Pratt tannery, and a conventionalized hemlock stands beside him. Benches imaginatively hewn from outcroppings of rock along the steep path which leads from the highway to the cliff bear carvings of hemlocks. A statement cut beneath the relief of his tannery gives full credit to the hemlock for its share in the Pratt triumph. It reads "One million sides of sole leather tanned with hemlock bark, in twenty years, by Zadock Pratt." Other brags were edited with a chisel by order of Pratt's heirs who thought them unseemly -- traces of the editorial work may still be seen on the Rocks.

Throughout his life Zadock Pratt liked to pay tribute to the hemlock tree. He liked to enlarge upon the usefulness of the tree's branches as beds for men spending a night in the wilderness; he liked to praise the value of hemlock timber and believed that a healing quality was imparted to the air permeated with the aromatic fragrance of hemlock. Today, thanks to the carvings on Pratt's Rocks, the old tanlord praises the hemlock from the grave.

A few years before Zadock Pratt settled amid the dense hemlock groves of what was to become Prattsville, another kind of evergreen tree was beginning to help bring fame and prosperity to another part of the Catskills. This evergreen was the pitch pine which grew on the top of a cliff on Elisha Williams' Catskill Mountain lands in an extremely picturesque way. The pitch pine is a very adaptable tree. It sometimes grows straight and tall in rich and sheltered lowlands but when its seedlings find themselves settled for life on sandy ridges or rocky ledges, they make the best of things by growing slowly into picturesquely gnarled forms. The pitch pine has given a distinctive character to New Jersey's Pine Barrens; it grows in noticeable uniformity on ridges close to the Atlantic coast, and a stand in Branford, Connecticut, has long been known as the Pine Orchard. Sometime before 1820, travelers to Elisha Williams' clifftop began calling it by the same name, and which Pine Orchard was named first is uncertain. Both were distinguished by dwarfed pitch pines growing in almost regular formation.

As the Catskills' Pine Orchard drew more and more visitors, many of its pines were cut down in order to extend even further its enormous vices. In 1823 more trees vanished to make room for a large hotel building known at first as the House on the Pine Orchard and in later years as the Catskill Mountain House. The number of pines that died to make room for the hotel was minute compared with that of the hemlocks felled to give wealth and fame to Zadock Pratt, but their sacrifice opened the way to an extraordinary passage in the history of the Catskills.

Meanwhile, the conversion of the cliffs above his town into a sculptured memorial grew. Pratt set a stonecutter to work carving a burial place for himself deep within the rocks. But the stone proved resistant as the workman penetrated a few feet inside and only a niche resembling a sentry box remains. A child once asked if this was a telephone booth of the ancient Indian

inhabitants of the land, and his error is understandable. Foiled by the hardness of the rock, some say, Pratt ordered a splendid coffin of hemlock wood for himself. Such coffins play a part in the folklore of the Catskills. It was a matter of common observation that a piece of green and knotty hemlock thrown on a fire would react like a bunch of firecrackers. Men often ended their traditional brags with the words, "And when I die let me be buried in a hemlock coffin so I'll go through hell snapping." Pratt's coffin never had a chance to startle the residents of hell. For a flood carried it off from the shop in which it was being made and it was never seen again. When Pratt died he was buried in a way that must have seemed to some the fulfillment of a prophecy. In 1853 romantic novelist and poet Mrs. Ann Sophia Stephens had praised Pratt and his works in a long poem titled *The Tanner and the Hemlock*. Mrs. Stephens wrote:

So the Tanner loves that stout old tree,
With its great trunk looming there,
And its light leaves dancing joyously,
As they sing in the mountain air

And she ended the poem with these words

For well he knows that the hemlock bough
Will weep o'er his honored tomb.

There is no evidence that hemlock boughs wept over Pratt's grave in the Prattsville Cemetery but they certainly surrounded it and waved above it. Hemlock hedges still surround it and hemlock trees clipped into geometric shapes ornament the cemetery and help keep it green throughout the year.

Editor's note:

Swamp An area in lower Manhattan compassing Gold, Frankfort, Pearl, Water and Ferry streets. It became the site of the city's first tanning pits during colonial times and was soon the center of the city's leather industry, which was attracted by the fresh water that flowed into the area from the Collect and by the proximity of the district to the docks along the East River. Although the pond was covered over by 1811, the Swamp remained the site of the city's leather district.

Collect. A large pond sixty feet deep formerly in lower Manhattan, just north of the present City Hall Park; it was also called Fresh Water Pond. Fed by an underground spring, its overflow ran to the Hudson River. Name is a corruption of the Dutch kolch (small body of water). It provided drinking water, and water for the tanneries, breweries, and slaughter houses built on its southern and eastern branches, and by late 18th century was considered "a very sink and common sewer". Pond was filled in between 1803 and 1811 by earth from the surrounding hills. By 1813, the pond was virtually covered as Centre Street was extended northward.

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Future research:

Find any connection between these Pratts and the Charles Pratt of Standard Oil who was one of the four key leaders of Standard Oil.

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