

# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSEPH ELLCOTT

By Patrick R. Weissend

Holland Land Office Museum  
Holland Purchase Historical Society  
131 West Main Street  
Batavia, NY 14020

© 2002 by the Holland Purchase Historical Society  
© Second Printing 2003



**Joseph Ellicott**

November 1, 1760 - August 19, 1826

Dedication

*To my parents, Elizabeth and Bruce Weissend, who inspired a young and curious boy to ask questions, read and learn.*

*To Cindy who rekindled that inspiration.*

*And to the members of the Holland Purchase Historical Society and the people of Genesee County who give me the opportunity to achieve my dreams and goals.*

## Introduction

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, the American frontier expanded westward into the wilderness. As the population of the young nation grew, the pioneers need for land also increased. These veterans of the American Revolution wanted to build a better life for their families. Many of these families came to Western New York and the office of the Holland Land Company to purchase their new land. When they arrived, many settlers were greeted by a six-foot three-inch woodsman named Joseph Ellicott.

Ellicott, Resident-Agent for the Holland Land Company in Western New York, was primarily responsible for transforming the land from the backwoods to a commercial center in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. His policy for settlement in Western New York assured a slow but steady growth.

### The Dutch and the Origins of the Holland Land Company

In the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch controlled shipping throughout the world, and Amsterdam was the Wall Street of Western Europe. Their financial empire started to relax in the 18<sup>th</sup> century because of war, lack of raw materials, and taxation. Other countries, such as France and England, began to catch up economically.<sup>1</sup>

As late as 1780, the Dutch still had financial strength throughout Western Europe and America. Dutch banks loaned the French \$7 million, and the British 40% of their debt. By 1796, the entire \$12 million debt of the United States was also on loan from the Dutch banks.<sup>2</sup>

The origins of the Holland Land Company began in 1789, when four Amsterdam firms, P. Stadnitski, N & J van Staphorst & Hubbard, P & C van Eagen & Ten Cate, and Vollenhoven sent an agent to keep them informed of financial developments and to invest money for them. The Club of Four, as it was called, invested in different funds such as the South Carolina Funded Debt, the Massachusetts Deposit and the Pennsylvania Population Company. They also invested in canal construction companies in 1791 and 1792.<sup>3</sup>

To keep the Dutch investors informed, they sent Theophile Cazenove to America. He was a protégé of Pieter Stadnitski. Cazenove arrived in the United States in 1790 and settled in Philadelphia. There he lived in grand style, and his house became known for elaborate dinners. He also became friendly with American leaders in business and politics.<sup>4</sup>

In August 1791, Cazenove advised the Club of Four to start buying land in the wilds of America. The van Staphorst firm was reluctant at first, but after the other three firms began to buy land, they joined in the venture.

The Dutch banking firms of W. Willink and RJ Schimmelpennick began to cooperate with the other four banking houses in September 1792, creating the Club of Six. Three months later, Cazenove bought 1.5 million acres in tracts 4 & 5 of the Genesee Lands from Robert Morris, Sr. At the same time, the Club of Six bought another 1 million acres in tract 2 from Robert Morris, Jr. and obtained an option for another 800,000 acres, which they later bought. They also purchased 700,000 acres east of the Allegheny River in Pennsylvania and about 77,000 acres in Central New York.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the firms wanted to sell the lands quickly to speculators, while others preferred to wait for a better opportunity. In order to create a better market, they decided to merge their holdings into one stock company, and on November 20, 1795 the Holland Land Company was formed.<sup>6</sup>

## Joseph Ellicott – The Early Years

Joseph Ellicott was born on November 1, 1760 in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. He was the fifth child and third son of Judith Bleaker and Joseph Ellicott. As a boy, young Joseph received a common school education and at age 14 moved with the family to Ellicott's Upper Mills, Maryland (now Ellicott City).<sup>7</sup> In Maryland, Joseph Sr. and his four brothers purchased over 280 acres of land on the Patapsco River and erected a saw and gristmill.<sup>8</sup>

After his father's death from pleurisy in 1780, Joseph lived with his eldest brother, Andrew, in Baltimore and for a time taught school. Andrew Ellicott, five years Joseph's senior, was engaged in the practice of surveying. Among the first jobs Joseph worked on with Andrew was locating the western boundary of the state of Pennsylvania in 1785.<sup>9</sup>

Joseph Ellicott was described as "short tempered, somewhat tactless, with an inner drive that made him rather dictatorial."<sup>10</sup> He was a hard worker and demanded the same from his employees. He had a business relationship with most men, as pride and reserve prevented him from becoming friendly with many people. Joseph was very close to his family, and after his father's death, he looked after his mother and emerged as the head of the family.

The next big job came in September 1789, when the Ellicott brothers, Andrew, Joseph, and Benjamin, were hired to locate the western boundary of New York. They needed to determine whether or not Presqu' Isle (Erie, Pa) was in New York or Pennsylvania. To determine this they had to travel into Upper Canada and the west end of Lake Ontario. The end of the lake determined the boundary line of New York and Pennsylvania.<sup>11</sup> While traveling along the Niagara Peninsula, the brothers stopped at Niagara Falls and made the first actual measurements of the Niagara River, the height of the falls, and the rapids.<sup>12</sup>

By 1791, Joseph struck out on his own. Secretary of War Timothy Pickering appointed him to run the boundary line between the state of Georgia and the lands of the Creek Indians. During this survey, Ellicott became ill with yellow fever and almost lost his life.<sup>13</sup> After Joseph finished the Georgia job, Andrew and Benjamin invited him to join them up north. They were surveying the city of Washington, D.C.<sup>14</sup>

In 1794, the Holland Land Company started surveying its Six Districts purchase in northwestern Pennsylvania. The survey was taking too long, so General-Agent Theophilus Cazenove hired Joseph Ellicott to speed it up. This decision was the beginning of a 25-year relationship between Ellicott and the Holland Land Company. His assistants were his brothers, Benjamin and David. The choice of hiring Joseph proved to be a wise one. His final report was 58 pages long: it was carefully organized, easily legible, factual, and with personal comments.<sup>15</sup> The report stated the quality of the land was poor and this news disappointed Cazenove, who believed the Northwestern Pennsylvania lands were more valuable than the land in Western New York.

Company directors in Amsterdam, predicting huge losses, ordered Cazenove to devote his attention to clearing the Seneca land title in Western New York. They also sent him an assistant named Paolo Busti.

Paolo Busti was born on October 10, 1749 in Milan, Italy. He took a job at his uncle's bank in Amsterdam where he acquired a reputation for business insight, industry, and honesty. He was also the brother-in-law of Holland Land Company director Ten Cate. He was persuaded out of retirement in 1796 to assist Cazenove. Busti, his wife Elizabeth, and their two daughters arrived in Philadelphia in February 1797. Two years later, Busti took over Cazenove's position as Agent-General.

## Treaty of Big Tree

In the summer of 1797, Cazenove again hired Joseph Ellicott as Chief Surveyor. This time to survey a 3.3 million-acre tract of land in Western New York. Before the survey could begin, financier Robert Morris had to clear the land title from the Seneca Indians. In late August 1797, Ellicott arrived

alone on horseback, in the Seneca village of Big Tree. Big Tree was just outside of the present Village of Geneseo, Livingston County. The negotiations began August 28, 1797. Ellicott was invited because he knew the territory from traveling through it on his way to Upper Canada eight years earlier, and he had a friendship with several Indian chiefs.<sup>16</sup>

There were three parties involved: Robert Morris, the Senecas and the United States government. Representing Morris was his son, Thomas. Over 1000 Senecas were led by Red Jacket, Farmer's Brother, and Cornplanter. Jeremiah Wadsworth represented the federal government. The Holland Land Company sent a team of six men to be observers. Their orders from Philadelphia were to stand on the sidelines and not be publicly involved.

Discussions were moving along until somebody sold whiskey to the Senecas. The result was three days of drinking. When negotiations resumed, Red Jacket, Farmer's Brother, and Cornplanter refused to sign the treaty. Morris then tried a new tactic: bribery. He promised Seneca women 60 cows and gave annuities to some of the chiefs. Red Jacket received \$600, Cornplanter \$300, Farmer's Brother and Billy \$100 each, and Little Beard \$50.<sup>17</sup>

The Treaty at Big Tree ended a little more than two weeks after it began. The Senecas retained a little less than 200,000 acres and received \$100,000 of the Bank of the United States stock with the dividends paid semi-annually. Ellicott was employed to layout the reservations.<sup>18</sup> With the signing of the treaty, Morris transferred the title of the 3.3 million acres to the Holland Land Company.

## **The Great Survey**

Before the land purchase could be sold and settled, it had to be surveyed. Explorer maps existed, but were inaccurate. Cazenove said, "Without a survey no rational plan of settlement for such an extended body of land can be devised."<sup>19</sup> The Federal Land Act of 1796 required surveyors to note in their field books "the true situations of all mines, salt licks, salt springs, and mill seats which shall come to his knowledge; all water courses... and also the quality of lands."<sup>20</sup>

Following the signing of the treaty, Ellicott started the preliminary work on the Great Survey. In the fall of 1797, he toured the boundaries of the purchase. He also surveyed the south shore of Lake Ontario to the Niagara River and the southwest beach of Lake Erie to the Western New York border. He prepared a topographical map; by mid-November, Ellicott finished his preparatory survey. He walked the last part of the trip, 200 miles, through the snow.<sup>21</sup>

Ellicott spent the winter of 1797-1798 in Philadelphia preparing for the survey. Among his objectives were to lay out the Indian reservations, determine the boundary line of the land reserved by New York State along the Niagara River, survey towns of six miles square complete with field books, and determine the course of the Genesee River.<sup>22</sup>

In March 1798, Ellicott and his army of about 150 men entered the woods and began the actual survey. The Chief Surveyor insisted on high standards. He used stone markers set along the boundaries of the purchase, the reservations, and township lines. At the time, the United States had no standard of measure. This dilemma deeply troubled the accuracy conscious Ellicott. To solve this problem, he gathered a number of rulers, determined the average length, and used that as one foot. To ensure his surveyors were using the same one-foot ruler, he attached a brass 12-inch ruler to every field book. Ellicott became the first person to use the same one-foot ruler we use today.<sup>23</sup>

The purchase was bounded in part by lines running north and south called meridians. To guarantee accuracy, astronomical measurements had to be made, and a portable transit was essential. Ellicott's brother Andrew was using the only portable transit in the United States in the South. Joseph solved this problem by having his mechanically inclined younger brother, Benjamin, build a new one.<sup>24</sup>

The Holland Land Company and Robert Morris had to agree where the eastern boundary of the purchase was, so a joint survey was necessary. Ellicott met with Morris employee, Major Adam Hoops, in Canandagua. Hoops refused to send a surveyor or approve a boundary the Holland Land Company would lay out. After a delay of 10 days filled with meetings and letters, Hoops accepted some principles to start

the survey at the southwest corner of the Phelps – Gorham Purchase. Benjamin Ellicott started the survey at the southwest corner of the Phelps – Gorham Purchase, went due west 12 miles, and laid a stone marking the southeast boundary between the Holland Purchase and the Morris Reserve.<sup>25</sup>

Joseph Ellicott kept his men in the woods until December 7th when snow made it impractical to continue. He was deeply disappointed the entire survey was not finished, but life in the woods was miserable. He had to deal with unexpected delays that slowed the work crews. Ellicott also dealt with sickness among the men and the packhorses. There were frequent supply shortages, and because whiskey was a backwoods staple, many fights broke out among the men.<sup>26</sup>

After the first season, only small tasks remained. Ellicott still had to lay out small patches of Indian Reservations, identify the eastern boundary at Lake Ontario, and survey the southwest corner of Holland Land Company lands. He finished these tasks during the second season and the final remaining task was his comprehensive report to the company. Ellicott started to organize it during the winter of 1798-1799. He spent the winter alone, in a log cabin somewhere in Western New York.<sup>27</sup>

The Great Survey was finally finished in October 1800 at a cost of \$70,921.69½.<sup>28</sup> Ellicott's carefully organized report included notes about the quality of land, types of trees, and potential sites of towns. His report clearly showed the value of the land. The soil was suitable for raising corn, wheat, rye, and other grains. Sugar maple, beech, oak, ash, and elm trees were abundant throughout the purchase. Different types of wildlife also dotted the terrain, including rattlesnakes, bears, wolves, elk, foxes, deer, minks, otters, and other animals.<sup>29</sup> With the Great Survey finished, the next step in settling the vast purchase was to find an agent with the characteristics to turn the wilderness into a new frontier.

### **Searching for an Agent**

The Holland Land Company started its search for a permanent resident-agent in 1800 and Ellicott became a finalist for the position. Joseph Ellicott found time during the Great Survey to write down his plans on the development of the purchase. Another of the finalist was Charles Williamson, land agent for the nearby Pultney Estates. He proposed the Holland Land Company spend money on development to encourage a more profitable future sale. He was eliminated because the directors wanted to make a quick profit. Thomas Morris, son of Robert Morris, was also a finalist but he never wrote his thoughts down because he believed the company would use his ideas without compensating him. Morris was also rejected because his thoughts resembled Williamson's.

James Wadsworth was offered a temporary agency over the land for one year in 1797. He suggested the company "avoid all considerable expenses" and "sell at rather low prices than give long credits." Wadsworth suggested that the company sell the land to rich individuals and societies. He was ultimately rejected because his terms were too high and he was committed to other personal projects.<sup>30</sup>

Two other candidates were company employees Gerritt Boon and John Lincklaen. Boon was a company agent on the Oldenbarneveld Tract near Utica, but he overspent there on wide roads and large mills. Lincklaen, the company agent on the Cazenovia Tract, wanted to invest in economic infrastructure, a policy he pursued at considerable cost in Cazenovia, and he was also rejected.<sup>31</sup>

That left Ellicott. He thought the company should spend as little money as possible on development, and private investors put capital in the land. Ellicott felt the company should spend money only on essentials, such as a few main roads, grist and saw mills, taverns, and blacksmith shops. He also suggested that every tract purchased be settled and only investors that paid in full would be exempt from settling the lot. Another of his suggestions was for the company to reserve good land to sell later at a higher profit.<sup>32</sup>

Ellicott submitted three sets of plans, and elaborated on his ideas. He foresaw easy sales, but difficult collections. He suggested the company accept payments in cattle, hogs, and grains. This action would encourage settlers to clear the land for farming. He knew many settlers would purchase small lots of about 120 acres at about \$2.50 per acre. As an incentive to large land purchasers, the company sold the parcels at reduced rates.<sup>33</sup>

Although Ellicott had no experience selling land, he gained support from Holland Land Company officials. He displayed certain traits and abilities that weighed heavily in his favor. First, he lived most of his life on the frontier, and would feel at home in Western New York. He also observed the techniques of other large land owners in regard to sales. Because Ellicott had spent the better part of the last four years in Western New York, he knew the land better than any of the other candidates. During the Great Survey, he managed company funds with care and honesty. This work ethic was an asset to the financial-minded Dutch bankers. The final trait was that he was unmarried and had no ambition to be. This gave him time to concentrate on the job at hand.<sup>34</sup>

Paolo Busti, Agent-General of the Holland Land Company, and Joseph Ellicott signed the contract on November 1, 1800 in Philadelphia. For the next 20 years, Ellicott held the post of Resident-Agent in charge of land sales on the Holland Purchase. The contract was for six years, and he was paid \$1500 per year with a commission of 5% for all sales.<sup>35</sup> His contract was revised a number of times over the next 20 years. In 1810, Ellicott received 30,000 acres instead of the 5% commission. A year later, his salary increased to \$5,000, and he received 2% commission on receipts. It is estimated that during his first 10 years of employment, Ellicott made about \$11,500 annually, and in the last 10 years it dropped to about \$7,000 per year.<sup>36</sup>

Ellicott left Philadelphia on November 5, 1800 and traveled to Albany. While in Albany, he wrote Busti telling him he had to wait for the printer to finish printing advertisements, receipt books, and ledgers. By December 17, Ellicott arrived in Canandaigua and was happy to learn land sales were brisk. He finally arrived at his new home in New Amsterdam (Buffalo) on December 28.<sup>37</sup>

### **Resident Land Agent**

Ellicott wasted little time planning the development of Western New York. He set up the first land office in the tavern of Asa Ransom in Clarence Hollow in 1801. A year later, he moved it permanently to Batavia.<sup>38</sup> Through Ellicott's influence, the Holland Land Company implemented programs to encourage settlement. It gave loans to settlers to build mills on the Purchase. It also gave land to the first two blacksmiths in the area. It loaned \$3,000 to assist the establishment of the first general store in Batavia, and offered free land to anyone who would open inns at 10-mile intervals along the newly opened roads. The company also donated money and land to establish churches and schools.<sup>39</sup>

The Holland Land Company sold land by an Article of Agreement, and the settlers received the deed upon full payment. The plan started to change in 1802, when Genesee County was formed. State law required County officers and voters to be landowners, and Ellicott estimated there were fewer than 30 landowners in the entire county. This made it almost impossible to have enough people for the positions available or to summon a jury. Ellicott changed the policy by giving a settler the deed when 25% of the purchase price was paid.<sup>40</sup>

Ellicott and Busti differed on the payment policies. Busti and the Directors thought the contracts should be either 4 or 6 years, with either a third or a quarter down. Busti then sent Ellicott a letter lowering the required down payment to 15% for large-scale buyers and 10% for small lots. Ellicott believed the requirement was still too high because many settlers arrived with little or no cash. Ellicott thought the way to populate the Purchase was with liberal credit terms that would give the settlers 10 – 12 years to pay. He believed that by selling land to poor landless families, they would work hard clearing and developing the land. Western New York would cease to be the frontier, and land values throughout the Purchase would increase. An example of this is the story of Richard Cary. Mr. Cary arrived at the land office with \$.03 in his pocket and in debt \$2. Ellicott knew that he would clear his land, and with Ellicott's liberal credit terms, Cary was able to buy a plot of land in Niagara County.<sup>41</sup>

Joseph Ellicott was very active in community politics and affairs. In the first general election west of the Genesee River in April 1800, he received 117 votes to be a member of the New York State Assembly. He turned down the position because his job as Resident Agent consumed too much of his time.<sup>42</sup> He was also appointed the first Genesee County judge, another position he turned down. The

judgeship was then given to his brother, Benjamin, on Joseph's recommendation. A public position he did accept was Genesee County treasurer. He took this position to protect the investments of the Holland Land Company.

Ellicott took pride in his records. In 1804 he completed a "large map, about 18 feet square... fastened at the north and south ends to rollers placed parallel to each other and about 3 feet apart... fixed on a table covered with glass... to preserve it from the rude hands of visitors."<sup>43</sup>

## The Erie Canal

Perhaps Ellicott's greatest achievement to the development of Western New York was his influence on the building of the Erie Canal. The idea of a waterway connecting the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean had been discussed before the American Revolution. Following the war, New York's war debt was too high to sponsor a capital project of that magnitude. As the population increased west of Seneca Lake, the canal project came to the forefront. Early transportation from Western New York focused on the Buffalo – Batavia – Canandaigua – Utica – Albany corridor using turnpikes. The cost of transporting goods from the frontier to markets was extremely high, and it was believed a canal would be a tremendous economic benefit for everybody.<sup>44</sup>

In 1808, surveyor Simeon DeWitt was instructed to make accurate surveys of the "rivers, streams and waters... between the Hudson River and Lake Erie," and "such other routes as he may deem proper."<sup>45</sup> DeWitt asked Ellicott his opinion about a canal going to Lake Erie. DeWitt valued Ellicott's opinion because he surveyed Western New York. Ellicott did not think the canal would ever be built, but he saw the advantages to the company if it was. It would improve the transportation infrastructure and would probably increase land sales. Settlers would also be able to send their goods to markets in the east, and most importantly, it would not cost the Holland Land Company a lot of money.<sup>46</sup>

By 1811, talk of building a canal died down. Many believed the principal markets would be on Lake Ontario at places such as Montreal. The War of 1812 changed that: men and arms needed to be transported to the Niagara frontier as efficiently and as quickly as possible.

Ellicott conferred with Busti about the project. Ellicott praised the project because it would greatly increase the value of land, at little expense to the company. He estimated it would raise land values near the canal from \$3 per acre to over \$20. He also thought the canal would allow settlers to transport goods to market at less than half the present cost.<sup>47</sup> Ellicott sent a ten-page letter to DeWitt Clinton giving his opinion of three possible routes. The first route was to swing around Niagara Falls, the second was moving down the Niagara River from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. The final route, favored by Ellicott, was a canal from Lake Erie to the Genesee River. He also offered to invest \$2500 for this route because it passed through company lands.<sup>48</sup>

At first, Busti was opposed to the project and was in favor of building roads. He changed his mind after Ellicott went on record supporting it. In 1810, Busti offered to donate 18,000 acres of company land to the state. The proceeds from land sales would be used to finance the project. Two years later the Canal Commission rejected the offer because there were too many conditions.<sup>49</sup>

Busti then made a second offer of half a township (3 miles square/11,500 acres) near the canal. Ellicott then suggested a much larger donation of over 100,000 acres. Busti needed a clearer explanation and Ellicott gave him three solid reasons. First, it created a better rapport between the company and the public. Second, it would rid the company of poor lands that would probably not be sold for a long time. Lastly, it would comply with the commission's request for land that could be located at once. Busti agreed with Ellicott's plan, and the Holland Land Company donated 100,632 acres of land in the southern part of the purchase. The conditions were the state would have to pay tax on the land and return it if the canal was not built within 15 years. On November 27, 1813, the Canal Commission accepted the offer, and the project was one step closer to becoming a reality.<sup>50</sup>

Ellicott, becoming more and more excited about the project, organized a party to track the canal from Lake Erie to the Genesee River. In July 1816, the Canal Commissioners ordered him to lay a route

from Black Creek to the Genesee River. For this task he selected two of his best employees, William Peacock as engineer and Andrew A. Ellicott as the surveyor.<sup>51</sup>

Joseph Ellicott's role in the construction of the canal was significant. As a Canal Commissioner, he urged the State to take the inland route over the proposed route from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. In April 1817, the New York State Legislature passed a law to build the Erie Canal. DeWitt Clinton sent Ellicott a letter stating, "I cannot leave this place without congratulating you upon the success of the Canal Bill. It has become a law by large majorities in both houses and after much opposition."<sup>52</sup>

On July 4, 1817, construction began on the middle section near Utica. By 1823, boats could travel from Rochester to Albany, and just two years later, they could travel the entire route from Buffalo to Albany and the Hudson to New York City and the Atlantic. As soon as the canal was navigable, hundreds of canal towns popped up along the route. Along the Holland Purchase, settlers built on unoccupied land. Lumber found a ready market and floated away. Wheat was now worth four times what it had been. Land values rose, making many people wealthy. Prosperity came, mud dried up, fever disappeared, and bears left. Western New York ceased being a frontier.<sup>53</sup>

## The Later Years

Ellicott's stronghold over the Holland Purchase lasted for twenty years, but his control eventually crumbled. Residents started to publicly complain about the Holland Land Company in general and Joseph Ellicott in particular. Although the company made substantial contributions to public improvements, many settlers criticized it for failing to provide adequate roads.

Buffalo residents were upset with the company because of the Buffalo Harbor Project. There was a sandbar across the mouth of Buffalo Creek, and when the canal was started, residents believed if the sandbar was not cleared, the canal would end in rival town of Black Rock. In 1818, Buffalo citizens asked the New York State Legislature for financial help to improve the harbor. A survey reported a breakwater could be built for about \$12,000. The Legislature offered to loan them the money, and turn it into a gift if the canal ended in Buffalo. The Holland Land Company refused to support the project because it was backed by a private group of citizens and not public officials. The incident gave the citizens, many of whom were prominent members of the community, bitter feelings towards the company.<sup>54</sup>

General attacks against the Holland Land Company started for the first time in late September 1819. A series of articles signed "Argicola" appeared in the Niagara Journal. The author charged the company asked too much money for its land, had not contributed much to community projects, drained the area of cash by sending it to Holland, and increased the principal on debts. The author recommended the legislature be asked to tax company lands to maintain highways and build schools. Ellicott told Busti the attacks were political, aimed at getting him and his political machine to support Clinton in the upcoming gubernatorial election of 1820. Ellicott thought if they ignored them the attacks would end, and Busti told Ellicott to deal with the rebellion with a favorable outcome to the company. Ellicott ignored the comments, and they intensified.<sup>55</sup>

Residents of Niagara County drew up a petition and held a meeting at Cook's Inn on October 24, 1819. The petition asked the state legislature to tax lands of non-residents for the purpose of maintaining roads and building schools. The petition was sent around the purchase and signed by about 1,300 settlers. The next stop for the petition was Albany, where it was given to a committee of the Assembly headed by Oliver Forward, the person who headed the earlier Cook's Inn meeting. A law was introduced and passed to tax Holland Land Company in the Assembly, but it was not taken up in the Senate.<sup>56</sup>

The Cook's Inn meeting was as much of an attack on Ellicott as it was on the Holland Land Company. Two of the meeting's leaders, Augustus Porter and Benjamin Barton were still upset with Ellicott over an incident that happened eight years earlier. Porter and Barton held a transportation monopoly around Niagara Falls in the early days of settlement. In 1811, Ellicott successfully prevented a renewal of the monopoly. Ellicott was also the boss of the political machine in Western New York and his opponents wanted to turn the people against him to break his hold.<sup>57</sup>

Busti felt that Ellicott could no longer control the population of Western New York and realized that because of Ellicott's failure to support DeWitt Clinton in the gubernatorial election of 1802, which Clinton won, Ellicott's political influence in Albany was suffering. Busti wanted a law passed in Albany selling the remaining Holland Land Company holdings to the state. The law failed and Busti held Ellicott personally responsible.

By this time, Busti realized that his long time friend, Joseph Ellicott, was no longer an asset to the company and that Ellicott's health was getting worse. He decided the time had come for Ellicott to retire. Out of respect for their friendship, Busti decided to wait until after the legislature closed and sent Ellicott a letter asking him to resign. Upon receiving the letter, Ellicott became deeply upset and sent Busti a 29-page letter analyzing each detail of the reasons Busti had given him for his dismissal.

In 1821, at 60 years of age, Ellicott decided to give up the fight, call it a career, and he retired. He wanted to buy the remaining land from the Holland Land Company. Busti offered to sell it for \$.60 per acre, paid in cash or stock in the Bank of the United States. Ellicott could not get financial support from potential investors and he eventually dropped the idea.<sup>58</sup>

In his retirement he traveled and visited family in Chautauqua County, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. He also prepared a comprehensive will that covered more than 13 ledger sized pages. He changed the will over the next year and a half, and his estate was valued at about \$600,000.<sup>59</sup>

In late 1824, Ellicott's health rapidly declined. His family took him to New York City, where specialists could help him. He was admitted to an asylum where "life became a twisted world of tormented thoughts, whirling confusion, and deep moroseness." His mind would flash back to the rich and warm moments of the past, but the blackness of the present took over.<sup>60</sup>

He stayed at the hospital until his death on August 19, 1826. Joseph Ellicott, the founding father of Western New York, hung himself in his closet. He was buried at a Quaker Cemetery in New York City. A few months later, his body returned to Batavia, and he was buried in the Historic Batavia Cemetery.

Ellicott's policies and practices turned the Western New York backwoods into sprawling communities, rich in heritage and history. Today, the millions of people who live on the Holland Purchase owe a debt of gratitude to Joseph Ellicott and his vision.

---

## **The Dutch and the Origins of the Holland Land Company**

<sup>1</sup> William Chazanof, Joseph Ellicott and the Holland Land Company, (Syracuse NY: Syracuse Press 1970) 2.

<sup>2</sup> Chazanof 3.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Wilhelmina C. Pieterse, Inventory of the Archives of the Holland Land Company 1789 – 1869, (Amsterdam: Municipal Printing Office of Amsterdam 1976) 9.

<sup>4</sup> Chazanof 16.

<sup>5</sup> Pieterse 10.

<sup>6</sup> Pieterse 11.

## **Joseph Ellicott – The Early Years**

<sup>7</sup> Charles W. Evans, Family History: Fox, Ellicott, Evans and Others, (Buffalo: Press of Baker, Jones & Co, 1882) 166.

<sup>8</sup> Charles W. Evans 21.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Van Cortlandt Mathews, Andrew Ellicott: His Life and Letters, (Alexander, NC.: WorldComm Publishers 1997) 40.

<sup>10</sup> Chazanof 14.

<sup>11</sup> Charles W. Evans 166.

<sup>12</sup> Van Cortlandt Mathews 69.

<sup>13</sup> Charles W. Evans 167.

<sup>14</sup> Van Cortlandt Mathews 89.

<sup>15</sup> Chazanof 17.

## **Treaty of Big Tree**

<sup>16</sup> Chazanof 22.

<sup>17</sup> Chazanof 22.

<sup>18</sup> Chazanof 22.

## **The Great Survey**

<sup>19</sup> Wendy Woodbury-Straight. "Joseph Ellicott: Professional Surveyor in the Wilderness" Professional Surveyor July/August 1983.

<sup>20</sup> Wyckoff, William. The Developer's Frontier: The Making of the Western New York Landscape, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988) 31.

<sup>21</sup> Chazanof 23.

<sup>22</sup> Warwick, Robert ed. Reports of Joseph Ellicott Volume 1, (Buffalo, NY, Buffalo Historical Society 1937) 33.

<sup>23</sup> Chazanof 25.

<sup>24</sup> Chazanof 25.

<sup>25</sup> Chazanof 29.

<sup>26</sup> Chazanof 27.

<sup>27</sup> Chazanof 27.

<sup>28</sup> Chazanof 28.

<sup>29</sup> Chazanof 37.

## **Searching for an Agent**

<sup>30</sup> Chazanof 29.

<sup>31</sup> Wyckoff 43.

<sup>32</sup> Chazanof 30.

<sup>33</sup> Chazanof 30.

<sup>34</sup> Chazanof 31.

- <sup>35</sup> Chazanof 32.  
<sup>36</sup> Chazanof 33.  
<sup>37</sup> Chazanof 33.

### **Resident Land Agent**

- <sup>38</sup> Robert W Silsby. "The Holland Land Company in Western New York," Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society Volume VIII (1961) 3.  
<sup>39</sup> Silsby 7.  
<sup>40</sup> Silsby 8.  
<sup>41</sup> Silsby 4.  
<sup>42</sup> O.A Turner. Pioneer History of the Phelps & Gorham Purchase (Geneseo, NY: James Brunner, 1976) 417.  
<sup>43</sup> Woodbury-Straight .

### **The Erie Canal**

- <sup>44</sup> Wyckoff, 101.  
<sup>45</sup> Chazanof 160.  
<sup>46</sup> Chazanof 160.  
<sup>47</sup> Wyckoff 102.  
<sup>48</sup> Chazanof 160.  
<sup>49</sup> Chazanof 164.  
<sup>50</sup> Chazanof 165.  
<sup>51</sup> Chazanof 170.  
<sup>52</sup> Chazanof 173.  
<sup>53</sup> Thomas, Arad: Pioneer History of Orleans County, New York (Albion, NY Orleans American Press Print 1871) 56.  
<sup>54</sup> Silsby 9.

### **The Later Years**

- <sup>55</sup> Silsby 10.  
<sup>56</sup> Silsby 10.  
<sup>57</sup> Silsby 10.  
<sup>58</sup> Chazanof 205.  
<sup>59</sup> Chazanof 206.  
<sup>60</sup> Chazanof 208.

### Works Cited

- Brooks, Charles E. Frontier Settlements & Market Revolution Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Chazanof, William. Joseph Ellicott and the Holland Land Company, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Press, 1970.
- Evans, Charles W. Family History: Fox, Ellicott, Evans and Others. Buffalo: Press of Baker, Jones & Co. 1882.
- Evans, Paul D. The Holland Land Company.
- Mathews, Catherine Van Cortlandt. Andrew Ellicott: His Life and Letters. Alexander, NC.: WorldComm Publishers, 1997.
- Pieterse, Dr. Wilhelmina C. Inventory of the Archives of the Holland Land Company 1789-1869. Amsterdam: Municipal Printing Office of Amsterdam 1976.
- Silsby, Robert W. The Holland Land Company in Western New York. Buffalo: Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society Volume VIII 1961.
- Turner, O.A. Pioneer History of the Phelps & Gorham Purchase Geneseo, NY: James Brunner, 1976.
- Warwick - Bingham , Robert, ed. Reports of Joseph Ellicott Volume I. Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society, 1937.
- Warwick - Bingham , Robert, ed. Reports of Joseph Ellicott Volume II. Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society, 1937.
- Williams, Clara L.T. Joseph Ellicott and Stories of the Holland Purchase. Batavia, NY: Clara L.T. Williams, 1936.
- Woodbury-Straight, Wendy. "Joseph Ellicott: Professional Surveyor in the Wilderness." Professional Surveyor July/August 1983: 10-13.
- Wyckoff, William. The Developer's Frontier: The Making of the Western New York Landscape, New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988.