THE MYSTERY OF RANSOM'S TAVERN

By Heath J. Szymczak

Ransom's Tavern is the oldest and most historic home in all of Western New York, yet only a few people even know of its existence. In 1799, Asa Ransom built a large two-story log tavern on the west fork of Ransom Creek on Main Street in Clarence Hollow (then "Pine Grove"). The Tavern was an oasis in the wilderness for pioneer travelers (including Aaron Burr's daughter, Theodosia), was referenced in the 1810 law that created Buffalo, and sheltered refugees and wounded soldiers fleeing the burning of Buffalo during the War of 1812. Joseph Ellicott lived there and used part of the Tavern as the first office of the Holland Land Company. Ironically, it was the only home identified by name on Ellicott's famous 1804 "Morris Purchase Map", but then it never appears on any map ever again. By 1855, it was gone.

Between the 1837 and 1855 something happened to the Tavern, but what? The Tavern is mentioned with great reverence in several history books, but none of the authors ever explain what happened to it. It is as if the Tavern just vanished into the mists of time. There is no record of it burning down or being demolished. Although there were many Ransom children born in the Tavern, many of whom had long and prosperous lives, none of them ever mentioned that their home had been destroyed, which would have been a tragic and highly notable event. Whatever happened to the Tavern was, for some reason, something that they did not talk about.

The most likely scenario is that the Tavern was moved just up the street to 10897 Main. Although Ransom's Tavern was the only large circa 1800 two-story log home ever known to be built in Clarence, 10897 Main is also a large circa 1800 two-story log home. The strange coincidence of 10897 Main is that it just mysteriously appeared on East Hill at the same time that Ransom's Tavern disappeared from the Hollow--there is no record of anyone ever building it, nor is there any record of anyone even living in it until 1850. Not only does 10897 Main match the description of Ransom's Tavern, and is consistent with the size and style of other taverns built in the early 1800s, but it also has a "stuffed foundation" indicating that it was moved rather than being built in place. The answer is obvious: Ransom's Tavern was moved, but who moved it and why so much secrecy?

A newspaper article from 1917 sheds some light on this mystery. It states that 10897 Main was not only "older than Buffalo—built long before the War of 1812", and that it was in fact used as a tavern, but that it was also used as a meeting hall by a Masonic lodge. It turns out that two of the founding members of Clarence's Masonic "Centre Lodge 356" both owned the land at 10897 Main, but neither ever lived there: Archibald Clarke and Rhodes Stranahan. The plot thickens: it was the Masons moved Ransom's Tavern.

Stranahan purchased the land at 10897 Main just three months after Ransom died in 1835. When Ransom's wife Keziah died just two years later in 1837, and with all the children grown, the Tavern sat empty. This is when Stranahan and the other members of Centre Lodge 356 (who certainly had the manpower and resources for such an undertaking) most likely purchased the Tavern and moved it to 10897 Main. It is significant that Clark's daughter Betsey was married to Asa Ransom, Jr. as she no doubt influenced the transaction. As 1837 was also the year of a deep financial crisis in the United States, there may have been some financial pressure to sell the Tavern as well.

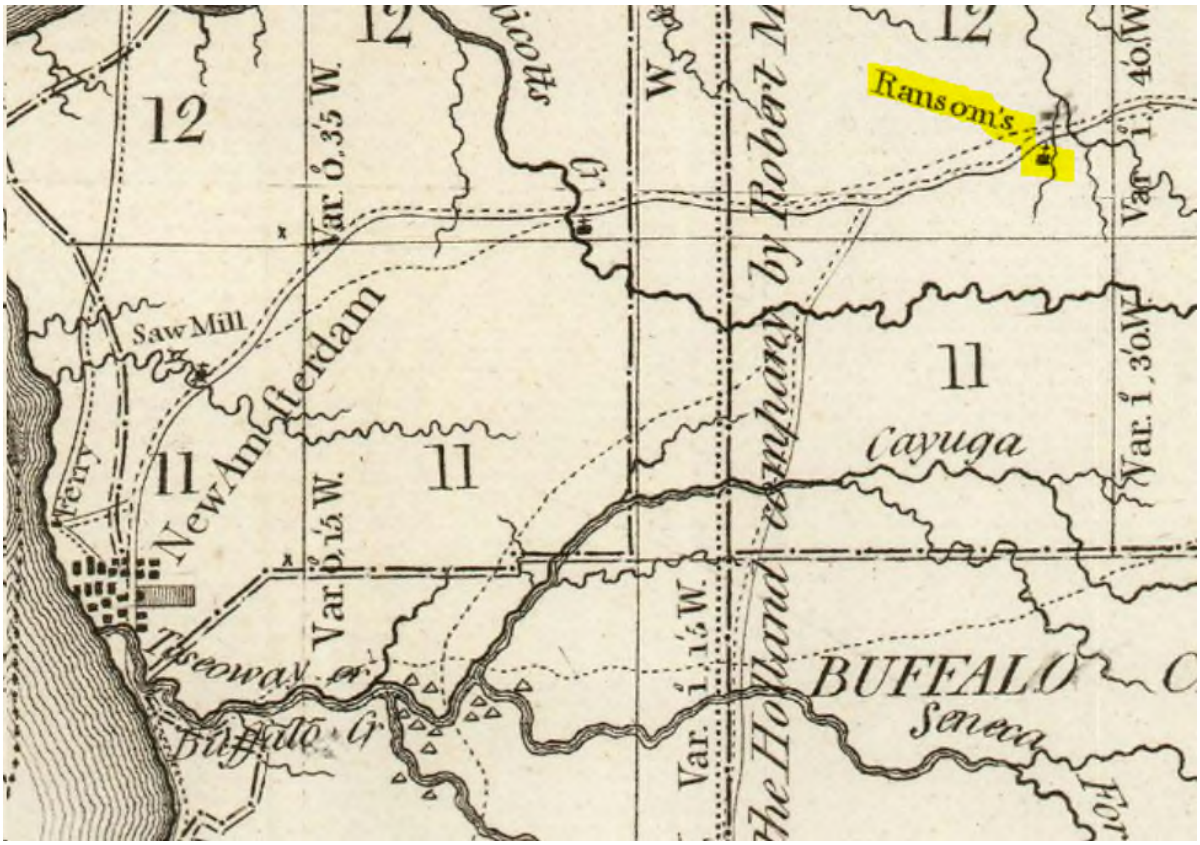
Although it was common for the Masons to meet in taverns in the early 1800s, the purchase of the Tavern by the Masons in 1837 must have been a topic of some controversy around the village hearth

fires, particularly following the infamous William Morgan scandal of 1826 (just down the road in Batavia) and the rise of the Anti-Masonic Party in the 1830s. The Masons were viewed with deep suspicion and disapproval at this time. The sale of the Tavern to the Masons was likely a divisive event for the community and the Ransom family itself (and perhaps even a source of shame for both). This may explain why there was such silence and mystery surrounding the fate of the Tavern, as well as why the Masons opted for the privacy of East Hill rather than keeping their lodge in the heart of the village.

Stranahan died in 1844 and is buried in a nearby cemetery on Ransom Road. There is a Masonic symbol prominently displayed on his gravestone. In 1850, the Rice-Sinclair family came to Clarence from Black Rock, purchased Ransom's Tavern, and occupied it for the next 94 years. In 1944, Doris Brace purchased it and the Brace family, including David and Patricia Brace, cared for it until 2008 when it was designated by the Town of Clarence as its very first historic landmark.

Ransom's Tavern still looks largely as it did in 1799. It still has exposed hand-hewn log walls and beams, wide plank floors, colonial era hardware, bark-covered pine trusses with axe carved Roman numerals, peg holes from Ellicott's bookshelves, and a steep covered staircase with worn grooves from 224 years of foot traffic. Its subsequent use as a Masonic lodge only further enhances its already astonishing historical pedigree. The Rice-Sinclair and Brace families are owed a debt of gratitude for preserving, and landmarking, this treasure of our community's heritage.

Heath J. Szymczak is a member of the Town of Clarence Historic Preservation Commission and a Trustee of the Buffalo Niagara Heritage Village.


12
12
12
Ransom's
Var. 0.35 W.
Var. 1.40 W.
Saw Mill
11
11
11
Cayuga
New Amsterdam
Ferry
Var. 0.15 W.
Var. 1.30 W.
Var. 1.15 W.
The Holland company by Robert M
BUFFALO
Seneca
Buffalo C


REUBEN
STRAIT
DIED
APRIL 25 1844
AGED 66 YRS.
& MO'S.

petition shall be granted we promise a strict conformity to all the constitutional laws and regulations of the Grand Lodge.

Dated this 30th day of September A. L. 5816

Samuel Crouk
James Reed Jr
James Baldwin
Peter Elston
Joseph Black
Alfred Peck
Calvin Fillmore
Ezra Wells
George Strawbridge
Lewis Porter

D. L. Comstock
Rhodes Stranahan
Jacob Pratt
Jacob Boyer
Christian Baldwin
J. Chamberlain
Orrin S. Clark
Benjamin Bivins
John Stranahan
Joseph Bisbey
William Luce
Barney Ingalls