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A Young American, Frontier Style The Early Years of a Famous Citizen of Rochester

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The Hudson River starts its journey to the sea in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains. At first it traces a somewhat turbulent course, but by the time it joins its waters to those of the Mohawk at Albany the waywardness of its youth has passed. Thenceforward it flows, placid and majestic, for some one hundred and fifty miles, "the lordly Hudson," swayed only by wind and tide until it reaches the sea.

Nature has lavished her treasures along this noble river. Palisades and mountains, the peaceful valley, the timeless beauty of the stream itself, have drawn the admiration of countless travelers and elicited the quiet pride of generations of natives. Nor has beauty been its only attraction in the eyes of men. The Hudson forms a strategic highway, the adjoining fields have always been rich and fertile, and over these prizes mankind has contended for centuries. The war whoop echoed up and down the valley long before Hendrick Hudson and his sullen crew sailed up to the Mohawk junction in their search for a passage to India. The French brought their savage allies down from Canada, making life hideous that they might satisfy their Sun King's lust for empire. Johnny Burgoyne, captured with his army at Saratoga but debonair even in defeat, bowed low over the hand of General Schuyler's

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lady in the house that crowned and still crowns an Albany hill. The shades of Ichabod Crane and Rip Van Winkle are far outnumbered by that crowd of sterner spirits who in mortal guise wore the Continental buff and blue and perished by the river, musket in hand, in the business of creating a nation. The Hudson and its valley are redolent of charm and of men's strife for power. And it is at least worthy of notice that these qualities should have become preeminent among the characteristics of a man with the resounding name of Edward Thurlow Weed who was born in the valley, lived there as a ragged, barefoot urchin, and never succeeded in keeping away from it for any length of time, though his life stretched across a period of eighty-five years.

Childhood Days

Thurlow Weed (he soon dropped the Edward) was born November 15, 1797, the eldest son of Joel and Mary Ells Weed. It was perhaps only fitting that a future leader of the "Log-Cabin" Whigs should first see the light of day in a log cabin, and such was the case. The one-story structure stood near a turnpike connecting the towns of Cairo and Acra in Greene County, New York state, and Thurlow started the process of growing up almost in the shadow of the Catskill mountains. But perhaps the charm of the Hudson was already working, for within two years the family packed its pitiful belongings and made the ten mile trek to Catskill on the Hudson, thirty miles south of Albany.

The modest economic status of Joel Weed's brood was not unique in the history of the family. The none too fruitful genealogical investigations of later years indicate an ancestry that was honest and law-abiding but possessed neither of wealth nor high position. They were pious, patriotic, middle-class folk, who had gradually moved westward from Massachusetts Bay where the first American ancestor, Jonas Weed, had landed from the Winthrop fleet in 1630. Jonas hailed from near Stamford, Northampton county, England, but nothing is known about the English origins of the family save that tradition, a most uncertain evidence, linked their line with the great Edward Thurlow, Lord High Chancellor of England from 1778 to 1792. Thurlow Weed tried on one of his trips to England to find his family's record at Doctor's Commons. The search was fruitless and he fell to speculating about the

possibility of a French origin, to the irreverent mirth of his friend, William Kent. "You are not descended from the De Grasses," jeered Kent, "you are genuine Saxon 'by the soul of Hengist.'" ¹ Even this could be doubted, of course, but of one thing there could be no doubt. Young Thurlow was a Yankee to his finger tips.

Such genealogical interest as Thurlow's parents may have possessed found little opportunity for growth in Catskill town. Father Joel started in the carting business, lured perhaps by the fact that his elder brother Joseph was making a "good thing" there with horse and dray. But Joel, work as hard as he might, could never quite make ends meet. Business would slack off just when illness was ravaging the family; the horse would go lame, or get sick, or back off the dock, and repeatedly, for such was the custom of the day, Joel would find himself in debtors' prison. Then the only recourse was to get Joseph, or some other friend, to furnish bail so that work might go on and so that a hazel-eyed, sturdy little boy named Thurlow might have his Sunday ramble through the hills with his father. The imprisonments became almost perennial occasions, and perennially the family had to move. Sometimes the home was broken up, it seems, for Weed later remembered going to live with one of his employers, a certain Captain Baker, in Catskill, and later a short distance away in Jefferson. The war against imprisonment for debt that Weed prosecuted so relentlessly in later years must have stemmed in large part from recollections of those bitter childhood days when his father lived under the bailiff's eye. And that desire for affluence which grew upon him in his later years may well have derived in part from the hard and grinding poverty of his early life.

But there never was a completely bitter childhood, and life in Catskill yielded many strange and many pleasant memories for Weed's old age. The bustling little hillside village with its two shipyards offered sights and sounds arresting enough to the mind of a gawky, barefoot boy with a large streak of curiosity in his make-up. Sometimes the older men let an active, willing youngster go with them when they hunted for Captain Kidd's treasure, a youth who watched not a little terrified as they cut a black cat's throat so that the spurt of blood would mark the place to dig. Fights there were, good lusty brawls between the "up-town" boys who wore good clothes and had six pences to spend, and "down-town" ragamuffins; fights between the sons of

good Republicans and lads whose fathers wore the sinister black Federalist cockade; and when there was no fight to be had for the asking there was always a chance for boyish hands to heave a stone at Nance McFall's bawdy house on the edge of the village, that is until it was wrecked by an outraged mob which accused Nance of harboring a murderer.

Not that Catskill's boyland concerned itself exclusively with such dramatic encounters. Young Thurlow could stand beside the tavern bench, his toe tracing circles in the dust, while veterans of the Revolution told how they had fought under Mad Anthony Wayne at Stony Point, or under that Judas, Arnold, at Saratoga. One day the village bowed its head to muted fife and muffled drum while youthful eyes watched a veteran's horse, fully equipped, marching in his master's funeral procession. Young and old lined the bank of the Hudson on one historic occasion and half a dozen boys, Weed among them, swam out to an island where, mouths agape, they saw their first steamboat puffing and snorting fire and smoke, go wallowing by. The winter brought good skating and in the summer time young Weed and his cronies would trudge two miles along a winding, dusty road to the junction of Johnson's and Catskill creeks. There they swam and picked barberries, or listened in fascinated terror to the screams of a crazy woman confined in the white house at the top of the hill. Then they would hurry back to the post office in time to hear the lusty blast of a horn and watch "Phin" Mapes dash up with the stage and four, jovial "Phin" Mapes, who loved to chaff with the bystanders, tickling the horses meanwhile with an expert whiplash, while Dr. Croswell sorted the mail.²

But most of all young Weed loved to hang about the office of the *Catskill Recorder* where he could smell the printer's ink, listen to the clack and rattle of the press, and watch wistfully while Printer Croswell's son, young Neddy, a quiet, studious boy who mingled very little with the poorer sort, went about learning the trade.

There was no place for young Weed at first in the *Recorder* office. There was little enough place in the Catskill school, where he went for a few scattered months of drill in Webster's *Speller* and the *English Reader*. The sons of poverty learn to toil at an early age, and by the time he was eight years old he had found a job as bellows blower in a local blacksmith shop at six cents a day. Shortly this changed to boy

of all work at the tavern of Captain Baker, an ex-sailor who loved his grog better than his profits. A sheriff's sale ended this employment and, attracted by the romantic air and wondrous tales of a sailor who spent the winter in Catskill making nails and bellowing seamen's chanteys for an audience of fascinated boys, Weed determined upon a nautical career. For some two years he shipped as cabin boy on sloops that plied the Hudson between New York and Albany. The work was not too hard and there was a tang of adventure in pushing down to the sea gates. Young Weed dreamed briefly of distant lands and foreign faces, but the dream faded ignominiously before the dizzy spells that assailed him whenever he climbed the mast, and half regretfully the idea was abandoned. He settled down to the more prosaic life of a Catskill landlubber in the fall of 1808, and this time he found a spate of odd jobs waiting for him in the *Recorder* office. But the spell of the printing office was soon shattered, or so it appeared, by a change in family plans.

Nine years of Catskill were enough for Joel Weed. Life had never gone well for him there. People seemed to do much better a little farther west. So he loaded his family of five and all his possessions into a two-horse sleigh and in the winter of 1808 left Catskill for Cinninnatus in Cortland County. Poorly recompensed for leaving the *Recorder* office by the scenic splendors of the trip, young Thurlow found himself plunged willy-nilly into a much more primitive type of life than that of the pleasant river town. He was to spend a goodly number of the next twenty years on the frontier.

Life on the Frontier

Central and western New York was definitely a frontier region when the snows of the western road sang under the runners of the Weeds' bob sleigh. Utica was only a rude and straggling village, Syracuse was a swamp, so dark and tangled that even in the summer time the owls hooted at noon-day, and Rochester was a wilderness. Cinninnatus and Onondaga Hollow (to which the Weeds moved in 1809) were central New York localities that had advanced beyond the ne'er-do-well backwoodsman stage to that of the clearing farmer, but were still primitive enough. The homesteads of the pioneers were often separated from each other by miles of waste land, and the tiny settlements, flung into

precarious being at some vantage point on stage route or river passage, seemed to bear witness more to the futility of man's endeavors than to the grandeur of his hopes and dreams. Money was scarce, and had it been plentiful it could not have been used to purchase ease and luxury, for those articles were not to be had. School held for only four winter months, the school master boarding round as best he might, and the children on their way to and from the log cabin schoolhouse trudged through snow where they might see almost at will the moccasin prints of the Indian and the tracks of the wolf and the deer.

The master politician of later years must have owed much to his early training in frontier life. There he saw, a thousand times repeated, the bitter lesson of nature's constant warfare, that law of claw and fang the urgency of which was brought home so vividly by his own struggle for existence. There he could learn the need of being alert, observant, and quick to take advantage, of being shrewd and crafty, and merciless in combat. Nor was savagery the only lesson the growing boy could draw from nature. Her prodigality of life, her moods of sadness, her love of mystery and surprise, were these not reflected in his exuberant energy, the melancholy that enveloped him in times of defeat, his love of secret plans and swift surprises in political battle? The influence of his environment during his most impressionable years is impossible to measure and lends itself easily to exaggeration. But it would be foolish to deny the existence of such a relationship.

One may easily imagine an eager gawky boy who is helping to sugar off in the New York woods. It is his turn to tend the night fire, and as the wood burns low under the kettle he comes out to put on fresh hickory and beech boughs. The fire glows and the sap bubbles. The boy rises from his inspection of the blaze and stands, hands on hips, carpet-bound feet planted in the snow, staring for a long moment into the quiet forest. An owl calls. A breeze moves dark branches across the sky. And on the little cabin he sees the frost congeal the eave-drops,

'hanging them up in silent icicles,
quietly shining to the quiet moon.'

The forests and the hills were spread out before young Thurlow Weed. He lived among them and was a part of them. No man who has experienced that initiation can wholly escape its influence or its spell.

Labor is always scarce on the frontier and there was plenty of work in such communities for a willing lad. What with boiling sap, working as chore boy and farm hand, and tempering sand for moulding in the iron furnace of a certain pious Dutchman named Nicholas Mickles, young Thurlow led a busy enough existence for a twelve year old. In between times he went to school (some six or eight months was all that he later recalled) and began to read voraciously, on occasion walking considerable distances barefooted in the snow in order to borrow a book—any book. And, of course, no youngster could resist going berrying, or playing tag with young Lovel Mickles in front of the old red furnace office.³ Salmon occasionally wandered into Onondaga Creek from Lake Ontario and one spring evening, attracted by lights flickering along the bank of the creek, young Weed went down to find a group of Onondaga Indians, armed with pine knot torches and clubs, killing the fish in the shallow rapids below the mill. The obliging redskins lent a club with which the boy killed a fine salmon and the next day lawyer Forman gave him a silver dollar for it, his first dollar. Such incidents highlighted an existence that was otherwise not very exciting until, in December, 1811, Thomas C. Fay set up *The Lynx* at Onondaga Valley. He needed an apprentice and young Weed, his old desires awakened by the smell of printer's ink, applied for the job.

Fay was a contentious, swearing sort of man, beset by business troubles, and his half-illiterate apprentice sometimes frayed his short temper. Thurlow never forgot the occasion when, never having heard of the word "consort," he changed an obituary notice to read "the comfort of the Reverend Derick C. Lansing." The enraged proprietor hurled a claw-foot hammer at him, yelling that he would "try to beat some brains into your stupid head."⁴ Perhaps such indiscretions were necessary incidents in learning to be a printer. At least Fay liked him well enough to keep him on and, despite his employer's temper, Weed was happy on *The Lynx*. He was finally learning a trade that he could love. What if there was no pay for a beginning apprentice? A boy could always pick up a few coppers blacking boots at the nearby stage house, and chores and gardening paid for his board at Mrs. Hopper's where he ate in the kitchen, with a colored woman and her son, the broken food that came from the dining room. So all went smoothly until the spring of 1812, when the drums began to roll and a rifle

battalion, with green frock coats and yellow sashes was organized in Onondaga Valley. This splendor took the eye of an adolescent boy, whose blood was up already from tales of British outrages, and when the local Mrs. Malaprop tried to find a "prostitute" for her son, Weed offered to take his place in the ranks.⁵ His youth and Fay's vehement protests intervened and young Thurlow's first attempt to serve his country ended in a tame return to service on the ramshackle old press. But his disappointment was destined to be of short duration.

Fay took French leave of paper and family alike toward the close of 1812, and the creditors descended upon his printing establishment. Weed had a knack even then, it appears, for inspiring confidence, since he was left to issue a halfsheet for several weeks in fulfillment of advertising contracts. Then *The Lynx* closed its eyes forever, and the youthful apprentice was free to heed the call to arms. In the months that followed he served three times as a volunteer in companys that were hurriedly mustered to frustrate the designs of Sir George Prevost and Sir James Yeo upon the New York shore of Lake Ontario. He spent approximately seven months of patrol duty at Sackett's Harbor and nearby points, but these periods of service never coincided with enemy forays. His only smell of powder came from musket practice, but an appointment during this period as quarter master sergeant of the Fortieth Regiment, New York State Militia was another proof that he was a youngster with a budding talent for assuming responsibilities.⁶

A Wandering Printer

Weed continued his work as a journeyman apprentice when he was not with the militia, moving from town to town between Auburn and Albany. At Albany his earliest taste of the theater marked the beginning of a life-long devotion to the stage. At Herkimer he worked for William L. Stone, who was editing the Federalist *Herkimer Republican*, and earned his first five dollars by laboring nights and Sundays to strike off Republican handbills and election tickets on the press of his goodnatured employer. There Weed met young Michael Hoffman with whom he was to cross swords many times in later years, and there he was fascinated by the handsome face and easy bearing of the future abolitionist and reformer, Gerrit Smith. But Cooperstown, where he worked in 1814, was the center of more exciting happenings.

Weed boarded in Cooperstown with a Mrs. Ostrander, and promptly fell in love with her sixteen-year-old daughter, Catherine. The young journeyman's suit was favored by the girl and the two became engaged, considerably to the annoyance of the latter's family which looked askance upon this hardy wanderer who had blown into Cooperstown from nowhere and would probably blow out again just as easily. The plighted troth yielded to parental frowns but, like many another Pyramus and Thisbe, the two young people found a way to circumvent the opposition to their romance. They agreed to separate and not even to communicate with each other for several years. Over three years went by, years of unbroken silence, as Weed remembered them half a century later. Then one day he went home from his work to find a letter waiting for him, and the engagement was renewed. They were married April 26, 1818.⁷

One reason for the Ostranders' opposition to the match may well have been a scandal that set all the gossiping tongues in Cooperstown to wagging. It happened that Weed attended a Methodist evening service with two other young fellows about his own age, not long after his arrival in the village. Boys of sixteen are not usually interested in pious meditation and they may have found the exhorter a trifle dull. At any rate, their attention gradually became centered upon three young country girls who were likewise afflicted with ennui. The two groups gravitated toward one another after the service, and as they walked away from the church a certain amount of persiflage was exchanged. The girls' wagon stood in a nearby shed and there one of the boys, under pretext of assisting a maiden into the vehicle, "was guilty of some rudeness to her person," as Weed's counsel later expressed it. Nothing criminal had occurred, but the frightened girl's account of the incident apparently enraged her family. Her story was put in the hands of a local lawyer and a great hullabaloo ensued. All of the youths were indicted by the grand jury on a charge of assault and battery. Mrs. Ostrander's boarder had no money for bail, but bail miraculously appeared, and a rosy-cheeked, enthusiastic young lawyer named Ambrose L. Jordan, who had lately hung out his shingle in Cooperstown volunteered to act as his counsel. The trial was held on February 15, 1815, at the Otsego County Court of Sessions, and ended in a complete vindication of the boys, the jury finding them all not guilty without leaving the court room. But the incident was destined for vicious

misrepresentation in more than one of Weed's political battles.⁸

Weed headed east from Cooperstown at the conclusion of his trial, penniless and without employment. He found work in Albany, however, under two editors, Solomon Southwick and Jesse Buel, with both of whom he was destined to have later political connections. A year of labor in the capital furnished money for a new suit of clothes, and, more important in his eyes, for almost nightly visits to the theatre. It also gave occasional opportunities for visiting the sessions of the legislature, where an exciting contest over the office of Speaker of the assembly drew his attention and stimulated an already awakened interest in politics. The printing of the legislative proceedings went to Jesse Buel, the state printer in 1816, and this meant plenty of work for the employees on the *Albany Argus* and a good, fat income for the proprietor. The possibility of occupying such an exalted station as had fallen to Buel's lot may have occurred to an ambitious young journeyman as he bent over the *Argus* type font, but Weed could scarcely have foreseen the day when his own paper would wrest the state printing from this same *Argus*, on a turn of the political wheel.

Employment slackened in Buel's establishment when the legislative session of 1816 ended, and Weed drifted down to New York where he worked in various printing establishments for another year. A journeyman printer, when employed, worked a long, hard day, often rising long before dawn in the winter months and laboring until well after the candles were lighted, but Weed was accustomed to hardship and by now the smell of printer's ink had seeped into his blood. Sometimes, too, the work would be lightened by the competitive drive of a fellow printer, as was the case at Jonathan Seymour's establishment at 49 John Street, where he found in young James Harper a kindred spirit. Harper was a big fellow with a prejudice against liquor, but with such a jovial nature that he became known among the hard drinking printers as 'the teetotaler who was never sober.' 'Now Thurlow,' Harper would say after they had labored manfully for perhaps twelve hours, 'let's break the back of another token,—just break its back.' Weed would agree and once started they would seldom stop before they had taken 250 more impressions from the Ramage hand press, "two pulls on a quarto form."⁹ Such labor brought in twelve to fourteen dollars a week

and this, with board at ten dollars a month, left a respectable sum for other purposes, a considerable part being utilized in becoming thoroughly acquainted with the histrionic attainments of Placide, Power, Ellen Tree and other celebrities of the New York stage.

Interests other than his work and the stage claimed a share of his attention in New York. Curiosity prompted him to carry proof sheets for the famous English radical William Cobbett. He also found time to attend an occasional political rally and to become an active member of the New York Typographical Society, an organization of journeymen printers whose aspirations for better pay and dislike of non-union workmen he evidently shared.¹⁰ Nor were his interests wholly secular, for he sampled the spiritual wares of the Gotham churches and finally became a regular attendant at Dr. Edward Mitchell's Universalist church in Pearl Street, not as a member, but as a seeker after religious truth. He was not to be so close to formal religion again for over fifty years.¹¹

Life in New York was pleasant and Weed had no thought of leaving until he received the offer of a foreman's job on the *Albany Register* in the spring of 1817. His former bondsman at Coopers-town, Israel W. Clark, had taken over the paper and wrote in glowing terms of its prospects. Ambition beckoned, and one June day Weed took passage on a river sloop for Albany.

The *Albany Register* was published "At the Sign of Faust's Statue, No. 22 Hudson Street" and there Weed entered with his accustomed energy upon new and exciting duties, for Clark saw possibilities in his young friend and encouraged him to write editorial paragraphs. The scattered copies of the *Register* that still exist give little indication of the subjects chosen, although his natural humanitarianism appears to have found scope in such topics as the treatment of the Indians, the kidnapping of free negroes, and even a defense of Pontius Pilate. It is possible that Clark, a staunch champion of DeWitt Clinton, gave his young foreman an occasional opportunity for a fling at Martin Van Buren and the Tammany Hall Bucktails, but editorial policy was scarcely Weed's to shape and the chances are that most of his time was taken up by his duties as foreman and by other interests. One of the latter involved the printers' union that he had joined in New York.

The New York Typographical Society still regarded Weed as an active member, or at least as an ardent friend, and he was asked to further their petition for articles of incorporation. He had been the chairman of a committee that had drawn up a similar petition the year before and now, with the support of both Clark and Solomon Southwick, he lobbied vigorously for the measure. The act of incorporation passed the assembly in unblemished form during the 1818 session, but a stony-hearted senate amended the bill, prohibiting all interference with wages, and the union found itself reduced to the level of a benevolent society. Thus ended, none too successfully as compared with later efforts, Weed's first experience as a lobbyist.¹²

But lobbying and editorial writing, interesting as they were, bowed to romance that spring. The opposition of the Ostrander family finally broke down before Catherine's quiet determination and what appeared to be Weed's excellent prospects on the *Register*. The marriage took place on Sunday evening, April 26, 1818, at Coopers-town, the young couple returning to Albany to set up the simplest form of housekeeping.¹³ The bride was nineteen and the groom was in his twenty-first year. They were full of hope and plans for the future and the fates appeared to be propitious, for within a year Weed was offered an opportunity to become a full-fledged editor and proprietor.

The Frontier Editor

The New York Republicans were split asunder in 1818 by a contest between Governor Clinton and the Tammany Hall Buck-tails,¹⁴ led by the supple Martin Van Buren, for control of the party. It was a war to the knife, with a rich prize in prospect, for the Federalist party, relict of Hamilton and John Jay, was dying, and the Republican group which triumphed would rule the state. Hence the unrelenting fury of a battle which was to be waged with equal vigor in the rural districts and in the urban areas. Among the former was Chenango county, where a Bucktail editor named John F. Hubbard had been running the *Norwich Journal*. Hubbard's political views had offended a considerable number of his financial backers, and he was in a mood to sell out in the autumn of 1818.¹⁵ This fact

came to the attention of Israel W. Clark, Weed's employer, and Clark was undoubtedly the prime mover in having James Birdsall, Obadiah German and other politicians with some means buy Hubbard out and set up a Clintonian press with Weed as its proprietor. The *Journal's* owner, poor as the proverbial country printer, agreed, and on November 24, 1818, Hubbard sold his printing establishment for \$800, receiving in payment a note signed by Weed and Obadiah German. The agreement included a promise by Hubbard not to start a rival paper in the county. Thus he turned over to Weed the "good will" of his establishment.¹⁰ Weed and his bride left for Norwich with high hopes and there, on December 10, 1818, appeared the first number of the first paper that he could call his own, *The Republican Agriculturalist*.

The *Agriculturalist* (its very title bore witness to Weed's grammatical deficiencies) was a four-column, four-page weekly, published on Thursdays and supposedly devoted to the interests of the county's farmers. Its motto, boldly enclosed in quotation marks, proclaimed that "He who causes but one spear of grass to grow where it did not, is of more real service to community, than the most splendid victories of Alexander the Conqueror."¹⁷ Weed pledged himself in his "Induction" to propagate morality, Christianity, patriotism—"As an AMERICAN, our attachment to the zion of our nativity, borders on enthusiasm"—and finally, agriculture.

Morally, at least, the *Agriculturalist* was as good as the word of its editor. Gambling was frowned upon, readers were told of the inebriate who exploded when he tried to blow out the candle, and a column of Moral Miscellany spouted good advice until, during the depression of 1819, it was crowded out by notices of sheriff's sales and insolvencies. Politically, the paper was a staunch defender of Clinton, who had bestowed his favor by an early request that it be sent to him at the capital, and who later appointed Weed a commissioner of deeds. Canals and internal improvements in general were vigorously championed, the Bucktail attempt to democratize the constitution which resulted in the revision of 1821, was earnestly denounced, and the "regular" Clintonian candidates, with one exception, were zealously upheld.

The one exception was that extraordinary figure, Solomon Southwick. This magnetic, lovable but thoroughly erratic man had made

a great impression upon Weed during the latter's stay in Albany, and when, in 1819, Southwick announced himself as a candidate for the state senate in opposition to the Clintonian caucus nominee, Weed put the "Anti-Caucus candidate" at the masthead of the *Agriculturalist*. This irregular procedure brought down upon his head a measure of criticism but he persisted, and when Southwick was roundly defeated his Chenango county champion lamented the sad state of the times and mourned the humiliation of "The Poor Man's Friend."¹⁸ Such a choice did not do much credit to the young editor's judgment, but it was made from the heart and indicated an independent spirit, one that as it developed might be more inclined to rule than to obey.

But neither the zest of political battle nor the birth of Harriet Ann, their eldest child¹⁹ could suffice to give the Weeds a happy life in Norwich. There was not much chance of getting ahead in a homespun county, so thinly populated that the hills abounded with wild deer, and a wolf could chase a boy up a tree and keep him there all night; a county, moreover, that turned out to be Bucktail, since it resented the cost of distant canals. Weed strove to foster agricultural progress, but he knew very little about the technique of farming. His designation of a sow as a "female swine" must have produced raucous mirth among the settlers, and his efforts to promote the local agricultural society were vitiated by the accusation that his purposes in so doing were political. Partisanship ran high in Norwich and Weed's talent for stinging personal comment involved him in an encounter with a local Bucktail lawyer, an encounter that resounded up and down the countryside.

Weed and this lawyer, Lot Clark by name, had been at sword's point from the time of the editor's arrival in Norwich, and by the fall of 1819 the strife had waxed very hot indeed. Weed was compelled to retract a denunciation of Clark as the confederate of extortioners, but the apology was coupled with a sneer and plenty of bad blood remained. Then, early in November, "A Card," obviously written by Weed, appeared in the *Agriculturalist*. It accused Clark of driving a cow to pound within fifteen minutes of her escape from her owner's yard, and suggested the lawyer's spiritual if not physical descent from the "cowboys"²⁰ of the Revolution. The enraged attorney, armed with a letter testifying his innocence, an apology

ready for Weed's signature, and a rawhide whip, constituted himself a one-man punitive expedition and sallied forth into Norwich's main street. The encounter took place in the midst of a group of highly interested spectators, and when Weed refused to sign the apology, the cowskin descended upon his head and shoulders. In the melee, with partisans of each rushing in to seize the arms of the other, the whip changed hands and Weed struck one or two blows before they were finally separated.²¹

But cowhiding was not the worst trial that confronted the aspiring editor. The early reappearance of John F. Hubbard in the field of Norwich journalism was far more ominous. The news of Hubbard's intended sale to Weed had doubtless brought him a speedy promise of financial support from Bucktail sources, for he had tried vainly to back out before the transaction had been completed.²² This Weed had refused to permit, and Hubbard had grudgingly surrendered his establishment. But within a month he reappeared with new type and equipment, reestablished the *Journal*, and launched into vitriolic denunciation of his rival. A war of words ensued, a contest in vilification. Weed was "a hollow Weed," a "young quat," a "tool," "fool," "knave," and "liar." He had written an article defending Judas Iscariot. He butchered the English language. He was "fit for nothing but to assault defenceless females." Thus raved the *Journal* in blistering assault.

Weed's powers of invective were not yet fully developed and he could not equal his assailant at mud slinging. However, he did very well. Hubbard was described as morally dishonest and utterly without principle. This "pungent punster" who had "shook off the cumbersome restraints of moral duty, and raised a monument of disgrace upon the remaining fragment of his character," edited a journal that was "degenerating into a mere receptacle of common-place nuisance (sic)." Weed declared virtuously that he scorned to maintain any political controversy with such a "dishonest rogue." But the "rogue's" hot shot continued to play upon the battered *Agriculturalist*.

If there was any doubt as to Weed's ability to rival his opponent's invective, there was none at all about the financial status of the *Agriculturalist* and its proprietor. Debts began to pile up. Weed was trying desperately to borrow funds after the lapse of little more than a year and a \$400 judgment against Hubbard, indemnity for

the forfeited "good-will," was only a palliative. Weed sold the *Agri-culturalist* early in September, 1820, and after a parting blast in which he affirmed his loyalty to Clinton and to internal improvements, he returned with his family to Albany, and resumed for a time the status of journeyman printer.

Employment was none too stable in the capital, however, and the young printer kept looking about. His thoughts turned to Catskill and, somewhat diffidently, he approached Edwin Croswell, who had succeeded his father on the *Recorder*, and who, rumor had it, wished to sell out. But Croswell's courteous reply scotched Weed's hopes and ended a correspondence that gave no hint of the furious battles to come.²³ A Bucktail press was offered on attractive terms, but he refused it as inconsistent with his former course. Temporarily out of a job, the erstwhile editor agreed to go on an electioneering jaunt for Southwick, who possessed an unquenchable ambition to occupy the governor's chair. Weed quickly discovered that support for "The Poor Man's Friend" was conspicuous by its absence, but wallowing through the central New York mud had its compensations. The *Manlius Republican*, published not far from his old home at Onondaga Hollow, was for sale and, not without some doubts, Weed finally closed the bargain. He took his family to Manlius in the late summer of 1821, arriving in such straitened circumstances that for eight days they lived on bread, butter and water. "It is pinching times, but I am determined to stand it," he wrote to a friend.²⁴

The *Republican* did better for a time than Weed had dared to hope, but such prospects as it had soon faded. Bucktail presses seemed to sprout all over the county and Weed found it increasingly difficult to counter the blows of such political giants as "Little Asa" Eastwood of Cicero. A Bucktail victory deprived him of the sheriff's patronage, which had been secured through his continued support of Clinton, and within a year he was once more in straitened circumstances. Then a friend wrote about the attractive possibilities at the thriving village of Rochester, some seventy-five miles further west. Weed decided to investigate. He made his way across the rolling hills of western New York and, one September day, appeared in the office of the *Rochester Telegraph*, Everard Peck proprietor.

Peck was a busy as well as a prosperous man, and without putting much thought on the matter he told the young stranger that

there was no opening. Weed's eyes filled with tears and he turned to leave. Then Peck called him back. There was some further conversation, and when Weed left for Manlius it had been agreed that he should come as a printer and as junior editor of the *Telegraph* with a salary of \$400 a year.

Weed went back to Manlius rejoicing, and proceeded to wind up the affairs of the *Republican*, characteristically trying to get a place for his apprentice in the *Telegraph* office. This Peck refused to consider, but he did procure a three-room house for his new employee at ten shillings a week, and stocked it with a little wood and pork. Late in October or early in November, the Weeds packed bag and baggage and came to Rochester by way of the Erie canal, which had just been opened that far west. Their house was not quite ready and the Pecks put them up for a few days. Then they moved into their meager establishment and Weed settled down to work on the *Telegraph*.

The removal to Rochester ended one phase of Weed's existence. Rude and hard though life was still to be, the old, hand-to-mouth journeyman days were now at an end. New opportunities lay just ahead. The rise from obscurity to influence and from rags to riches had begun.

Editor's Note: The above account of Thurlow Weed's pre-Rochester years will appear as the first chapter in a forthcoming biography of Thurlow Weed by Professor Glyndon G. Van Deusen of the University of Rochester. Readers of *Rochester History* will recall his earlier article "Thurlow Weed in Rochester," which appeared in our April, 1940, issue. The following three letters by Everard Peck, proprietor of the *Telegraph*, have been selected from the rich collection of Weed Papers on deposit at the University of Rochester, Rush Rhees Library, and they are printed here through the courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas G. Spencer and the Rush Rhees Library.

Unpublished Peck-Weed Letters

Rochester Oct. 16, 1822

Mr. Weed

Dear Sir

We have not yet heard anything respecting the Chase rules &c which I expect to procure in N York. We have written to Mr. W. L. Stone requesting him to look up Smith the Press maker & hand him a letter personally. It is more than probable he may have left the city in which case we shall be obliged to get them bungled up here. I sent you a paper yesterday by which you will see that the *Substantial* patronage has increased much since you left here & that we are much in want of the Imperial Sheet to give our Customers a fair Chance.

I have not positively engaged a house for you. I might do it at 10/ per week but this is an abominable rent. I may succeed in getting a comfortable box (for more than that you cannot call anything unless it would cost 100 or 125 Dlls)—

You will see the Embankment is finished & the communication will of course be open as soon as the river shall furnish water to supply the canal from here to Clyde. Whether it will do so now is perhaps a little doubtful. I was going to suggest whether it would not be advisable for you to come on singly & alone at first.

2 or 3 weeks would afford you time to look up a snug place & perhaps suit yourself better than can be done now & then your family could come up to the village in 3 or 4 weeks at fartherist (sic) without doubt by canal. You however can best judge what is proper. Should I not have engaged a house when you come a few hours would enable you to provide a place. I will in the meantime look out. As to Politics all is *hodge podge*. No character to it. The Bucks are splitting & fighting like cats while the *good & true Repub-* [licans] look on & laugh. To meddle with politics now except with a long stick & at a good distance would be to dirty ones fingers.

I have heard nothing as yet respecting the Preceptor²⁶ & I almost feel afraid to say until I do conclude to print something that we

will employ your young man. I almost doubt too whether Sibley wants [one] at present. If you could provide a place for him in your neighborhood for a time merely it is not impossible we can employ him hereafter. If we could do it we would & would do it at once but for our Mr. Wells who would in that case want a place. Should we do the Preceptor which I hope to, we could employ him to advantage. Just at present I should advise that you locate him in that neighborhood—perhaps Utica.

Annexed is an account against A. E. Noble who is a watch maker in Pompey E. Hill. I have written him but cannot hear from him he has taken the paper from the beginning. I wish you would go over & see if he will pay it. If not take his note or if the Postmaster knows of his taking the paper out of the office & this [is] deemed sufficient evidence to fix him I wish you to sue him. Just manage as you think prudent & proper & the *demand* & charges shall be paid.

In great haste

Yrs &c

E. Peck

settle & or compromise —

take $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{2}{3}$ or all as circumstances

make proper

Mr. A. E. Noble Pompey E. Hill

To E. Peck & Co Dr

For the Rochester Telegraph from July 1, 1818

to July 1822 4 years..... 8.00

from July 1st to Oct. 15, 182250

Interest84

9.34

Mr. Noble

Please pay T. Weed the above acct
whose rect. will be good for the amount

E Peck & Co

Editor's Note: Levi Sibley was at this time publisher of the *Monroe Republican*, successor to the *Rochester Gazette* recently sold by A. G. Dauby, the first printer in Rochester.

Oct. 23 [1822]

Mr. Weed

Dear Sir

I have taken a pretty convenient house with 3 rooms though at considerable distance from the office. Rent 10/ per week. I have no doubt it might have been rented for more. & is cheap for the place, times, &c. You must get your children insured or they will blow away. It was the best I could get for any reasonable price. You may perhaps do better when you come. I have hired [the place] for six months. The canal is now furnished with water & you had better bring your Family with you. I would not leave your young man for any length of time as I am in hopes I can employ him after a time although I have heard nothing of the preceptor yet.

I learn that Prentiss is coming here. I can only say that when there are 3 printers—business will be done pretty reasonably—however we have nothing *to say*. You would probably do well to leave your family at Blossom's tavern on the East side a day or two till you get the house set in order.

I shall purchase a little wood for you — & we can supply you with a *little Pork* etc. to begin with. The sooner you come the better as the difficulty of settling in the winter is greater than now.

I hope I shall do enough to employ your young man before long at present business is dull.

Write when we shall expect you — yrs in great haste

E. Peck

Rochester Jany. 12, 1823

[context indicates date is
really Jan. 12, 1824]

Mr. Weed

Dr Sir

Your communications were both recd. the last came Sunday evening. The arrangement is a good one to give us the main part Friday night & if anything important comes up to give it to us Sunday evening.²⁷

I wish you to be extremely careful about dates of the proceedings. I believe this week the dates were wrong by one Day through-

out. I altered them. Your manner will I think be interesting to Readers of the Telegraph. You will see I have not yet announced publicly that you are the writer of the correspondence for I did not know whether [you] did or did not wish it. Our readers here know it of course & it shall be announced whenever it is a proper time or whenever you signify your wish to have it done. I took the liberty to make some slight verbal alterations & left out the remarks for the present on the subject of a Congressional Caucus — Clay — Crawford &c. I thought this had better be left until the thing was more settled — & we are short for Room this week as you will perceive.

Do attend to giving the Proceedings in a fair hand & if I do wrong in altering or excluding say so & I will do so no more.²⁸

Your family have moved & the house is rented. There is a letter [in] the P office for you Postmarked "Buffaloe" in Haskins Handwriting — shall I send it to you?

Yours, &c

E Peck

How do you & Leake & Croswell
agree?

[There was originally more
to this postscript but the
letter has been mutilated.]

NOTES

1. Weed Papers, Kent to Weed, December 28, 1853. For genealogical evidence see Cutter, W. R., *New England Families* (N. Y., 1914) I, 407; Chadwick, G. H., and Vedder, J. V. V., *The "Old Times" Corner*, Greene County Historical Society Publications (Catskill, 1932), I, 99; Huntington, E. B., *Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths of Stamford Families* (Stamford, 1874), pp. 125-133, and *History of Stamford, Connecticut*, (Stamford, 1868), pp. 45, 167; Banks, C. E., *The Planters of the Commonwealth* (Boston, 1930), pp. 65, 84; Weed, T., *Autobiography*, (Boston, 1883), p. 1; Barnes, T. W., *Memoir of Thurlow Weed* (Boston, 1864), pp. 1-2.
2. Weed, "Stage Coach Travelling," in *The Galaxy*, IX, 609.
3. Weed, *Autobiography*, (Boston, 1883), pp. 10-21; Weed Papers, L. G. Mickles to Weed, Jan. 23, 1861. Mickles remembered that Weed had a deformed foot, the toes drawn under as in what is usually called "club foot," but this recollection spanning half a century is highly suspect. Weed suffered a great deal in later years from varicose veins, but I have found no evidence other than Mickles' testimony, of any physical deformity.
4. *New York Commercial Advertiser*, March 4, 1868.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Onondaga Historical Society. *Semi-centennial of the City of Utica*, Utica 1882, pp. 133-135; *Albany Evening Journal*, Jan. 29, 1840; Weed, *Autobiography*, pp. 23-30, 38-40. Weed claimed and was awarded a quarter section of bounty land for these services, under the Act of Congress of March 3, 1855. He never took up the land, but framed the award and hung it in his study as a badge of honor.—National Archives. War of 1812. Bounty Land Warrant 22, 658-660; Weed Papers, P. Besancon to Weed, Sept. 19, 1855; E. B. Morgan to Weed, May 7, 1856.
7. Weed, *Autobiography*, pp. 36, 74; Barnes, T. W., *Memoir*, p. 8. This is Weed's story. There is some evidence that their correspondence continued during the separation.—Weed Papers, S. H. Davis to Weed, Oct. 8, 1819.
8. Minutes of the Court of Sessions, Otsego Co., I, 1791-1817, Feb. 15, 1815; *Albany Evening Journal*, July 21, 1831, letter of A. E. Jordan to Weed; Weed, *Autobiography*, pp. 36, 42, 527-528. Weed's account is not accurate. He stated, in 1831, that he was fifteen at the time of the incident. He was actually sixteen. He states in his *Autobiography* that he was regarded as the principal culprit and so was brought to trial first. Actually one of the other boys, Justin Clark, was first tried and acquitted. Then Weed and Horace Griffin were tried together, briefly, only three witnesses being called against them, and also acquitted.
9. Weed Papers, H. Clark to Weed, Feb. 1886. Barnes, *Memoir*, p. 5. A "token" was the amount of paper necessary for 250 impressions. It was regarded as the equivalent of one hour's work.
10. Stewart, E., *A Documentary History of Early Organizations of Printers*. U. S. Bureau of Labor Bulletin No. 61, Washington, 1905, pp. 864-880; Weed Papers, J. R. Reynolds to Weed, Aug. 15, 1817, Jan. 31, 1818, G. Klinck to Weed, Sept. 30, 1817. These letters, written shortly after Weed's departure from New York, give confidential details about a proposed demand for increased wages, and about New York City "rats" who should be blacklisted in Albany. Weed had been active also as a member of the Albany Typographical Society and one of its members, an employer,

- felt that Weed was "a democrat" beyond hope of redemption—Autograph Collection, The University of Rochester, J. B. Van Steenberg to Weed, Nov. 7, 1816.
11. Weed Papers, Kennedy Farrell to Weed, Nov. 3, 1817, Edward Mitchell to Weed, Aug. 17, 1818, Duncan McDonald to Weed, Jan. 1, 1868. See also, Weed, *Autobiography*, pp. 60-61; Barnes, *Memoir*, p. 159f, mentions the religious interest displayed in Weed's letters to his wife, 1815 to 1825. Those letters, unfortunately, have disappeared.
 12. Weed Papers, Petition of the N. Y. Typographical Society, Jan. 31, 1817, J. R. Reynolds to Weed, Jan. 31, 1818, A. Mather to Weed, April 14, 1818; Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 880. Judging by Mather's letter, which reported new members "in shoals," the society was well pleased with the result.
 13. Otsego *Herald*, April 27, 1818.
 14. A buck's tail worn in the hat was Tammany's official badge.
 15. Hamilton, M. W., "Thurlow Weed's Nemesis at Norwich," in *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association*, XXXVI, (April, 1938), p. 125.
 16. Weed Papers, copy of the bill of sale, dated Nov. 24, 1818, I. W. Clark to Weed, Jan. 17, 1819; Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 9; *The Republican Agriculturalist*, Jan. 28, 1819. The agreement was conclusively brought out in the suit that developed.
 17. The original, from *A Voyage to Brobdingnag*, ch. VII, is, "that whoever could make two ears of corn, or two blades of grass, to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of politicians put together." Accuracy in quotation never bothered Weed overmuch.
 18. *Agriculturalist*, Feb. 11, April 1, 15, 22, May 13, 1819; Weed Papers, Southwick to Weed, March 26, 1819. Weed even went so far as to attack Clinton in defending Southwick, a move which brought an earnest and successful plea for a recantation from the candidate, who, for all his star-gazing had moments of practicality.
 19. Feb. 6, 1819.
 20. Tory marauders near New York.
 21. *Agriculturalist*, Nov. 4, 11, Dec. 2, 1819; *Norwich Journal*, Nov. 9, 16, 1819, quoted in Hamilton, M. W., *The Country Printer*, N. Y., 1936, p. 192 and note. John F. Hubbard asserted that Weed's blows "sung innocent." Weed promised to continue his verbal attacks and did so on at least one later occasion, but there is no record of any further personal encounter.
 22. Hubbard contended that at first he had been innocent of the politics of the purchasers, but this is extremely flimsy. Like Weed he was obviously being used as a pawn in the political game that was being played.
 23. Croswell to Weed, April 12, 1821. "No apology, I assure you," wrote Croswell, "was necessary for the familiarity of yr. address. It was such as I expect to receive & which I should be offended if I did not, from those whose early acquaintance I take pleasure in reviving."
 24. Barnes, *Memoir*, p. 19.
 25. Weed Papers, L. H. Redfield to Weed, Oct. 3, 1822, E. Peck to Weed, Oct. 14, also n. d., 1882; *Albany Evening Journal*, Feb. 21, 1854; Weed, *Autobiography*, pp. 95-97. Weed declares that he brought his family to Rochester before he obtained employment from Peck, but this is a mistake.
 26. Caleb Bingham's *The American Preceptor Improved: Sixty-fifth (fifth improved) edition* was published by Peck in 1823. *Being a new Selec-*

tion of Lessons for Reading and Speaking. Designed for the Use of Schools.

27. Weed was at this time in Albany as agent for a group of Rochesterians who were attempting to procure a bank charter.
28. This letter was written a little more than a year after Weed entered Peck's office. It signifies that, while Peck felt free to alter **Weed's report** of the Assembly proceedings, he was so deeply impressed by Weed's judgment, or was so dependent on his assistance that he wished to do nothing that would run counter to the wishes of the young **printer**.