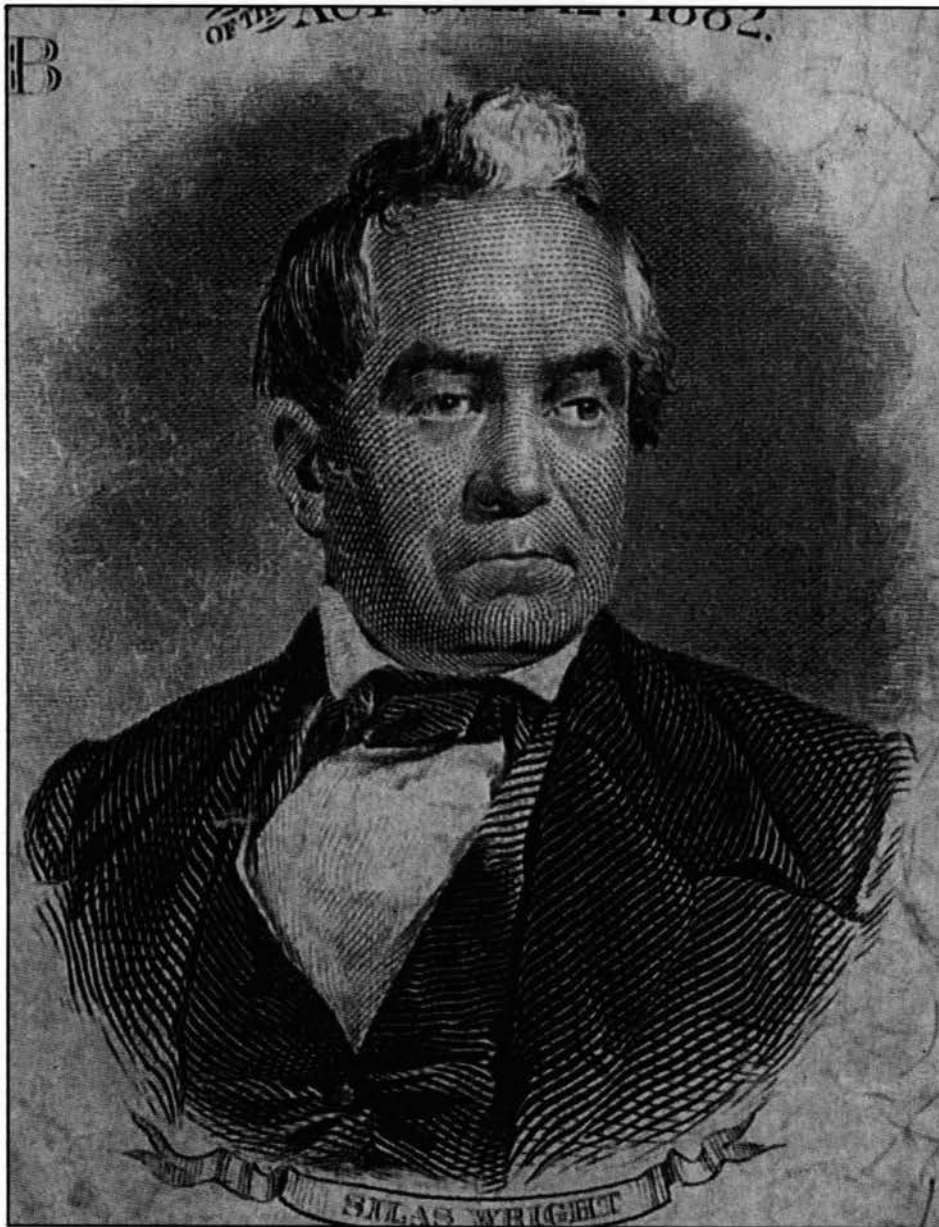


*The St. Lawrence County Historical Association*  
**QUARTERLY**

*Volume XL - Number 2 - Spring, 1995*



**The Bicentennial of  
Governor Wright**

# The St. Lawrence County Historical Association at the Silas Wright Museum

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association is a private, not-for-profit membership organization based at the Silas Wright Museum in Canton, New York. Founded in 1947, the Association is governed by a constitution, by-laws, and Board of Trustees. The Historical Association's membership meets annually to elect its officers and trustees.

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## Our Mission

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association is an educational resource center and museum that researches, collects, preserves, and interprets St. Lawrence County history through collections development, publication, exhibition, and programming; whose purpose is to help establish the intellectual and cultural connections that expand awareness and place St. Lawrence County in its state and national context, while revealing its unique identity. The Association examines different aspects of life in St. Lawrence County from multiple and diverse resources through community partnerships and collaboration. SLCHA values quality, integrity, and accessibility and operates within established museum standards befitting its American Association of Museums (AAM) accredited status.

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St. Lawrence County Historical Association  
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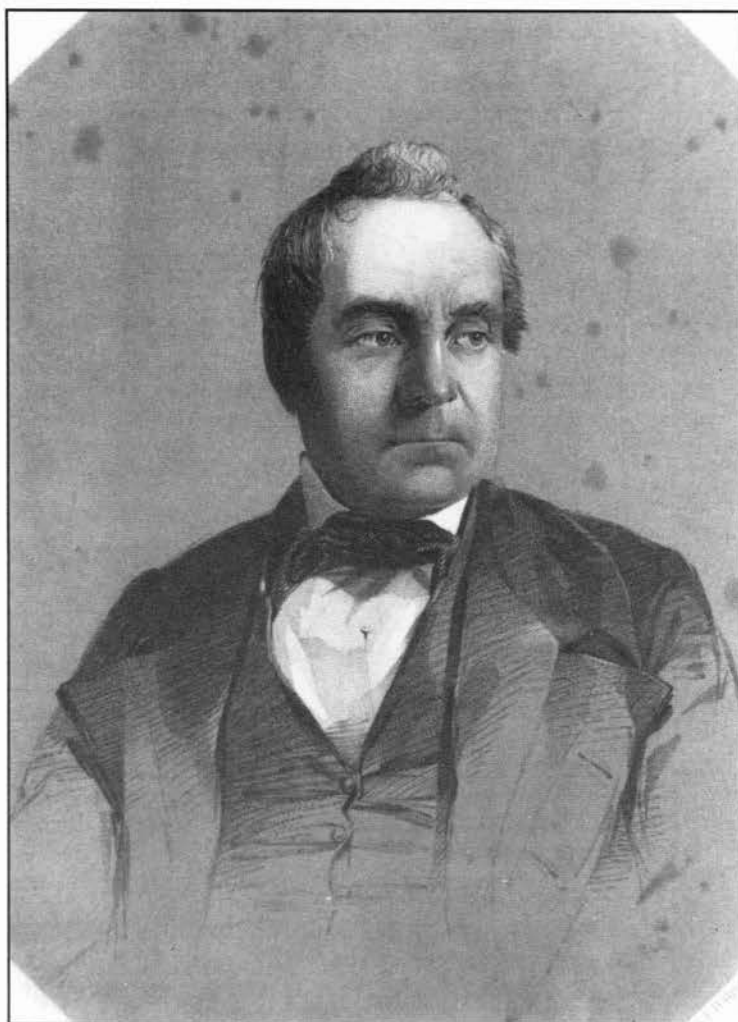
**Cover Illustration:**

*Detail of the engraving of Governor Silas Wright, Jr. from  
the 1882 fifty dollar United States gold certificate.*

(From the SLCHA Collections)

# Honoring Wright's Memory: An Introduction

by Stewart J. Wilson



From Hoag's *History of St. Lawrence And Franklin Counties*

*Governor Silas Wright, Jr., 1795-1845.*

**T**his issue of *The SLCHA Quarterly* contains six short articles with a common theme. Each explores a topic that in some way was a tribute or honor to Governor Silas Wright, Jr., the highest ranking elected official ever to come from St. Lawrence County. It

is only fitting to examine these topics as we mark the bicentennial of Wright's birth throughout this year. Indeed, the Historical Association has celebrated the Wright bicentennial in 1995 with a variety of events, programs, tours, and other publications.

Wright's legacy to the North Country remains profound today. In his various public posts, most notably New York Governor and United States Senator, Silas Wright laid the foundations of political discourse for northern New York. His party loyalty, fiscal conservatism, and rela-



tive liberalism on social issues are currents still present in today's political waters. But Wright's influence went beyond the intellectual or philosophical. He was a mentor and icon to following generations of North Country leaders in a wide variety of fields. Contemporaries, such as Senator Preston King of Ogdensburg, John Leslie Russell of Canton, and Azariah Flagg of Plattsburgh, looked to Wright for leadership. A later generation of leaders, men such as A. Barton Hepburn and Irving Bachellor, grew up with the myth and legend of Silas Wright, "The Farmer Statesman."

It is not our task here to recount the story of Silas Wright. Numerous biographies, especially of his political career, have been written. For background on Wright's life and career, William Mallam's *Silas Wright - The Farmer Statesman* (recently published by the Historical Association); John Garraty's *Silas Wright*; and Ransom Gillet's two volume work, *The Life and Times of Silas Wright*, are recommended.

Rather than biographical material, the articles in this *Quarterly* explore the history of how Wright was honored by both his contemporaries and following generations. Some of these honors occurred before Wright's death in 1847. Obviously, the Mathew Brady daguerreotype of Wright was done prior to his death, although Brady's collection of lithographs of famous Americans, including Wright, was published posthumously. The silver set for Governor Wright was begun before his death, but was completed and presented to Mrs. Wright after the Governor was deceased. Wright County, Missouri, was named for

then Senator Wright in 1841, fully six years before he died, while the other two Wright counties were named after his death. Other Wright honors covered here are perhaps more appropriately tributes, since they occurred after 1847. These subjects include the Silas Wright Grange in Canton (named in 1879), the Wright gold certificate (1882), and the custom house stamps (1887).

Many other tributes and memorials to Silas Wright await further investigation. They include other places named for Governor Wright, such as Wrightsburgh, Wright Road, and Wright School in St. Lawrence County; Wright Peak, the sixteenth highest mountain in the Adirondacks; and the Town of Wright in Schoharie County, New York. Literary Wright tributes worthy of attention include numerous posthumous poems, such as the well-known poem, *The Lost Statesman*, by John Greenleaf Whittier; Irving Bachellor's novel, *The Light in the Clearing*; and 19th century Wright biographies, notably those by Hammond, Jenkins, and Gillet. Additional memorials deserving further research are the large Silas Wright monument in Weybridge, Vermont, and the smaller obelisk on his grave in Canton; the numerous political dinners and events held in Wright's honor; the Silas Wright pumper operated by the Canton fire department; the *S.S. Silas Wright*, a Mississippi paddleboat; other portraits and photographs of Wright; and the creation and development of the Silas Wright house as a museum in Canton.

Perhaps of equal interest to the exploration of each of these subjects is how the memorialization of Gov-

ernor Wright has changed over the last 150 years. For instance, after the Civil War, Wright was viewed as a political hero by the Republicans and Democrats alike, whereas today, we celebrate Wright less for his political leanings than for his integrity, loyalty and honesty as the "Farmer Statesman." Perhaps, the memorials and tributes have less to tell us about Silas Wright, than what the people of a particular time find admirable or worthy in a leader. As we explore how Silas Wright has been honored over the years, we need to ask more questions about Wright's continuing role as "ideal citizen" and "political hero." Has the view of Silas Wright changed over time? What different aspects of Wright's life and career have been most meaningful to people in different eras? What does the life and spirit of Governor Wright have to tell us today? By looking at the tributes and honors to Silas Wright fifty or hundred years after his death, we may, in fact, come to a deeper appreciation of both Silas Wright the man, and our ancestor's wishes and aspirations for leadership and community.

## About the Author

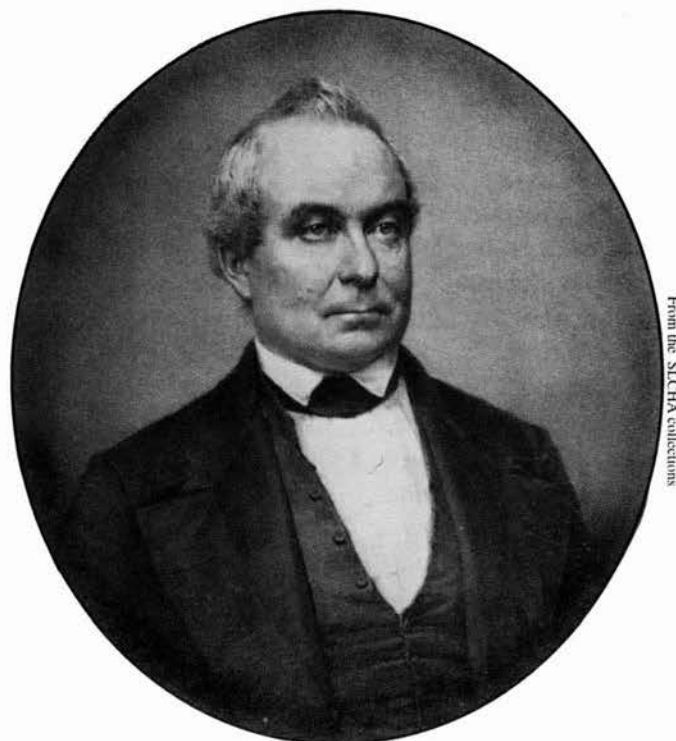
Stewart J. Wilson has served as the Public Information Coordinator of the Historical Association for the past three years, and is currently the production editor of *The SLCHA Quarterly*.

# Silas Wright: “Illustrious American”

by Thomas E. Price

Imagine a large open room brightly illuminated by the rays of the sun, radiating from the large skylight in the ceiling. One corner of the room is particularly scant of furniture except for a single chair with a menacing iron clamp attached to the back. A light gray curtain is stretched behind the chair and against the wall. The pungent odor of iodine and burning candles fills the room. Approximately four feet in front of the chair is a large wooden box on four legs standing nearly three feet in height. A large lens, aimed directly at the chair, protrudes from the box like a muzzle of a small cannon. A table is set up beside the box which is covered with rectangular sheets of metal.

Such was the setting as Silas Wright walked into Mathew Brady’s studio in the mid-1840s. Wright, a prominent figure in state and national politics, was probably asked on several occasions to sit for Brady. Finally conceding to the young daguerreotypist’s wishes, Wright sat in the lone chair as Brady or an assistant positioned Wright and tightened the head clamp, immobilizing him. Brady may have tried to put Wright at ease by explaining the need for total immobilization so that a clear image could be captured. After Wright was positioned, the shade, partially covering the overhead skylight, was fixed in position to allow the optimal amount of light to strike the subject. Brady took his



*Frances D'Avignon engraving of Silas Wright, based on a Mathew Brady daguerreotype. The engraving appeared in Brady's Gallery of Illustrious Americans, published in 1850.*

position behind the camera and studied the upside down image of Wright on the ground glass. He probably noticed the gentle yet determined look of Wright, accented by his tired eyes, large nose, and strong jaw. Wright looked rather worn from his years in public office and the many miles travelled from northern New York to all parts of the country. His attire consisted of a plain black suit with a white shirt. The collar, a bit askew, was held tightly in place by a black neck stock. When all adjust-

ments were to Brady’s satisfaction, he exposed the plate, and Silas Wright became a prominent part of American photographic history.

Modern photography saw its beginnings in France. For years inventors experimented with recording a visual image. Many were successful in temporarily securing an image, but Louis Daguerre finally met with complete success in 1837. Daguerre permanently secured an image by using a piece of copper, coated with silver and sensitized with chemicals,

and then exposing the plate to light for a number of seconds or minutes. The French government, greatly pleased with Daguerre's discovery, awarded him an annual pension of six thousand dollars in return for a complete disclosure of his process. Daguerre published his work in August, 1839, and practical photography was born.

It is unclear who first brought the daguerreotype process to America, but certainly much credit goes to Samuel F. B. Morse, a young artist and scholar. Morse, better known today for his invention of the telegraph and Morse code, was one of the earliest photographers in America. Morse met Daguerre in Europe while giving lectures on his newly developed telegraph. Morse first envisioned Daguerre's invention as a way of streamlining his portrait painting business. By taking a photograph first, Morse's subjects would no longer have to sit for hours until the painting was complete. Morse had many students of daguerreotypy in the late 1830s and early 1840s, and today several are considered "fathers" of modern photography in America.

Seemingly everyone wanted to attempt Daguerre's process, and many tried to improve it as well. Daguerreotypists appeared in St. Lawrence County as early as 1840. The Shew brothers, Jacob, Myron, Trueman, and William are credited with being the first daguerreotypists in Ogdensburg. They were taught the daguerreotype process by Samuel Morse, but by 1841 they were in the employ of John Plumbe, another photographer of Silas Wright. Plumbe, a young entrepreneur, saw a financial opportunity in daguerreotypy. A man of many talents and titles, he took on the appellation, "Professor of Photography"

at Harrington's Museum in Boston in 1841. Known as an excellent portrait photographer, it was said of him in the *Bay State Democrat* that Plumbe, "takes the very life from a man, and transfers it to his silver plate. We saw one of KRAZ the other day, taken by the Professor's Daguerreotype so faithfully that he has not looked well since."

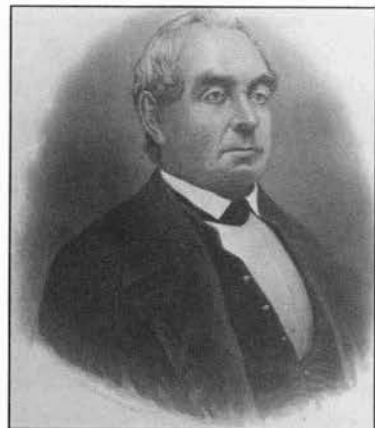
Plumbe soon expanded his enterprise to not only the taking of daguerreotypes, but also the sale of photographic materials. William Shew of Ogdensburg made photographic cases for Plumbe. John Plumbe's business thrived and he expanded rapidly. He sent Trueman Shew to run a gallery in Philadelphia, and Jacob Shew was sent by Plumbe to open a gallery in Baltimore. By 1845, Plumbe had fourteen galleries spread throughout the United States. His was the first of many chains of galleries. Plumbe was also the first to collect portraits of celebrities. He photographed Governor Silas Wright for publication in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in 1846. However, Plumbe's success was short-lived. He sold his New York gallery in 1847. Later, threatened by financial failure, Plumbe committed suicide in 1857. After Plumbe's demise, the Shew brothers eventually moved west and continued to work in photography.

Mathew Brady was another student of Samuel Morse. Born in Warren County, New York in 1823, Brady began studying art at the age of fifteen under the tutelage of American painter, William Page. Also a former student of Morse, Page saw great promise in young Brady's work. Page took him to New York City to further his studies at the National

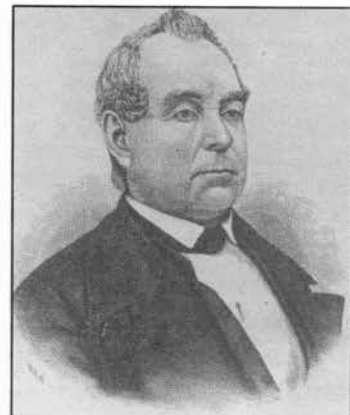


From the SILCHA collections

*Three engravings of Wright. The engraving above was based on a John Plumbe daguerreotype and was done for publication in 1846. The two engravings below were done for publications in the 1870s and appear based either on Plumbe's daguerreotype or the earlier engraving.*



From Gillies's *Life and Times of Silas Wright*, 1874



From the *History of St. Lawrence Co.*, 1878



Academy of Design, of which Morse was then president. During Brady's time at the Academy, Morse introduced him to the daguerreotype process.

Brady became very skilled in the process and excelled at portraits. Like Plumbe, Brady captured many great American personages on the copper plate. He opened his first gallery in 1844 on the corner of Broadway and Fulton Streets in New York City. The newspapers hailed him as the greatest photographer among the thousands then in business. Many nationally and internationally known celebrities sat for Brady over the next few years. Nearly all of the great political figures of the time, including all of the Presidents starting with John Quincy Adams, sat for Brady. It is probably during his tenure as New York Governor, in 1845 or 1846, that Silas Wright sat for Brady.

Brady's business soared, and he was tireless in the advancement of daguerreotypy. His ambition soon went beyond the simple act of creating photographs. Brady saw an opportunity to publish a book containing the images of celebrated personalities. Brady's idea was to feature engravings of twenty-four of America's most notable people and accompany each image with a short biography. This venture took several years to create. The final product was probably America's first book of photographic history. Published in 1850, it had the flattering title, *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*, and it featured only twelve images instead of the intended twenty-four. Governor Wright was one of the twelve men chosen by Brady to grace the pages of this ambitious volume. For the first time, Silas Wright, a person known in name and action across the continent, had a "real" face to accompany his accomplishments.

The other notables in Brady's book consist of Wright's political contemporaries: Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, Millard Fillmore, and Lewis Cass. The remainder are a mix of men who were known for a variety of endeavors. They are: William H. Prescott, American historian; John J. Audubon, artist and naturalist; Winfield Scott, military hero of two wars; William E. Channing, Universalist minister and reformer; Zachary Taylor, military leader and later President of the United States; and John C. Fremont, explorer. Brady had photographed them over the previous decade, but for the purposes of publication, he employed a lithographer to create stone plates from which to print the images. He chose lithographic expert Frances D'Avignon to complete this task. He then employed the well-known dramatist and author, John Howard Payne, to write biographies of each of those featured. However, Payne was unable to finish the work because of his appointment as Consul to Tunisia. Brady then hired C. Edwards Lester to complete the historical sketches. The completed volume sold for twenty dollars, or one could purchase single portraits for one dollar each. The publication was hailed by the press and public as a masterpiece of photographic history. One admirer dubbed the *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*, the "Valhalla of America."

Though widely acclaimed, the *Gallery of Illustrious Americans* was a financial failure, due, at least in part, to the rather high price of the work. However, the book helped further Brady's photographic career. Mathew Brady expanded his photographic endeavors over the next fifty years, becoming one of the most famous photographers in American history. His chronicling of the Civil

War has left an indelible mark on the American psyche, and ushered in a new chapter in photography.

Because of inventors like Louis Daguerre and Samuel F.B. Morse, and practitioners like John Plumbe and Mathew Brady, a visual understanding of the middle part of the last century was preserved. Today, their efforts bring history to life by matching deeds with faces. Who can hear the "Gettysburg Address" without picturing the care-worn image of Abraham Lincoln, or read a speech delivered by Daniel Webster without thinking about the deep set eyes and cold determination on his face as captured by several early photographers? Brady, and his contemporaries in photography, have preserved an important visual record of the people and events of the 19th century.

## About the Author

Thomas E. Price has been the Collections Manager at the St. Lawrence County Historical Association for the past three years.

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# A Silver Tribute: A Study of the Silas Wright Silver Set

by Heather J. Parmenter

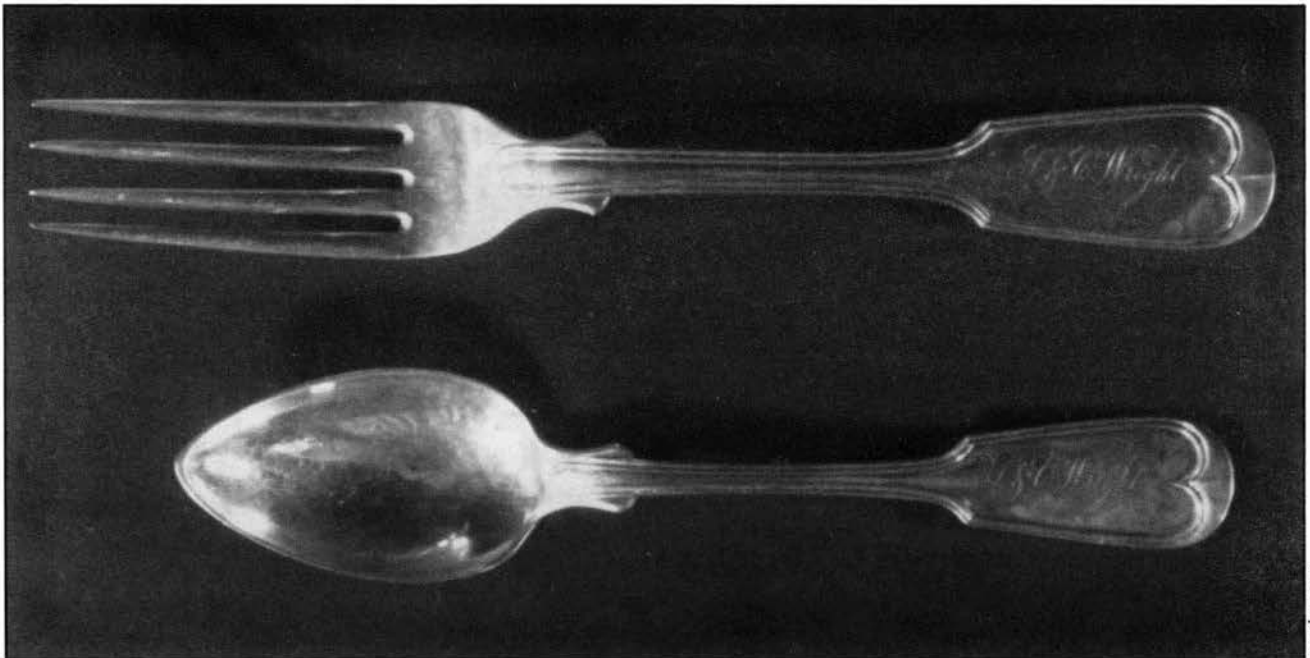
*"This valuable token of esteem for Governor Wright will ever be prized as a memento of the great statesman, and is likely, in time, to pass into as many hands as there are pieces, to be prized more than gold or rubies." -Ransom Gillet, 1874*

In 1847, arrangements were made to honor the recently retired former Governor and United States Senator, Silas Wright, who had devoted most of his life to the affairs of New York State. Silver manufacturer, Gerardus Boyce of New York City, was commissioned to create a set of silver to commemorate the life and work of Silas Wright.

However, the untimely death of this esteemed resident of Canton came before the gift could be bestowed on him. Nevertheless, he was not forgotten, and the set of silver was presented to his wife, Clarissa Moody Wright, later that year. Nearly 150 years have passed since this gift was presented and the individual pieces of the set of silver have been scat-

tered. In light of the bicentennial of the birth of Silas Wright in 1995, it seemed appropriate to address the fate of the silver set that stood in testimony to his life.

With this in mind, I have concentrated on discovering more about the Silas Wright silver set. To gain a better understanding of the reasoning behind this gift, I consider here



*A spoon and fork from the Silas Wright silver set. These two pieces are in the SLCHA collections. The whereabouts of only three other pieces from the set are currently known. The set was made by well-known silversmith Gerardus Boyce in 1847 and presented to Clarissa Wright in 1848, after Governor Wright's death in the fall of 1847.*

the arrangements for the presentation of the gift and the circumstances surrounding it. In order to place the gift in the larger context of American culture, I discuss the significance of presentation silver to both the donor and the recipient. I also have attempted to discover more about its manufacturer, Gerardus Boyce. By examining other works by Boyce, a description of one of the set's pieces, and the actual pieces of flatware owned by the St. Lawrence Historical Association and St. Lawrence University, I speculate on the style of the entire set. I also briefly discuss the different items in the set, and their uses, in order to provide a clear explanation of the size and character of the set. The initial goal of my research was to attempt to locate additional pieces of the silver set. Thus, I also address the descent of the silver set since the death of Clarissa Wright.

## Presentation of the Wright Silver Set

With his gubernatorial defeat in 1846, Silas Wright seemed determined to retire from the political arena, although many of his colleagues in the Democratic Party encouraged him to accept a nomination to run for the presidency in 1848. He returned to Canton to join his wife Clarissa and renew work on his farm. Prior to his election to the Governor's office, he purchased approximately one hundred acres of land.<sup>1</sup> Although he had little time for farming during his political career, he maintained considerable interest in agriculture throughout his life. In his retirement which began in early 1847, Silas Wright hoped to take over the work of the hired hands who previously ran the farm in his absence.

In recognition of his devotion to agriculture, the New York State Agricultural Society invited Silas Wright to deliver an address at their annual meeting held in Saratoga Springs on September 16, 1847. Silas agreed and prepared his address, stressing the importance of agriculture as a connection to "the wants, comforts, and interests of every man."<sup>2</sup> His words were deeply seated in the traditions of Jeffersonian democracy as he saw the importance of improving agriculture as critical to the economic well-being of New York State. Ironically, Silas Wright's devotion to agriculture may have prevented him from delivering his address. On August 27, 1847, Wright died of complications probably due to a heart attack related to his hard labor in the fields. At the meeting of the New York State Agricultural Society in September, General John A. Dix, a personal friend of Wright's who had worked with him extensively at different levels of government, delivered the speech on his behalf.<sup>3</sup>

During the summer of 1847, a circle of friends and supporters arranged to honor Silas Wright for the accomplishments in his life and career. They commissioned a silver manufacturer, Gerardus Boyce, to produce a set of silver that was to be inscribed:

*Presented to Silas Wright,  
By his Mercantile Friends of  
the City of New York,  
in testimony of their respect  
and regard for his Public  
and Private Character  
4th July 1847.*<sup>4</sup>

One of these mercantile friends was John D. Van Buren, the son of President Martin Van Buren, Silas Wright's political mentor.

There is some question as to when these "mercantile friends" intended to bestow this honor. While July 4th is inscribed on the set, it is known that Silas Wright's death occurred before the gift was presented to him. According to Gillet's *Life and Times of Silas Wright*, the set was said to have been nearly ready at the time of Wright's death. If this is the case, these "mercantile friends" may have intended to present the set at the Agricultural Society meeting. Gillet's biography indicates that these men had arranged to present the set to Silas Wright through General John A. Dix, who subsequently read Wright's address at the meeting.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the initial presentation date, the fact remains that Silas Wright never lived to receive this tribute. However, his mercantile friends remained committed to recognizing the work of their late esteemed friend. On November 18, 1847, General John A. Dix was invited to a meeting in New York City to receive the set of silver on behalf of Clarissa Wright, as a lasting remembrance of her husband. Acting as representative of the men who wished to bestow this gift, John D. Van Buren stated that "We hoped to tell [Silas Wright of] our high estimate of his public services, and that we shared in the confidence and pride with which the people of this state regarded him; that in this busy mart of commerce, devoted to gain, his simple, earnest, truly republican character was known and appreciated."<sup>6</sup> Clarissa did not receive the set of silver until the following January when her brother, Horace Moody, delivered the set to her. On its delivery, she sent a letter of gratitude to Gerardus Boyce, the manufacturer, to compliment the beauty and skill with which the set had been completed.<sup>7</sup>



SLCHA photo

*Detail of the handle of silver set fork in the SLCHA collections showing the engraving of Silas and Clarissa Wright's initials, "S & C Wright."*

## **The Tradition of Silver as a Gift**

The gift of a set of silver was highly symbolic in a time period focused on progress and industry. Traditionally, silver was an appropriate material for presentation pieces made to honor an individual for acts of civic importance. Because it is remarkably flexible, silver can be worked easily to form a wide variety of objects and styles. Its high monetary value and its durability further enriches the quality of such a gift.<sup>8</sup>

Presentation silver first became popular in America with the birth of the republic. At that time, precious metals became more readily available, allowing the uses and styles of silver to become quite diverse. Following the War of 1812, presentation silver reached a new height in achievement as silversmiths were commissioned to produce commemorative pieces for heroes of the war. At the same time, the birth of

industrialization in America created the themes of progress and economic development in presentation silver. For example, in New York, DeWitt Clinton was awarded two silver vases in 1825 to honor him after the completion of the Erie Canal.<sup>9</sup> In this light, it is not surprising that the merchants who made arrangements to pay tribute to Silas Wright chose to present him with silver. At the same time, their choice reflects the high esteem with which they regarded him.

## **The Wright Silver Set**

The set of silver that was presented to Clarissa contained one hundred and twenty-five pieces and was valued at \$1,900. This price demonstrates the substantial worth of the set considering that the two most valuable household goods listed on an inventory of Silas Wright's possessions at the time of his death were a Brussels carpet appraised at \$75 and a sideboard listed at \$45.

The set included two pitchers that each held four quarts and one pint, and a silver tea kettle that held three quarts, as well as a coffeepot, teapot, sugar dish, cream pot, and slop bowl. In flatware, it contained a soup-ladle, fish-knife, crumb-knife, ice-cream slicer, a pair of sugar tongs, four butter knives, and nine dozen table and dessert spoons and forks.<sup>10</sup> After the death of Clarissa Wright on August 15, 1870, the set was divided among her three brothers and the children of a deceased brother. Since then, the set has been scattered. As a result, the location of only five pieces of flatware of the one hundred and twenty-five piece set are currently known. Thus, one can only speculate on the appearance of the larger pieces in the set.

Generalizations can be made concerning the style of the set by studying other known works of the manufacturer, Gerardus Boyce. Also, a detailed description of one of the

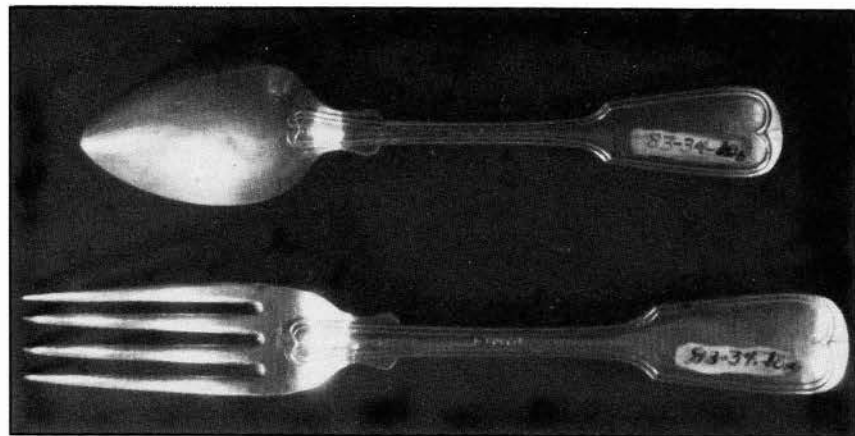


Wright pitchers survives which offers some insight on the style. Lastly, the five surviving pieces of flatware owned by the St. Lawrence Historical Association and St. Lawrence University are crucial in determining the flatware style of the remainder of the set.

## Gerardus Boyce's Style

Gerardus Boyce was born in 1797 and began his business in New York City as early as 1820. He worked under the firm Boyce and Jones from 1825 to 1828. He continued his business until as late as 1857.<sup>11</sup> Boyce died in 1880. When Boyce was commissioned to produce the set for Silas Wright in 1847, he had been working in his profession for nearly thirty years. During his years as a silversmith, he produced many fine pieces including a five piece tea set currently on display at the Charleston Museum in South Carolina, and unusual items such as dish crosses and a boatswain's whistle.<sup>12</sup>

In developing an idea of what the Wright silver set may have looked like, a description that appeared in the *Commercial Advertiser* in 1889 of one of the pitchers, serves as an excellent indication of the style of the set. The pitcher, purchased by New York State Governor David B. Hill in 1887, is described as being sixteen inches in height, small at the base, and swelling to its fullest proportions about one-fifth from the mouth. The surface is beautifully decorated in repoussé work and is also partly engraved and hammered. A smooth shield appears on the center on either side of the pitcher with one side bearing the inscription that honors Silas Wright. The article described the handle as bold and strong, arabesque in style.<sup>13</sup>



*The back side of the Wright silver set spoon and fork in the SLCHA collections. Note the silversmith's mark in the center of the handles.*

At sixteen inches tall, the size of the pitcher gives an indication of the importance of the set. The repoussé design was just becoming popular in American silver in the 1840s and was accomplished by hammering from the reverse side of the piece to create a raised decorative pattern, usually portraying naturalistic or sentimental scenes.<sup>14</sup> A creamer produced by Gerardus Boyce, currently in a private collection, has a combination of repoussé and engraving that could be comparable to the silver pitcher described in the article.<sup>15</sup> Although no other piece located in this study has a smooth shield motif as exhibited in the pitcher belonging to the Wright set, a pair of pitchers made by Boyce, belonging to another private collection, do portray a smooth oval on the side of the pitchers engraved with the owner's initials.<sup>16</sup>

The arabesque style is defined in McClinton's *Collecting American Nineteenth Century Silver* as an "interwoven design of the Italian Renaissance."<sup>17</sup> How this definition translates into the form of the handle of a pitcher can be left to speculation. None of Boyce's work seems to exhibit an interwoven design in the

handles. The majority of his silver contains handles in the C-scroll or S-scroll style where, as suggested by the name, the handle is shaped in the form of a large "C" or "S."

Another form of repoussé work that may have occurred in the Silas Wright set is reeding. Several pieces in other sets produced by Gerardus Boyce exhibit this style, particularly in the form of melon-reeding. Named for its resulting shape, melon-reeding appears in a tea set that is located at the Charleston Museum. It also appears in a set originally made for Beech and Susan Vanderpool, currently in a private collection.<sup>18</sup> A tea-kettle-on-stand produced by Boyce that belongs to a private collection in Pennsylvania also exhibits melon-reeding and may be comparable to the tea kettle in the Silas Wright set.<sup>19</sup> These sets are of high quality and their beauty causes one to hope that additional pieces of Wright's set have survived.

When considering the flatware that complemented the larger pieces of the set, there is less need for speculation, as five pieces are available for study. Two pieces, a spoon and fork, were donated to the St. Lawrence County Historical Association in



1983, and three pieces are currently owned by St. Lawrence University. They exhibit the French threaded pattern and are engraved "S and C Wright." On the back of each, "G. BOYCE" is stamped into the stem.

The threaded pattern of flatware became popular in the beginning of the nineteenth century where a double-thread outlined the fiddle-shaped handle.<sup>20</sup> Two butter knives and a mustard spoon produced by Gerardus Boyce that exhibit an identical pattern to the Silas Wright pieces are owned by the New-York Historical Society. Similar threaded patterns were manufactured by other companies during the same time period. In 1847, the year that Boyce produced the Wright silver set, Roger Bros. Company of Hartford, Connecticut advertised flatware that was nearly identical in style.<sup>21</sup> This flatware design remained popular until after the Civil War.

In Silas Wright's set, there were many different pieces of flatware. All the flatware in Wright's set undoubtedly exhibited the French-threaded pattern and each piece was engraved with "S and C Wright." The other flatware in the set included a soup-ladle, fishknife, crumb-knife, ice-cream slicer, a pair of sugar tongs, four butter knives, and nine dozen table and dessert spoons and forks. While soup-ladles, butter knives, and table and dessert spoons are fairly self-explanatory, the other types of flatware are not as frequently used today. A fish knife has a large blunted blade and is similar to a spatula. It is often accompanied by a large fork and is used for serving casseroles as well as fish. Crumb knives are similar in shape to fish knives and have a long straight edge with the opposite edge curved upward. They serve almost as a dust pan for brushing the

crumbs from a tablecloth. Ice cream slicers, or knives, are shaped similarly to the fish knife and are used for slicing blocks of ice cream. Lastly, sugar tongs are used for serving sugar and have various sizes and shapes. Larger tongs are used for hors d'oeuvres.<sup>22</sup>

## What Happened to the Wright Silver Set?

With the nearly one hundred and fifty years that have passed since Clarissa Moody Wright received the set of silver in remembrance and tribute to her husband, the set separated and scattered among several hands. With no children of her own, Clarissa Wright directed in her last will and testament that both her real and personal estate be divided among her three brothers, Simeon D., Lucius, and Horace Moody, along with the three children of her deceased brother, Luman Moody. According to Gillet, the set was divided among her brothers, nieces, and nephew in accordance to the will.<sup>23</sup>

Apparently the silver pieces did descend through the lines of the Moody family, at least to an extent. In 1973, Mary A. Bogue donated a spoon, fork, and mustard ladle to St. Lawrence University. In a letter accompanying her donation, Bogue mentioned that her father, Warren Curtis Bogue, had received the flatware from his mother, Mary Strong Bogue, who was a niece of Clarissa Wright and one of the children of the deceased brother, Luman Moody.

Some pieces, as suggested by a scrapbook kept by Mrs. Jessie Weed, reached the hands of friends of Clarissa Wright, while others sadly landed in pawn shops.<sup>24</sup> Some forks that may have been a part of the set were donated to St. Lawrence Uni-

versity in 1965 by the wife of Guy Howard who received them from his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Howard. They were residents of Canton at one time and had somehow acquired the pieces during their stay.<sup>25</sup> At this time, the forks have not been located.

According to Gillet, Clarissa Wright gave one of the pieces to a personal friend of her husband who had helped manage her affairs.<sup>26</sup> From an article in the *Commercial Advertiser*, we know that this piece was one of the silver pitchers. Although the article does not name the owner, it reports that the pitcher had been purchased by Governor David B. Hill for one hundred and fifty dollars. The article predicts that the Governor would ultimately leave the pitcher to the State of New York.<sup>27</sup> Governor Hill mentioned in his will that he had purchased the silver pitcher from the heirs of Silas Wright's executor in 1887.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to the newspaper prediction, in his will Governor Hill directed that the piece, which he referred to as the "Silas Wright Silver Pitcher," be given to Alton B. Parker, one of his executors. Parker, had worked with Hill as a campaign manager, and had served at different levels in the New York State court system, including Associate Judge of the Court of Appeals.<sup>29</sup> Governor Hill's high regard for the historical significance of the pitcher is illustrated in his own will in the direct reference to Gillet's narrative of the occasion for this gift. Unfortunately, the descent of this silver pitcher has not been traced further.

## Conclusion

While only five pieces of flatware of the one hundred and twenty-five piece set of silver presented in

1847 to honor the life and accomplishments of Silas Wright have been located, it is likely that other pieces of this set still exist and will be identified eventually. Whether the larger pieces of the set exhibited the repoussé, or the melon-reeding, style that was prevalent in Boyce's work, we can only speculate. From studying the pieces of flatware of the set and the other works of silver manufacturer Gerardus Boyce, it can be assumed that the pieces of this set are of significant value, and were of the high style of the period. In any case, Silas Wright's contributions to the State of New York were appropriately paid tribute in this fine gift of silver.

## About the Author

Heather J. Parmenter conducted her research on the Wright silver set while working as an intern at the Historical Association and completing a degree in Anthropology at SUNY-Potsdam. She is currently a graduate student in museum studies at the University of Delaware.

## Acknowledgements

In order to ascertain whether pieces of the Silas Wright set had been acquired by any major museums or other institutions in New York State or elsewhere, numerous inquiries were made. Although none could report that they knew the whereabouts of these pieces, the curators were very helpful in providing information concerning Gerardus Boyce and his other works. I received guidance from both Ken Hafertepe, the Academic Programs Director, and Amanda Lang, the Ceramics and Silver Curator at Historic Deerfield in Massachusetts who directed me to several sources. I also received assistance from Don Fennimore at the Winterthur Museum in Newark, Delaware, along with Bert Denker, the librarian of the Decorative Arts Photographic Collection at Winterthur. I received information from Deborah D. Waters, the Decorative Arts Curator at the Museum of the City of New York; Margaret K. Hofer,

the assistant curator at the New-York Historical Society; and Barry R. Harwood, the associate curator at the Brooklyn Museum. A. Bruce MacLeish of the New York State Historical Association at Cooperstown, and Susan Jackson Karp, a graduate intern at the Albany Institute of History and Art were also very helpful.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>John Arthur Garraty, *Silas Wright* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 392.

<sup>2</sup>R.H. Gillet, *The Life and Times of Silas Wright* (Albany, NY: The Argus Company, 1874), 1950.

<sup>3</sup>Gillet, 1949.

<sup>4</sup>Gillet, 1826.

<sup>5</sup>Gillet, 1826.

<sup>6</sup>Gillet, 1827.

<sup>7</sup>Gillet, 1833.

<sup>8</sup>Gerald W.R. Ward, "Introduction," in *Marks of Achievement: Four Centuries of Presentation Silver* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 17.

<sup>9</sup>David B. Warren, "From the New Republic to the Centennial," in *Marks of Achievement: Four Centuries of Presentation Silver* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 75, 77.

<sup>10</sup>Dr. Franklin B. Hough, "Honorable Silas Wright," in *History of St. Lawrence CO., New York*. (Philadelphia: L.H. Evert and Company, 1878), 232.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Von Khrum, *Silversmiths of New York City 1684-1850* (1978), 18.

<sup>12</sup>Decorative Arts Photographic Collection, The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Newark, Delaware, 1967 and 1936. (Hereafter, D.A.P.C.)

<sup>13</sup>"A Relic of Silas Wright: Rescued From Oblivion By Governor Hill." *Commercial Advertiser*, July 3, 1889.

<sup>14</sup>Katharine M. McClinton, *Collecting American Nineteenth Century Silver* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 46.

<sup>15</sup>D.A.P.C., 1976.

<sup>16</sup>D.A.P.C., 1977.

<sup>17</sup>McClinton, 273.

<sup>18</sup>D.A.P.C., 1971.

<sup>19</sup>D.A.P.C., 1974.

<sup>20</sup>McClinton, 27.

<sup>21</sup>Doris Snell, *American Silverplated Flatware Patterns* (Des Moines, IA: Wallace Homestead Book Co., 1980), 96.

<sup>22</sup>Richard F. Osterberg and Betty Smith, *Silver Flatware Dictionary* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1981).

<sup>23</sup>Gillet, 1834.

<sup>24</sup>Mrs. Jessie Weed, 1955 scrapbook, St. Lawrence Historical Association archives.

<sup>25</sup>Mrs. Guy Howard, Letter of Correspondence to the President of St. Lawrence

University. May 25, 1965. Hartford, CT.

<sup>26</sup>Gillet, 1834.

<sup>27</sup>"A Relic of Silas Wright," *Commercial Advertiser*.

<sup>28</sup>David B. Hill, "Last Will and Testament." Albany, NY, January 24, 1906.

<sup>29</sup>Edgar A. Werner, *Civil List and Constitutional History of the Colony and State of New York* (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons, and Co., 1889), 326.

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# The Wright Counties

by Stewart J. Wilson

Nearly 150 years after his death, Silas Wright, Jr. is still fondly remembered in his home area of St. Lawrence County, and in Weybridge, Vermont, where Wright spent his childhood. Wright also remains an important figure for historians of the Jacksonian period, both because of his prominence in New York and the nation, and his important stands on major issues of the day, such as Andrew Jackson's war on the U.S. Bank. However, Silas Wright is a forgotten figure throughout most of the country today. But his fame did spread beyond his home states, and his memory lives on in the names of three rural counties in the midwest.

Silas Wright, Jr. built a solid national following throughout the 1830s and 1840s while serving as a United States Senator and New York Governor. As a Jacksonian Democrat and protege of Martin Van Buren, Wright became a leader of the Democratic party, especially the northern branch of the party. His standing was such that he had been offered posts on the Supreme Court and in the cabinet as Secretary of the Treasury. He was also the Democratic party's initial nominee for Vice-President in 1844, which Wright turned down in favor of running for Governor.<sup>1</sup> In 1847, shortly before his death, Wright was frequently mentioned as a leading contender for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1848. Wright's moderate

anti-slavery stand; his reputation for honesty, loyalty, and integrity; and his humble rural roots had made him a revered figure among abolitionist frontiersmen. Is it any wonder then that pioneers would choose to name their new settlements after Silas Wright, "The Farmer Statesman?" Three counties in Iowa, Minnesota, and Missouri do indeed bear Silas Wright's name.

## Missouri

Wright County, Missouri, was the first of the three counties named in his honor. The county was created, and named for Silas Wright, on January 29, 1841. Missouri was admitted to the union in 1821 as a slave state under the Missouri Compromise. Most of the population of the new state developed along the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. The Ozark borderlands in the southeast portion of the state, where Wright County is located, remained sparsely populated for decades. Thus, the county was not created until two decades after the admission of the state to the union.

Little is known about the reasons for the naming of Wright County, Missouri. However, examining Missouri state politics during its first two decades provides some clues. At the time, Wright was in his eighth year as a United States Senator. Since 1828 Missouri had been a solidly Democratic state. In the election of 1828, every county in the state voted

for Andrew Jackson. The leading political figure in the state was Thomas Hart Benton, who served in the Senate from 1821 until 1851. Benton and Wright, both staunch Jacksonians, became close friends and allies in the Senate.

Although heavily favoring the Democrats, it still seems puzzling that a county in a slave holding state would be named for Wright, who clearly opposed the expansion of slavery to new states. However, most of the newly settled areas of Missouri tended to be opposed to slavery. The older Missouri counties along the two rivers, including the St. Louis area, were the pro-slavery centers in the 1830s and 1840s.

A definitive answer is not known, but it seems reasonable that Silas Wright was chosen as the namesake for the county simply because he was a leader in the Democratic party at the time. Many of the counties near Wright County, Missouri, bear the names of other famous figures of the time, including Polk, Webster, Dallas, and Benton, as well as references to important issues, such as Oregon and Texas counties.

Wright County, Missouri, lies about thirty miles east of Springfield, and about forty miles north of the Arkansas border. The county seat is Hartville and the current population is just under 17,000. Rectangular in shape, the county contains about one fourth the land area of St. Lawrence County, New York.



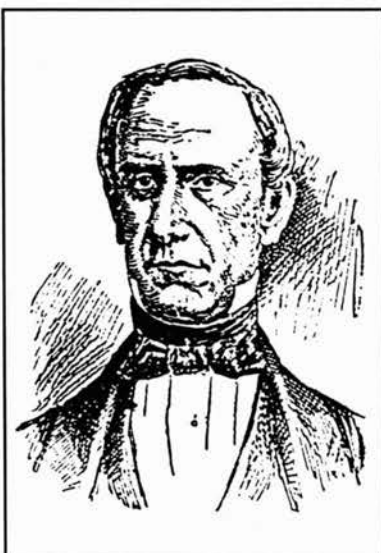
## Iowa

Unlike Wright County, Missouri, the two Wright counties in Iowa and Minnesota were named after Silas Wright's death. Wright County, Iowa is located approximately 80 miles straight north of Des Moines and 40 miles south of the Minnesota border. The county is close to the same population (14,000), and at twenty-four miles square, also similar in size to Wright County, Missouri. The county seat is Clarion.

Wright County, Iowa was established by an act of the Iowa General Assembly in 1851. It was named for both Silas Wright, and for Governor Joseph A. Wright of Indiana, although no specific reason was given for honoring the two Governors.<sup>2</sup> Joseph and Silas Wright shared many traits valued by the settlers of Iowa. Both Wrights were of humble origins. Silas' father had been a farmer and shoemaker, while Joseph's father ran a brick yard. As politicians, both were Democrats, both spoke eloquently on tariff issues, and both were strong advocates of "scientific agriculture."

Joseph A. Wright was still Governor of Indiana when Wright County, Iowa, was named. He served as the tenth Governor of the state, from 1849 to 1857. During the Civil War, Joseph Wright switched to the Republican party, and was appointed and briefly served as a United States Senator in 1862-63. He also filled an important international post as minister to Prussia and Germany under Presidents Buchanan, Lincoln and Johnson. Joseph Wright died in Berlin in 1867.<sup>3</sup>

As with Missouri, one is left to speculate as to the reasoning behind the naming of the Wright County in Iowa, and the conclusions drawn are comparable. Iowa became a state in



From the National Encyclopedia of American Biography

Governor Joseph Wright  
of Indiana.

1846, with the Democrats leading the call for statehood. Since 1840, the Whigs had opposed statehood, fearing that it would cause a rise in taxes. The Democrats controlled the state for the first eight years, until the creation of the Republican party in 1854, and once again it seems logical that Wright County was simply named for Democratic "heros," in this case, the two Wrights.<sup>4</sup> As in Missouri, many other Iowa counties are named for famous figures of Silas Wright's era, including Webster, Calhoun, Clay, Polk, Dallas, Harrison, Woodbury, and Benton.

Although Iowa had become a state in 1846, and Wright County was established and named in 1851, it appears that the earliest white settler in the county did not arrive until 1854. Major Anson Brassfield was the first recorded settler, followed by S.B. Hewett, Sr. and Jr., and N. B. Paine, all of Massachusetts.<sup>5</sup> Although Silas Wright was born in Massachusetts, no connection between the early settlers and Wright is mentioned, or is likely,

since the county's name preceded settlement.

Although created in 1851 and settled in 1854, Wright County, Iowa really began to function as a governmental entity in 1855. In that year, the settlers became disenchanted with being under the tax jurisdiction of neighboring Webster County, and decided to create their own government. This momentous occasion was recorded in poetic form by N.B. Paine:

*I saw Wright county born alive,  
August 5 of eighteen fifty-five.  
When Webster county levied tax  
That made us hump up our backs,  
We took legal steps to claim  
a franchise under our own name,  
And all our voters on the Boone  
Flocked to our ranch that August noon.  
A tent was raised of carpets made,  
That we might labor in the shade;  
Judge and clerks were duly sworn,  
To see no bogus votes were thrown,  
For all agreed, without debate,  
Wright county must be legitimate....<sup>6</sup>*

Thus, Wright County was set on solid footing, and remains today as a tribute to the two Governors.

## Minnesota

Of the three Wright counties, Minnesota was the last named, but of the three, the most detailed account of the naming of the Minnesota county survives. It was named in 1855 while Minnesota was still a territory. Statehood followed three years later in 1858. Although explored years earlier, the county had received its first white settlers in 1852. The earliest pioneers took up residence in the eastern part of the county, named Otsego township after the New York village.<sup>7</sup>

Early in 1855, three men, out of a total of only ninety-two in the county, were chosen to form a committee,



## Location of the Wright Counties



travel to the state legislature in St. Paul, and advocate for the creation of what would shortly become Wright County. The three men were W. G. McCrory, S. T. Creighton and Samuel M. McManus. The three crossed the Mississippi into Sherburne County, and then picked up a stage to St. Paul. The *History of Wright County Minnesota* provides an account of how the county was named. After getting aboard the stage, Mr. McCrory said:

Well, gentlemen, our people failed to suggest a new name for the county last night; now, I have in New York state a very particular political friend whom I would much like to see honored by naming our county after him; it is true that he is a Whig and you are both Democrats, but I hope that at this time you will lay aside all political animosities and agree to name the proposed new county Seward, in honor of Hon. William H. Seward.<sup>8</sup>

However, his companions would not agree to that proposition, and McCrory proposed a second choice:

There is a man in Orange county, my native county in New York, a personal friend of mine; you would probably have no objection to naming the county after him, and thus giving him lasting fame. He is a Democrat, not it is true, my political friend, but a man whom I greatly respect. He is the Hon. Silas Wright.<sup>9</sup>

The other two gentlemen were willing, and thus the name of the county was chosen.

McCrory was mistaken about Silas Wright's native county, and he speaks about Wright as though he were still alive, when in fact he had died eight years earlier. The other early histories of Wright county<sup>10</sup> do

not give this exact account of the naming of the county, although they do mention that the discussion about the name was animated. Either McCrory made a mistake at the time, or perhaps more likely, his story was mistold and embellished when recounted at a later date. With McCrory being from New York, it is difficult to believe he would not have known that Wright was no longer living and that he was from the northern part of the state.

In any case, by an act approved February 20, 1855, the Minnesota territorial legislature created and named a number of counties, including Wright County. At that time, the borders of the county were also set, with the Mississippi and Clearwater Rivers forming the northern boundary, and the Crow River providing most of the eastern boundary. The southern and western boundary lines were set arbitrarily by the legislature. Irregular in shape, the county is nonetheless approximately the same size as the other Wright counties, and is located about twenty-five miles northwest of Minneapolis. The county seat is Buffalo, and the current population is just under 70,000. Although primarily rural, in recent years the county has seen a great influx of people from the neighboring Twin Cities.

## Conclusion

Of the three Wright counties, the one in Minnesota is perhaps most similar to Silas Wright's home, St. Lawrence County, New York. Both have boundaries on major rivers. Both have histories of extensive lumbering industries. And, both have deep roots in agriculture, particularly dairy production. However, it is fitting that all three counties named for Silas Wright, "The Farmer

Statesman," remain largely rural and agricultural today.

Although the three counties named for Governor Wright bear his name proudly, none of the counties are particularly famous or well-known. However, if history had taken a slightly different turn, Wright might have become the namesake of a well-known city. During the Democratic convention of 1844, Wright was overwhelmingly chosen as the running mate for James K. Polk, but he turned down the nomination for a variety of complicated political reasons. In Wright's stead, George M. Dallas of Pennsylvania was nominated and elected Vice President. Less than a year later, a small village in the brand new state of Texas was named for the Vice President. One has to ask, if Silas had accepted the Vice-presidential nomination, would we be spending Sunday afternoons watching the "Wright Cowboys," or the "Silas Cowboy Cheerleaders?"

## Acknowledgements

A number of people provided important background information for this article. Thank you to the following individuals and organizations for their assistance: David N. Barker, Mrs. Kenneth Baule, Betty Dircks at the Wright County Historical Society (Minnesota), Bruce Fehn at the University of Iowa, Veilene McOllough at the Clarion, Iowa Public Library, and the Wright County Library in Hartville, Missouri.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>After Wright turned down the nomination for Vice-President, the convention chose George Dallas of Pennsylvania as James K. Polk's running mate. In running for New York Governor, Wright helped carry the state for the Polk/Dallas ticket.

<sup>2</sup>Benjamin F. Gue, *History of Iowa*, vol. 3.

<sup>3</sup>*The National Cyclopedic of American Biography* (New York, 1906), 269-270.

<sup>4</sup>It is interesting to note that although Silas Wright was a Democrat, it is likely that

he would have become a Republican after the formation of that party in 1854. Wright's mentor, Martin Van Buren, broke with the Democrats in 1848 and ran for President on the Free Soil ticket, and Wright's own protégé, Preston King of Ogdensburg, was a leader in the formation of the Republican party. Thus, Wright was definitely "in tune" with the politics of Iowa, as it has been a predominantly Republican state since 1854.

<sup>5</sup>Gue, vol. 3.

<sup>6</sup>B. P. Birdsall, ed. *History of Wright County Iowa*. (Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen & Company, 1915), 77.

<sup>7</sup>D.R. Farnham, *History of Wright County Illustrated* (1880), 23.

<sup>8</sup>Curtiss-Wedge, Franklyn. *History of Wright County Minnesota*, 1: 117. (Chicago: H.C. Cooper, Jr., & Co., 1915), 117. In 1855, William Seward had served two terms as Governor of New York (1839-1843) and was serving as United States Senator from New York. An abolitionist, Seward was soon to switch his allegiance from the Whigs to the new Republican party. His greatest fame came as Secretary of State under Lincoln and Johnson, and he is best remembered today for the purchase of Alaska in 1867.

<sup>9</sup>Curtiss-Wedge, 1: 117.

<sup>10</sup>The two other histories consulted were: D.R. Farnham's *History of Wright County Illustrated*, and the *History of Wright County, MN* (reprinted from the *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley*, by Prof. N.H. Winchell, Rev. Edward D. Neill, and Charles S. Bryant).

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# The Silas Wright \$50 Gold Certificate

by Thomas E. Price



The \$50 United States gold certificate bearing the image of Silas Wright. The actual bill measures 7 1/2 inches by 3 1/8 inches. The front is printed in black and gold inks, with the Treasury seal in red.

As one of the leading figures in his day, Silas Wright, Jr. was among society's elite. He stood alongside figures such as the great orators, Webster, Calhoun, and Clay, and aligned himself with such prominent men as Presidents Jackson, Van Buren, and Polk. These men exemplified the refined nineteenth-century American. They were men of power, prestige, and wealth. Although Wright had his share of power and prestige, wealth was another matter. Wright did not come from a particularly wealthy background and his lack of financial resources was an ongoing source of worry throughout his life. In a letter postmarked, "Washington, 15 Feby. 1828," Silas, then a young Congressman, wrote to his brother Pliny about

politics: "But I have entered too early upon this field. No man ought to attempt it until his means of living are secured. This ought to be not the dependence for a livelihood, but the expenditure of time after that living is secured."<sup>1</sup>

In another letter, this time written to his mother Eleanor on December 1, 1844, the newly elected Governor Wright penned, "My business to Albany was partly to make arrangements about a house for us to live in at that place, and my object was to hire one with the furniture, so as to save myself from the necessity of purchasing furniture, which would cost more money than I have or could well get."<sup>2</sup> With words like these, it seems ironic that a man plagued by troublesome financial standing,

would some thirty-five years following his death, appear on a piece of United States currency, let alone a gold certificate.

As the result of an act of Congress, Silas Wright became one of the few non-presidents to be pictured on a piece of U. S. currency. Section 12 of the Act of July 12, 1882, states:

That the Secretary of the Treasury is authorized and directed to receive deposits of gold coin with the Treasurer or assistant treasurers of the United States, in sums not less than \$20, and to issue certificates therefor in denominations of not less than \$20 each, corresponding with the denominations of United States notes. The coin deposited for or

representing the certificates of deposit shall be retained in the Treasury for the payment of the same on demand. Said certificates shall be receivable for customs, taxes, and all public dues, and when so received may be reissued; and such certificates, as also silver certificates, when held by any national - banking association, shall be a member of any clearing-house in which such certificates shall not be receivable in the settlement of clearing-house balances: *Provided*, That the Secretary of the Treasury shall suspend the issue of such gold certificates whenever the amount of gold coin and gold bullion in the Treasury reserved for the redemption of United States notes falls below \$100,000,000; and the provisions of section 5207 of the Revised Statutes shall be applicable to the certificates herein authorized and directed to be issued.<sup>3</sup>

It is this act of Congress that called for the issuance of gold certificates and which ultimately honored Silas Wright by placing his image on the \$50 gold certificate.

### **What is a Gold Certificate?**

Before focusing on Silas Wright and his connections to the gold certificate, we should examine the gold certificate itself. Gold certificates have a long history, and were often the subject of controversy.

A gold certificate is a type of paper currency, issued by the federal government, redeemable in gold for the amount printed on the bill. Gold certificates find their roots in 1863, issued for internal use by banks and clearing houses for the easy exchange and transfer of gold. However, the government stopped issuance of these certificates in 1875 as part of

its Resumption Act, in an attempt to stabilize the fluctuating dollar. The gold certificate re-emerged seven years later, this time in another act of Congress. As previously stated, in the act of July 12, 1882, which also extended the charters of national banks, provision was made for the issuance of gold certificates against deposits of gold coin in the U.S. Treasury. "Provision was also made that the issue of these certificates would be suspended whenever the gold, held against outstanding United States notes, should fall below \$100,000,000."<sup>4</sup> In compliance with this act, the U.S. Treasury printed gold certificates in \$20, \$50, \$100, \$500, \$1000, \$5000, and \$10,000 denominations. The lower denominations, the \$20, \$50, and \$100 certificates, were circulated for use by the general public.

Gold certificates were unique forms of currency. These certificates had inherent value, as they were readily backed and redeemable with something of immediate worth. In the early 19th century, the U.S. economy was not backed by a specie standard, the idea that the gold or silver dollar be the "standard unit of value." Thus there were great fluctuations in the value of the U.S. dollar. Gold certificates strengthened the economy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries by boosting and stabilizing the value of the dollar by backing it with gold. This economic success eventually led to the Gold Standard Act of 1900, which stated that all U.S. currency would be backed by gold.

Gold certificate issues increased steadily in the early 1900s. "From 1900 to 1910, issues of gold certificates increased from \$201 million to \$803 million."<sup>5</sup> This fact also suggests that the American public

hoarded gold in the form of these certificates. This response came about because the public knew that the dollar was historically unstable in comparison to gold. It was the eventual drying up of this stream of gold, and the substitution of silver certificates, that led to the law against the issuance of gold certificates. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Gold Reserve Act of March 9, 1933 stated that individuals were to exchange gold certificates immediately, and that after May 1, 1933, they would have no value. The fall of the gold standard meant the death of the gold certificate. Yet, in total, there were nine series of gold certificates issued between 1863 and their demise in the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> It was not until 1964 that the restriction on gold certificates was lifted, restoring their face value in modern currency, although they remain irredeemable in gold.

The gold certificate is still legal tender today, although its real value is not monetary, but rather numismatic. Gold certificates are considered some of the most beautiful pieces of currency ever issued by the United States. They are generally collected for their beauty and history rather than their worth as currency.

### **Why Silas' Image?**

There is much speculation as to why Silas Wright's image was chosen to grace the 1882 series \$50 gold certificate, some thirty-five years after his death. It is the sole decision of the Secretary of the Treasury to choose whose image will appear on the currency. The year 1882 was a tumultuous year in politics. The previous year, President Garfield was assassinated, leaving Vice President Chester Arthur in the chief executive's office. Arthur appointed





From the SLCHA Collections

*The reverse side of the Silas Wright gold certificate, shown here considerably reduced in size. This side is printed in only one color, a golden orange.*

Charles J. Folger, former New York State Senator and Chief Justice of the Court of Appeals, to the post of Secretary of the Treasury. It was during his short stint as Secretary in 1882 that Folger chose Silas Wright to grace the \$50 gold certificate. There are a couple of interesting hypotheses as to why Folger may have made his decision.

In the late 1800s, Silas Wright was still fondly remembered and revered by the American people. A correspondent for the *Brooklyn Eagle* on December 15, 1891 wrote, “New York state has, fortunately, had very many brilliant men who have served her faithfully in official positions, men who have stood high in national politics, but there have been few whose memory has been more fondly cherished than Silas Wright. He died in 1847, but his fame becomes greater as the years go on... No man was ever so loved in the state of New York as Silas Wright.”<sup>7</sup> It is possible that the popularity of the late Governor Wright prompted Folger’s decision. However, upon examination of the other gold certificates printed in 1882, we see that Wright is in the company of such notables as Presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. It seems there must have been other motives be-

sides Wright’s popularity to justify his presence on a piece of currency.

Although Silas Wright was a powerful political figure in his time, his early death made him something of an icon of democracy. The idea of “Silas Wright” was synonymous with the “common man” and the “good of the people.” In a time of great political scandal and distrust, such as that witnessed in the administrations of Presidents Grant, Hayes, and Garfield, the average voter wanted their government representative to be someone who would evoke the political morals and standards that Silas Wright had stood for some thirty-five years earlier: simple honesty and common sense. The politicians of the later part of the century clearly understood this. A politician needed to use the memory of a “Silas Wright” to add leverage to a political career marred by corruption. Because of this, Silas Wright became a rallying point for many politicians seeking election. This may have rung true for the very man who was responsible for placing Wright’s image on the \$50 gold certificate.

Just four months after the act of 1882, Folger became a candidate for Governor of New York. Was his decision to “resurrect” Silas Wright by placing him back in the public eye

a political tactic to help put himself in the Governor’s seat? It is possible, but it had little effect on the outcome of the election. The use of proxies in the state committee led to allegations of fraud. These allegations swept over the political convention and incited a “popular revolt” leading to Folger’s loss to Grover Cleveland by a wide margin of 192,854 votes.<sup>8</sup> These events created the impetus for Cleveland’s political good fortunes, which ultimately put him in the White House in 1884 and again in 1892.<sup>9</sup> It is ironic that if Folger did indeed try to use the memory of Silas Wright to his own advantage, that his subsequent political downfall would be caused by a fraudulent election.

There are other alternatives to this somewhat melodramatic speculation about the choice of Governor Wright for the gold certificate. It is a custom of the Treasury to feature an equal number of representatives of the various political parties on currency. If one examines the currency of today, there are about the same number of Democrats and Republicans pictured. It is possible that Secretary Folger followed this custom by honoring one of the party “saints.” Who better to honor than fellow New Yorker and political ally, Silas Wright, “The Great Commoner.” Although a Democrat in life, it is relatively safe to surmise that Silas Wright would have joined the faction that became the Republican party in 1854. In addition, as a politician, Wright had strong ties to the financial dealings of the United States. During his career, Wright served as New York State Comptroller, and was at the center of the United States Bank controversy of the 1830s which brought about the elimination of the Second Bank of

the United States, the largest financial monopoly in American history up to that time. With Wright's political and financial connections, it may have been simply a logical decision for Folger to place Wright's image on the currency.

## Conclusion

It may never be known what the true reason was for featuring the image of Silas Wright on the \$50 gold certificate. No legislation or written notes have been found concerning Folger's mo-

tives. However, because of his decision, Wright will always be remembered. A man of meager financial means in life, his history is as rich as any the North Country and the State of New York has ever produced. Only a handful of individuals have appeared on U.S. currency, and the \$50 gold certificate has helped insure the memory and legacy of Silas Wright.

## The Wright Certificate in Local Circulation

The brief newspaper article reprinted below presents a rather unusual use of the Silas Wright gold certificate. The limited print run of the bill, the relatively high denomination, and the fact that the certificate could be redeemed for gold meant that the Wright certificate was never widely known or used. As evidenced by the printing of this article in the local newspaper, the existence of the Wright certificate was not well-known in the area in 1913. Although not confirmed, the "Wright fountain" referred to was probably a fountain either near the bridge across the Grasse river, or in the village green at the corner of Main and Park Streets in Canton. The following article is from the *Ogdensburg Weekly Advance*, July, 1913:

*A \$50 bill bearing the portrait of Silas Wright, former Governor of New York, was given in payment here Tuesday, by Charles Pfaff, of Boston, for damages done to the Silas Wright fountain in Canton. Col. Pfaff and party in two cars were touring from Boston to Alexandria Bay. In Canton they had the misfortune to run into the Silas Wright fountain, somewhat damaging it. J. Fred Hammond, president of the village, notified the Ogdensburg authorities to look out for them and when they arrived here they were stopped. Col. Pfaff got into communication with President Hammond and was told that \$50 would pay for the damage to the fountain. The Col. pulled out a roll of bills, took off a \$50 note bearing the picture of Gov. Wright, handed it over to Recorder Corcoran, asking if that would be "all right." He was assured that it would be and the two cars departed for Alexandria Bay.*

## Acknowledgements

Information for this article was graciously provided by the office of United States Representative John McHugh.

Thank you to Mary Ruth Judd for bringing the newspaper clipping on the local use of the gold certificate to our attention.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Letter from Silas Wright to Pliney Wright, February 15, 1828 (in the SLCHA archives).

<sup>2</sup>Letter from Silas Wright to Eleanor Wright, December 1, 1844 (in the SLCHA archives).

<sup>3</sup>A. Barton Hepburn, *History of Coinage and Currency in the United States and the Perennial Contest for Sound Money*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1903), 243.

<sup>4</sup>Hepburn, 243.

<sup>5</sup>B. Krause, *Collecting Paper Money for Pleasure & Profit*, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Betterway Books, 1992), 34.

<sup>6</sup>For more information on gold certificates and the gold standard, see Hepburn and Krause.

<sup>7</sup>*Brooklyn Eagle*, December 15, 1891.

<sup>8</sup>C.A. Conant, *The Progress of the Empire State* (New York: The Progress of the Empire State Company, 1913), 38.

<sup>9</sup>J.B. Bishop, *A. Barton Hepburn His Life and Service to His Time* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 102.

# The Silas Wright Custom House Stamps

by Paul Schumacher, with Stewart J. Wilson

**A**t a recent stamp show where my exhibit, "Not Quite President of the United States," was on display, I was approached by a judge who seemed impressed with some of the historical trivia in the exhibit. The display deals with people who were in some way associated with the Presidency, but never attained the office.

"Where do you find these people?" the judge asked. "I have never heard of this guy," she said, pointing to the page on Governor Silas Wright, Jr.

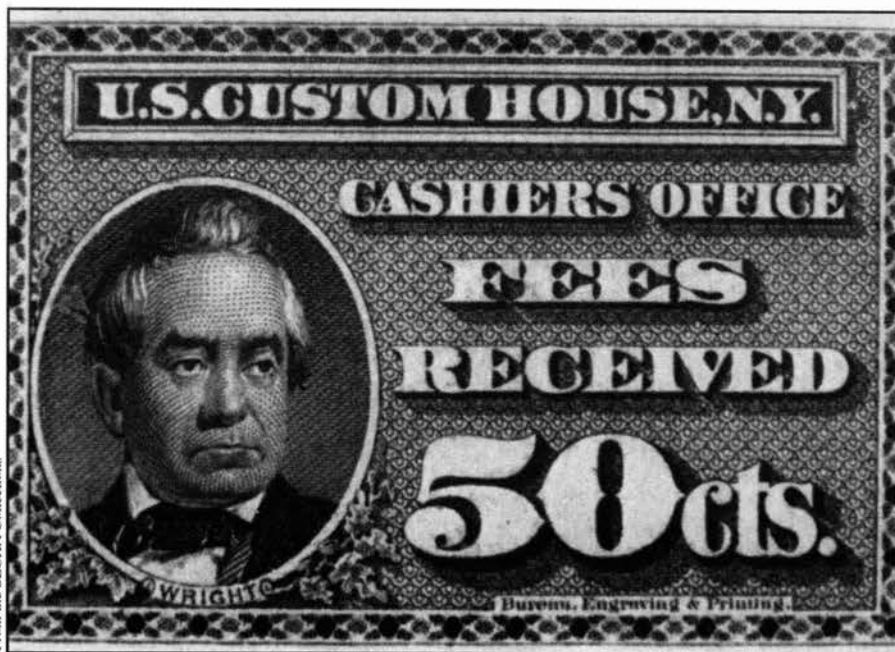
Though not nationally known today, Silas Wright was one of the best known politicians in the United States back in the days when adhe-

sive postage stamps were a new idea. Wright had a number of connections to the history of stamps and post offices. One of the earliest political offices held by Wright was postmaster of Canton, New York. He served as Canton's third postmaster, from 1821 to 1827. As a U.S. Senator from 1833 to 1844, Wright served on a committee dealing with the postal system, and was the leading force behind reducing the cost of mailing a letter in the early 1840s. The new railroads and steamships had made it much cheaper for the post office to transport the mail, and Wright pushed through legislation to reduce the cost of postage.

As a member of the Senate, Wright was entitled to free franking

privileges. Numerous examples of Wright's free frank are known, although the *American Stampless Cover Catalog* lists, but does not price, Wright's Senatorial frank. Other items related to Wright and philately are special cancellations and cachets. A special cachet envelope was created for Governor Wright's 140th birthday in 1935. Similar cachets, with slight alterations, were also used for his 150th birthday and recent bicentennial celebrations.

Perhaps the highest honor in philately is to be pictured on a stamp. Silas Wright's one appearance on a set of stamps came in 1887, when he was pictured on a set of eight issued



From the SLCHA Collections



The 50 cent Silas Wright custom house stamp, shown enlarged to the left, and actual size above. The stamps were issued in eight denominations ranging from 20 cents to 90 cents, with each denomination printed in a different color. The 50 cent stamp shown here was navy blue.



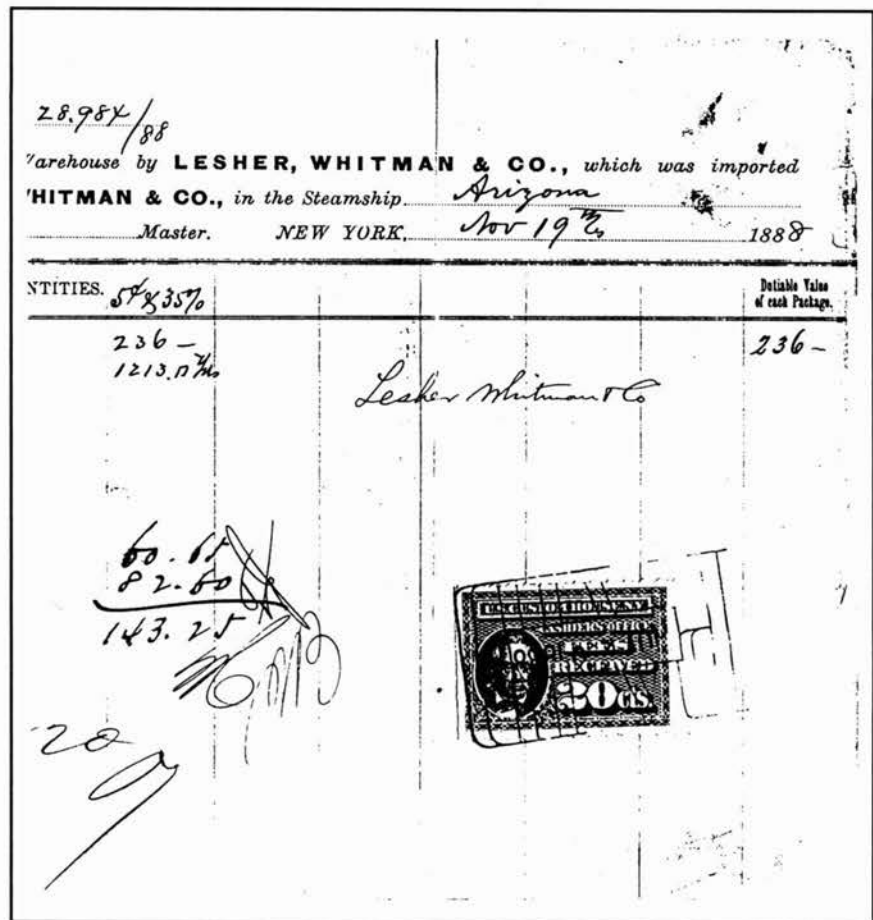
for the New York customs house. They are listed in the revenue section of *Scott's Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps*, even though they are not revenues. The stamps were used to indicate that payment had been made for services, not for fiscal levies.

Each stamp has a slightly different background, and there are a number of perforation and roulette varieties. The stamps are very rare in mint condition, and only the twenty cent low value has been found on a document. The document, from Leshner, Whitman & Co., measures 14 by 8 1/2 inches and the stamp indicates payment of a fee for issuing a withdrawal bond on a case of worsted dry goods.

According to the *Annual Reports of the Director of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing*, the custom house stamps were printed in seven years, 1887 through 1890, 1903, 1914, and 1916. The *Report for 1887* indicated that eight plates were made, one for each stamp, and each plate cost \$65. The stamps were printed in sheets of fifty and bound in volumes of 100 sheets for a total of 5,000 stamps in each book.

The rarest items in the Wright set are the top three values: the seventy cent violet brown, the eighty cent brown, and the ninety cent black. Quantities printed were 20,000, 15,000, and 10,000, respectively. The stamps remained in use until 1918, although only at one site, the Port of New York.

The reason why Governor Wright was selected to appear on the set of custom house stamps remains speculative. He seems to have had no particular connection to the customs house, although a customs house is located in his home county at



Document from Leshner, Whitman and Co., with a Silas Wright custom house stamp affixed. This is the only known document with a Wright stamp attached.

Ogdensburg, and Wright was a leading figure on tariff issues. Perhaps Wright's ties to New York City merchants played a role, even thirty-five years after his death. More likely, Wright was selected because he was a Democratic party hero. The stamps were issued during the Presidency of Grover Cleveland, the first Democrat to occupy the White House since the Civil War.

### Note

Sections of this article originally appeared in, "Wright on N.Y. Custom House stamps," in *Stamp Collector*, January 14, 1995, page 11.

### About the Author

Paul Schumacher is a financial analyst and stamp collector from Cherry Hill, New Jersey. One of his philatelic interests is collecting items depicting or related to figures who almost became President.

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# Silas Wright Grange No. 427

by Shannon Scherer

In February, 1879, the Silas Wright Grange, number 427, was established in the Village of Canton, New York. It was created “to promote independence, hard work, fairness, self-discipline and cooperation.” Grange organizations, like the Silas Wright Grange, were established throughout the United States to bring together

farmers and the agrarian classes. The national grange, the Patrons of Husbandry, was organized in 1867 as an association of farmers dedicated to their mutual advancement and welfare.

The first grange meeting in Canton consisted of thirteen men. The precise date and the minutes from this original meeting are lost. None-

theless, it is recorded that William Perry, a charter member, suggested the grange be named after Silas Wright since his own ancestors were, “honored friends of Governor Wright.” Perry also contributed a Bible, and was given the position of Overseer. Other charter members and their positions in the grange were as follows: Horace J. Harrington, 1st



*The current home of Silas Wright Grange No. 427, located just off Route 68, near Canton, New York.*



From the SLCHA collections

*William Perry, charter member of Silas Wright Grange No. 427. Perry suggested naming the grange after Silas Wright, and he held numerous posts in the grange before his death in 1903.*

Master; Sandford Barnes, Lecture; Elliot Healy, Steward; James Smith, Assistant Steward; E. D. Gray, Chaplin; Byron Healy, Treasure; James A. Clark, Secretary; E. Sanderson, Gate Keeper; and Mrs. H.H. Harrington, Ceres. There were a total of twenty-two charter members. The growth of membership in the early years was steady.

One goal of the grange movement was cooperative buying. In many cases, farmers were not receiving sufficient prices for their own products in order to meet the retail cost of merchandise. However, the grange represented more than just a buying cooperative or a social meeting place for its members. It also served as a school, a lecture hall, a store, as well as a place to meet and discuss politics. The overall purpose of the grange was to educate and elevate the American farmer.

Many aspects of the members' lives were incorporated into the grange. The farming community pulled together to help out each other and work for common causes. Grange members were taught frugality, and compassion, for their fellow farmers. The grange pledge was, "United by the strong and faithful tie of agriculture, mutually resolved to labor for the good of our Order, our country and mankind."

The standard grange meeting consisted of the presentation of the flag, regular business, initiation of candidates, educational programs and singing. Differing degrees of membership could be attained. Regalia was worn to meetings: sashes and aprons for the sisters, sashes and pouches for the brothers. Drinking was not permitted at any of the grange meetings. At one point, fees for membership were a dollar a meeting and thirty dollars per year. Frequently there were potluck feasts in which members would come together to unite and celebrate.

The Silas Wright Grange has played an active role in the broader Canton community. For example, the grange donated twenty-five dollars to the Silas Wright Memorial Fund in 1905. Members were greatly concerned with children's welfare issues in the 1920s. Fund-raisers for food and clothing were set up as an effort to provide for needy local children. The grange showed concern for the environment by buying land for reforestation with Scotch pines, in cooperation with the Canton Adirondack Water System.

The Silas Wright Grange has met in various locations over the years. Early meetings were held in the Matthew's Block, and later in the

Canton Opera House. In 1881, the second floor of the fireman's hall housed the needs of the grange. In 1941, meetings were held at the Harrington Hotel, the present site of the Family Dollar store. The upstairs of Kaplin's Store housed the grange meetings in 1947. Two of the grange's meeting places have encountered fires. The Jameson Block meeting place was damaged primarily by smoke, but was spared from the flames. The second fire was more disastrous, but fortunately no lives were lost.

Silas Wright Grange No. 427 remains vitally important in the lives of its members, who assemble today at a small former schoolhouse located just off Route 68. Paralleling national trends, the membership and participation has decreased, but the current members remain dedicated to the principals and goals of the grange movement.

## About the Author

Shannon Scherer is originally from Manhasset, New York. She recently graduated from St. Lawrence University with a double major in Government and History. She served as an intern at the SLCHA during spring term, 1995.

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# THE OLD WEST LIVES!

**I**n February, 1882 *Harper's Weekly* magazine published an illustration of a twenty-one year old New Yorker, Frederic Remington. And so began the career of an artist who would be celebrated for generations as an artist who captured the Old West. Remington would go on to create hundreds of images as diverse as the exciting *Charge of the Rough Riders Up San Juan Hill* to the serene *End of the Day*. During his career, cut short at the age of forty-eight, he would become a painter, sculptor and writer.

**A**lthough Remington was drawn to the West by the excitement of conflict, he always returned to the land he loved—Northern New York. He produced many paintings of the St. Lawrence River and the Adirondack Mountains. Make plans to visit the Frederic Remington Art Museum and see the Old West come to life. The works are so realistic you may think you hear the thundering of hooves.

Tuesday, July 30, 1907  
 "Blowing like hell-and quite tiresome. I to day [sic] finished *Indian Raid* and the work I had laid out for summer. Intend to sketch for study now and loaf-a sort of vacation. Mrs. picking her last peas. Our garden is so poor it hardly repays our pains but could be enriched. Ebbie H. posed for little indian and wounded buck picture. I have good drawing for it. Island is dry as a desert. They're afraid there will be a fire on Chippewa Point."

*Frederic Remington*

from Remington's personal journal

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### Admission

Museum members are free	
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Youths under 12	Free
Organized group tours	\$2

Last gallery tour at 4:00 pm

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