



The soil, my friends, is a subject with which we are intimately connected. It is the source from whence we came; it is the granary from which we are sustained; it is the grave where we are finally to repose. The earth which we cultivate is the same from which we were animated. Today it is man; tomorrow it is dust..."

George Tibbits in his address to the *Rensselaer County Society for the Promotion of Agriculture and Domestic Manufactures*, 1819

# George Mortimer Tibbits

Tibbits is a name with which all Hoosacians are well-acquainted. Rev. Edward Dudley Tibbits founded the school in 1889; Edward's father, John Bleeker Tibbits, was instrumental in the development of the incandescent light bulb; John's father, George Mortimer Tibbits, constructed the gothic-style castle on the hill; and George's father, also George Mortimer, purchased the land now occupied by the school in 1800. Today, the Tibbits name echoes in its various incarnations from the Hoosic River above which the 846-acre Tibbitts (sic) Forest rises to greet the Rensselaer Plateau straight through to Tibbits Avenue in Troy along the mighty Hudson.

The family arrived in the United States from Warwickshire, England in the 17th century, settling on a small point along Providence Bay in what is now Rhode Island. Generations of Tibbits were born at the farm located on a parcel of land then-known as Tibbits Point, including George Mortimer, in January of 1763. His family eventually relocated to Lansingburgh where George would meet Francis Atkinson, a dry-goods dealer from New York City. The chance meeting would change the course of the young man's life.

According to George, Atkinson offered to supply the aspiring entrepreneur with items for a mercantile if he would procure pine and oak timber and deliver it to New York City the following spring. Atkinson did not require any security to back the exchange and George agreed. He made good on his promise and within a year had established himself as a trustworthy and successful merchant.

George would later write: "This act of kindness of Mr. Atkinson, in trusting me without any security, made a deep impression upon my mind, which never has been nor ever will be erased. I was surprised at the time at the confidence which he appeared to repose in me... I have always looked back upon it as the first stepping-stone to my future progress in life."

In 1787, Benjamin Tibbits, George's younger brother, joined the firm as a partner. He would later be joined by another brother, Elisha. A few years later, George married Sarah Noyes and the two relocated to Troy, where George left the business to his brothers and began focusing on his passion for politics and philanthropy.

From 1800 to the time of his death in 1849, George Tibbits acted as a director for the Rensselaer & Saratoga Insurance Company; President of the Rensselaer County Agricultural Society; a director of the Troy Turnpike



"The White House of Nepimore Vale" (known today as Dudley Cottage,) was the summer home of the first George Mortimer Tibbits. Pictured above in 1939, the home had not yet undergone renovations for its use as a dormitory and faculty housing, and is far closer to what it would have looked like when George purchased the property in 1800.



Railroad Company; and also as a director of the Farmers' Bank in Troy.

George served as fire warden, a village trustee, the chief engineer for the local fire department, and later Troy's Mayor. He was elected to the house assembly in 1800, he served as a member of the National House of Representatives within the Eighth Congress from the Tenth Congressional District of New York. He was a member of the New York State Senate from 1815 to 1818. In 1816 and ran for lieutenant-governor of the state on the ticket with Federalist Rufus King.

An early abolitionist, George supported black churches in Troy. Conjecture surrounding the property now occupied by Hoosac School suggests the site was a stop on the Underground Railroad. It is certainly possible given Hoosick's proximity to a convergence of two routes heading north from Albany into Canada.

Also known for his willingness to promote Troy's prosperity, stories abound of projects and initiatives led by George. These included the city's expanded water supply system and protection of the Hudson River waterway to maintain thru-traffic.

Having already amassed a fortune from his business dealings, George's interest turned to land. In 1800, he acquired a large holding in Hoosick which included a small white dwelling and a number of out-buildings constructed by the Tory Col. Francis Pfister just prior to the American Revolution. Col. Pfister lost his life during the Battle of Bennington and his property was seized by the Americans and later sold.

### **Erie Canal, the Troy Turnpike and Railroad Company, and the Hoosac Tunnel**

During this same period, George became an advocate for connecting, via canal system, Lake Erie with the Hudson. He is also credited with the resourcefulness of allocating funds to see the Erie Canal come to fruition. The "Tibbits Bill" was signed by Governor Clinton on April 15th, 1817 and the canal was initiated that same year.

Serving on the Board of Directors for the Troy Turnpike and Railroad Company, George supported a railroad route from Troy to Bennington and was the sole director to vote against construction of a turnpike road in favor of the railway.

The rail system in America was still in its infancy, but George saw value in connecting major hubs via rail for transport of people and goods. According to Grace

Greylock Niles' book *The Hoosac Valley, Its Legends and Its History*, "[George] believed in the proposed Troy and Hoosac Tunnel Route to Boston, and in 1834 he personally engaged Prof. Amos Eaton and his students of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute of Troy to survey a railroad route to the base of Hoosac Mountain in North Adams. Mr. Tibbits, then a gentleman of 70 years, accompanied Eaton's students on foot, sharing the hardships of the expedition with them."

The underpinnings of the Hoosac Tunnel project were underway just prior to George's death in 1849. Groundbreaking occurred in 1851 and the tunnel was completed by 1875.

George's passion for the railroad extended beyond its routes. He was also interested in improvements to the physical rails supporting the trains. Just prior to his death, George met with engineer Loammi Baldwin, who proposed a system made of timber and strap-rail laid over a level rock bed. George purportedly commented, "The time would come when the whole longitudinal structure would be made of iron." If true, this marks the first introduction to the iron t-rail design still in use today.

### **New York State Prison System**

George Tibbits also had a voice within the New York State prison system. Following the death of a female inmate in 1826 at Auburn State Prison, George was asked to join a panel for recommendations for the treatment and handling of prisoners in the state. His subsequent recommendations led to improved treatment of prisoners and the construction of a separate prison to hold female populations. Sing-Sing was completed in 1828 and is still in operation today.

### **On the Nepimore Vale**

George Tibbits maintained his white house on the hill overlooking the Nepimore Vale, spending time away from the business and bustle of Troy whenever he could. It is said his favorite time of day was the quiet of morning and it is easy even now to imagine him walking the grounds as the first light of day spills pink over the horizon.

George died on July 19th, 1849 at his Troy home, leaving his Hoosick property to his eldest son, George. What would he have thought to learn his quiet estate would one day house a school; his old white house on the Nepimore Vale, the students and teachers? Each of these new faces, pausing as George did in the early hours to look out at the bends in the mountains where the river runs reflecting back that pale and pink morning sky. -SG