

The Howard Brothers and Their Fredonia Enterprises
By Douglas H. Shepard

Edward **Howard** was born in Herkimer County, NY in February 1800. His name first appears locally in the 1825 Pomfret Assessment Roll under “**Norton & Howard.**” The “**Norton**” was James **Norton**, born in 1786, who came to Fredonia with Leverett **Barker** in 1809. He worked as a millhand at the Clothing Works on Mill Street [later **Norton** Place] and, by May 1819, he owned a half interest in it. In July 1823 he became sole owner and, by 1825, he had taken Edward **Howard** in as a partner.

Norton’s decision to take on a partner may have been caused by family tragedy and disruption. He had been married to Polly **Norton** before moving to Fredonia. They had three children, all born in Fredonia between 1814 and 1821. In August 1823 Polly died, leaving him the surviving parent of three children between two and nine years old. On 2 September 1824 he married Electa **Webster**. Soon after, he took the 25-year old Edward **Howard** into the firm. On 15 March 1827, **Howard** was married to Electa’s sister Emily **Webster** in the Fredonia Baptist Church, although neither appears in its membership lists. **Howard** must have come here with or later brought other family members because the 1830 Census records the household he headed as containing four males, one between 10 and 15, one 15-20, one (Edward?) 20-30 and one 30-40. Of females, there were one under 5, one 20-30 (Emily?), and one 50-60. A Martha **Howard** “sister of Edward **Howard** of Fredonia” died in Westfield on 13 October 1826, age 16. In addition, Manly D. **Howard**, who died in Grand Rapids MI on 17 September 1884, age 67, was described as a “brother of the late Edward of Fredonia,” so he could have been the male between 10 and 15 in 1830. Manly **Howard** was born in West Winfield, Herkimer County, NY around 1817. He came to Fredonia in 1826 and attended the Fredonia Academy for three terms in 1834-35, beginning when he was 17.

Edward **Howard** must have done well in business since all his children too were able to attend the Fredonia Academy. They were Martha M., born around 1828; Ella or Helen E., 1834; Lewis S., 1836; Caroline E. (or Emily Caroline). 1838; Mary R., 1840; Edward D., 1842; Frank W., 1844; and Clarence M., 1848.

Helen died in August 1853 followed by Martha in September. Edward was involved with the mill – at various times it functioned as a fulling, carding, grist and flour mill – at least through the 1840s. (In 1838 he took on E. E. **Case** for the wool carding business of **Howard & Case**). However, by the 1850 Census he described himself as “Pedling.” In 1855 he was still a “Pedler” but in 1860 and 1865 a “Farmer.” Still living at home were all the surviving children: Lewis, Carrie, Mary, Edward, Frank and Clarence.

Apparently the first of the children to work outside the home was Lewis Sherrill **Howard**. He had attended the Fredonia Academy for seven terms from when he was five years old in 1841 through 1853. He was said to have begun working as an assistant to the Postmaster, L. L. **Pratt**, when he was 15. That would have been in 1851 while he was still attending the Academy. At about 17 (1853) he was put in charge of the office by O. W. **Johnson**, the Postmaster who had taken over on 30 June 1853. For many years, following the British model, it was standard practice for the Postmaster (appointed by the President whenever a new party occupied the White House) to have the post office at his place of business. It also became customary for the post office room to have for sale newspapers, magazines, stationery and other goods. Indeed when it was announced that the Post Office was being moved from the Johnson House (1 Park Place) to the first floor of the Censor Block (4 Center Street), the item added “The

Bookstore of E. D. **Holt** is also to be removed to a room adjoining the Post office in the Censor Block, the two rooms having been arranged conveniently both for the occupants and the public.”

[**Holt** is interesting in himself. The family of Erastus **Holt**, Sr., arrived in Sheridan in 1830, moving to Pomfret in 1849. Some of the children attended the Fredonia Academy. Walter W. **Holt**, probably an older brother, established a law practice in Fredonia in 1849. He was joined by the younger Erastus in 1850. When Walter’s young wife died in 1853, he and Erastus moved into a boarding house together. In February 1854 Erastus bought William Wallace **Perkins’** Post office bookstore. (**Perkins** had completed ten terms at the Academy in 1847, the year before Erastus began there.) In 1857, after the Post office and the bookstore were moved to the Censor Block, 4 Center Street, he sold it to the **McKinstry** Brothers and went into business in Hamilton, Ontario. When the Civil War broke out, he immediately sold that business and enlisted as a Private in the 6th Massachusetts Regiment. Later he became an officer in the 49th New York Regiment and was killed in one of the last battles of the war. The local E. D. **Holt** Post of the G.A.R. was named in his honor.]

When **Holt** sold to the **McKinstrys**, they must have put Lewis **Howard** in charge because there is a traditional “Carrier’s Address” (the newspaper carrier’s annual greeting) in 1859 from “Lewis S. **Howard’s** Post Office Bookstore.” By 1860 he was named Deputy Post Master and had taken on his brother Edward to clerk in the book and stationery department, and in July 1861 he bought the bookstore from the **McKinstrys**. Edward continued to work there although he also began working as a telegraph operator.

In March 1865 Lewis **Howard** bought various jewelry items from **Nichols** and **Goodwin** of New York City, including a \$96 Montandon watch, and in September 1866 Lewis and Edward advertised that they had available for sale five different grades of the American Watch manufactured at Waltham MA. This seems to mark the beginning of their involvement in this field. In May 1867 Edward was finally taken on as a full partner in the firm. In February 1868 along with Orson **Stiles** and the **McKinstry** Brothers, they bought the corner lot at Water and East Main streets with some wooden buildings on it. The old wooden stores were moved off (they were destroyed in a fire along East Main Street in April 1868) and a three-story brick building, the Union Block, was put up on the lot.

The building had the Censor office and printing business and the **Howard’s** bookstore and jewelry business, although, for the 1870 Census, Edward identified himself as a book and stationery dealer, Lewis as a book dealer, Frank a clerk in the Post Office, and Clarence a sewing machine agent. By 1873, Frank became the Deputy Post Master.

Lewis, who had been ill with consumption for some time, died on 1 October 1874. Their father, Edward **Howard**, who had been paralyzed since 1865, died the following March, 1875. In September of that year E.D. and C. M. **Howard** formed the Independent Watch Co. based at 63 Main Street (today’s 1 East Main Street). This was followed by the Lake Shore Watch Co. and the Empire Watch Co. The **Howards** bought watch movements and cases from several manufacturing companies and inscribed each with one of their three company names.

At about this time, Frank **Howard** took over the Alonzo **Lewis** Bakery/Grocery (7 Water Street) while Clarence and Edward continued the Bookstore/Jewelry business on East Main Street. They must have been doing very well since, at the end of 1876, they were able to buy a long-standing patent medicine business at a significant cost, estimated at the time as in the neighborhood of \$100,000.

What they were buying — or buying into — was the **Pettit-Barker** Eye Salve Co., founded by James **Pettit**, who was born near Albany NY in April 1777 and became a physician

specializing in optical surgery. According to Dilley's sketch of his grandson, William W. **Pettit**, (*Biographical and Portrait Cyclopaedia*,), James **Pettit** settled in Fredonia in 1835. (He and his wife were received by letter into the Fredonia Baptist church on 5 September 1835.) He bought 25 acres in Cordova, where he and his wife and family ran an Underground Railroad station. **Pettit's** son Eber M. **Pettit** bought 15 acres in Cordover, although he and Darwin R. **Barker** later ran an Underground **Railroad** station and patent medicine business in Versailles, NY.

Although there are no local advertisements for James **Pettit's** medical practice, he did immediately begin advertising himself as the exclusive local agent for **Morison's** Pills. This was a patent medicine created by an Englishman, James **Morison**, who sold his Vegetable Universal Medicines widely in the U.S. Its efficacy was attested to by the British College of Health, which **Morison** had also concocted. It was not until 1843 that the first batch of **Pettit's** Eye Salve was made up, fifteen dozen tins. Eber **Pettit** acted as the firm's traveling salesman, putting them out on commission in Chautauqua and surrounding counties.

Darwin R. **Barker**, Leverett's son and Hezekiah's grandson, was born in Fredonia in 1820. He attended the Fredonia Academy in 1830 through 1839 as did Eber's daughter Helen E. **Pettit** (1836-1844). When he left the Academy, he relocated in Versailles to run his father's tannery and leather store there. Eber **Pettit** and his family (including Helen) had moved there in 1838. In 1846 Darwin **Barker** and Helen **Pettit** were married and he began to work for the **Pettit** company. When James **Pettit** died in 1849, Eber **Pettit** took over the business and **Barker** began doing the traveling that Eber **Pettit** had been involved with since 1838. In 1855 **Barker** became a full partner and, in 1858, with business much increased, he handed over the traveling to Eber's son James and concentrated on the office work.

The Versailles Botanic Mills, which began around 1859, prepared bark, roots and herbs to be used in patent medicines. They were sold to **Starr** and **Pettit** (Eber's son James) and later were owned by D. R. **Barker** under the management of Eber's son James **Pettit**.

In 1862 through 1864, the **Barkers** bought a farm at 278 Central Avenue and moved back to Fredonia, where their only surviving child, daughter Dora, could attend the Fredonia Academy. There was no longer a need for an Underground Railroad station, but the Eye Salve business relocated to Central Avenue, with Eber **Pettit** buying six acres adjoining the **Barkers** in 1868. The company continued to flourish, even during the depression of 1873. Finally, when Edward and Clarence **Howard** offered to buy them out in 1876, a deal was struck.

The **Howards'** next move was to put up a new building in which to manufacture **Pettit's** Eye Salve. The lot was immediately behind the Baptist Church building so that their manufactory was actually up against the rear wall of the church. It was an L-shaped structure. The short leg, 24 feet deep, ran 61 feet along Temple Street, in line with the church building. The long leg, also 24 feet wide, ran from Temple Street back 84 feet along the church's back wall. It had a basement and two stories above it. The construction was well under way by the beginning of December 1877.

At the same time E.D. and C.M. **Howard** sold the book and jewelry store to Frank **Howard** as announced in January 1878. In December 1878 F. W. **Howard** issued Vol.I, No.1 of *The Fredonia Astonisher* (a take-off on *The Fredonia Advertiser*). Its subhead was "This Paper is Published for Money, Not for Glory." The cost was 5¢ per copy, or 50 cents per year, "and free to all our customers." The four-page advertising sheet consisted primarily of fillers taken from various sources along with ads for F. W. **Howard's** Jewelry Store offering "any American Watch," and **Howard's** Bookstore. Oddly enough, the only specific references to watches by name are to Elgin, Waltham, Springfield and Hampden watches.

The sale of the store to their brother, left E.D. and C.M. **Howard** free to concentrate on "their constantly increasing \$16 watch and **Pettit's** Eye Salve business." The construction of the new facility must have taken most of 1878 since it was not until its 15 January 1879 issue that *The Fredonia Censor* announced that "the **Howard** Bros. began making eye salve today," with Dr. E. M. **Pettit** in charge of the operation. In addition to the machinery for watch production and for the medicine lines — Eye Salve, Cough Cure and Blood Purifier — the **Howards** bought printing and binding equipment with which to make labels, fliers, pamphlets and other advertising material.

They succeeded so well that by March 1880 they had purchased a 2-acre lot (88 to 96 East Main Street) on which to build a new factory. The old building was moved, in parts, to the new site and was extensively added to. As part of the new arrangement, Darwin R. **Barker** bought out Eber M. **Pettit** on 19 June 1880, extinguishing the **Pettit & Barker** business name.

New staff were hired and production increased in both lines, watches and medicines. By March 1881 the **Howard** Bros. had experimented with making their own watch movements rather than just buying and assembling, and had determined to go ahead with that project. They let it be known that they intended to form a stock company. "They have already had very tempting offers from other places to move their entire manufacturing establishment away from Fredonia" the *Censor* of 2 March 1881 declared. In other words, local citizens should guarantee their continued presence by buying into the company. By 23 March 1881 the capital stock was "all subscribed by responsible citizens" and on 24 March the Independent Watch Company of Fredonia, New York was incorporated in papers filed at the Court House that day. The Directors included Edward **Howard**, Clarence **Howard**, and Darwin **Barker**. By the end of the month, the watch property of **Howard** Bros. was turned over to the Independent Watch Co.

Howard Bros. continued to manufacture medicines in the East Main Street factory, but work was about to begin on a separate facility for them on East Main Street and Railroad (Cleveland) Avenue. Although both enterprises did very well, the **Howard** brothers branched out once again. In November 1881, along with F. B. **Rice**, they bought out the J. N. **Durrell** shop and patents for manufacturing **Durrell's** Nut-Tapping Machine. Patented in 1871, J.N. and W.F. **Durrell** had established their works on Dunkirk's Railroad Avenue in July 1873. The machine cut the threads inside the nut blank doing several at one time.

A lengthy article in *The Advertiser & Union* of 11 July 1873 had described the works in some detail. The new building was 40 x 60 feet, of two stories. In addition to J. N. **Durrell's** patented nut tapper, they made "bolt cutters and other tools," They were equipped to do all kinds of machine work. "Their drills are for the largest work, and they have a lathe that swings four feet and turns twelve feet. We also noticed a machine to cut gearing — the only machine of the kind in Dunkirk except at Brooks' [railroad works]." So what the **Howards** purchased in 1881 was a fairly large enterprise.

The works were moved to Fredonia's Railroad Avenue [now Cleveland Avenue] location and, in 1883, the **Howard** Bros. exhibited the machine at the Chicago Exposition.

One enterprise of theirs did *not* go so well. Mark **Twain's** mother and sister and her family had been living in Fredonia since 1870. When the Independent Watch Co. was incorporated in March 1881, the stockholders included C. L. **Webster** (Mark **Twain's** niece's husband), Samuel L. **Clemens** himself and his sister, Mrs. P. A. **Moffett**. In September 1881 Mark **Twain** "called at the Independent Watch Company's factory and was much pleased... The company will have one watch movement named the 'Mark **Twain**,' in honor of this distinguished stockholder." And on 1 February 1882 the "Mark **Twain**" gilt key winding

movement was born. Unfortunately, by September 1882, the distinguished stockholder had become suspicious that a swindle was in the works. He understood, he said, that the **Howard** Brothers, having gotten the stock value high, were unloading their shares at a profit and declaring a dividend unlawfully. He prepared an open-letter advertisement for **Webster** to put in the local and Buffalo newspapers, but **Webster** apparently negotiated with the firm so that the ad never appeared. Instead *The Fredonia* Censor of 20 September 1882 carried the quiet announcement that **Howard** Bros. have purchased 30 shares of Mrs. P. A. **Moffett**, and 50 share [sic] of 'Mark **Twain**.'"

In 1883 the **Howard** Bros. established the Fredonia Watch Co. making watches which had important innovative features. By early in 1885 they had established the company office in Chicago, and by December they had organized the Peoria Watch Co. in Peoria IL to which they transferred the Fredonia Watch Co. operation and closed the East Main Street factory.

It was just about this time that the **Sears** and **Roebuck** connection occurred. In a special section of the 16 June 1907 *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, an article on multimillionaire Richard W. **Sears** quotes him as saying "that if a watch firm at Fredonia, N.Y., years ago hadn't sent him a watch, C.O.D.. with privilege of return if he thought he couldn't sell it, he still might be [a] dealer in coal, wood, and lumber, in northern Minnesota." It was in 1886 working as a Railroad station agent and private entrepreneur in North Redwood MN that the incident happened that opened **Sears'** eyes to the possibilities of a mail-order business.

The **Howard** Bros. continued operating the medicine factory on East Main Street and Railroad Avenue until March 1888 when they moved it to Buffalo NY. Four years later they put up a new building to house the works on Washington near Mohawk. At about the time Clarence and Edward **Howard** were moving on, Frank **Howard** advertised what he called "The Empire Watch Co., 63 Main Street, Fredonia, N.Y." In a 15-page advertising brochure, "F. W. **Howard**, Manager" authorized all Express Agents to take orders for the watches described in the brochure. At the end are excerpts from letters from satisfied customers. The letters are dated between 1 June 1886 and 8 April 1887, which suggests promotion of this enterprise began no later than early in 1886 or late 1885. "Empire Watch Co." seems to be the name of his mail-order business, not the designation of a particular kind of watch movement as it had back in 1875.

It seems to have been Frank **Howard** who inspired Richard **Sears**, not Clarence and Edward, since most accounts give 1886 as the operative date of **Sears'** inspiration and the **Howard** Bros. had moved to Chicago and then Peoria in 1885.

Frank **Howard** continued his jewelry store in the same location on East Main Street until June 1892 when he sold the business, ending the **Howard** watches connection in Fredonia after almost thirty event-filled years.