

Up, Up...and Away! Local Balloon Flight Before the Wright Brothers.

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Americans, including those here on “the Purchase,” had heard of the Montgolfier brothers and their French balloon flights by the time George Washington was sworn in as president. Benjamin Franklin had witnessed balloon flights while he served as a diplomat in France. Dreamers as far back as antiquity had conjured up images of imagined flight. In the late 1400’s, the Italian artist and engineer, Leonardo da Vinci, had produced drawings of such things as helicopters and man-made “birds.” However, only the lighter-than-air craft, balloons inflated with hot air or hydrogen gas, gave any immediate promise of real flight.

The honor of the first American balloon "ascension" goes to French showman, Jean Pierre Blanchard who crossed the English Channel by air in 1785. He was a veteran of many flights when he decided to ascend from what was then the US Capital, Philadelphia. It was really a business proposition for which Blanchard sold rather expensive tickets, \$2.00 and \$5.00 depending on seating.

After considering several suitable sites, Blanchard chose the yard of the Walnut Street Prison in Philadelphia. It offered security, a wind break, and crowd control where he could insure that paying spectators got their money's worth and freeloaders were kept at bay. Blanchard's ascent, January 9, 1793, was witnessed by George Washington and four later Presidents, together with thousands of others. It was a great success scientifically but not financially. Blanchard realized only \$405 because tens of thousands of people chose to view the ascent free from local rooftops.¹

The first American to be a "professional balloonist" was Charles Ferson Durant, a native of Jersey City, NJ. His first trip was a spectacular flight over New York City which extended from Battery Park in Manhattan to South Amboy, NJ on September 9, 1830. Durant "retired from the air" at the age of 29, after 12 flights, but he inspired an ever-growing group of "aeronauts, as balloonists were frequently called.

In 1889, Burton Ham presented a paper to the East Bloomfield Historical Society in which he described what may well have been the first balloon ascension in Ontario County.

“In the year 1828 a balloon ascension took place in front of Frederick Boughton’s tavern, now known as Sweeney’s hotel. Being well advertised, a great crowd gathered to witness it. The balloon was about 10 feet in height, with a wire frame fastened in the opening in the bottom, in which was a sponge filled with turpentine, which when lighted soon filled the

¹ Jackson, Donald D. *The Aeronauts. The Epic of Flight .4.* Alexandria, Va. Time-Life Books. 1980. pp. 30-33, 43-52; Josephy, Alvin M. Jr. (ed) *The American Heritage History of Flight.* 1962. American Heritage Pub. Co. 1962. pp. 51, 53.

balloon with gas to its fullest extent. When freed from its fastenings it went directly up about 300 feet, then took fire, the net and sponge lodging on the tavern roof, which took fire, and for a time the excitement was such that no way was found to reach the roof and extinguish it. At last a scuttle hole was found, then a few pails of water ended up the first balloon ascension in East Bloomfield. Seymour Boughton now living in Pittsford was the balloonist and builder.”²

It is not clear from the paper, written 50 years after the fact, if Seymour Boughton actually rode the ill-fated balloon. Without question, however, balloon ascensions were already a sure way to gather a crowd.

On September 26, 1836, the *Rochester Republican* reported that a Mr. Lauriat made a balloon ascension in Rochester on the 24th. He landed safely in Sodus an hour later. Lauriat apparently made an earlier ascension on September 8, 1836. In 1910, the *Geneva Daily Times* reported that a poetic “farewell” leaflet he dropped over the crowd on that date was preserved in the family of Morley Turpin of Rochester.³

John Wise, a native of Lancaster, Pa., was born in 1808. He took his first balloon flight at the age of 27. Thus began a career in ballooning that lasted until he tragically disappeared over Lake Michigan in 1879, at the age of 71.⁴ Wise was a popular aeronaut at summer entertainments such as county fairs and Fourth of July celebrations. In 1847, Wise flew from Auburn to Syracuse where he was paraded through the streets for his glorious accomplishment. He had a number of harrowing experiences widely covered by the press.

In 1859, Wise was attempting to learn more about high altitude air currents (over 12,000 feet) he hoped to follow west-to-east across the ocean. He and two companions were taken on a wild 809 mile ride which started in St. Louis and ended in Henderson, NY, in the Thousand Islands. Wise’s balloon, the *Atlantic*, was huge; 120 feet high and 60 feet in diameter. Wise carried a lifeboat; lots of food, wine, and lemonade; 1000 pounds of sand ballast; and a bag of express mail.

The voyage, which lasted almost 20 hours, set a distance record which lasted for 50 years. However, Wise and his crew nearly drowned in Lake Ontario, and were nearly dragged to their deaths when the wrecked balloon was forcefully blown through woods.⁵ Wise's name was familiar

² “East Bloomfield Historical Society. Mr. Burton Ham Tells About the Manufactories of the Town.” *Ontario County Times*. Mar. 13, 1889. p. 2.

³ “The Ascension.” “Mr. Lauriat Safe.” *Rochester Republican*. Sep. 29, 1836. p. _; “Balloon Ascension.” *Geneva Daily Times*. Feb. 26, 1910. p. _. Lauriat was well known for make balloon flights throughout the northeast and had recently made several in the Boston area. His exploits were widely reported in the *Albany Evening Journal* in 1835-36.

⁴ John Wise made 463 ascents and perished Sep. 28, 1879 at the age of 71. He and George Burr were carried out over Lake Michigan, near Chicago, by high winds. Burr’s body was later found in the lake. No trace of Wise or his balloon was ever found. See: “John Wise (balloonist).” Wikipedia. (Available on the Internet at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wise_\(balloonist\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wise_(balloonist))) (Accessed Mar. 16, 2011.)

⁵ Jackson, Donald D. *The Aeronauts. The Epic of Flight*. 4. Alexandria, Va. Time-Life Books. 1980. Pp. 57-63, 69.

to Finger Lakes residents who read of his exploits in many area newspapers.

The first balloon ascension in Rochester lifted off in 1836. In all likelihood, John Wise was the aeronaut.⁶ Ballooning was an attraction, entertainment, as airplane flight would be until it became clear that passengers could be carried for profit. Balloon flight, except for its use for military use and weather reporting, has never progressed beyond a form of recreation.

By 1848, Ira J. Thurston, a well-known aeronaut from Ohio, was following the example of John Wise.⁷ On May 31, 1848, Thurston was advertising his “*First Grand Atmospheric Voyage*” from the Village of “Hemlock Lake.”⁸ The advertisement noted that “*The Balloon was manufactured by John Wise, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the most celebrated Aeroneaut in the world.*” Two weeks later, on June 14, 1848, the *Messenger* (p.3) reported on the flight in detail. “*The feeling manifested at this time no pen can describe,*” the paper stated, “*Many, animated with the sublimity of the scene, were in ecstasies and made the [air] ring with shouts of joy, while others, deeply affected, contemplating the probable result, could scarce control the emotions...*”

Unfortunately, when Thurston tried to lift off from Canandaigua, at the Independence Day celebration, July 4, 1848, the crowd was so noisy, and pressed so close to the balloon, that the aeronaut could not get off the ground. His balloon was ruined. The crowd was then incensed, since Thurston had been paid to produce a spectacle. The next day angry citizens called a public meeting demanding an explanation from “Mr. T.” Thurston promised to make up for “*that accident which disappointed so many people and cost him several hundred dollars.*” His ascension August 3, 1848 was apparently ample compensation for the disappointment of the previous month.⁹

So many people came to see balloon flights that local newspapers had to reassure the public from then on. “*We think there need be no fear on the part of the citizens...*,” wrote the editor of the *Ontario Messenger*. “*...The ascension will be entirely successful; as great care will be taken in selecting the ground, and there will be a sufficient number of officers in attendance, to keep order. Let no one be afraid to come.*” Even the balloon inflation process, a technological marvel of its time which could last seven hours, was considered a sight to behold in awe.¹⁰ Contemporary papers show that Thurston made ascensions from Batavia, Canandaigua, Geneva, and Elmira.

⁶ Elwood, George M. “Some Earlier Public Amusements of Rochester.” *Publications of the Rochester Historical Society. Publication Fund Series. I.* Rochester, NY. The Society. 1922. p. 42; Foreman, Edward R. “Annals of Rochester.” *Centennial History of Rochester, New York. I. Publications of the Rochester Historical Society. Publican Fund Series. X.* Rochester, NY. The Society. 1931. p. 288. There is some discrepancy in that Foreman indicates that the first balloon ascension took place in 1836, and Elwood indicated Wise’s ascension took place in 1848.

⁷ “Who’s Who of Ballooning.” Available on the Internet at <http://www.ballooninghistory.com/whoswho/who'swho-t.html> (Accessed Mar. 16, 2011).

⁸ *Ontario Messenger*. May 5, 1848. p. 3.

⁹ *Ontario Messenger*. Jul. 12, 1848. p. 3; Aug. 9, 1848. p. 2.

¹⁰ *Ontario Messenger*. Aug.2, 1848. p. 3.

Thurston published colorful descriptions in local newspapers. After his rescheduled ascension in Canandaigua, August 3, 1848, Thurston wrote this breathless account of his feat for Canandaigua's *Ontario Messenger*.¹¹

“Cut loose from moorings 5 minutes past 5 o'clock P.M.; passed off at an angle of about 45 degrees, until I had arisen between 5 and 6000 feet from the earth when the Aristadt [his balloon] became stationary, the wind being perfectly calm. The thermometer stood at 40 degrees. At this time I found I was about opposite to John Greig's house [intersection Scotland Rd and Main St.], and having a fine view of the village, which I enjoyed with great satisfaction. I remained in this position about 5 minutes, when the wind began blowing quite hard; I opened the valve and let a portion of the gas escape, and commenced descending very slow, still moving to the north for the distance of a mile and a half, where I saw a suitable place to land, when I made arrangements for that purpose. On nearing the Earth, the wind became so changeable, that I was frustrated in my designs, for when within about 20 feet of the ground, a sudden gust of wind took me up again, and carried me directly over a piece of woods, and not having sufficient ballast to throw out to lighten the balloon, the consequence was, I could not clear the forest, and my car became entangled in a tall maple tree, 70 feet from the ground. I made the balloon fast to the tree and let myself down by means of a rope. On enquiry, I found I had landed on Col. Blossom's farm, about 3 miles and a half from Canandaigua, to which place I went and procured assistance, when I returned obtained my balloon.”

On September 27, 1848 the *Ontario Messenger* (p. 3) published Thurston's account of his ascension at Geneva on September 2. His writing style aside, there can be no doubt why the reality of flight began to capture the imagination of common people.

“After inflating my balloon, the process of which is unnecessary to mention—at 20 minutes past 4 o'clock P.M., cut loose from my moorings ascending rapidly in a southern direction, in 15 minutes I found myself about three miles south of the place from which I had just left, when I stood about 4 minutes suspended between heaven and earth, not knowing what next would be my fate, when a breeze from the west took me over the waters of the romantic Seneca Lake. Then I was about 5000 feet high, when at this point, I could see the bottom of this beautiful sheet of water. Still ascending rapidly, the breeze gently wafting me across the lake, and when on its eastern shore my attention was attracted by the appearance of the villages in my view, which was as follows, viz: Canandaigua, Penn Yan, Bath, Jefferson, Ovid, Waterloo, Seneca Falls, Auburn, Vienna, and Geneva, which presented a beautiful prospect, still ascending I found myself at an altitude of some 10 or 12,000 feet from the earth. When at this height I found my balloon fully distending, and the mercury standing 2 degrees below freezing—my attention was again called to the prospect of ten lakes which were visible to my sight, they were: Ontario, Canandaigua, Seneca, Cayuga, and others I could not give the names of. All the country over which I passed presented to me the most sublime prospect I ever beheld; the farms being laid out at right angles, particularly attracted my attention. Being at this time, as near as I could judge, about 4 miles from the Cayuga lake and discovering an open field about 2 miles east, where I designed to land, I pulled the valve cord and let off a portion of the gas, which let me descend very fast—while thus descending I came to a current of air which blew from almost every point of

¹¹ *Ontario Messenger*. Aug. 9, 1848. p. 2.

the compass, which rendered my alighting on the spot which I intended, absolutely impossible, and being now obliged to land where I could, my anchor caught in the top of a majestic old basswood tree, where I remained, quietly perched, for the space of 15 minutes, when men came to my assistance, the names of whom I cannot recollect,—they soon cleared the ground, and I lowered a bottle of sparkling claret, which they eagerly quaffed. I then attached a cord to the car and passed the same to the men who came to my assistance, which I prized very highly, then crept from my resting place into the limbs of the old tree and clambered down its trunk to terra firma, at which place I arrived at 17 minutes past five o'clock—performing a journey through the regions of space, of some 12 miles in the short space of forty seven minutes. Thus endeth my fifth aerial voyage.”

Thurston's life came to a sad end with a ballooning accident that made national news. According to the *New York Times*, he “made an unexpected balloon ascension from the vicinity of Adrian, Mich.” While he was “securing his balloon after descending, and after removing the car, it suddenly rose, while Mr. Thurston was upon it, and rapidly disappeared. As it rose, Mr. T. clung to the portion on which he was seated...”¹² Thurston's body was found about ten miles away.

The use of balloons for military intelligence and observation was promoted during the Civil War by a New Hampshire practitioner of the new science of meteorology, Thaddeus S.C. Lowe. A week after the firing on Fort Sumter he went up in a balloon over Cincinnati and came down in South Carolina; much to the chagrin of secessionists. They let him go when he convinced them he was just a scientist. However, two months later Lowe was in Washington convincing Union military leaders that using balloons was a good idea. On June 18, 1861 Lowe transmitted the first air-ground telegraph message. Others, including John Wise, also promoted the military use of balloons. However, it is the work of Thaddeus Lowe that was most significant.¹³

In 1862 there were several regiments of Finger Lakes soldiers serving in General McClellan's "Peninsular Campaign" in Virginia; most notably the 33rd NY. They could see balloons being used for military observation and intelligence. In mid-May Lowe's balloon, *Intrepid*, was launched just 40 rods from the position occupied by the 33rd, the “Ontario Regiment,” near Yorktown.¹⁴

While not much repeated, the Lowe-McClellan experiment did achieve some lasting historical note. At one point the observer sent aloft was an unknown, but brash, Lieutenant named George A. Custer. Custer married a Canandaigua girl, Libby Bacon. Lowe's controversial claim that his balloon was the winning factor at the Battle of Fair Oaks (one of the Seven Days Battles) is still debated. Matthew Brady, the renowned photographer, published several photographs of balloons being used by the Union army.

At the same time, the patriotic people of Geneva could experience a balloon ascension

¹² “Mr. Thurston, the Lost Aeronaut, Found.” *New York Times*. Mar. 11, 1859. Available on the Internet at <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=FB0C13F835551B7493C3A81788D85F4D8584F9>. (Accessed Mar. 16, 2011.)

¹³ Jackson, Donald D. *The Aeronauts. The Epic of Flight*. 4. Alexandria, Va. Time-Life Books. 1980. p. 63, 81-90.

¹⁴ Contant, George W. *Path of Blood*. Dover, DE. The Author. 1996. pp. 108-109, (n. 55) 114.

themselves. The local committee arranging for the annual Independence Day celebration contracted for a thrilling ascension by Prof. Andrews of Seneca Falls. Andrews' balloon, *Seneca*, required 24,000 cubic feet of gas for inflation according to the advertisement in the *Geneva Gazette*.¹⁵

The US military continued to use balloons, most notably in the Spanish-American war at the Battle of Santiago in Cuba. Several local soldiers were there, and probably saw the balloon. The English, French, and Germans also put the balloon to military use.¹⁶

Balloon ascensions continued to attract crowds to fairs and celebrations to the end of the Nineteenth Century and beyond. Reviewing the recent Naples Fair, a local correspondent for the *Ontario County Times* reported on the "performance of the Allen brothers" there in September, 1890.

"The balloon ascension on Thursday was one of the most satisfactory performances of the Allen brothers. An attempt to make a second ascension on Friday ended in failure and damage to the balloon after it was partly inflated. The cause was the high wind prevailing at the time."¹⁷

Naples crowds apparently enjoyed aviation events. In 1910, that fair was the scene of the first powered flight over the county.¹⁸

By the turn of the Twentieth Century, larger balloons with rigid skeletons, called dirigibles, were making regular appearances at public celebrations. Count Zeppelin's contributions to Germany, in particular, would give that nation an important weapon used in World War I, and a leg up on trans-Atlantic passenger travel until the *Hindenburg* disaster.

About the time the Wright Brothers were taking to the air, "Captain" Thomas Scott Baldwin came to Hammondsport to see Glenn Curtiss. Baldwin was a showman and balloon promoter who entertained crowds across the nation. He had already employed Lincoln Beachey who later captured the attention of many local people with his daredevil exploits in Rochester, Niagara Falls, and elsewhere.¹⁹ Baldwin was also impressed with the light-weight engines Curtiss manufactured, primarily for motorcycles. He wanted Curtiss to power his dirigibles.

Baldwin and Curtiss struck up a long-standing friendship after 1904. Baldwin established a balloon factory in Hammondsport and Curtiss took a liking to flight which would lead him to surpass the Wright Brothers in less than a decade.²⁰

¹⁵ *Geneva Gazette*. Jul. 27, 1862. p. 4.

¹⁶ Jackson, Donald D. *The Aeronauts. The Epic of Flight*. 4. Alexandria, Va. Time-Life Books. 1980. pp. 92-99.

¹⁷ "Local Events." "Naples." *Ontario County Times*. Sep. 24, 1890. p. 2.

¹⁸ "The Naples Fair a Great Success." *Ontario County Times*. Sep. 21, 1910. p. 6.

¹⁹ Marrero, Frank. *Lincoln Beachey: The Man Who Owned the Sky*. San Francisco: Scottwall Associates. 1997. pp. 15-17, 19-25; 51-59.

²⁰ Mitchell, Charles R. and Kirk W. House. *Images of Aviation. Glenn H. Curtiss Aviation Pioneer*. Charleston,

Balloon ascensions remained a popular form of entertainment for many years after the advent of the airplane²¹. Balloon festivals still attract large crowds today. Brightly colored balloons are frequently seen in local skies during the summer and fall. Even for those who only stand and stare, they are exciting, and somewhat puzzling, as they silently glide through the sky. The next time you see one, remember that the feeling you have has been shared by Finger Lakes residents for more than 150 years.

JOHN WISE POPULAR BALLOONIST



Born 1808--started flying 1835 in PA.

1847—flew from Auburn to Syracuse—paraded as hero.

1859—tested high altitude wind—took wild ride St. Louis to Henderson, NY.—set distance record.

Wise often in the local papers.

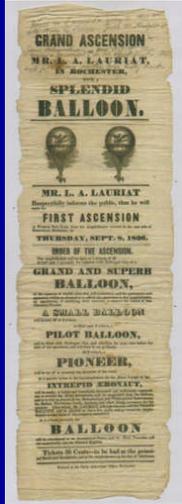
Died in accident over Lake Michigan 1879.

BALLOON ASCENSION AT AUBURN.—Mr. Wise made another ascent in a Balloon at Auburn, at four o'clock on Saturday. A Telegraphic despatch from Syracuse on Saturday evening at 7 o'clock says:
Mr. Wise has just arrived from Auburn, he landed near Onondaga lake. They are now towing him through the streets in a wagon.—
Roch. Dem. July 27.

SC. Arcadia Pub. 2001. pp. 23-27, 42.

²¹ For example, see: "Canandaigua's Business Men Extend The 'Glad Hand' to the People of Ontario Co. Balloon Ascension with Double Parachute Drop..." Ontario County Times. Jul. 26, 1916. p. 1.

FIRST BALLOON FLIGHT OVER ROCHESTER 1836



Handbill in collection of Rochester Historical Society.

Aeronaut was "Mr. [Louis] Lauriat".

Landed in Sodus an hour later.

Lauriat was "professional balloonist."
Born 1785 in French West Indies.
Died 1858 in Sacramento, CA.
"Epic" flights from Boston 1836.
45-100 flights in lifetime.

Mr. Lauriat, who made a balloon excursion at Rochester, descended at Sodus, 33 miles from Rochester, in an hour after he ascended.

Albany Evening Journal
Sep. 29, 1836

IRA THURSTON POPULAR AERONAUT



Ontario Messenger
Jun. 28, 1848

1848—OH native working in Upstate, NY.

May 31, 1848—flew from Hemlock.

Jul. 4, 1848—flight from Canandaigua failed.

Unruly crowd—failed—public meeting.

Aug. 3, 1848—make-up flight from Cdga.

Sep. 2, 1848—flew from Geneva.

Thurston and others—many frequent flights around Upstate NY.

Thurston died in accident near Adrian, MI—Sep. 16, 1858.

BALLOON ASCENSIONS POPULAR INTO 20TH CENTURY



rpt00318.jpg Rochester Public Library Local History Division

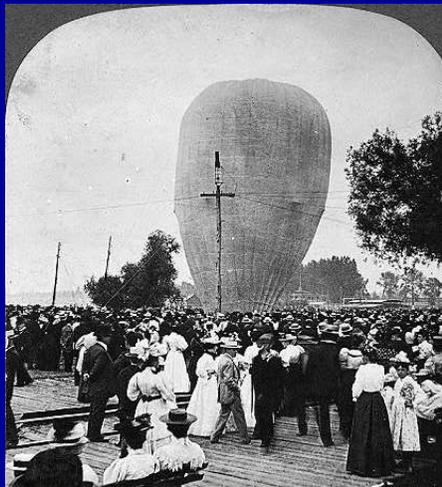
Samuel A. King's "Hyperion" taking off from Rochester on flight to Cazenovia. Oct. 19, 1869. Crowd of 20,000!

Local men in 33rd NYV saw balloon use in Civil War.

Balloons continued in use or advertising.

Popular at County Fairs, Fire Dept. Carnivals, Emancipation Day, Independence Day, etc.

BALLOON ASCENSIONS POPULAR INTO 20TH CENTURY



Lifting off from Ontario Beach



Lifting off from Canandaigua
Mid 1800s

May be Prof. Andrews
Jun. 27, 1862