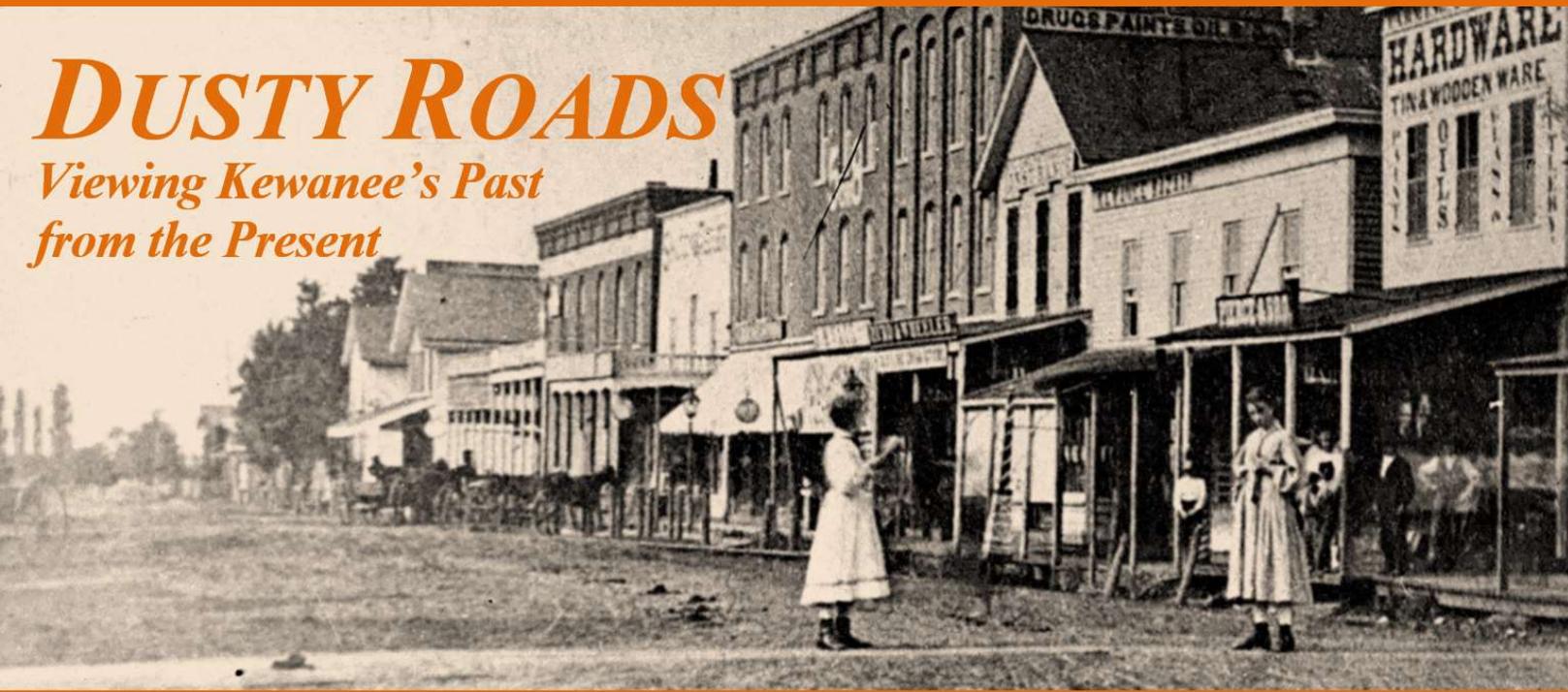


DUSTY ROADS

*Viewing Kewanee's Past
from the Present*



by Dean Karau

May 2020

John Howard Wells

His Illness, Leading to an Untimely Death, Brought Out the Best of the Wethersfield Colonists

"We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men."

– Herman Melville
(1819 – 1891)

The author of one of the first, great American novels, *MOBY DICK*, was a contemporary of the Wethersfield colonists. They and Melville had in common an understanding of the greater good. The life, illness, and death of one of the early colonists reveals much about our predecessors' sense of community.

54-year old Colonel John Howard Wells arrived in the Wethersfield Colony in 1838. He hosted the first meeting of what became the Wethersfield Congregational Church in 1839. He was a signatory of the articles for the First Ecclesiastical Society of Wethersfield in 1842-43.

But he died in 1844. What his fellow Wethersfield settlers provided for him in the last years of his life should be an inspiration for us today.

Col. Wells was born in England, but his family came to America when he was five years old. At seventeen years of age, Howard's father sent him back to England for his education. (He was called Howard

within his family.)

At twenty-two, Howard returned to America. He entered into business and, initially, did quite well. Reverses, however, caused him to lose most of what he had acquired. But he managed to avoid losing everything, so that when he emigrated to the Wethersfield Colony, Col Wells was considered "a man of means" among the colonists.

Col. Wells arrived in the colony by himself in 1838. He was considered a man of splendid physique and personal appearance.

Soon joining him were his 41-year old wife, Julia Ward Tracy, and their children, 5-year old Henry Dana, 3-year old Ebenezer Tracy, and 2-year old Franklin. The family added two more children in their early years in the colony, Martha Caroline (b. 1839) and John Howard (b. 1842).

Because of his legal training, Col. Wells became the attorney for the colony, and thus his name appears on many of the colony's records in the Henry County Recorder's Office. He was a respected and influential citizen.

But Col. Wells' health began to take a turn for the

worse. Correspondence between the Wells family in the colony and relatives in the East describes his decline.

“Monday, July 25th, 1842:

“Friday morning Aunt Hannah Wells received a letter from Uncle Howard who is at Wethersfield, Illinois. . . . He has been confined to his bed twenty-one days with an inflammatory rheumatism, & had suffered much pain. . . .”

“Tuesday, Dec 13th 1842:

“We hear indirectly that Uncle Howard has been confined six months with the Rheumatism and that his eldest son Henry was sick.”

“Friday. Feby 10th 1843:

“They have heard from Aunt Julia at Wethersfield Illinois. Uncle Howard was able to move about on crutches. . . .”

“Saturday. Nov 18th 1843:

“[When Col. Wells’ wife was returning from a visit to the East], Uncle Howard was not well enough to meet her She found her family well except Uncle & little [John] Howard. Uncle had been dangerously ill with Scarlet Fever but was recovering.”

“Thursday, May 30th 1844:

“Yesterday we received a short letter from Uncle Howard the first part written May 8th after a few lines. he says he commenced the letter last week but was so unwell that he could not finish it, and at the end of his letter that he was too ill to read what he had written.”

“Thursday, June 20th 1844:

“Miss Marsh . . . brought us the sad intelligence of the death of Uncle Howard, which she heard from Mr. Bulkley one of the Stockholders of the Wethersfield’s Co. We felt anxious about my Uncle from the tone

of his last letter. . . .”

“Tuesday, June 25th 1844:

“Aunt Julia [received a letter] on Friday giving them the intelligence of the death of Uncle Howard on the 30th of May. “He retained his senses almost to his last hour was resigned & calm in the near approach to death.”

Death was a constant companion for settlers in the West, not an unusual occurrence. But the hardships leading up to it can reveal the character of those around the dying. For the Wethersfield colonists, their character proved magnificent.

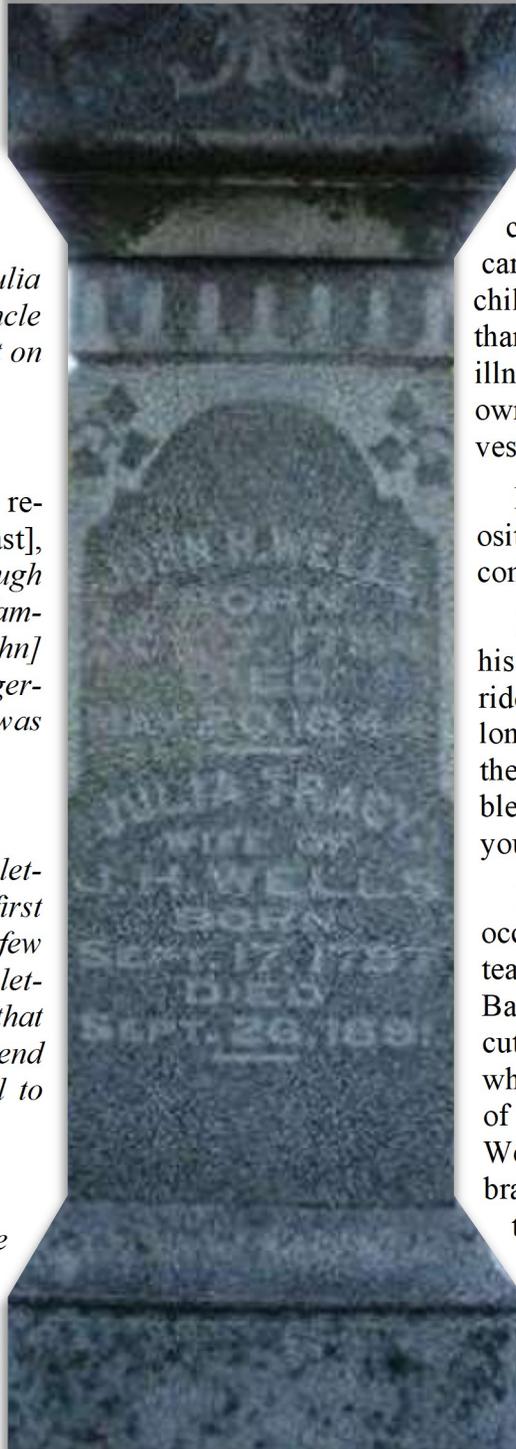
For instance, during his slow decline, Col. Wells was unable to take care of his corn crop, and none of his children were old enough to do more than plant it. But during his prolonged illness, his neighbors came with their own teams and implements, and harvested his all of his crops.

But that was not the last of the generosity he and his family received from his community.

In the last winter of Col Wells’ life, his son said that he continued to be bed-ridden. He had no hired help and no longer the means to employ any, even if there would have been someone available. And his children were still too young to be of much help.

But his neighbors, again, rose to the occasion. They gathered with their teams and their axes, and went into Big Barren Grove to the north. There, they cut down trees and gathered up any which were already down. At the end of two days, they had hauled to Col. Wells’ cabin “a pile of logs and branches half as big as a church” so that the Wells family had heat for warmth and fire for cooking.

Col. Wells’ son remembers in particular one neighbor, “a very poor man.” But despite his own economic condition, Hazelton Page came every night of that long winter, from



his cabin, half a mile away across the big slough (today's Mill Creek), to the Wells' cabin. Page cut and split the wood needed for the next day's fires in the Wells' household. Col. Wells' son said that the name of Hazelton Page was one he neither could, nor would, ever forget.

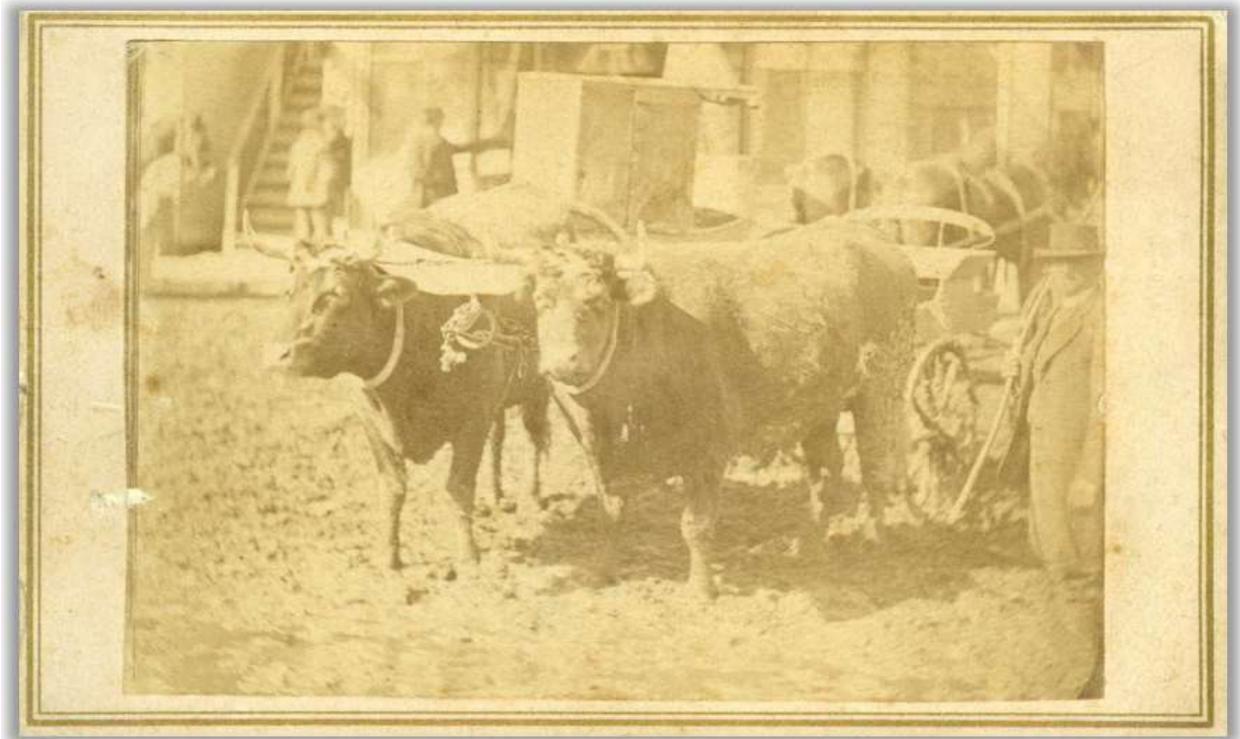
Col. Well's son also believed that none of Col. Wells' friends and neighbors were ever compensated for their services and, if it would have been offered, it would not have been accepted.

Those settlers in the Wethersfield Colony never

reached the material heights to which they aspired when they conceived of and implemented their grand adventure.

But they certainly reached a level of community spirit and commitment to one another which should make us all proud.

It is a level of spirit and commitment to which we should aspire now in this time of crisis.



Hazelton Page and his team in later years

To learn more about Kewanee and Wethersfield, past, present, and future, please visit my Facebook page, Dusty Roads, at

<https://www.facebook.com/dusty.roads.kewanee/>



Dean Karau is a Kewanee native who moved away when he was 12 years old. Now retired, he continues to enjoy the outdoors, genealogy and history. He returns regularly to Kewanee to explore his roots and the history of Kewanee and Henry County.