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Asa Eastwood and His Diaries, 1806-1870

Faye Dudden

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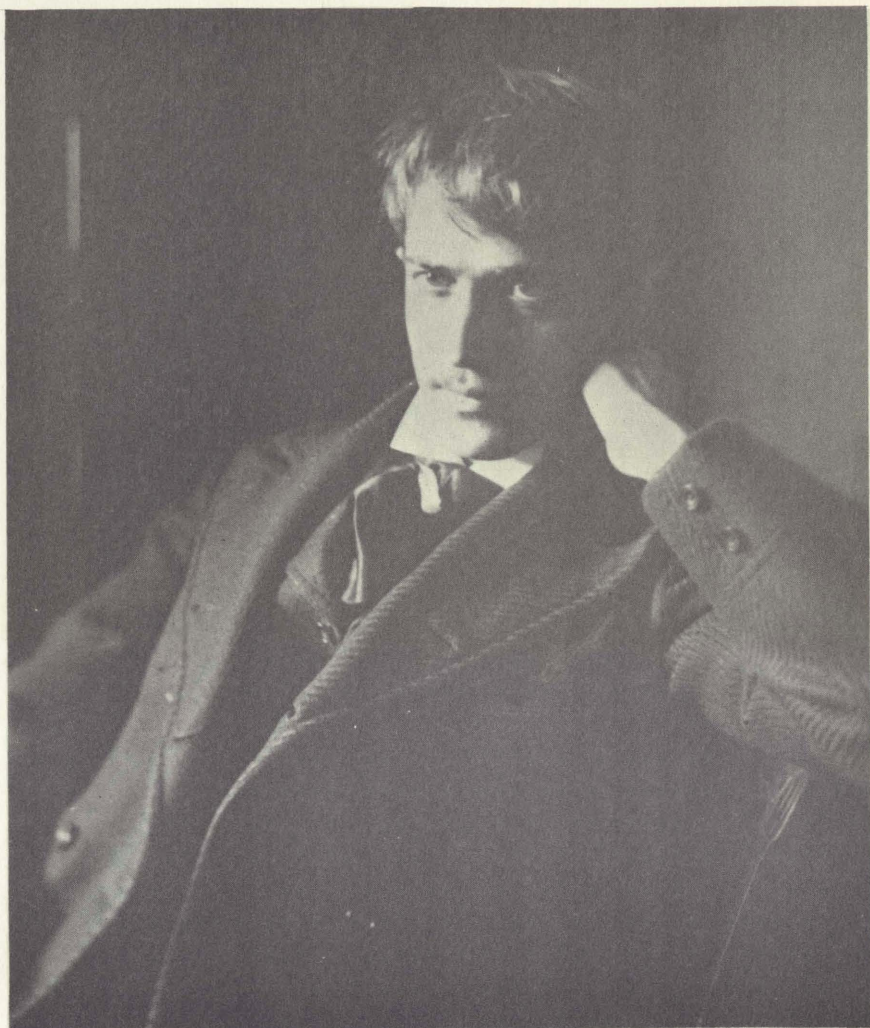


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Stephen Crane in 1893. Photograph by Corwin Knapp Linson, artist, friend of Crane, and author of *My Stephen Crane* (Syracuse University Press, 1958). From the Stephen Crane Papers, George Arents Research Library.

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Asa Eastwood and His Diaries, 1806-1870

by Faye Dudden

Asa Eastwood was a moderately successful nineteenth century American, notable for his hard work, opportunism, determination and longevity. Born on February 20, 1781 in New Jersey, he was an early settler in the hamlet of Cicero, N.Y., where he arrived from New York City in 1817. His varied career included business and farming ventures, salt-making, minor politicking and office-holding. He died at the age of 89, after seeing his eleven children grow up and a great deal of American history pass by.

Like so many men of his day, Asa Eastwood kept a diary. The four volumes he filled from 1806 to 1870 delineate nineteenth century customs, events and patterns of living and are now available for research in the Asa Eastwood Papers at Syracuse University, along with small amounts of his correspondence and legal records. Eastwood was alert to events of historical importance, and episodes such as the 1807 New York-to-Albany voyage of Fulton's *Clermont* or John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 did not escape mention in his diaries. Yet his entries are perhaps less significant for the passing historical scene than for the portrait they provide of Eastwood, typically a man of his time. His struggle to make a living and to achieve finally some measure of success is a story shaped by politics, the weather, his health, family needs and capabilities, hard work and plain luck.

Eastwood's first diary begins in the bustling world of New York City, in the years before he moved to Onondaga County. He had married Mary Doxsey in 1801 and by 1806, when the diaries begin, he had three children. In the thick of the fight to make a living, Eastwood apparently had little time to write, for there are only one or two entries per month. A selection from his diary in those years is typical in its reflection of Eastwood's interest in the news as well as of his changing business undertakings. The spelling and grammar of Eastwood's original entries have been retained and editorial insertions are indicated by brackets.

Miss Dudden, a graduate of Cornell University, is a manuscripts processor in the Manuscripts Department of the Library. She has arranged and described the Asa Eastwood Papers for research use.

May 1st [1812]

took an Inventory of my Property etc and found myself worth about \$2128

I Moved from 22 Fletcher St to 18 Same St

our Hat Store was opened this Day at No 144 Front St under the firm of Leary & Eastwood

[May] 19th

this Day the funeral Procession George Clinton the Vice President took Place in N. York

[June] 20th

this Morning the News arrived from Washington that war was Declared against Great Britton on the 18th inst the Votes in the Senate were 13 to 19

A Man was taned at the Navy Yard. he belonged to the Navy of which he spoke Disrespectable.

1812 July 4th

this Day the Embargo Expires

Several American Privateers Sails on a Cruise for the first time from this port

[July] 22nd

Wars alarm Still rings from Pole to Pole and is a Death like Voice to Almost Every Soul

[July] 25th

Cleared this Day \$27 for Cost as Constable

In a retrospective entry Eastwood mentions having gone to sea at the age of nineteen:

In the year 1800 During the war with France I Shiped on Board the united States frigate Constellation, in company with my Brother John [,] Alexander Murray Commander, and returned in the summer of 1801.

Returning from a year aboard the frigate, he began digging clams for a living. It proved to be less than remunerative:

I barely kept even with the World, not making much by claming. I concluded to try something else. I went to Buying and selling things in market, and towards the close of the Watermellion season I procured a small boat and went ten miles to harlem River where I found a patch of watermellons in good condition. I purchased them at a low price took them to New York and in ten days I Cleared thirty dollars.

Eastwood then drove a horse and cart around New York, peddling fresh produce and seafood door-to-door. This venture apparently led him to shop-keeping, and at various times over the years before 1817 he operated a grocery, a hat shop and a bakery. Eastwood's enterprising interests led him into speculation once or twice, including a disastrous attempt to cash in on the high prices during the War of 1812:

1813 Dec 24

Myself and James Leary Bot four thousand Dollars worth of Sugar at \$35 pr 100 lb

[Dec] 26

News arrived this Day from our Ministers at Ghent that Peace Between the U. S. and Great Briton was Like to take Place on which News froren [foreign] Goods fell about forty Per Cent

1814 Feb 18th

Myself & Leary Sold our Sugar which Cost on the 24th of Dec \$4000 Last this Day at auction on which we Lost \$1850

During this period Eastwood also served as constable and later as marshal in his ward, positions which brought him a steady return and apparently propped up some of his fledgling businesses. Those posts were filled by appointment, and Eastwood's selection almost certainly represented his successful cultivation of political connections. At the same time, his diary entries begin to contain careful notes on the local election returns.

In 1809 he joined the Tammany Society, a fraternal order which dated from Revolutionary days. The society had built a meeting place known as Tammany Hall, and in those days the General Committee of the Democratic-Republicans in New York leased the Long Room in the building as a regular meeting hall from the Society's ruling body, a council of thirteen officers called "sachems." The name "Tammany Hall" thus popularly referred to the ruling clique of the Democrats who met there. Although membership in the Tammany Society was highly prized by ambitious Democrats because many party leaders were also Tammany "braves," not every brother was a politician or even a Democrat. Only in cases of intraparty feuding did the Society have a distinctly political role. At such times, the Council of Sachems' decision as to which rival faction would be allowed to lease the rooms was tantamount to a mantle of legitimacy for the group chosen.¹ Eastwood's membership in the order, taken together with his political appointments, indicates his party loyalties and ambitions. Probably Eastwood was one of the smallest fish in

¹ Jerome Mushkat, *Tammany, the Evolution of a Political Machine, 1789-1865*, Syracuse University Press, 1971. The bibliographical essay (pp. 383-407) by Professor Mushkat is valuable for further study on Tammany.

the large pond of the New York Democratic political spoils system, but his connections with it enabled him to accumulate a substantial sum of money.

Eastwood might have contemplated a promising future in New York but in 1817 he bought the farm in Cicero. The diaries offer no reason for the move. Perhaps it was a question of security for a man with his family responsibilities, for by then his ever-growing brood had reached a total of eight children. Certainly it seems to have been a half-hearted move, as he spent substantial periods of the next few years, until about 1825, back in New York, leaving his in-laws and children to maintain the farm.

Eastwood's frequent returns to the city give evidence, even as reflected in his laconic notations, of his ability to seize an opportunity or create one. In April of 1822 he went from Cicero to New York, and on May 2 he wrote:

I was Elected Constable of the 2nd Ward and Sworn into office, but the Election was Contested, and after my Serving two weeks it was Set aside by the Corporation on account of my be[ing] Ineligible not haveing Lived in the City 6 Month immediately preseding the Election, and a new Election was ordered on the 11th and 12th of June, the Corporation Presented me with the freedom of the City so I might run.² I did so & Lost it.

Why Eastwood ran if ineligible, how he managed to win the first election and lose the second, and why he should have received such a favor as the "freedom of the city" from the Corporation—all these questions remain unanswered. Clearly, he was still able to attach himself with advantage to a political patronage system in New York in which his name had not been quickly forgotten. On the day after his arrival in 1823 from a stay in Cicero he was appointed marshal and this time, not having to face the voters, Eastwood kept the job. He wrote of that appointment:

Cicero March 4th 1823

this day I started fro New York where I arrived on the 9th inst

New York March 10th

This day I was appointed to the office of Marshal by Stephen Allen Esq Mayor of the City of New York. I boarded with Jacob Hunter No 160 front St. I commenced in my office but found business very dull. May 1st I went to board at Tammany Hall . . . and continued there until Nov 5th when I started for home to see my family etc When I arrived on the 9 Nov found all well and things in excellent order. during my Residence in New York I made

² The Corporation was the city legislature, also known as the Common Council.

Clear of all Expenses only about \$175—by my office, times in New York have changed very much for the worse in all kinds of business.

At one point in 1824 Eastwood took a trip to Virginia:

I left Cicero again on the 3rd of Dec 1823 for New York where I arrived on the 7th Inst and took board as before at Tammany Hall where I remained until the 25 May 1824 when I Started for Folly landing in virginia and arrived on the 27th inst after a pleasant passage of 47 hours in the Schooner George Capt Petter. I remained in virginia collecting monies until the 30 June.

From whom or for whom he collected, Eastwood does not say, but he pocketed a handsome 25 percent plus expenses on that trip. Thus he kept a bit of cash in his pockets. At the same time, his stock in the Tammany Society was rising:

The 13th of May 1823 I was Elected Sagamore of the Tammany or Columbian Order at there Great Wigwam in the City of New York. And on the 13th of May 1824 I was elected one of the Sachems of the Same Society.

Meanwhile, the seasons were passing in Cicero, and his farm, in the hands of relatives, was prospering. About the year 1825 Eastwood's diary entries begin to turn away from his venturesome, New York-oriented existence toward his crops, the weather and other preoccupations of upstate life. He was active as a Mason and was a senior warden of Cicero Benevolent Lodge no. 330. He was beginning to find outlets for his political energies in this rural setting, as he became Cicero Justice of the Peace and was elected county delegate to the New York State Constitutional Convention of 1822. Of the convention Eastwood wrote:

[1821 June] 28th

This Day the Convention Met at the Capital in the City of Albany and Commenced Business by Chooseing by an Election Daniel D. Tompkins Vice President of the U. S. President. the Convention continued in Session 75 Days and after almost New Modeling the Constitution they finally adjourned on the 10th of Nov when I went to New York and returned here on the 1st Day of Dec. the Pay of the Delegates were \$3 Per Day

Despite his proven ability to turn political advantage to private profit, Eastwood apparently showed himself worthy of the public's trust, for he became his district's representative to the New York State Assembly in 1832 and held many minor positions in the county as well.

1851

Sept 20. William Eastwood & wife, and Benjamin started for Michigan and further west, they had 3 good Days, then came Wind & Rain

24 Took to Syracuse 84 Bushels wheat sold at 66
put in granery 20

30, Self & wife went to Syracuse to the County Fair it ^{was} quite rainy during the day, but next morning the weather was clear and fine, and held so for the two days during the fair, the next morning cloudy and rainy, a heavy shower in the night the fair was held in the Vestable Block, and there was a petty fair & exhibition, the cattle show was on the Vestable Farm, one mile out,

The first day we went out a slave was arrested at Slains about noon, the Bells were all tolling, the slave got away in the day time but ^{was} taken back, a large mob was round the Building during the afternoon and at 1/2 past 8 at night, they rushed through the outer door and plank partition, rescued the slave & sent him to Canada, all was done in 3 minutes,

A page from September 1851 entries in the diaries of Asa Eastwood, showing his account of the "Jerry Rescue" on September 30. From the Asa Eastwood Papers, George Arents Research Library.

Eastwood's perennial business ambitions had been frustrated in Cicero initially, since a grocery partnership, Hale & Eastwood, had been a resounding failure, ending in 1820 with a sheriff's sale for debt. But he kept on trying. He entered a partnership for a grocery with John Sniffen in late 1824, dissolving it the following spring, and he built a salt-works in the nearby town of Salina in 1825, which enjoyed some prosperity. In 1836 he opened a store in Cicero Corners in a partnership with his son Elisha, but he sold out in 1840 with this assessment of the venture:

During the time I kept Store at Cicero Corners I made but little not exceed \$500, besides I had a goodeal of trouble and vexation to get along and meet payments. During the same time my Sons B. & J. Eastwood worked my Farm on Shares, except the first year I had it worked, the Seasons for Farming with me have been very unfavorable for the four years of the time since I left my Farm from 1835 to 1839 (nearly both years included) cattle Grain Pork etc was Very high but I had none to Sell, in 1840 a fall in Cattle Grain etc tooke place, at this time I sold Some Cattle and Grain, but at a low rate, So on the whole for the last five years I made but little more on my Farm than to pay the expenses of the Same. Thus five years more of hard Struggle has been added to my Life with but little gain, During which time my health and that of my family has generally been very good.

Eastwood here sounds weary, his determination turned to resignation by bad years for crops and equally disappointing times for business during the monetary crisis of the late 1830's.

The year 1840 marked a turning point: Eastwood had made his last major effort in business. Though his business success had been limited, he had by this time accumulated a modest amount of ready cash and he began to make occasional small investments in land and livestock. His position was assured by his well-established farm and his children, many of whom were full-grown. Thus there began for Eastwood a slowing of the pace of life. For the first time he had sufficient economic security to allow him time for concerns other than the hard struggle to make a living.

In place of the recurrent calculations of financial worth that dot the diary pages of his youth, Eastwood's notations for the 1840's, 50's and 60's are more apt to contain reflective comments on the beauty of the land, the death of a neighbor, or his care for the members of his family. One such entry reads:

7 Oct 1865

Maple Tree about 12 years ago my wife found near the fence in the front dooryard a little maple as big as a pipe stem 5 inches high and very crooked. She cleared the grass

etc from around it since which time it has been properly cared for it is now over ten feet high with a perfect straight nice body and bids fair to make a fine shade tree. I prize it the more from its being discovered by one whom I loved . . .

He also became concerned with national issues of the day, and wrote about the presidential campaign of John C. Fremont, the advent of plank roads, and a Republican group called the Wideawakes. Here is Eastwood's account of a famous episode in Syracuse history known as the "Jerry Rescue":

[1851 Oct]

The first day we went out a slave was arrested at Salina about noon, the Bells were all tolling. the slave got away in the day time but was taken back. a large mob was round the Building during the afternoon and at 1/2 past 8 at night, they rushed through the outer door and plank partition [partition], rescued the slave and sent him to Cana, all was done in 3 minutes.

Because of the Democratic position on the extension of slavery, Eastwood turned in his buck's tail, symbol of Tammany membership, in 1860.

The decades of Eastwood's old age fill many diary pages because the entries are longer and they flow smoothly, marked by a tranquility never attained in the earlier years of his struggle to survive. A typical page reads:

1863 10 Sept

John Eastwood has finished his splendid dwelling house in the first ward of Syracuse its an elegant substancial Building of Brick it cost about \$4000, he was going to Build it in 2 month But it took one year before it was finished
J. R. Cook Esq. leaves here Bag & Bagage for the west, expecting never to see this Town again, he was an old Resident of this Town & Vicinity
Nelson took to Syracuse 400 lb of Butter Sold 21 c.

[Sept] 16

Cranburies. Yesterday Saml [and] Nelson and families, also N. Whiting, O. Whiting their Families and others went to the Cicero Swamp cranbeyng, they are very plenty they 10 or 12 Quarts each fine day tp 82

[Sept] 17

Picknick. a very large school Picknick came to day from Manlius & Sullivan in about 40 carriges, they went to the Island in the large Steam Boat, Partook of their refreshments, then returned on Board & Steamed round Both

Islands & landed. I went with them. fine weather, light wind.

Ironically, he was freed from the exhausting effort to make a living only to confront a more disheartening circumstance. All of Eastwood's friends and many of his family died before him, and he began to feel himself alone in the face of death. Like many of the American pioneers, he took comfort in his assured anticipation of a better life to come. His last entry reads:

1870 Feb 20

I am 89 to day never been confined to the House with Sickness a day in my life but for 3 month past I have failed more than in several years before. I am on the downhill of life I am prepared for the event, I have seen trouble enough in this World and feel quite sure of Better fare in the next.

Five days later Asa Eastwood died.

