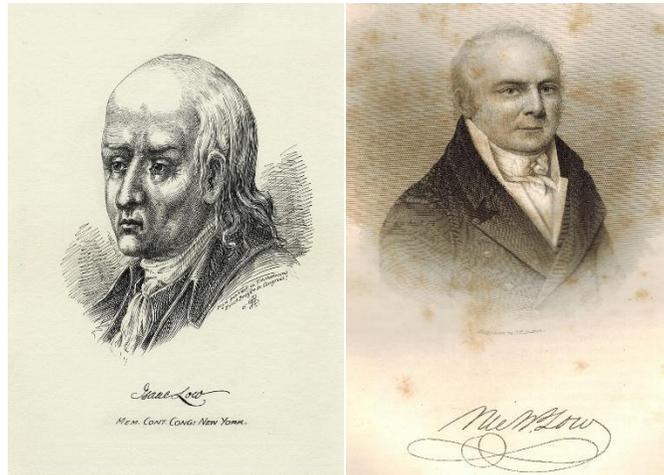


THE BROTHERS LOW

Submitted by Sam McKenzie, April 2020

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Isaac Low

Nicholas Low

Isaac (1731-91) and Nicholas Low (1739-1826) were born in New Jersey, but spent their lives as successful businessmen and Manhattanites. Nevertheless, they had a significant influence upon the development of Saratoga County in the late 18th Century and particularly the founding of Ballston Spa. They were of Dutch stock. Consequently, they pronounced their surname to rhyme with Cow and not Snow. If unconvinced, please telephone the Historical Society of Lowville, NY (also founded by the Lows) and see how they answer.

The brothers differed in their approach to politics. The powerful merchants of New York City apparently chose Isaac as a “safe pair of hands” into which they could entrust the chairmanship of five successive “Committees of Correspondence” between 1765 and 1775. These represented the city and coordinated with the other colonies in opposition to taxes imposed by the British Parliament. The British Crown saw them as highly illegal, as was the First Continental Congress which Isaac attended. Brother Nicholas seems to have been uninvolved in these matters.

Unfortunately for Isaac, his political stance was founded on two incompatible principles, “no taxation without representation”, but also “my ambition is to live and die as a British subject”. As it turned out, nothing could have bridged the chasm between those principles. Thus, in late 1775, when the New York Provincial Assembly asked him to acquire munitions for their Militia, Isaac retired from public life. Following the occupation of New York City by British Forces, Isaac returned to Manhattan in late 1776 and thereafter cooperated with the British administration.

Nicholas, meanwhile, ran his import/export business from Manhattan until the arrival of the British in September 1776, having earlier supplied both gunpowder and cannon to the Provincial forces. After arriving at Philadelphia in late 1776, he supplied further armaments and allowed ships which he owned to become privateers (i.e. licensed pirate ships) on behalf of the Colonies. Nicholas continued to serve the cause and his own profit for the remainder of the War, expanding his business into speculative areas including the Virginia tobacco trade and buying up cheaply Provincial war bonds and other debt instruments.

In 1779 New York declared Isaac attainted of treason. The penalties were seizure of his properties and, effectively, banishment since his life was forfeit if arrested. Thus, Isaac and his wife had to leave for England with the British Forces upon their departure in November 1783. For the rest of his embittered life, until his death in England in 1791, Isaac was obsessed with recouping something from his lost fortune estimated at £19,000 sterling. A large portion of this was land in the Patent of Kayaderosseras, including a tract adjacent to what is now Ballston Spa. From the British Loyalist Claims Commission he received £1,700, and from his brother's efforts to reacquire and sell the confiscated property, perhaps another £1,000 to £2000. However sincere and strenuous the efforts Nicholas had made on his brother's behalf, they seem not to have endeared him to Isaac, whose letters reportedly are filled with complaint about the paltry amount of cash yielded.

Nicholas, meanwhile, prospered in his own business. One of the important contacts he made on his return to New York City in December 1783 was Alexander Hamilton, a hero of the Yorktown battle and favorite of George Washington. The Brothers Low were actually distant in-laws of Hamilton. Margrieta Low, Isaac's wife, was related to the influential Schuylers of Albany, who included Elizabeth Schuyler, Hamilton's wife. Through Hamilton, Nicholas became involved with the new Bank of New York and later the Bank of the United States. In 1790, when Hamilton became Treasury Secretary in the Washington Administration, State War debts were assumed by the Federal Government at par, providing Nicholas a windfall of \$40,000. This gave him a start in banking, marine insurance and upstate land speculation. Nicholas also became a financial manager for rich men such as Rufus King, who for one reason or another were out of the country. (King was US Ambassador to Great Britain.) Alexander Hamilton was Nicholas' attorney of choice with respect to all of these business streams. Conveniently, they were close neighbors, at 23 and 24 Broadway.

In 1794, Nicholas married a widow, Alice Fleming (1758-1818) with whom he had three children, Cornelius, Nicholas and Henrietta. Alice's parents were English. Her father was a chaplain in the Army of General Wolfe and she travelled with her parents to Quebec upon its capture from the French. Her maternal grandmother is rumored to have been the wife of Viscount Weymouth of Longleat. Whether the Viscount was her grandfather forms the plot of a ghost story told at Longleat House, now open to the public. Alice married a Loyalist New Yorker, Sampson Fleming, at Detroit in 1777 and in 1784 moved with him and their five children to New York City where Fleming died in 1791.

From the 1790's Nicholas' main business interest was speculation in upstate lands. By 1800, he had spent \$160,000 on such property and was to profit considerably. At the time of his death in 1826, he passed to his heirs an inheritance that by 1860 was valued at \$1 million. Nicholas also inherited property from his father Cornelius Low who had died in 1777. One tract was the "13th Lot of the 14th Allotment" of the Kayaderoseras Patent, or what became the Village of Ballston Spa. By 1787 Nicholas had become aware that land he owned around the main mineral spring was particularly valuable. In 1792 he built a hotel across from the spring opposite Brookside, called later the McMaster House. His other building projects in the Village included Gordon's Creek Canal (1803), the "lower" Bathing House (1803), the Sans Souci Hotel (1804), and a 4-story brick factory on Bath Street (1814). Nicholas also donated land for churches, village offices and a courthouse, which helped the successful campaign for Ballston Spa to become the County seat. He sold the last of his holdings in the Village including the Sans Souci to Harvey Loomis in 1824.

The Brothers Low started off on similar paths, making money in business. Their paths diverged when Isaac got involved in Politics, ultimately picking the losing side and suffering. He may perhaps be viewed as unlucky. Other Loyalists such as Sampson Fleming and Alexander Macomb, who profited from supplying the British in doing actual harm to the Patriots, brought their profits to Manhattan in 1784 and were welcomed (as opposed to expelled).

Nicholas, however, "stuck to his knitting", went along with the new republic and prospered. One of the places that initially did well under his leadership was Ballston Spa. Modern analysis, however, perceives that his big city way of making money from the Village likely disadvantaged the later development of Ballston Spa versus Saratoga Springs, which ultimately won out as the Spa of choice by the mid-19th century.

Picture credits: Isaac Low -New York Public Library web site

Nicholas Low "History of Lewis County' (1860), Franklin B. Hough, page 132