

Solving the Mystery of an American 19th century Silver Box

By Kay Olson Freeman



Fig.1

1. The locomotive wheel alignment is 4-4-0 (4 driving wheels and 4 smaller front wheels) which was introduced 1837, in Philadelphia, PA, and became the “American Standard” throughout the 19th C. This wheel alignment was designed to run over uneven tracks and curves. Large numbers of 4-4-0 locomotives started to be constructed by 1845. In Canada, the first was made in Toronto by John Good’s foundry in 1853.

Engraved silver pieces provide the intriguing challenge to discover more about the circumstances of the presentation, donors and recipient. An interesting example is a table snuff box with the name “Allen Sweet” engraved on its lid. On the bottom of the box is an engraved depiction of a locomotive, coal tender, freight car and passenger car.¹

Inside the lid of the box are engraved eight names who describe themselves as “Outsiders.” It takes careful comparing of how all the engraved letters are formed to see the descriptive word is not “Outriders” or “Outsiders.”

The box measures 9 x 6.5 cm; it has a substantial weight of 129.6 g (Fig.1). The fancy shape features an integral hinge; the lid’s overall engraving of

scrolling foliage on matted ground is typical of mid-19th century Rococo Revival style. This can be compared to similar style English boxes by Nathaniel Mills dated 1842 and 1853 (Fig. 2 and 3). The American box does not have a date; nor maker's or retailer's mark to provide a clue. Therefore, the biographies of the names associated with the box will have to tell the story.

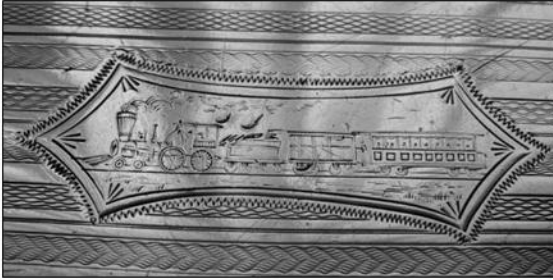
Certainly, the box was manufactured before 1863 which is the year when one of the presenters dies. Additionally, all the named presenters are living in Syracuse, Onondaga County, NY. Checking the Syracuse City Directories, some of the donors are only listed there before 1854, which further narrows the time of presentation.

Since there is an engraving of a railroad train on the silver box, surely the presentation had something to do with railroads. Indeed, the story will travel along railroad routes of Western New York State ending in Detroit, Michigan. The box is dedicated to "Allen Sweet". There are two men named Allen Sweet, father and son; however, it was the son, Allen Sweet, Jr., who was prominently associated with the railroads.



Fig. 2 , Table snuff box, Birmingham 1842, Nathaniel Mills, given to William Spence, Esquire, Liverpool Academy

Fig.3 below: back side of table snuff box, Birmingham 1853, by Nathaniel Mills, given to William McDonald, Esquire, Municipal Council of Bonaventure, Quebec.



Engraved cartouches on front and back of the Allen Sweet box

2. It is significant that the Sweet and Rogers families were from Rhode Island. The beginning of America's Industrial Revolution is credited to Samuel Slater's 1793 textile mill in Pawtucket, RI.

February 4, 1829, Utica Sentinel advertisement: "The cotton spindle may be seen at factory of Allen Sweet, Esq. at New Hartford." [The spindle had been invented by someone else].

Oliver G. Rogers (born 1789, RI - died November 1, 1866, Willowvale, Oneida County, NY) was said to be the first builder of cotton and wool machinery in New York State west of the Hudson. An advertisement in an April 1844 Utica newspaper: "Nathan Rogers, late firm of O.G. and Nathan Rogers, has joined a Utica machine shop making all kinds of cotton and woolen machinery, steam engines, turning and engine lathes."

I believe that the box was presented to Allen Sweet, Jr. in December 1852 when he was leaving the Rochester & Syracuse Railroad and moving to work on another railroad. At that time, he was presented with a silver medal by his associates at the R&S Railroad: conductors, engineers, ticket agents, freight masters, etc., who would be considered "insiders." The box was presented by associates who were "Outsiders," meaning that they were not working for that railroad.

Allen Slocum Sweet, Jr. was born September 31, 1821, at New Hartford, Oneida County, NY. Both of his parents were born in Rhode Island. His father, Allen S. Sweet, Sr. was born in 1790, and, his mother, Louisa Rogers, in 1795. They were married October 5, 1815. Sweet, Sr. and members of the Rogers family (Louisa's father and two brothers: Amos, Oliver G. and Nathan Rogers) emigrated from Rhode Island to live in a close area of Oneida County towns called Chadwicks, Willowvale, New Hartford and Whitestone/Whitesboro. Together, Sweet, Sr. and the Rogers family manufactured machinery for cotton and woolen mills. Sweet, Sr. had a foundry and a factory.²

Allen S. Sweet, Sr. died September 7, 1865 and is buried in Forest Hill Cemetery, Utica, Oneida County, NY.³ Buried with him is his wife, Louisa Rogers

Sweet, who died June 21, 1883, in Detroit, Michigan, where she had been living with her son, and after his death, with his widow. Members of the Rogers family are interred at Forest Hill as well.

The young Allen S. Sweet, Jr., of Auburn, Cayuga County, NY, is first mentioned as having co-invented a new locomotive light using a parabolic reflector.⁴ The co-inventor was his uncle, Melancton/Melancthon Wells Mason (born 1805, MA - died June 20, 1875, Rochester, NY). Mason had married Lucy Rogers, the younger sister of Allen Sweet, Jr.'s mother. The Mason and Sweet families remained very close.

Another uncle, Nathan Rogers, with William Wakely, of Auburn, NY, is said to have manufactured locomotive headlights to Sweet and Mason's design in 1838.⁵

In March 1842, Allen S. Sweet, Jr. marries Helen Olcott in Cayuga County, NY. Helen was born January 14, 1822, the daughter of Josiah B. Olcott and Cecilia Marie Devereux. Josiah (born 1783, MA or Connecticut - died 1826, Manlius, Onondaga County, NY) had migrated from East Hartford, Connecticut with his father who was a pioneer in the salt industry of western New York State. Helen's mother was born in New York State.

3. Email from Forest Hill Cemetery, Utica, states that Allen Sweet, Sr. and his son purchased Lot 699, Plot 25A, which is large. Only buried there are Sweet, Sr, his wife and their unmarried daughter, Cynthia A. Sweet (born 1820 - died February 20, 1883).

4. Official Catalog of National Exposition of Railway Appliances, Exhibit May-June 1883, p. 21, which is quoted in John H. White, History of the American Locomotive, 1830-1880, p. 215.

Melancton W. Mason is described in his obituaries as

the inventor of the first locomotive headlight. A newspaper article of October 1842 says "M. W. Mason, Auburn, NY," exhibited at the New York State Agricultural Fair, held Albany, NY, "one of the most brilliant lamps for railroads ... that can be conceived. The improvement consists in the material [salt/sodium] and the peculiar shape of the reflector." Mason was awarded a silver medal at the Fair. Mason worked with the Auburn & Syracuse Railroad from 1838 to 1850. He intermittently farmed in Elbridge, Onondaga

County, NY, where he invented an ox-yoke (patent #33003, August 6, 1861). He is credited with inventing the first snow-plow for railroads. He continued master mechanical work with various railroads in different places before his death. Melancton Wells Mason is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, Rochester, NY.

5. John H. White, History of the American Locomotive, p. 215



6. Austin Olcott was born 1818, NY and dies of yellow fever, February 12, 1858, in Havana, Cuba. Milton Olcott (born 1820, NY – dies 1886, Pittsford, Monroe County, NY) left most of his estate to his sister, Helen Sweet, of Detroit, and she was his executor. Austin and Milton Olcott are buried Mt. Hope Cemetery, Rochester, Monroe County, NY.

7. The firm of “Noble & Benton, Exchange Place” remains unknown despite extensive efforts to find them. Newspaper accounts say “the medals were manufactured by Messers. Noble & Benton, specimens of whose skill have before attracted attention.” Thus, they must have done other work. There was an “Exchange Place” in Rochester and in Syracuse; but they are not listed in City Directories. The firm is not in New York City.

Helen Olcott had two brothers, Austin and Milton Olcott, who both were locomotive lamp manufacturers in Rochester, NY⁶. Austin Olcott of Rochester, NY, obtained patent # 8805, March 16, 1852, for a burner for Argand lamps to be used in locomotive headlights.

In the 1850 US census, Allen and Helen Sweet are living in Auburn, Cayuga County, NY, with two daughters. In the census enumeration, no occupation is listed for Allen; but he was working as an engineer/mechanic for the Auburn & Syracuse Railroad, which, when later extended, became the Rochester and Syracuse Railroad.

On December 8 and 10, 1852 two articles in Syracuse and in Auburn newspapers report that Allen Sweet was leaving the Rochester & Syracuse RR to work on the State Line RR. Two other men, (William Hart and John Hart), were leaving at the same time as Allen Sweet, Jr. They were each presented with large silver medals made by Noble & Benton, Exchange Place⁷. Each medal’s obverse side depicted a low-relief locomotive and tender and a wreath and the words “Presented by his late Associates to ...” The reverse was engraved with the names of 28 presenters⁸.

Allen Sweet, Jr. moves to Buffalo, catcher that “ killed over 300 head
 NY. “A.S. Sweet” of the Buffalo & Erie RR is credited with building a
 particularly strong wooden cow under the engine.”⁹
 Another daughter, Helen Elizabeth

8. 28 names of medal presenters as found in Rochester City Directory 1851 and Syracuse City Directory 1851-1852. Those not identified must be living Auburn, NY, as was Allen Sweet, Jr. Early City directories are not available for Auburn. In the newspaper account, some names are given only with initials (there may be typos also); but I have been able to find full names and occupations for most.

William Henry Ayres

Andrew Bankson, conductor, R&S RR

Charles P. Clarke [sic] - Charles Parsons Clark (1822, MA-1907, NY) in 1847 handled freight for A&S RR, 1848-1850 clerk. NY Central RR freight agent 1853-1889. Republican mayor Syracuse 1867-1870. Pres. Syracuse Savings Bank and farmer. Presbyterian.

David Cogswell. Syracuse

W.H. Cummings [there is Charles G. Cummings, builder, R&S RR]

Henry Dickson, engineer, R&S RR

Sylvester C. Donnelly, collector, R&S RR

Henry Dutton, conductor, R&S RR

J. F. Fargo - conductor, R&S RR. Living Syracuse. **Jerome Freeman Fargo** (born 1820, Jamesville, Onondaga County - died 1883, Buffalo, NY) was the brother of William G. Fargo (born 1818, Pompey, Onondaga, NY - died 1881, Buffalo, NY). William co-founded Wells, Fargo and started the American Express Company. William in 1841 was an express agent Auburn & Syracuse RR. 1841, Jerome was a night-watchman and then freight conductor Auburn & Syracuse RR and on 1st train to run Syracuse to Buffalo.

Henry Frink, Conductor R&S RR. Living Syracuse.

James E. Gifford, conductor, R&S RR

Thomas S. Gifford, conductor, R&S RR

William G. Gifford, conductor, R&S RR

Horatio G. Glen, engineer, dispatcher, living Auburn, Cayuga County, NY. 1850 set speed record on Auburn RR: 78miles in 2 hours, 35 minutes with 8 stops.

Sheldon G. Godley [1850 census, age 25, living Auburn, NY, single, works RR]

Glen and Godley are sons-in-law of Melancthon W. Mason

Andrew J. Harlow, clerk, R&S RR

William Harrison, engineer, R&S RR

William T. Harvey, conductor, R&S RR

Joseph Hoffman, engineer, R&S RR

William F. Hurd, conductor, R&S RR

Aaron W. Newton, conductor, R&S RR

David W. Perry, engineer, R&S RR

Dudley P. Phelps, living Syracuse, receiver Railroad ticket office.

George B. Redfield, general agent, R&S RR

Simon S. Sanborn, clerk, R&S RR

Charles A.W. Sherman, ticket office receiver, R&S RR

Sidney M. Strong, conductor, R&S RR

A. Worlfs [?]



Sweet, was born in Buffalo, July 12, 1859¹⁰.

In the 1860 US census, Allen Sweet, Jr. and his family are living in Detroit, Michigan. His occupation is master mechanic. He is listed in Detroit City directories as Superintendent locomotive department of Michigan Central RR. While living in Detroit, Allen Sweet, Jr. obtains two patents:

#38992, June 23, 1863 – Improvement in smoke-stacks for locomotives—a spark arrester.

#40290, October 12, 1863 – Improvement in supports of locomotives upon car-trucks.

March 5, 1867, Helen and Allen S. Sweet, Jr. celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary. A party was given by Helen's brother, Milton Olcott, at Monroe Springs, near Rochester, NY. Newspapers reported details of the party and said that the Railroad, as a sign of its respect, provided a private car from Detroit for the Sweets' trip. The couple were given a large number of silver gifts worth \$4000. Among the gifts was a pair of silver

bouquet stands from Mrs. H.G. Glen and Mrs. S.G. Godley of Syracuse and a silver sardine box from Mr. and Mrs. Henry Stearns of Syracuse. [Horatio G. Glen and Sheldon G. Godley were among the 28 silver medal presenters in 1852. Margaret Glen, Sophia Godley and Elizabeth Stearns were the married daughters of Melancton Mason.]

Allen S. Sweet, Jr. died, of congestion of lungs, in Detroit, May 31, 1873, age 51 years, 8 months. He is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery, Rochester, NY. An escort was provided by a fraternal group, Knights Templar of Rochester. His wife, Helen Olcott Sweet, died, in Detroit, April 17, 1915, and she is buried with him and three of their unmarried daughters.¹¹

Following, are the full names and biographies of the eight men who describe themselves as “Outsiders” on the presentation box. I have used a wide variety of diverse sources to literally piece together their life stories. They tend to move around a lot and have varied careers; but all were living in Syracuse, or nearby, in 1852.

G. S. Backus = Gerrit Smith Backus (born 1825 – died in Peru after 1869). Backus designed and mapped railway routes. He did not work on locomotives or trains. He is described as an “engineer reputed to be one of the ablest professionals in the design and construction of railway routes.” He designed the Watervliet/West Troy, NY Weigh Lock House @ 1850. October 28, 1851, Backus married Fanny Johnson (1827-1894), “The Belle of Geneva”, NY. The 1851-1852 Syracuse, NY,

9. John H. White, History of the American Locomotive, p. 212.

10. Helen Elizabeth Sweet was the only daughter to marry. She married October 16, 1878, in Detroit, Frederick Kimball Stearns, who was member of a very successful pharmaceuticals company founded by his father, Frederick Stearns (1831-1907). The father gave an important collection of musical instruments to the University of Michigan. There is a Stearns building in downtown Detroit and Helen and Frederick’s home is a landmark Arts and Crafts style house on Jefferson Street. Helen Sweet Stearns was active in women’s suffrage.

11. The three unmarried daughters are: Cecilia L. Sweet, died November 25, 1852, age 9 years, 8 months; Kate H. Sweet, died June 22, 1881, age 16 years, 9 months; Adelaide A. Sweet (January 19, 1845- June 16, 1905).

12. Henry Wells' partner in Wells, Fargo Express Co. was William George Fargo (1818-1881) who was from Onondaga County, NY. William G. Fargo's brother was Jerome Freeman Fargo (1820-1883). Both had worked for the Auburn & Syracuse RR. Jerome F. Fargo was among the 28 named presenters of the silver medal to Allen Sweet, Jr. in 1852.

13. A.L. Stimpson, History of the Express Companies and the Origin of American Railroads, 1858, p. 140

City Directory lists Gerrit S. Backus, civil engineer, residing at Rust's Hotel. Backus went to Peru to plan a railway linking Lima with Callao on the Pacific coast.

C. H. Wells = Charles Henry Wells (born 1828, Palmyra, Wayne County, NY - died May 23, 1891). In the 1851-1852 Syracuse City Directory, Charles H. Wells is listed as express agent, boarding at the Globe Hotel. In 1855, Wells was a Republican alderman of Syracuse. Most significantly, Charles H. Wells was the son of Henry Wells (1805-1878), one of the original partners of the Wells, Fargo Express Company¹² and founder of Wells College for Women, Aurora, Cayuga County, NY. Henry Wells moved to Albany, NY, in 1841, taking his son to assist him. "That was where 'Charley Wells' (since so efficient and popular as a messenger, an agent, and now [written in 1858] assistant superintendent) received first lessons in the express business."¹³ However, the Arizona and New Mexico Express is said to have failed under Charles H. Wells. Charles H. Wells led a peripatetic life: In 1851, he was married in New York City; in the 1860 census, he is living in Cleveland, Ohio; in the 1870 census, he is living in NYC; 1879-1884, he is listed in San Francisco, CA, City Directories.

J. S. Lewis = Capt. Joseph Stewart Lewis (born 1803, Washington County, NY - died June 18, 1896, Geneva, Ontario County, NY). He remained unmarried. He was a Democrat and a member of the Masons fraternal order. 1836-1841, Lewis was a popular steamboat captain on Lake Seneca and Keuka Lake. 1841-1860, he was the operator of a stagecoach carrier of US mails. Also, in the 1850's to 1860's, he was in the woolen business, with Stewart S. Cobb, in Seneca, Seneca

County, NY, which is located very near Auburn, NY. Lewis spent the last part of his life as a farmer in Geneva, NY. Joseph S. Lewis is most spoken of in trotting horse history as having sold the mare, "Dolly Spanker," to a New Yorker. She was the dam of the famous trotter, "George Wilkes." Lewis was "not a racehorse man. He was moral and religious and did not race or gamble." This attitude was similar to that of Henry Bonner, another well-known NY trotting horse owner. [Lewis is a common surname; however Joseph Stewart Lewis is the most prominent man at that time and area. He is often called "J.S. Lewis."]

Wm. Winton = William Winton (born 1805, Connecticut – died March 19, 1871). Winton came to Syracuse, NY, in 1828. He was bookkeeper and then landlord of the Exchange Hotel, located at the corner of South Salina and Washington Streets, next to the railroad depot. Later, Winton owned the Globe Hotel and is listed as such in 1851-1852 Syracuse City Directory. Also, Winton was a salt manufacturer and a trustee of Onondaga Savings Bank. In 1858, Winton was elected Mayor of Syracuse and was a Democrat politically.

R.S. Eaton = Riley Samuel Eaton (born 1813, NYS – died August 22, 1863). Eaton is always associated with hotels and was described as a popular host. First he was proprietor of a hotel in Ithaca, NY, and then Blossom Hotel, Rochester, NY. In Syracuse, he was bookkeeper for Voorhees House, the Globe Hotel and, in 1851, took over the Empire Hotel. In the summer of 1859, Eaton worked at Howard House in New York City and a newspaper reports him as "looking well" – perhaps alluding to health problems which caused

14. May 26, 1851, Daniel Webster (1782-1852) had given a speech, in Syracuse, urging the upholding of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, as long as it was a US law. This precipitated the vitriolic anger, and, perhaps, publicity-seeking, of extremist Abolitionists. As a result, the "Jerry Rescue" occurred in Syracuse in which a black man (real name William Jerry Henry, born 1813, NC – died 1853, Canada) was transported to Kingston, Ontario, Canada, to prevent him from return to his owners under the Fugitive Slave Act.

15. In 1844, Allen Sweet had supported Henry Clay in his opposition to the annexation of Texas, fearing war with Mexico, which did occur. Later, Henry Clay devised the complicated, multi-part, Compromise of 1850, which set the boundaries of Texas and strengthened the Fugitive Slave Act. Northern businessmen tended to support tranquility and the status quo. Northerners had divided attitudes on the Civil War. For instance, there were many Southern sympathizers in New York City - so many that Abraham Lincoln lost the 1864 election in the City, although he won New York State.

his early death? Eaton was married in 1838 and his only son dies, age 4, in Syracuse, July 6, 1848.

O. Burrows = Orson Burrows (born 1813, NYS - dies October 4, 1885, Brooklyn, NY. He is buried in Cedar Grove Cemetery, Queens, NY). Orson Burrows is listed in 1851-1854 Syracuse City Directories as the landlord of the Exchange Hotel. Orson had a brother, Orange Burrows (born 1809, NYS - dies April 1874, Buffalo, NY). Orson and Orange were the sons of Elisha Burrows who was born in Massachusetts and moved from Connecticut to Rome, Oneida, County, NY, where he dies in 1828. There is some confusion between Orson and Orange Burrows since both are called "O. Burrows" at times; but Orange Burrows is not listed in Syracuse Directories. In 1850, in Syracuse, "O. Burrows" attends a Democratic political rally with "J.C. Woodruff" and "W. Winton."

In Syracuse, Orson married Caroline Parrish Wood, whose father, Isaac G. Wood, had been a keeper at the State Prison, Auburn, NY, and then ran a boarding house in Syracuse.

About 1855, Orson moves from Syracuse to Buffalo. In the 1860 US census, Orson and Orange Burrows are living together in Buffalo, NY. Orange Burrows will marry and remain in Buffalo. In 1870, Orson and his family have moved to Detroit, Michigan. By 1879, Orson Burrows and his family have moved to New York City where he is a cashier at Fifth Avenue and 26/27th St. They are living in Brooklyn as well.

For many years, there are long-running newspaper advertisements for a fireweed patent medicine to cure scrofula which "O. Burrows" endorses. April 7, 1878 an ad in a Syracuse newspaper states "Capt. O. Burrows, landlord Exchange Hotel is the same

ho lived in Buffalo and now has moved to Fifth Avenue and 26th St, NYC ” who had one of worst cases of scrofula seen, finally ascertaining that he is indeed the same man.

J.C. Woodruff = Jason Cooper Woodruff (born 1800, New Haven, Connecticut - dies July 16, 1878). Woodruff was Mayor of Syracuse in 1852. He was a Democrat and a Presbyterian. In October 1845, a flouring mill he owned burned down. Primarily, he was in the livery business; but he had been a blacksmith and stage coach driver. He was very proud of his horsemanship. Supposedly, he provided wagons to transport the fugitive slave, Jerry, during the “Jerry Rescue” which occurred in Syracuse on October 1, 1851.¹⁴ He has a son, Jason C. Woodruff, Jr. (born 1827, NY -?) who is listed in 1853-1854 Syracuse City Directory as a railroad conductor, boarding at the Globe Hotel. In the 1860's, he is working in the livery business.

D. Becker = Daniel Becker (born 1820, Half Moon-on-Hudson, Saratoga County, NY - dies November 11, 1893, Syracuse, Onondaga County, NY. Buried Oakwood Cemetery, Syracuse). Daniel Becker was a prominent retail jeweler with a store

located in the center of Syracuse on South Salina St. Daniel Becker's obituary says that, in 1835, he went to New York City to learn the jewelry manufacturing trade. In 1840, he moved to Syracuse to engage in manufacturing gold pens for 3 or 4 years. Then he opened a jewelry store, D. Becker & Co., with his father, Albert Becker (born 1796 - dies 1883). After Albert retires, Daniel's brother, James Becker (born 1818 - dies 1898) joins the firm. In 1860, because of his health, Daniel Becker tried farming for a while on the banks of Oneida Lake, during which time he was a trustee of the village of Cicero, NY. In 1864, Daniel returns to a firm now called Becker & Lathrop, located at Salina and Washington Streets, Syracuse. His brother, James Becker, having retired, this was a partnership with Eliel Gilbert Lathrop (born 1835, MA - retires 1904, dies 1921, Syracuse), who had been an employee at the firm. Daniel Becker had six sons (one, Gilbert L. Becker, he named after his partner), and some will continue in the jewelry business as will Lathrop's son, Gilbert Lathrop.

Originally, there was some speculation that the word describing the presenters of the silver box was

“Outriders” and that they were linked to the anti-slavery, Abolitionist Movement and the Underground Railway. Syracuse was nick-named the “Canada of the United States” because of its reputation for sheltering and transporting escaped slaves, especially by a black minister, Jermain Wesley Loguen (1813-1872), who had spent time in Canada.

However, the men named on the silver box were not radical activists. They believed that as long as the Fugitive Slave Act was a law, it should be obeyed. Not to do so would be treasonous. R.S. Eaton, Wm. Winton and O. Burrows, signed their names, in exactly that way, to a March 23, 1854, Syracuse petition upholding the Fugitive Slave Law, as long as it remained unrepealed, and opposing mob rescues such as had recently happened in Milwaukee.¹⁵

Another possible meaning of “Outsiders” could involve railroad stock shares. There were disagreements among shareholders concerning the valuation of their stocks during the consolidation of various railroad lines into the NY Central RR which was finalized in 1853. Shareholders of the Rochester & Syracuse RR initially wanted a greater valuation of their stock in exchange for the new NY Central RR stock shares. However, I have explored this aspect and can find no evidence to support this theory.

I am sure readers will share my amazement what data can be unearthed with diligence and how this silver presentation box “contains” a larger story of 19th century industrial development, transportation, family associations and mobility in western New York State and beyond.

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