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SUNRISE IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE CATSKILL MOUNTAINS

ON NOVEMBER 21, 1829, CARLETON WATKINS was born to John Maurice and Julia Anne Watkins in Milfordville, New York, a tiny town in the tight hills west of the Catskill Mountains.¹

The lesson Carleton would take from his mother's family was to go west, so Carleton's story must start with them. Julia's father, John McDonald, was a classic example of his type, a Scots-Irish Presbyterian whose family had settled the first western frontier in the late 1700s.² He seems to have arrived in Milfordville around the turn of the nineteenth century, though exactly how and from where the McDonalds came is somewhat fuzzy. According to one local oral history, the McDonalds were descended from the famed Scottish MacDonalld clan that was nearly wiped out by Robert Campbell at the Massacre of Glencoe in 1692. Many of the remaining MacDonallds then emigrated to Nova Scotia. It was said that John McDonald's forefathers were among those MacDonallds, and that they subsequently traveled west, into the Catskills. That may or may not be true. At the turn of the eighteenth century, Milfordville was the frontier, and civic record keeping is rarely a priority of frontier towns.³

Eventually several McDonalds worked their way west to an empty, nameless place in central New York State. They built a sawmill and a bridge

that forded the Susquehanna River. As a result, the place became known as Milfordville.⁴ Julia's father, John, would inherit this mill and much land. John McDonald expanded the family's holdings to include a hotel and tavern and apparently a second mill, this one a gristmill that was also used for the production of whiskey. Milfordville grew from a name to a town around John McDonald's holdings, which assured both his prosperity and the stability of the town. John McDonald was a manifestation of one of the young republic's early themes: individual opportunity lay in new land, and the new land was always to the west of the settled East. Think of McDonald as the real-life embodiment of Marmaduke Temple, the frontier town builder in *The Pioneers*, James Fenimore Cooper's classic 1823 novel of early American westering that was set in these same foothills of the Catskills. Temple's town is usually considered an analogue for Cooperstown, but it could just as easily be another town a stop or two down the Susquehanna, such as Milfordville.

Milfordville's McDonalds began to intersect with Milfordville's Watkinses around 1800: It is likely that one of John McDonald's brothers was one William Ellis McDonald. William married Lydia Burgett Watkins, a woman who had four children with her first husband and then more with William. One of those children was named John M. Watkins.

It is not clear where John Watkins was born, but he grew into the sort of solid citizen on whom communities depend. He arrived in Milfordville by 1821, when he was fifteen. He had been an orphan since the age of ten. John cut timber in the mountains around Milfordville until, wanting to better himself, he found work in town as a carpenter's apprentice.⁵ He built houses for the leading men of the village, men who must have recommended his work to the other leading men of the village, because before long most of them lived in John Watkins houses.⁶ John thanked them by building Milfordville's first house of worship, a Presbyterian church. Years later, John would express his continuing commitment to this place by painting the church and then by building it a bell tower.⁷ He would become one of the region's most respected hotel- and tavernkeepers. John was well enough regarded by the menfolk of Oneonta, as Milfordville became known after 1832, that they elected him a sergeant in the town's militia.⁸ He was well enough regarded by the militia captain, John McDonald, that McDonald gave to John the hand of his eldest daughter, Julia. For John Watkins, marrying Julia was an

excellent career move. McDonald was far and away Milfordville's leading citizen, the town's postmaster, its biggest landowner, and surely its wealthiest man.⁹

There is no record of how John McDonald's daughter Julia met John Watkins. While family records are imprecise, John and Julia were almost certainly either cousins or cousins by marriage. It seems that John McDonald was willing to give Julia's hand to a local orphan of lesser social status because he was, in fact, a McDonald.

John Watkins would have realized that marrying Julia ensured that he would play a role in the town's future. Not long after, the townsfolk confirmed John McDonald's decision: the town's militia voted McDonald's son-in-law into McDonald's old captaincy.¹⁰ As a result of the intertwined history of Milfordville and the McDonald family, when Julia Watkins gave birth to Carleton, the couple's first child, John would not have been just concerned about the troubled economic state of the town and its prospects for the future, he would have been expected to play a role in trying to improve them. He would, but first: Carleton.

A child remembers moments of freedom and wonder. Carleton's earliest memory was the night the sky snowed fire.¹¹

It started with a ruckus outside four-year-old Carleton's window, where hundreds of Oneontans were rapidly gathering in the street. In a way, this was no accident: the hotel and tavern that John Watkins ran for or inherited from his father-in-law was located on Oneonta's most commercial block, between the river and the highway that ran through town.¹² Whenever something big was happening, like the Fourth of July, militia drills, or a political rally, Oneontans came here.¹³ Oneontans could find this stretch of Chestnut Street in the dark, which was exactly what they had done this night.

Carleton ran out of his father's house and into the street. Everyone was looking at the same place: up the narrow valley of the Susquehanna, toward where Charlotte Creek fed into the river, creating a gentle V that broke up the weathered foothills of the Catskill Mountains. They were staring at the constellation Leo and at the lion's mane, which was where the stars seemed to come from as they streaked across the sky. That was where Carleton

looked too. He saw stars, shooting stars, an almost impossible number of shooting stars.¹⁴

How many? So many that the great Leonid meteor shower of November 1833 may still be the greatest celestial event in U.S. history. The numbers that quantify the event are so large that they become abstract: Carleton saw ten to twenty falling stars per second. *One one thousand*: twenty shooting stars. *Two one thousand*: forty. *Three one thousand*: sixty. Eventually two hundred thousand shooting stars, and maybe many more, flew through the sky that night.¹⁵ For now, Oneontans had absolutely no idea what was going on. Like other townfolk across America, they looked to the most prominent, best-educated man among them for guidance. On this occasion and on others, that man was Ira Emmons, who farmed a large piece of land in East Oneonta, a mile or two up the Susquehanna River from the town.¹⁶ As Emmons had a little farther to go to reach John Watkins's hotel, he arrived on his horse-drawn sleigh after a crowd was already assembled. As Emmons probably knew they would, townfolk crowded his sleigh and asked him to explain why the skies were falling. He did not disappoint. Emmons climbed up onto his chaise and turned to explain to the crowd why the sky was snowing fire.

Emmons's entrance was so grand and the way Oneontans treated him was so deferential that Carleton would remember the moment for the rest of his life. Seventy years after that night, when he was asked about it by an Oneonta historian who had traveled to San Francisco to meet him, Carleton described the scene in detail: Emmons, wearing a long cloak with a cape attached to it, spoke to the assembled from atop his sleigh, a tall, black silhouette as the heavens showered streaks of white, red, blue, and green behind him. Carleton remembered being both awed by something he didn't understand and excited by learning what it was. He remembered the respect accorded the man who built insight from experience and who melded beauty with science. The way a seventysomething Carleton recounted the story leaves the reader suspecting that he was also talking about his own career, that he was establishing the point of genesis for his own interest in the intersection of beauty, science, and philosophy.

Meanwhile, as Carleton's father fretted about the future of a tiny mountain town, Carleton grew up. There was the time four hundred people cele-

brated the Fourth of July in the front yard of Carleton's father's hotel, the day on which a man from nearby Cooperstown marked the occasion by letting loose a huge paper balloon that drifted into the sky.¹⁷ There was the time Carleton and the other boys in town went on a covered-sled ride through the snow to Otego, the next town to the west, a grand journey to a new world,¹⁸ and the time seven-year-old Carleton and a chum scrambled up to the Rocks above town and carved their names in stone, and the many, many times Carleton climbed to the top of the bell tower that his father had built onto the Presbyterian church, lit balls of cotton with turpentine, and threw them out toward town, his own personal fireworks.¹⁹ And then there was the time Carleton was playing by the Susquehanna River behind his grandfather's house and fell in! It was spring and the river was high and it was fast and Carleton was scared and out of nowhere Carleton's dog, a huge bulldog-and-mastiff mixed breed known for both his size and his good nature, jumped in, grabbed his young master's clothes with his mouth, and pulled the boy to the far bank. These are the kinds of thrills a boy remembers.²⁰

In Carleton's case, he also remembered a mural on the side of a building. The painting was commissioned by William Angel, friendly business rival of Carleton's father, John, and father of young Carleton's best friend, Myron, who hired an itinerant artist named David Wakelee to paint two signs on the external walls of his hotel. Angel's instructions to Wakelee, to paint a coach-and-four on one wall and a locomotive and train on another, suggest that Angel had a sophisticated understanding of Oneonta's past, present, and future. Angel knew that the coach-and-four, a kind of box-on-wheels pulled by four horses, was Oneonta's past and present. It was how goods and people transited to and from the Hudson River valley and from New York to this little mountain town. The mural also suggested that Angel knew the old-fashioned coach-and-four wouldn't cut it anymore. Like the night on which the sky snowed fire, the mural became a memory Carleton carried with him across the continent and through seven decades: art wasn't just a pretty picture; it could deliver messages about the present and about the future too.

The limited-capacity, slow, unreliable travel provided by the coach-and-four had been rendered obsolete not by the railroad—not yet, anyway—but

by the Erie Canal, the biggest infrastructure project in the nation's history. The canal enabled the cheap transport of wheat, flour, and whiskey from Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, and western New York across the state and down to New York City. By the time Watkins was born, the Erie Canal carried \$15 million of goods each year, twice as much as floated down the Mississippi to New Orleans; it had transformed America's economy and built New York City into the commercial powerhouse it still is today.²¹ From almost the day the canal opened in 1825, it was cheaper, overwhelmingly cheaper, for wheat to be shipped on a barge from a farm in Ohio up to Lake Erie, across the lake to the Erie Canal, and then floated down the Hudson to New York than it was for Oneontans to send wheat, flour, or whiskey to Philadelphia or Baltimore via the only route available to them, the Susquehanna River.²² As a result, the number of farms in New York's Mohawk Valley, through which the canal ran between the Hudson and Lake Erie, doubled, and the value of land there quadrupled.²³ Simultaneously, the canal made most of Oneonta's farms obsolete.

William Angel understood that if Oneonta was to compete with the Erie Canal, if it was to grow, if it was to give Myron and Carleton a reason to make their lives there rather than go west, it would have to attract the railroad, the only means by which Oneonta's goods could reach market at a price competitive with goods from the Great Lakes. Angel had just chartered a railroad company that was raising capital in an effort to make that future happen. The signs he had Wakelee paint were a hat tip to Oneonta's past and an advertisement for Angel's hotel, but they were mostly a plea for the town's future. The railroad of which William Angel dreamed was not to be: he retired two years later and soon died. Oneonta wouldn't attract a railroad for another thirty years,²⁴ by which point both Carleton and Myron had gone west. (In an extraordinary coincidence, they would each become pioneering chroniclers of California's Kern County, the prototype for industrial-scale western irrigated agriculture.)

Near the end of his life, Carleton tied those two Wakelee paintings to another memory, to one of the Fourth of July spectacles from his youth. Sometime in the late 1830s, Oneonta was midway through its celebration when an extraordinary spectacle belched its way up the Susquehanna River: a steamboat that had come from Unadilla, about twenty miles downriver

from Oneonta. Steamboats were by no means unusual in the United States by this point—the first steamboats ran up the Hudson around 1807.²⁵ Oneontans knew how important steamboats had become as movers of goods and people. Many Oneontans had offloaded agricultural products onto steamboats at Catskill, the terminus of the rough wagon road that ran east-west from Oneonta to the Hudson. Until now, no steamboat had ever made it up to this sometimes feeble point of the Susquehanna, just a couple of dozen miles from the river's source. As it turned out, none would again: this steamboat got stuck and had to be dislodged from the rocky bottom before it could head back downriver. No railroad (yet) for Oneonta, no steamboats either.²⁶

This lack of access to the most important recent technologies was rapidly exacerbating Oneonta's isolation and retarding its potential growth.²⁷ The prosperity that had carried Oneonta and the Watkinses through Carleton's first decade was ending, fast.

In 1840, as a railroad connection from Oneonta to the outside world turned from plan to dream, a rumor about John Watkins spread quickly through the town and the surrounding area. Farmers poured into Watkins's hotel at River and Main Streets to plunk a quarter onto his bar for a glass of local whiskey and to ask John a question: was the rumor true, was he really giving up on the town he had spent two decades building, often with his own two hands, for a new life on the western frontier?²⁸

Yes and no, John would have told them, yes and no. Yes, he was going to Ohio, but he was just going to look, and then he was coming back. He told them that he was taking the two-month trip with just a horse and buggy. You don't leave home with your wife, with four children and a fifth on the way—had the men heard Julia was pregnant again?—to start a frontier life in just a horse and buggy. The men would have offered congratulations and prayers in equal measure. Given the risks of pregnancy, John was plainly going to Ohio alone—and he was coming back.

Still, John would have realized that his own window for going west was closing. He was thirty-four years old, and going west was a young man's move. Carleton was about the age John had been when his parents died, and only a bit younger than John had been when he apprenticed himself to William Angel. If John was ever going to provide Carleton and his brothers

with upward mobility and a future, and if they were going to stick together as a family rather than slowly, steadily move west one by one by one in the coming years, the move would have to be now.

While John Watkins and his wife's family were deeply invested in the town they had helped create, maybe John thought of Oneonta in the way so many Americans in 1840 thought of where they were: as a waypoint, a jumping-off place. America's westward migration was well into its sixth decade. Maybe it was time for the Watkinses to join the rush. In 1825, the year the Erie Canal opened, the U.S. government sold about four million acres of western lands to settlers. In 1840, it would sell about *thirty-eight million* acres of western lands.²⁹ Maybe John had missed the boom. Then again, maybe the boom meant there were now enough people in Ohio to support a fine hotel.³⁰

There is no evidence that, at the time, Carleton thought anything of his father's trip to Ohio. But the same year, his dog, the same dog that had pulled Carleton out of the Susquehanna when he was younger, developed a couple of bad habits. There was the time that the dog chased one of Mr. Van Leuvan's cows into the Susquehanna out behind Carleton's house. When the cow jumped in the river to escape the fearsome bulldog-mastiff mix at its heels, the dog jumped in after the cow, landing square on the terrified animal's back. That was kind of funny, if only because Mr. Van Leuvan's cow crossed the river to the other side, at which point Carleton's dog jumped off and considered the game at an end. From there the dog's behavior degenerated. He began to chase sheep, by now Oneonta's most important agricultural assets. When sheep become scared, they produce less milk or run away. Like most small towns, Oneonta had few laws and fewer ways of enforcing them. One of the rules was that animals who came into the habit of chasing sheep on outlying farms had to either leave town or be shot. John Watkins may have been one of the half-dozen most important men in Oneonta, but his son's dog was not immune from the laws of the town. When a couple of farmers complained to Carleton's father that the boy's dog had become a nuisance, there was only one thing to do: John Watkins waited until one of the men staying at his hotel mentioned that he was headed for Ohio. "Would you like some company on your way to the frontier?" John would have asked. "My son has a fine dog, and he can't stay with us any

longer.” The man took Carleton’s dog and left for Ohio. Seventy years later, asked for a few memories of his boyhood in Oneonta, Carleton recalled that story. Everyone was going west, Carleton told the man, even my dog.³¹

Unlike most of the men who left Otsego County for Ohio, John Watkins came back to make his life in central New York. Excepting a few years he spent running a hotel in Albany, he would live the rest of his life in Oneonta.³² There is nothing in the historical record that even hints at why he chose to stay.

Soon after John’s return, Julia would give birth to their fifth child, George; the couple had two more children, Jane (born in 1842) and James (born in 1844). One wonders if John Watkins later regretted his decision: In part because he chose to stay put, three of his children fought in the Civil War. One did well and was promoted to lieutenant colonel, but another died in 1865, thirteen months after mustering out. As we shall see, at least two and probably four of John’s children left Oneonta. Only one of them remained to survive him.³³

Having decided to stay, John naturally became interested in the matter that consumed the town’s leaders in the fall of 1840: the death of local merchant Jacob Dietz and how it left Oneonta without a general store. Then as now, there are certain businesses that a town must have to enable the workaday routines of the residents, the kind of businesses that attract people to the town. In 1840 a store of general merchandise, where you could buy or trade for sugar and salt and yarn and flour and nails and paint, was one of those things.

John and the men of the town sent word through their families and friends that Oneonta was in need of a new storekeeper. It is likely that then, as now, the men who ran the town sent word that certain civic allowances would be made in order to entice such a businessman to Oneonta. The record suggests that a fine storefront right along the busy Charlotte Turnpike was assured; that the store would be within a stone’s throw of all the local hotels and taverns; that a sizable piece of land suitable for a businessman to erect a substantial home might be found; and that it would be close enough to the gentleman’s store that in case of fire or other disaster, he would be quite near the store.³⁴ Before long, such a man was found. His

name was Solon Huntington, and for several years, he had been operating a small store in Connecticut. He was ready to move west—but not *too* far west, not to the frontier—so he came to Oneonta, where he promptly built a three-story stone house complete with a basement for the warehousing of goods, a public indication of his commitment to the town. But Solon Huntington wasn't the only Huntington that Oneonta attracted. In addition to a storekeeper, Oneonta got itself a butter man.

Townsfolk may not have thought much about how the region needed a butter man, but the farmers who lived outside the village surely had. Here's why: When Oneonta-area farmers all but stopped growing wheat in response to the arrival of the Erie Canal, they invested in sheep and cattle. In 1840, no New York county was home to more sheep than Oneonta's Otsego. Butter was the motivating reason. Farmers in Ohio and western New York could not ship butter down to New York City; it was too far for the product to travel without spoiling. For once, geography worked in favor of Oneonta's farmers, who produced butter that they salted heavily and placed in sixty-six-pound barrels called firkins, which they sent down the Charlotte Turnpike to the Hudson, then down the Hudson to New York City.³⁵ While Solon Huntington would soon become a prosperous local merchant of distinction, the operator of a general store that was the biggest and most successful in at least a three-county area, the main reason we remember him today is that he helped launch the career of a butter man.³⁶

Solon's brother was Collis Potter Huntington, and Oneonta had never seen anything like him. Collis was a significant physical specimen: at over six feet tall and a brawny two hundred pounds, his mere presence attracted attention. Collis made good use of his size in his business, in which he handled leaden butter firkins as if they were mere packets of yeast. But it wasn't just Collis's size of which Oneontans took note, it was his business savvy, his drive.

Upon visiting Oneonta in 1840 or 1841, Collis, an experienced traveler, intuited that for every tradesman or merchant in Oneonta, there were fifty-six farmers in the surrounding country. There were five times as many sheep as people in Otsego County, a ratio that was only slightly lessened in bordering Delaware and Chenango Counties.³⁷ Collis noticed all those sheep and cattle; he noticed the Charlotte Turnpike and the access it provided to

the Hudson and to New York City, which was then the largest commercial hub in the United States. Those farmers were producing an enormous amount of quality butter, butter that could be bought inexpensively (high supply!) and transported to New York, where it could bring strong prices and a healthy profit.

That is exactly what Collis did. “The butter trade was a precarious one, breaking up nearly everybody who tried it,” he later said, well aware of how quickly the product could spoil. “I was the only person who followed it for eight years without losing money on my invoices.”³⁸ Collis was so proud of his hugely profitable butter runs that fifty years later, when he dictated a kind of oral history of his life, he devoted a couple of dozen pages to his prowess as a butter man, the most he devoted to any section of his semiautobiography but one.³⁹ If the dollar figures and profits about which Collis boasted were even sort of accurate—and when it came to the story of his own life, Collis was perfectly capable of selective and embellished memory—by the mid- to late 1840s, he was likely the wealthiest man in Oneonta. He was not yet thirty years old. In the decades to come, he would remember how the Watkinses and other leading Oneontans had welcomed his brother and him, financially and otherwise. He would take care of those families for the rest of his life. One of those families was the Watkinses.

A teenager such as Carleton Watkins, who was fourteen when Collis, twenty-two, began making his butter runs, would have been plenty impressed with Collis’s success. Carleton fished with Collis in Silver Brook. They played an early version of baseball in Oneonta’s streets.⁴⁰ Whether Collis realized it or not, he was teaching Carleton ambition; he was showing him what could happen when a determined young man moved west to a new place, grabbed the sheep by the firkins and made a business of it. Carleton surely knew that when his father was his age, he was already working as a lumberman and was learning carpentry. Carleton grew up in substantially more comfort than had his orphaned father, so there wasn’t as much urgency about his future, but still, what next? What did Oneonta hold for him?

Not much. As the 1840s and Carleton’s teenage years neared an end, the small economic boom provided by the construction of the road between the Hudson and Oneonta had played out. Between 1840 and 1850, the population of the United States grew 36 percent, but Oneonta’s population barely

budged. When four-year-old Carleton had seen the great meteor shower, there were about fifty houses in the village. Sixteen years later, there were only sixteen more. The local economy was contracting. Carleton would have noticed that he was far from the only Otsego County teenager with nothing to do. He was the eldest of his parents' seven offspring. Theirs was a typical family size for that time and place.⁴¹ Sixty-eight percent of the residents of Otsego County were under thirty years old.⁴² As Carleton approached his twentieth birthday, he and virtually every other area teenager must have wondered what there could possibly be for him to do in a no-growth town surrounded by filled-up farmland.

The answer arrived like a flash: gold had been discovered in California! The nation-changing news probably arrived via word of mouth, from traders such as Collis who had traveled the New York-to-Oneonta route. Soon it was all anyone in Oneonta was talking about. Within about a year of the discovery, almost 5 percent of the population of Otsego County, two thousand men, would leave for California.⁴³ Among the first Oneontans to decide to leave was the butter man, Collis Huntington.⁴⁴ His plan was to open a branch of the Huntingtons' general store in California, not to pan for gold. If the most prominent trader in central New York, Oneonta's newly elected fire captain and probably the wealthiest man in the area, was giving it all up for California, who would want to stay?⁴⁵

Many Oneontans asked Collis to take them with him. Eventually Collis picked five men. They each paid their own way. One was named Leroy Chamberlin,⁴⁶ and nothing else is known about him. Another was Daniel Hammond, about whom we know little, except that once in California, he made a good life for himself in Sacramento. The others have better survived in the historical record: George Murray, a bookkeeper at the Huntingtons' Oneonta store, and Egbert Sabin, son of local businessman Timothy Sabin. Collis did not much like the corpulent and lazy Egbert, and in California he would come to like him so much less that he would ship him back to Oneonta. There seems to have been some quid pro quo or business deal between the Huntingtons and the Sabins: When the Huntingtons moved to Oneonta, they bought the large plots of land for their homes at a good price from Timothy Sabin. After Collis left for California, Timothy Sabin would take over the region's butter trade.

The final man Collis took to California was the son of the town's newly elected supervisor (which told you all you needed to know about how much faith Oneontans had in the future of their town).⁴⁷ He was a rangy nineteen-year-old whose father had helped bring Solon and Collis Huntington to Oneonta. The young man's passage to San Francisco was financially backed in part by Dr. Samuel Case, who lived in a house that had been built by that same new Oneonta supervisor. Collis's fifth gold rusher was his fishing buddy, Carleton Watkins.

Over the next half century, Watkins and Huntington would play starring roles in the rise of the American West and in the transformation of the nation from an agrarian coastal state to a continent-filling industrial power. Meanwhile, in the 165 years since Carleton and Collis left Oneonta, the annual growth rate of New York's Otsego County has been about .01 percent.