



Albert W Bacon

An Early Leelanau-Grand Traverse Success Story

Albert W. Bacon came to Traverse City in the spring of 1857, when he was twenty-five years old. He came as a young surveyor working for the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad. His crew was involved with land the government had granted to the G.R. & I in the southern part of Antrim County, with their base set up at the southeast corner of the county, around the Elk Lake area.¹

His ancestry was English, his family's presence in America dating back to the mid-1600's, originating at Barnstable, on Cape Cod, with the Massachusetts colony. As the family prospered and grew, its sons and daughters moved westward. Albert was born in Orwell, Addison County, Vermont. Coming into the world on May 19, 1832, he was the third-born child and second son of John Wright and Harriet Bacon. He grew up on the family farm near the southern end of Lake Champlain, next to his grandparents place, the Nathan and Anna Bacon farm.²

Over time, the Bacons had become well-connected. Other members of his family had migrated westward into New York State, then on to Michigan, where they settled at Monroe, near Detroit. Especially notable was an older cousin, Daniel Stanton Bacon, a schoolteacher who became an attorney, served as a member of the Territorial Legislature of Michigan Territory, as a Judge of Probate, as a bank director, and as a founding director of the Michigan Southern Railroad Company.^{3, 4} Daniel's daughter, Albert's second cousin, was Elizabeth Bacon Custer, wife of General George Armstrong Custer. George Custer had spent part of his youth living with a half-sister in Monroe, Mrs. David Reed, while attending the "Boys and Young Men's Academy" originally founded by city leaders, including Daniel Bacon.⁵ Operated under the direction of the noted Professor Alfred Stebbins,⁶ it was considered a prestigious institution, and did successfully prepare the future General for his entry into the Army Academy at West Point.

As young bachelor, Albert originally made his home in Traverse City, at a boarding house on Front Street operated by the young couple William and Eliza Fowle. It was called "The Bay House" until they took it over; they changed the name to the "Traverse City House".^{7, 8}

It wasn't long before Albert W. Bacon had made a name for himself around Traverse City, as a land speculator. Within six years, he had acquired approximately half of North Manitou Island, some 5,648-acres, 297-acres on South Manitou Island, all of Marion Island in Grand Traverse Bay, which he liked to call "Island No. 10." He also owned a variety of property in and around Traverse City, from the only house on the Leelanau County line on the west, to his farm near Elk Lake on the East.⁹ In the summer of 1863, the local newspaper called him

"a real estate dealer of unquestionable integrity," mentioning that he could offer over 11,000 acres of public and privately-held cedar land (wetlands), farm land, fence land (pasturage) and timberland.¹⁰

Not originally having the power to levy taxes, the cash-poor Federal government established a practice of exchanging public land for goods and services. The government was not averse to conflict, and was involved in one skirmish after another from the time of the Revolutionary War until the Civil War. Soldiers often received land warrants as pay, in lieu of cash, and after the government finally declared these warrants transferable in the mid-1800's, a lively trade in military bounty land warrants arose. These warrants were often held by veterans, widows of veterans, and their heirs, to whom they actually had little real value, and who were therefore often willing to sell them for much less than the price of the land they were good for. That opened great opportunities for anyone with a little money, and land speculators accounted for upwards of 85% of land acquisitions involving such warrants. Land speculation soon became a competitive activity, with buy and sell offers commonly appearing in newspaper ads at the time.

Most of Albert Bacon's acquisitions, upwards of 90% of them, were military bounty land warrant transactions. In his case, most the warrants arose from military service in the War of 1812, and the War with Mexico of 1846-'47. The Indian wars were also represented – the Creek, Apache, Black Hawk, and Florida Wars. Most of the warrants were purchased from veterans; some from their widows or next-of-kin.¹¹

His success in real estate brought a degree of prominence that led to other business ventures¹², and to public service as a member of the school board, and as assessor.¹³ Young and now quite eligible, he was a popular figure on Traverse City's social scene; a *bon vivant*, at it were, and even recklessly fun-loving at times.¹⁴ To the county's single young ladies, he was, no doubt, a "person of interest."

But he married Hattie Griswold; a down-state girl.

Harriet J. Griswold, or "Hattie" to her family and friends, was the eldest child of Roger W. Griswold, and his second wife, Frances (Browning) Griswold. Hattie was born in Vermontville, in Eaton County, Michigan, on May 9th, 1840.¹⁵ Her family was involved with the G.R. & I Railroad, which might have been the connection which led to the young couple's acquaintance. Albert and Hattie were married in Vermontville in the fall of 1863, on Wednesday, October 28.¹⁷ He was thirty-one, she was twenty-three.

On May 21st in the following spring, the propeller *Nile* was sitting at her dock in Detroit, about to depart for Chicago, when her boiler exploded, destroying the ship and killing eight persons onboard. At least thirteen other crewmen and passengers were injured. Large pieces of her boiler flew as far as 300-feet, while other fragments of the ship damaged houses far across the river at Windsor in Canada. A heavy timber from



the ship was thrown through the brick back wall of a nearby shoe store, fatally striking a cobbler in the back of the head as he worked at his bench.^{18, 19}

Albert W. Bacon, traveling on business for his Traverse City firm Campbell & Bacon, was among the dead. As others were sitting down for breakfast aboard the luxury vessel, he had remained on deck, and was thrown some 250-feet ashore by the force of the blast. He had died instantly.²⁰

And so, Hattie's marriage ended in tragedy on a Saturday morning, May 21, 1864.²¹ It had lasted only seven months. She was now a young, childless widow. A few days later, her husband was laid to rest in the Griswold family section of Vermontville Township's Woodlawn Cemetery.²²

Albert's cousin, the respected Probate Judge Daniel Stanton Bacon of Monroe, was called upon to settle his affairs in Traverse City.^{23, 24} Judge Bacon faithfully executed that responsibility on behalf of Albert's widow for two years before dying of Cholera at home in Monroe in the spring of 1866. The torch was then passed to Hattie's brother-in-law, Walter C. Bacon, who served in that role until the estate was finally settled.

Hattie stayed on in Vermontville for several years²⁵, then moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, taking up residence with her younger brother, Dr. Joseph Griswold, and his family.^{26, 27} She never remarried, and passed away in Grand Rapids in 1919. After faithfully waiting for fifty-five years, she was reunited with Albert in eternal rest at the Woodlawn Cemetery in Vermontville Township.²⁸

And thus ends the story of Albert W. Bacon, who won his place in the history of Leelanau and Grand Traverse Counties as the area's *first land mogul*, as he is often called. That is somewhat of a misnomer, but for the average observer, seeing that name on so many land patents probably conjures up images of a much different kind of historic personality. Few would suspect that Albert W. Bacon was merely a very bright young man who was brought into the area quite by happenstance – a young man who, for a very brief moment in time, became highly successful by keeping a sharp eye out for opportunities, and by having the courage to seize those which came his way



Editors Note: This essay is a compilation of information from a variety of historic texts and Internet resources. While information from these sources is not always in agreement, the information contained in this work represents an earnest attempt to remain faithful to the facts, or what was probable given the times and the circumstances of the events.

References

- ¹ Michigan History Magazine, Vol. II, 1918, pg. 394
- ² 1850 U.S. Census for Orwell, Vermont
- ³ Burial record for Daniel Stanton Bacon
- ⁴ Charter & Laws, Michigan Southern & Northern Indiana Rail-Road Company, 1855, pg 105
- ⁵ History of Monroe County Michigan, 1913, John McClelland Bulkley, Vol. 1, pg 422
- ⁶ Custer-Bacon Biographical Sketch, Monroe County Library
- ⁷ 1860 U.S. Census for Traverse City, Michigan
- ⁸ The Traverse Region – Historical and Descriptive, 1884, pg 81
- ⁹ Old Settlers of the Grand Traverse Region, Wait & Anderson, 1918, pg 44
- ¹⁰ Traverse City Record Eagle, July 24, 1864, pg 4
- ¹¹ Copies of original land patents are available elsewhere on the manitouslandarchives.org website
- ¹² Grand Traverse Herald, Friday, May 17, 1861 adv pg 3: Hitchcock Campbell & Bacon
- ¹³ Sprague's History of Grand Traverse and Leelanau Counties, Evan Sprague and Mrs. Geo. Smith, 1903, pg 315
- ¹⁴ Old Settlers of the Grand Traverse Region, Wait & Anderson, 1918, Adv – pg 88
- ¹⁵ Historical Collections, Vol. 28, 1886, pg 276
- ¹⁶ 1850 U.S. Census – Vermontville, Michigan
- ¹⁷ Genealogical Information for Harriet J. Griswold – from Internet resources, including 1880 U.S. Census for Grand Rapids, Michigan
- ¹⁸ Great Lakes Shipwreck Record, part N
- ¹⁹ Newspaper: Marshall Democrat Expounder, Thursday May 26, 1864, pg 2
- ²⁰ Newspaper: Marshall Statesman, Wednesday May 25, 1865, pg 2
- ²¹ Portrait Biographical Album of Barry and Eaton Counties, Michigan, 1891, pgs 595, 596
- ²² Cemetery Index – Woodlawn Cemetery, Vermont Township, Eaton County, Michigan
- ²³ Traverse City Record-Eagle, Saturday, August 1, 1964, feature: “Century Notes”
- ²⁴ Traverse City Record-Eagle, Monday, September 30, 2002, feature section: books
- ²⁵ 1870 U.S. Census – Vermontville, MI
- ²⁶ 1900 U.S. Census – Grand Rapids, MI
- ²⁷ 1989-1900 Polk City Directory, Grand Rapids, pg 154
- ²⁸ Cemetery Index – Woodlawn Cemetery, Vermont Township, Eaton County, Michigan