

Two Heroes from Genesee County – Ely S. Parker and Charles F. Rand
(a talk with youngsters participating in the “History Heroes” Summer Camp
at the Holland Land Office Museum)

by

Michael J. Eula, Ph.D.
Genesee County Historian

History is full of examples of individuals who have had an enormous impact on their society. Our county is, of course, no exception. People who have made their mark on society are people who have displayed traits that are typically associated with heroes. In Genesee County, two people who have exhibited the characteristics of a hero are Ely S. Parker and Charles F. Rand.

Before talking about these men we should take a few minutes to discuss who we think a hero is. Who do you think a hero is, and why? (Discussion). Let me add to what some of you have said. To begin with, the word hero comes from the Greek word *heros* – which means a defender or protector. So heroes tend to be protectors or defenders – just like Ely Parker or Charles Rand, as we will see. This also means that heroic people will engage in self-sacrifice and risk-taking – just as our two Genesee County heroes. Thirdly, our heroes in Genesee County – in this instance Parker and Rand – are people who strive to take care of others. They both helped people to heal and to learn. Finally, our two heroes – like other heroes – were both role models for others in Genesee County and indeed, the nation at large. With all of this in mind, we will turn first to Ely Parker.

Before looking at the characteristics that made Ely Samuel Parker a hero and consequently a famous person I will briefly outline the basic features of his life. He was born into a large family in 1828. Parker was a Seneca Native American born in Indian Falls, which at that time was part of the Tonawanda Reservation. He spoke both Seneca and English. Parker eventually studied at the Yates Academy in Orleans County. Aspiring to become a lawyer, he studied law for three years in a law firm in Ellicottville, New York, for three years. He then applied to take the bar examination but was denied permission. As a Native American, he

was not considered to be a U.S. citizen. Native Americans did not become citizens until 1924 as a result of the Indian Citizenship Act.

Not allowing this setback to discourage him, Parker was able to gain admission to the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. He then found work as a civil engineer. He was involved in engineering upgrades to the Erie Canal. When the Civil War started in 1861, he tried to join the Union Army as an engineer. But the Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, denied his application – as a Native American, he could not join. That changed by 1863, when the Union Army suffered from a shortage of engineers. By May of 1863 he entered the Army as a captain. He eventually became an assistant to General Ulysses S. Grant, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Accordingly, he was present when Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox in April of 1865. In fact, Parker helped to draft the surrender documents – which were in his handwriting. He was subsequently promoted to Brigadier General.

Not long after the Civil War, Parker was named the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. He served as Commissioner from 1869 to 1871. He worked hard to improve the lives of Native Americans. After service as a member of the Board of Commissioners of the New York Police Department he retired. Parker died on August 31st, 1895, and was eventually buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo.

Throughout his life General Parker displayed the characteristics of a hero. During his time in the Army he exhibited a willingness to risk injury and even death. His readiness to put himself in harm's way sets him apart from other Americans – which is why we still remember him today. As you will recall, the very word hero is derived from the Greek word *heros* – meaning a protector or a defender. A soldier by definition is a protector who defends his fellow soldiers and the civilians back home who all rely upon the valor of the people in uniform. In this sense as well Parker was a clear hero.

Like other heroes, General Parker displayed traits that were less dramatic but equally important. He was a clear role model – especially for young people, Native American and otherwise. He never allowed unjust setbacks to long discourage him. He picked himself back up after disappointment and found new ways to

move his life ahead. Not able to sit for the bar examination after studying law for three years, he found a new profession – engineering – and started over, and became successful. We all have setbacks in our lives – Parker taught that it is how we respond that matters. Finally, in his work as the Commissioner of Indian Affairs he displayed heroism when he worked to improve the lives of Native Americans. It is just as important to teach and nurture our fellow human beings as it is to undertake the job of protection as a soldier. Ely Parker taught us that as well, which is why we still remember him today.

Another famous person from our county who is also remembered as a hero is Charles F. Rand. He was born in Batavia in 1839. After spending time in New Orleans, Louisiana as a newspaper reporter, he returned to Batavia. On the thirteenth of May, 1861, he heard of the telegrams from President Lincoln calling for 75,000 volunteers to form the Army of the Potomac. Rand immediately volunteered – only ten minutes after President Lincoln’s call. This meant that Charles Rand became the first man to volunteer for the Union Army in the Civil War.

He entered the Army as a Sergeant, and eventually earned the Congressional Medal of Honor – the first Medal of Honor given to a soldier. On June 27th, 1862, at the Battle of Gaine’s Mills, a musket ball crushed his right shoulder. Despite his wound, Rand continued to fight. He pushed a handful of dirt into the wound in order to halt the bleeding. He was medically discharged on August 30th, 1862. But he nevertheless continued to work for the government in an administrative capacity. As an assistant to the Commissioner of the Bureau for Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, he endeavored to assist the many political refugees and ex-slaves attempting to build a new life in the wake of the upheaval produced by the Civil War. Despite only having one reliable arm, he resolved to study medicine. He graduated from Georgetown University School of Medicine in March of 1873. After practicing medicine in Washington, D.C. for six years, he returned to Batavia in 1879 and started a medical practice. He also found time to start a wheel factory. Dr. Rand died in 1908, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Like Ely Parker, Charles Rand exhibited the characteristics of a hero. When he became the first to volunteer for the Union Army as a result of President Lincoln's call, he embodied the Greek ideal of *heroes* – he sought to protect and defend his community and his nation that now faced mortal peril. This Medal of Honor recipient's citation therefore read, in part, that he

remained in action when a part of his regiment broke in disorder, joined another company, and fought with it through the remainder of the engagement.

Rand maintained his composure in the face of ferocious enemy fire, and in the process, protected what remained of his regiment. To live up to the ideal of the Greek *heroes* necessitated taking risks and accepting the idea of self-sacrifice – which he clearly did. The fact that Dr. Rand chose to jeopardize his own safety in order to help his fellow soldiers in the regiment, in the midst of a dangerous battle, sets him apart from most people – soldiers and otherwise.

His actions established him as a role model for others. Dr. Rand's ability to fight back from a horrific shoulder injury could not but inspire those who knew him – or of him – to overcome obstacles in their own lives. Dr. Rand cultivated an optimistic attitude that also made him heroic. Just as importantly, his work as a healer – as a physician – made him as much of a hero as did his battlefield exploits. The daily work of striving to cure patients suffering from illness was just as crucial to the well-being of society as was his headline-grabbing bravery during the Civil War. In this way too he was a hero, and is rightfully famous to this day.

Genesee County is rightfully proud of Ely Parker and Charles Rand. One of the sources of pride is the different aspects of heroism that each man displayed. Those traits, that I have outlined in this talk – and which many of you brought up in our discussion – capture virtues not always seen in our fellow human beings. It is important for us to study heroes such as Parker and Rand – they have the power to influence all of us; to allow us to bring out the best in each of us. At a time when young people, such as all of you, are searching for adults they can look up to, Ely Parker and Charles Rand stand as two examples of heroes whose

character is something to emulate and hope for in ourselves. This is why these two men are famous, and worthy of study in our own day.