

Signatures Recall Love Story

By Karl Sanford Kabelac

Three National Bank Notes in the Heritage Auctions April 2008 sale bring to mind a long-lasting love story that began over a century and a half ago.

They are the Palmyra NY notes, one being the uncut sheet of Series 1882 five dollar notes signed by Pliny T. Sexton as president. The other two, a Series 1882 twenty dollar note and a Series 1902 ten dollar note, are both signed by H. H. Sexton, with a hardly distinguishable “v” after the name, signifying a vice president. And indeed Harriot (Hyde) Sexton was Pliny’s wife and served as vice president of the bank for almost 40 years.

Palmyra is a village in upstate New York, about 25 miles southeast of Rochester. Both the Erie Canal and the New York Central Railroad were built through it in the nineteenth century. Its population was 1,937 in 1900 and slightly over 3,500 today.

The First National Bank of Palmyra was founded in 1864, the outgrowth of a private bank. It received charter #295. Pliny T. Sexton was the first cashier and became the president upon the death of the founding president in 1876. And at the 1881 death of his father, who was a director and vice president of the bank, Harriot became a director. The next year she also became the bank’s vice president, a position she would hold for 39 years.

Pliny Titus Sexton had been born in the village on June 12, 1840. His Quaker father was a banker and businessman and active in the abolitionist movement. Pliny attended the Classical Union School in the village and studied law in Poughkeepsie, NY. He was admitted to the New York State bar in 1861 and admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court in 1882. But he seldom practiced law, as he kept active with his banking and real estate interests.

He also served in various civic roles. He was the village president from 1879 to 1883 and president of the local Board of Education from 1883 to 1889. But perhaps his most important public role was as a member of the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York from 1890 to 1921. He served as their Chairman from 1915 to 1921. (This is not an actual university, but rather the government agency that charters and oversees educational organizations, such as schools, colleges, universities, libraries, museums, etc. in the state. The Board of Regents is the head of the State Education Department, the administrative arm of the University.)



Above: Pliny T. Sexton at his desk in the bank, 1910.
(Courtesy Historic Palmyra) Right: Harriot (Hyde)
Sexton as a young woman. (Courtesy Historic Palmyra)



SEXTON, Harriot Hyde:

Banker; born in Palmyra, N. Y., April 16, 1839; daughter of Stephen and Laura Eliza (Leonard) Hyde; educated Palmyra Classical Union School; married, Palmyra, N. Y., Sept. 17, 1860, Pliny T. Sexton. Vice-president First National Bank of Palmyra, N. Y. Republican; Presbyterian. Address: Palmyra.

SEXTON, Pliny Titus:

Lawyer, banker; born Palmyra, N. Y., June 12, 1840; son of Pliny and Hannah (Van Alstine) Sexton; educated in Palmyra Classical Union School, private schools, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, State and National Law School, Poughkeepsie, N. Y., LL. B., 1859; received LL. D. from Union University, 1893; married, Palmyra, N. Y., 1860, Harriot Hyde. Admitted to New York bar 1861, and U. S. Supreme Court 1882. President and director since 1876 of First National Bank of Palmyra, N. Y. President of village of Palmyra, 1879-1883; president Palmyra Board of Education, 1883-1889; Republican candidate for State treasurer, 1883; regent of University of the State of New York since 1890; procured appropriation and authority for University Extension work by University of State of New York, being the first legislation on the subject in the United States; honorary chancellor of Union University, 1893. Republican; Quaker. Member American Library Association, New York State Historical Association, New York State Bar Association, American Bar Association, Association of the Bar of the City of New York. Mason. Recreation: Cross-country rambling. President Union Club of Palmyra. Address: Palmyra.

The Sextons adjacent entries in *Who's Who in Finance* (1911). She is one of the few women in the 1087-page volume.

At his death, *The New York Times* editorialized on the important role he had played in a complex reorganization of the Regents' authority in the first decade of the twentieth century. They noted that he "gave his whole mind and heart and strength to it. His appearance, as of an ancient prophet or philosopher, comported with his character and wisdom. He lived the part he looked."

A biographical entry in the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (volume 20) noted his particular interest in the education and general welfare of children. On a very serious level, this was shown in the three decades he served as a Regent. On a more personal level, an obituary noted that every Christmas morning for nearly fifty years he would give a shiny new dime to each village child who came to the bank and signed his or her name in a book he kept for that purpose.

In addition he founded a free kindergarten for the village children. He was a loyal and important supporter of the public library. He provided the village with an attractive park with playground equipment for the children. In the summer free moving pictures were shown in the park, and in the winter they were shown in the Palmyra Opera House.

Harriot Hyde was born in the village on April 16, 1839, and thus was a year older than Pliny. She also attended the Palmyra Classical Union School. They were married on September 17, 1860, when she was 21 and Pliny only 20. Although there were no children, they adopted and brought

up Lucy Angell, a niece of Mrs. Sexton.

An 1896 reference noted that the Sextons had a summer home at Lake George, stating "the tastes of Mr. and Mrs. Sexton lead them to outdoor recreations, walking, boating and horseback riding. It recalled that in the winter of 1865/66, right after the Civil War, the young couple made a 1,500-mile trip by horseback through the South."

Towards the end of her life, Mrs. Sexton was in poor health. The 1920 census shows that a maid, a housekeeper, and a nurse were assisting the elderly couple. At her death on November 22, 1921, one obituary noted that they "were united in matrimony over sixty years ago. They were playmates in childhood and were companions all through their life journey. During Mrs. Sexton's long illness her husband rarely left her side, and it has been his constant prayer that he might be spared to minister to her through her closing years of feebleness."

At her death she was buried in the lawn of the impressive building at the edge of downtown Palmyra that served as both their home and the bank. A simple



Above: View of the FNB Palmyra and the Sexton home. The door on Main Street with the circular stairs opened into the bank. The door on Williams Street with the regular stairs opened into their home. (Courtesy Historic Palmyra)



Above: A group of men on the bank stairs, 1890. The gentleman in the light jacket (second from left) is Robert M. Smith the cashier. Next to him in the doorway is Pliny T. Sexton, the president. (Courtesy Historic Palmyra)

block of granite marked the spot. Thus they would remain close together as long as he lived on. And when he died they both were then interred in the village cemetery.

After her death, Pliny's own health began to fail and he died almost three years later on September 5, 1924. He had been associated with the bank for 60 years, and had served as its president for the last 47 of those years.

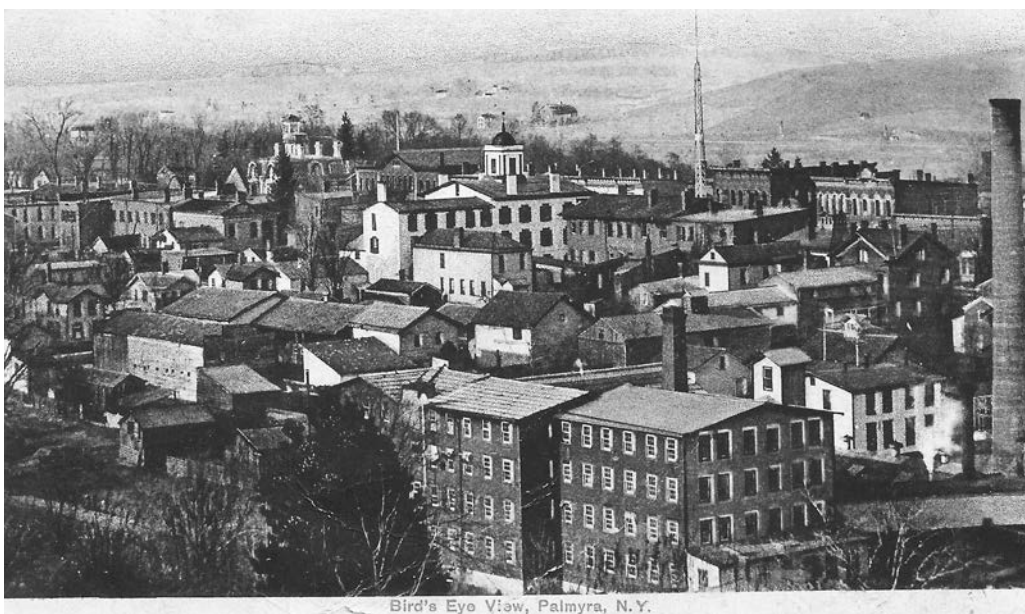
The next year his major interest in the bank was sold. Two years later the bank moved out of its former home into a newly constructed building. The old bank building became the village post office. Eventually part of it was removed and a theater built, while the other part became a grocery store for awhile before being torn down in the 1960s.

The bank itself merged with another bank in 1929 and, with subsequent mergers and name changes survives today as a branch of the Community Bank.

During its 65-year existence the bank issued \$6,503,750 worth of National Bank Notes; 739,896 large size in denominations ranging from \$1 to \$100 and a mere 876 Series 1929 notes in \$5, \$10 and \$20 dollar denominations.

There is, of course, another signature on these notes. It is that of the cashier, Robert M. Smith. He too was a native of Palmyra and a contemporary of both Pliny and Harriot, having been born in the village on November 23, 1839. After service in the Civil War he returned to the village and became a teller in The First National Bank. When Pliny moved from being cashier to president on December 30, 1876, Smith became the cashier and served in that role, and later also as a vice president of the bank, until his death in January 1925. His obituary noted that, as a lifelong friend and decades long business associate of Pliny, the sadness occasioned by Pliny's death hastened his own death several months later.

It was just south of Palmyra where the Mormon Church had its beginnings. Among Pliny's extensive landholding in the area was Mormon Hill (now called Hill Cumorah), the site where Joseph Smith said he received the Golden Tablets, and thus a spot of great importance to the Mormons. In 1928 his heirs sold it to the Mormons, who every year have a com-



Bird's Eye View, Palmyra, N. Y.

Above: Bird' eye postcard view of Palmyra, ca 1910. The bank is in the far background, left of center. The pole in the far background, right of center was an election pole from 1892.

Below: The First National Bank of Palmyra building and home of the Sextons. The Sampson Gun, placed in front of the building and dedicated in 1903, commemorates William Sampson (1840-1902) a Palmyra native who had a distinguished naval career spanning almost four decades.



Sampson Gun, Palmyra, N. Y.

RE-UNITED STATES BANK OF NEW YORK & TRUST CO. NEW YORK. MKH HR-TE-WEL. SECUR: TC TF WR JEMPRC WEL LACH 1883

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NATIONAL CURRENCY. 6292596

SECURED BY UNITED STATES BONDS —
DEPOSITED WITH THE TREASURER OF THE

UNITED STATES

B. K. Pruce
Register of the Treasury

Jos. Edgemo
Treasurer of the United States

The 295

FIRST

National Bank of
Palmyra

Will Pay the Bearer on Demand

FIVE DOLLARS

Palmyra, NEW YORK, 25th 1883

71534 R. M. Smith, Cashier Wm. J. Weston, Treasurer

20 10 5 1 20 10 5 1 20 10 5 1 20 10 5 1

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memorative festival there reenacting the dramatic story of the founding of their religion.

A Note on Sources

Rochester NY had four English language newspapers during the 1920s. Obituaries for the Sextons and for Smith appeared in most, although they ranged greatly in length. In addition, obituaries for the Sextons also appeared in *The New York Times*. Several local history volumes were especially useful. These included George Washington Cowles, *Landmarks of Wayne County, New York*, 1895; Henry Hall, *America's Successful Businessmen*, v. 2, 1896; Thomas L. Cook, *Palmyra and Vicinity*, 1930; and Betty Troskosky, *Palmyra: A Bicentennial Celebration*, 1989. Several other sources are noted in the text. The assistance of Bonnie Hays of Historic Palmyra is gratefully acknowledged.

First National Bank, Palmyra.

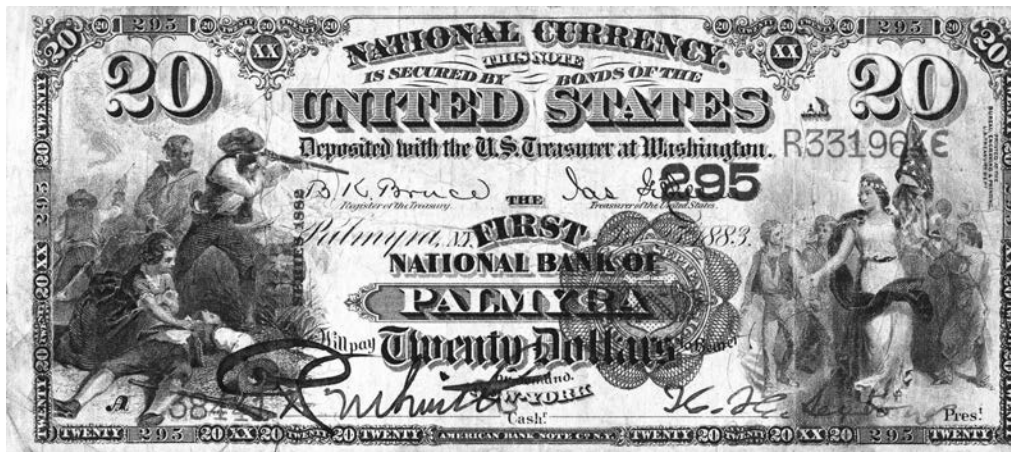
PLINY T. SEXTON, *President*.

No. 295.

R. M. SMITH, *Cashier*.

Loans and discounts.....	\$77,810.31	Capital stock paid in.....	\$100,000.00
Overdrafts.....	3,609.79	Surplus fund.....	20,000.00
U. S. bonds to secure circulation...	50,000.00	Undivided profits, less current expenses and taxes paid.....	1,380.91
U. S. bonds to secure deposits.....	50,000.00	National bank notes outstanding..	44,000.00
U. S. bonds on hand.....		State bank notes outstanding.....	
Premiums on U. S. bonds.....		Due to other national banks.....	
Stocks, securities, etc.....		Due to State banks and bankers...	
Bank's house, furniture, and fixtures		Due to trust companies and savings banks.....	
Other real estate and mortg's owned		Due to approved reserve agents.....	
Due from other national banks.....		Dividends unpaid.....	
Due from State banks and bankers...		Individual deposits.....	114,439.27
Due from approved reserve agents.....	82,129.75	United States deposits.....	
Internal revenue stamps.....		Deposits of U.S. disbursing officers.....	
Checks and other cash items.....		Notes and bills rediscounted.....	
Exchanges for clearing house.....		Bills payable.....	
Bills of other national banks.....	2,625.00	Liabilities other than those above stated.....	
Fractional currency, nickels, cents.....	205.33		
Specie.....	8,440.00		
Legal-tender notes.....	2,500.00		
U. S. certificates of deposit.....			
Redemption fund with Treas. U. S.....	2,500.00		
Due from Treasurer U. S.....			
Total	279,820.18	Total	279,820.18

The condition of the bank on September 5, 1900, as reported in the annual report of the Comptroller of the Currency for 1900.



A Series 1882 Brown Back \$20 bill signed by H. H. Sexton as vice president of the bank. She was Harriot (Hyde) Sexton, the wife of bank president Pliny T. Sexton. (Courtesy Heritage Auctions)



H. H. Hyde as vice president signed this Series 1902 red seal \$10 bill. (Courtesy Heritage Auctions)