1815  DUDLEY SELDEN

MARRIED: In New-York, on the 29th ult, Dudley Selden, Esq., of that city, to Miss Mary Augusta, daughter of Isaac Packard, Esq., of Boston.

Albany Argus
Dec. 8, 1825
CLASS OF 1815.

DUDLEY SELDEN.

Member of the Assembly from New York in 1839.

Mr. Selden was a brilliant man in his profession and as a legislator. He died in Paris, where his widow subsequently died.

Autobiography of Thurlow Weed p. 405
Harriet A. Weed, Editor
Boston, Mass. 1884.
HOWARD SUTTON
4 East 88th Street
New York, New York 10128
212-410-1382

May 19, 1991

To: Selden Sutton

From: Howard Sutton

Subject: Dudley Selden (1797-1855)

Today is your birthday, and, in honor of the occasion, I would like to offer this summary of what I've been able to find out about your ancestor, Dudley Selden.

For the benefit of others who may read this, I should say that we've always been curious about Dudley because of the mysterious inscriptions on the Selden urn, an ornate silver vessel about 18 inches high, topped by a recumbent, loosely-robed woman leaning on her elbow. This is what it says on the front:

Presented by the Whig young men of the City and County of New York to the Hon. Dudley Selden for the noble stand taken by him on the floor of Congress in defence of the Constitution and laws of his Country.

And this is what it says on the back:

Committee.

Wm. L. Pickering, Chauncey Bush.
Chas. St. John, John P. Hone.
Samuel C. Mott.
Nov. 1st 1834.

There's also a manufacturer's stamp on the bottom:

MOTT'S MANUFACTURERS N. Y. YORK

I assume that the Mott on the committee is connected with the manufacturing firm. I also assume he's connected with the street of the same name, as in "And tell me what street compares with Mott Street in July?" John Hone may be connected to Philip Hone, who
was mayor of New York in 1825 and was active in building the Whig party. And who knows what Chauncey Bush's connections might be?

Apart from a brief entry in A Selden Ancestry (published by Edwin Van Deusen Selden, Oil City, Pa., 1931) which I'll quote later, we knew practically nothing about Dudley. Your mother has busts of Dudley and his wife in her living room, and everyone seems to agree that your brother Rob resembles him. We can conclude, then, that he had a noble visage, but what was the noble stand he took on the floor of Congress?

I checked The Biographical Directory of the American Congress and found this entry:

SEL DEN, Dudley, a representative from New York; was graduated from Union College, Schenectady, N.Y., in 1819; studied law; was admitted to the bar and commenced the practice of his profession in New York City in 1831; member of the State assembly in 1831; elected as a Democrat to the Twenty-third Congress and served from March 4, 1833, to July 1, 1834, when he resigned; died in Paris, France, November 7, 1855; interment in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Which raises several more questions: When and where was he born? Why did he resign? If he was a Democrat, why did a Whig committee present him with the urn four months after he resigned? And what was he doing in Paris?

The entry in A Selden Ancestry adds some information about his family:

HON. DUDLEY SEL DEN (Joseph Dudley), b. 1796-97, died November 7, 1855, Paris, France; buried Troy, N.Y., where he had spent many years of his life; was a lawyer Prominent in his profession, honest in politics, and reliable in his friendships; was a member of Congress. Married Augusta M. Packard, born May 31, 1803, Boston, died May 31, 1868, Paris, France.

MARIA LOUISA SEL DEN [their daughter]: married William Rogers Morgan.

This quotation contradicts the previous one on the question of where he was buried. Since we've seen his monument in the Greenwood Cemetery, with your aunt Elsie's headstone nearby, I'd say that's probably where he was buried.

The Ancestry indicates that his father, Joseph Dudley, was one of Colonel Samuel Selden's thirteen children. The colonel commanded a Connecticut regiment in the Revolutionary War, and was wounded on September 23, 1776, in a battle with Hessian soldiers at what is now 23rd Street and Third Avenue in Manhattan. He was captured and taken to the debtors' prison on Wall Street. Then he was moved to a large house on Warren Street, west of Broadway, where he died of a fever, on October 11. He was buried in the New Brick Church yard the following day. (The receipt that Elsie gave you, dated July 11, 1777, documents the payment of 34 pounds and six shillings to the
executor of the colonel's estate, his eldest son, Samuel, for the loss of the colonel's clothing when he was taken prisoner.)

The *Ancestry* says that Joseph Dudley and his family "lived for some years in Lansingburgh [not clear what state], and from there removed to Troy, N. Y., where he was a prominent merchant. So Dudley may have been born in Troy. I should also note that Joseph had two sons named Dudley. The first died in infancy.

Here is how the line runs from Dudley to you:

**Dudley Selden** married Augusta Packard, and they had one child: Maria Louisa Selden.

**Maria Louisa Selden** married William Rogers Morgan, and they had two children: Maria Louisa Morgan and William Rogers Morgan, Jr.

**William Rogers Morgan Jr.** married Joanna Wright (his first wife), and they had three children: Joanna Morgan, Dudley Selden Morgan, and Ethelinda Morgan. (These are the subjects of the family portrait we saw at the Newport Historical Society.)

**Joanna Morgan** married Arthur Goadby, and they had three children: Dorothy Selden Goadby, William Goadby, and Elsie Goadby.

**Dorothy Selden Goadby Morgan** married Robert Snyder Womrath, and they had three children: Dorothy Selden Womrath, Linda Womrath, Robert Womrath, and Mary Womrath.

Which makes Dudley your great-great-great-grandfather. (To keep the record straight, I should note that your name has changed from Dorothy Selden Womrath to Selden Womrath Sutton.)

He started studying law in 1819, when he was about 22, and was admitted to the bar in 1831, when he was about 34. That makes him sound like a slow learner, but he apparently had an active real estate business at the time. In fact, by 1825, when he was 28 or so, he owned all, or nearly all, of 290 acres of land comprising what was originally known as Harlaem Commons and later known as Yorkville, on the island of Manhattan.

In 1811, the commissioners of the Corporation of the City of New York established the familiar grid pattern for Manhattan streets and avenues north of 14th Street, running almost to the tip of the island. When you consider that almost none of the land north of 14th Street had been developed, it's clear that establishing the grid was an act of extreme optimism. It was also a bit reckless, since there was at least one public document that showed that New York City didn't really own all of that land.

That document, "New Harlem Patent, Grant of Confirmation to the Freeholders and Inhabitants of Harlem," was issued by Richard Nicholls, first governor of the Colony of

Title Conveyances is a book of 175 pages plus a few maps. It has two parts. One, called "Deduction of the Title to Harlem Commons and Abstract of the Title of Dudley Selden, contains about 150 years' worth of legal documents pertaining to the Commons. It's obviously intended to establish Dudley's right of ownership.

The second part is a list of real estate transactions that Dudley made between January 1, 1825, and January 1, 1838. Nearly all of the transactions had to do with property in the Commons. The "Deduction" part was reprinted by another New York publisher (De Puy, Holmes) more than thirty years later, in 1872. Which suggests the original edition must have been fairly popular.

The "New Harlem Patent" gave the Harlem Commons land to the people then living there, though the boundaries aren't all clear from the text. As far as I can tell, the freeholders were people who already had some sort of claim to property. The "inhabitants" were probably squatters. (By the way, the "Patent" required that the name be changed from New Harlem to Lancaster, but somehow it didn't catch on.)

In any event, by 1820, the citizens of the Township of Harlem were pretty discouraged. They had endured years and years of disputes about the ownership of the Commons. Uninvited strangers kept moving in, and it was abundantly clear that the New Yorkers on their southern border had territorial ambitions. So the citizens appealed to the state legislature, which passed an act, on March 28, 1820, appointing five trustees empowered to sell all or part of the property. This sentence, from that 1820 act, conveys the mood of the citizenry:

And whereas the said common lands being then waste and unproductive and liable to be sold under assessments of the corporation of the City of New York for opening the avenues to the said city, it had been deemed expedient to the said freeholders and inhabitants, and for their interest that the same should be sold, and they had, in and by their petition, prayed for power to sell the same.

So there they were, in the wastes of Manhattan, first praying for power to sell, then praying for a buyer. Their prayers were answered a few years later when Dudley showed up. He was the right man at the right time, a man who saw townhouses where everyone else saw trees.

He also knew his way around a courtroom. As the "Deduction" shows, there was an enormous amount of legal underbrush to clear away. But on April 30, 1825, Dudley acquired nearly all of the land. A few landowners held out, but Dudley later managed to acquire their property too. He asked the city surveyor to divide the Commons into the standard 25-by-100-foot lots -- about 5,000 in all -- and he immediately put them up for
sale. About a quarter of the lots were sold in the first year. Another quarter were sold over the next dozen years. Not bad for a wasteland.

I've attached a map that shows the outline of the Commons, based on the maps in *Title Conveyances*. As you can see, the Commons was essentially a long, narrow triangle running from 107th Street and Central Park West (then Eighth Avenue) down to the corner of 75th and York (then Avenue A). The lower leg of the triangle conformed with the line separating New Harlem and New York; the upper one conformed with the line separating New Harlem and Manhattanville. Most of Dudley's lots were in an area that became part of Central Park about 30 years later.

What's especially interesting is that the plot on which our building stands, at 4 East 88th Street, is right in the middle of this Euclidian limbo. This plot was originally made up of lots 260, 261, 262, and 263, which Dudley sold, along with several others to the east, to Anthony Amoux on July 6, 1826.

We'll come back to Dudley's real estate ventures later. Let's turn to his political career. He was a member of the New York State assembly in 1831. Then he ran as a Democrat for the House of Representatives. He represented New York City in the first session of the Twenty-Third Congress, from December 2, 1833, to June 30, 1834.

The Twenty-Third was a particularly tumultuous Congress. It also had an all-star cast: Future presidents James Buchanan and John Tyler and such would-be presidents as Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John Calhoun had seats in the Senate. Ex-president John Quincy Adams, and future presidents Franklin Pierce, Millard Fillmore, and James Polk had seats in the House. Andrew Jackson, a Democrat, was president at the time, and Martin Van Buren was vice president.

One of the mayor issues of the day was whether the Bank of the United States should be re-chartered. This was a private bank that held the Federal government funds. President Jackson was under the impression that the officers of the Bank had conspired against him. Although the Bank's charter had a few more years to run, he vetoed a bill to re-charter in July of 1832. This caused a huge furor. In September, 1833, he fanned the flames by ordering that all of the Federal funds be transferred from the Bank to his favorite local banks. Jackson was also determined to phase out paper money in favor of specie -- coin -- even though the ratio of paper to coin was about 15 to 1.

Dudley was opposed to these machinations and didn't hesitate to say so. He made a lot of people very mad, and his final gesture was to resign, on July 1, 1834. A few months later, the committee of Whig young men presented him with the urn that commemorates his "noble stand."

(About the Whig party: Dudley evidently ran for various offices as a Whig without success. At the time, the Whig party was a loose alliance of factions opposed to Jackson -- states rights supporters in the south, frontier developers in the west, and businessmen..."
and supporters of the Bank in the east. What held the factions together was the belief that Jackson had encroached on the legislative branch of government and therefore undermined the idea of republicanism. Henry Clay and Daniel Webster led the party in the 1830s, but they weren't able to put a winning national ticket together. A Whig candidate finally reached the White House in 1840. That was William Henry Harrison, "Tippecanoe of the slogan "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too. Harrison died after a month in office, and Tyler, a former Jackson Democrat, became president. When Tyler vetoed bills that would reestablish the Bank of the United States, the Whig congressmen read him out of the party, and the entire cabinet resigned. Clay was the Whig candidate for president in 1844, but he was defeated by James Polk. The party gradually disintegrated after that, but its principles survived in the form of Lincoln's Republican Party, which emerged in 1856.)

Of course, the Democrats didn't think Dudley's stand was so noble. The Evening Post, a pro-Jackson paper and the forerunner of today's Post, printed this anonymous comment the day Dudley resigned from Congress:

An evening paper, with characteristic disregard for the truth, attempts to show that Dudley Selden has been true to the Working Men, and has secured their approbation. He never was true to any sect or party, and never obtained the approbation of any. Even the Bank myrmidons, while they applauded his treason to the democracy, scorned in their hearts the traitor. Universal detestation is the inevitable doom of such a man as Dudley Selden.

Living he forfeits fair renown
And, doubly dying, will go down
To the vile dust from whence he sprung,
Unwept, dishonored and unsung.

(William Cullen Bryant, the Post's editor and a popular poet, probably selected that bit of doggerel by Sir Walter Scott.)

Well, poor doubly dying Dudley. The fact is that he was right about Jackson's monetary policies. It eventually became obvious to everyone that Jackson didn't know specie from sour mash.

In 1836, the government had accumulated a surplus of $35 million, which was roughly the size of the annual budget. Congress decided to distribute this money to the states. The problem was that the 80 local banks that held this money had considered it a more or less permanent deposit and had made loans against it. The banks were then forced to call their loans in, which produced an enormous credit crunch. On top of that, the government's land agents were under strict orders to accept nothing but specie in payment for land. Naturally, the public lost faith in paper money, which meant it was practically impossible to make business transactions after that. The Panic of 1837 was inevitable, and Jackson's successor, Van Buren, was left holding the bag. It took years for the economy to recover. Van Buren never did.
I don't know why the *Title Conveyances* book was published at that time (1838), when half of the Harlem Commons lots remained unsold. I don't know who paid for the publication, and I don't know why anyone would buy such a laboriously assembled record. My guess is that the book signified the end of an era. After all, Dudley must have been one of the city's most successful entrepreneurs in the pre-Panic years, and people may have been extremely interested in learning exactly what he did and how he did it.

In the early 1840s, New York was plagued with poverty, crime, drunkenness, violence, corruption, high taxes, and deteriorating public services. (Sounds like New York in the 1990s.) But the city was poised for expansion. Between 1840 and 1855, more than two million European immigrants entered the country at New York. Most moved on to the interior, but many stayed behind. As usual, this was a mixed blessing, because those who stayed were generally the most highly skilled and least highly skilled.

The surge in population produced a real-estate boom. Since lower Manhattan was already crowded, most of the newcomers headed toward the open areas to the north. Many moved out to suburban Yorkville and commuted by horse-drawn cars on the New York and Harlem Railroad. (The railroad was chartered in 1831, when Dudley was in the Assembly.) In that decade, the population north of 14th street tripled, to about 100,000. It tripled again in the next ten years.

Of course, Dudley was one of the mayor beneficiaries of all of this activity. As a prosperous lawyer, he could afford to stay in the fashionable part of town. His first New York residence, from 1827 to 1832, was at 7 Park Place, near City Hall. Then he moved up to the Washington Square neighborhoods first to 746 Broadway (1833), then to 15 Washington Place (1834-1842), then to 663 Broadway (1843-1845), and finally to 519 Broadway.

Dudley's life changed radically at that point. In 1846, maybe a little earlier, he inherited a very large fortune from his father-in-law, who owned a plantation in Cuba. Dudley would have been about 49 at the time, and he did what any sensible man of that age would do: he moved to Paris, permanently.

At various times during his years in New York, Dudley had offices on William, Wall, and Cedar streets. He kept his last office, at 45 William Street, until 1849, but there's no trace of a residence after 1846. His daughter married William Rogers that year, so she may never have lived in Paris. His wife Augusta lived there until her death in 1868.

The busts of Dudley and Augusta were made while they were living in Europe. They're white Italian marble, and each has an inscription on the backs: L. SIMONETTI F. IN ROMA J85J. I assume that F stands for "fabbro," (maker), and that J85J is a misinterpretation of the date, 1851. What's odd is the way Dudley is dressed. It's hard to imagine any of his contemporaries -- Lincoln, Clay, Webster, the Whig young men --
sitting for a portrait in anything other than a conservative coat, shirt, and tie. But Dudley is wearing a costume that Lord Byron (d. 1824) might have worn: a loose, pleated shirt, open at the neck, and a fur-collared jacket. Did Dudley really dress that way? Or was that the sculptor's inspiration? Dudley had a stroke about that time, and I can't help wondering whether his stroke coincided with his first glimpse of his marble image.

Dudley was a man of many personae: the young real estate strategist from Troy, the Jacksonian defender of the working man, the Whig defender of the Constitution, the Wall Street lawyer, the man about Washington Square, the wealthy expatriate, the Byronic dandy, the family man. Whoever he was, he played an important part in the history of New York City, and it's strange that he isn't better known. We have no Selden Street, no Selden Park, no Selden Square, no Selden Place. He certainly deserves a memorial, and I'd like to be the first to suggest that we change the name of Carnegie Hill to Selden Hill.

Let me conclude with two obituaries that provide quite different pictures of Dudley. The first appeared in The Evening Post on November 27, 1855. The second appeared the following day in The New-York Daily Times (forerunner of today's Times, founded in 1851):

**Death of Dudley Selden, Esq.**

A letter received by Jas. W. Otis, Esquire, dated Paris, November 8th, announces the death of Dudley Selden, Esq., of this city, after a short illness. He had a stroke of apoplexy about four years ago in Paris, and has been an invalid since that time; his friends therefore were not wholly unprepared for the intelligence of his death.

Dudley Selden was formerly a prominent member of the bar of this city, and was well known, though not successful, as a politician. He commenced his political career as a democrat, and was elected to Congress by the Tammany democracy of this city, in 1833. To the surprise and disappointment of his political associates, he opposed the policy of President Jackson and of his party in reference to the re-charter of the United States bank, and finally resigned his seat before the expiration of his term, that his constituents might testify their approval of his course by re-electing him, an opportunity of which they neglected to avail themselves.

Mr. Selden joined his fortunes to Mr. Clay's, and was known for the remainder of his days as a Whig. He was the candidate of that party once or twice for important offices, but never with any success. By the death of his father-in-law, Mr. Packard, a Cuban planter of immense wealth, Mr. Selden came into the possession of a large estate, which has engrossed all the time which he had occasion or inclination to devote to business of any kind since that time. Almost immediately after the death of Mr. Packard, he left with his family for Paris, where he resided until his death.

**Death of Dudley Selden**

A letter from Paris, dated Nov. 8, has been received by James W. Otis, Esq., announcing the death of Dudley Selden, formerly a prominent member of the
New-York City Bar. Mr. Selden had a stroke of apoplexy some four years since, from which he had never recovered, though his last illness was a short one. Mr. Selden was elected to Congress in 1833 by the Democrats, but resigned his seat before the expiration of his term, for which he was elected, rather than vote with General Jackson's friends in reference to the recharter of the United States Bank. From that time on, he labored with the party of which Mr. Clay was the leader, and was much esteemed by his party, as in private life he was by all. Upon the death of his father-in-law, Mr. Packard, who was a wealthy Cuban planter, he came into possession of a large estate. He left with his family soon after for Paris and resided there until his death.

Thomas Appleton, a contemporary of Dudley's, said, "Good Americans, when they die, go to Paris." (Both Oliver Wendell Holmes and Oscar Wilde borrowed this line.) I like to think that Dudley agreed and that he was just trying to get a head start.
"Hon. Dudley Selden, b. 1796-97, died November 7 1855 Paris, France; buried Troy, N. Y., where he spent many years of his life; was a lawyer prominent in his profession, honest in politics and reliable in his friendships; was a member of Congress. Married Augusta M. Packard (b. May 3 1803 Boston, died May 31 1868 Paris, France) They had one child, Maria Louisa Selden, who married William Rogers Morgan."

Above information taken from "The Selden Family"
Son of Joseph Selden
Born 1796-97
Died November 7, 1855 at Paris, France.
Born Troy, N. Y., where he had spent many years
of his life.
Was a lawyer, "prominent in his profession, honest
in politics, and reliable in his friendships."
Was a member of Congress
Married Augusta M. Packard, born May 31, 1803, at
Boston; died May 31, 1868, Paris, France.
Their daughter, Maria Louisa Selden, married William
Rogers Morgan in 1846, son of Matthew and Lucinda(Lee)
Morgan, a member of Matthew Morgan & Sons, bankers of
New York City. He died in 1899.

Selden Ancestry p. 164
Oil City, Pa.
1931.

A representative from New York. Studied law and was
admitted to the bar, and commenced the practice of his
profession in New York City in 1831.
Member of State Assembly in 1831
Elected as a Democrat to the 23rd Congress and served
from March 4, 1833 to July 1, 1834, when he resigned.
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Selden Ancestry p. 196
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DUDLEY SELDEN

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Mr. Selden then joined his fortunes to Mr. Clary's, and was known for the remainder of his days as a Whig. He was the candidate of that party once or twice for important offices, but never with any success. By the death of his father-in-law, Mr. Packard, a Cuban planter of immense wealth, Mr. Selden came into the possession of a large estate, which has engrossed all the time which he had occasion or inclination to devote to business of any kind since that time. Almost immediately after the death of Mr. Packard, he left with his family for Paris, where he resided until his death. —(N. Y. Evc. Post.

Prof. Pearson's Scrap Book p. 405
A representative from New York; member of the State Assembly in 1831; elected as a Democrat to the Twenty-Third Congress, and served from March 4, 1833, until his resignation July 1, 1834; member of the Board of Trustees of the First National Bank of New York City; died in Paris, France, November 7, 1835.

From Biographical Congressional Directory, p. 984
Washington, 1913.

DUDLEY SELDEN, A.M., 1815, a member of the Philomathean Society, was a resident of Troy, N.Y. (Died 1855)

Philomathean Catalogue 1830.