

Dancing in His Father's Footsteps

Joseph Wood's eldest son followed in his father's footsteps. Born in Rochester in 1819, Joseph's first-born son Caleb was trained as a mason, as he had been, and was foreman on many of his father's biggest projects. The son would later use his skill as a mason to build his elegant house of brick in Perinton. But the life of a mason was not for Caleb Wood. Instead he would follow his father's footsteps in a different direction. Because like his father, Caleb Wood was a dancer.

Joseph Wood was a prominent contractor who built many of Rochester's early and important buildings, including the Eagle Tavern, the Smith Arcade, and the National Hotel. Prior to his role as one of Rochester's early contractors, Joseph Wood was a colonel in the New York militia during the War of 1812. The strong-armed mason and war veteran added another surprising profession to his resume – dance instructor. He promoted his academy in several editions of the 1828 Rochester Daily Advertiser: *“Dancing School – Mr. Joseph Wood, respectfully informs the ladies and gentleman of Rochester and vicinity that he will open a school for the instruction of Dancing on Thursday evening 18th inst. At the Aqueduct House, where a subscription is now open.”*

At the age of 20, Caleb Wood joined his father as a dance instructor. Dancing came naturally to him, and he was successful from the start. To further his skills, he studied in New York with the masters in the field. Upon his return to Rochester, Caleb began his life-long career, organizing dancing schools in Rochester, Syracuse, and Buffalo, as well as smaller cities and towns in the area. Dancing schools require music, and Caleb provided that as well. He built a large wagon to carry musicians and their instruments, including a piano. Local newspapers alerted citizens to the return of Caleb Wood and his famous school of dance. Imagine the sight of a horse-drawn wagon loaded down with musicians, announcing their arrival in towns such as Brockport, Avon, Mount Morris, and Lockport, the latter of which he visited 26 consecutive years.



Brick home at 524 Ayrault Road, built by Caleb Wood in about 1854. Photograph is circa 1945.

Back in Perinton, folks knew little about the renowned dance instructor. To his neighbors, Caleb Wood was a farmer, with 75 acres and a big brick house and barns on Ayrault Road. He had a few milking cows, some pigs and chickens. The lion's share of the farm produced apples, potatoes, and wheat. Each year, when the crops were harvested and winter was imminent, Caleb loaded his wagon and left Perinton. It was once again time to open C. J. Wood's School of Dance.

In the last years of his life, the dance school of Caleb Wood could be found in Rochester, at 10 ½ Mumford Street, and in Fairport, at Shaw's Hall on West Avenue. When he became disabled and sickened by disease, his wife and son helped run the school. After his death in 1887, they continued to hold classes at the Powers building in Rochester for many years. Although Perinton took little notice of Caleb Wood's accomplishments in the world of dance, the newspapers of other communities paid homage at his passing. One of many examples was the Medina Register, which ended a long notice of his death with the following: *"He was a man thoroughly liked by all who came in contact with him, and no man was better known throughout Western New York."*

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