

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED OCCASIONALLY BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 23

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

May 1965

The Next Meeting

of the Association will be held on Monday evening, May 3, 1965, at 8 o'clock, at the Colonial Home in Chazy. Talks on Chazy history will be presented by MR. MICHAEL ANDRASSY, Curator of the Home; DR. E. J. CZARNETZKY, Dean of the Miner Institute; and MR. JOHN P. ROSS, Rouses Point Historian. Parking is available across the street from the museum. The public is cordially invited to attend. Refreshments will be served.

Start Planning Now

for the June meeting, which will be our Tenth Members' Exhibit Night. On Monday, June 7th, the meeting will be held at the usual place over the Plattsburgh Public Library. Members are requested to bring their choice historic items for display.

Clinton County Place Names

(Readers are invited to send interesting additions for this series to the editors.)

Corbeau, Kirbon - today called Cooperville. Said to have been named from a large open place in the woods where crows and birds of prey used to congregate, and where they used to be shot. It was up the stream called *Kirbon River*.

Five Nations - later called Saxe's Landing. Once there were five families of five different nationalities living there.

Suckertown - on the Little Chazy River below Chazy. So-called because of the enormous quantities of suckers formerly taken in the river there.

Port Jackson - named for President Andrew Jackson, who was inaugurated about the time of the building of the dock there.

The Union - about two miles south of the present village of Peru, so-called from the friendly manner in which the Quakers clustered there, and from the harmony in which they lived.

Hopper Corners - at Saranac, named for Bis Hopper who lived nearby. Known now as *Pickett's Corners* after E. J. Pickett, who kept a store there for many years.

Port Kent - named for Chancellor James Kent on August 26, 1823.

Gougeville - named by Ira Lamson, who built the first dam at modern Elsinore for A. C. Moore and R. A. Gilman. Lamson declared these men had cheated him, so he named the place Gougeville, in 1851.

The Greatest Flood in Sixty Years

During the first two weeks of May 1892 the weather and the precipitation were seasonal, but on May 20th the rains started. This seemed natural to the people of Clinton County, but when they continued throughout the rest of May and through the month of June the people began to worry. When it wasn't raining the weather was hot and humid, averaging in the high 90's.

Dr. D. S. Kellogg recorded in his Journal at the time :

June 30. This week—in fact for several weeks past—there has been an immense amount of rain. For the first time water has stood in our cellar so as to necessitate opening the plug in our cellar so as to let the water out.

July 4. Yesterday the rain was terrific. I think that I have never seen so much rain in my life. Everybody hopes for clear weather. The water covers nearly half of our garden.

And still the rains came. They broke all records for the month of June to a total of 7.62 inches, three inches higher than the highest of the last twelve years. Lake Champlain rose four inches during June. On July 11 the Saranac River rose spectacularly. Beginning at 6 p.m., the river rose five feet above its normal level by 11 p.m. People along the banks became alarmed, and livestock and perishables were removed to places of safety.

The tributaries that fed the Saranac filled the river with their great overflow. The foaming flood headed toward Lake Champlain, taking with it many bridges, dams, and everything else in its path. On True Brook, which empties into the Saranac at Moffittsville, ten bridges averaging twenty feet in length were washed away. Many of the dams and mills on True Brook were also destroyed. The Old True Mill was partially destroyed and the dam went out, and the dam at the Pinkman Mill was also swept away. G. W. Goodale's starch factory, located near the mouth of True Brook, was also taken. The tremendous force of the current is shown by the fact that one of the millstones of the True Mill was swept down through the dam and landed about thirty rods below it.

The force of the current also caused the cutting of new channels in several places, notably at Saranac village. Here sixty rods of the old channel were left, and a new channel of eighty rods cut across a meadow belonging to G. W. Bulls, whose home was threatened.

The Saranac bridge at Redford was also washed away. The swelling tides picked up many thousands of valuable logs and plummeted them toward Plattsburgh. The bulkhead of the Iron Dam on South Catherine Street was carried away and a great deal of damage was done on the lower dam above Bridge Street. The total losses were between \$10,000 and \$15,000 in the Saranac valley, with the town of Saranac the hardest hit.

The flood waters lowered rapidly and people hurriedly began to clean up the litter. The greatest flood in sixty years was over. Amazingly, there was no loss of human life, but there was one narrow escape. At Clayburg, just as the bridge was about to go, an old man started to cross and was saved by another man seizing him. Both were in danger of drowning, but a third man caught the second just in time, and all were saved.

Today it is hard to believe that the peaceful Saranac hides in its slow-moving waters a dormant monster of nature.

Brian Lee, SUC, Plattsburgh

A Giant Crumbles

THE SARANAC RIVER PLANK ROAD

In the mid-eighteen hundreds superhighways existed as they do today, but they were in the form of heavy oak planks leveled and imbedded in the road. In moist and other problem areas, the planks were coupled with wrought iron straps. This is the archaic way of building roads, but once they were comparable to the modern mazes of asphalt. One such road brought prosperity to Clinton County, until its downfall in 1892. This now legendary road was called the Saranac River Plank Road.

In November 1849 the last plank was laid, and a buzzing flurry of trade and travel flowed from the dock area of Plattsburgh through Morrisonville, Elsinore, Saranac and Redford. The iron-smelting industries flourished, and the mule-drawn wagons hauling the ore from the docks to Cadyville, Elsinore and Saranac formed a nearly unbroken line of traffic. Farmers tried to get land along the road because of the ease of marketing their products. A "pseudo-empire" developed, and the Company prospered from the tolls collected at Plattsburgh, Cadyville and Saranac for the next forty years.

In 1892 E. C. Baker, an active politician in the county, stated that "the Saranac River Plank Road was the means of facilitating if not producing more business for this county than any other project during the last half century." Yet when he made this statement the road lay in ruins. Every bridge was out, and the planks were washed sometimes a half mile away.

One trouble was the advance of the railroads. When the Chateaugay Railroad was completed, iron ore from Port Henry arrived at Saranac in rail cars, not in wagons. This cut deeply into the Company's profits. When the mines at Port Henry and the foundries in Saranac started to dwindle, the economy of the area was greatly damaged. The Company continued to operate until a debt of \$4,000 was incurred, when the board of directors threw open the toll gates at the end of 1891 and publicly declared bankruptcy.

The road was then in extremely poor shape, and the winter completely ruined what remained. Evidence of its condition is the fact that from April to December 1892, liability awards of \$8,000 were granted to individuals for damages suffered on the road. All of a sudden a question arose: who was to pay these damages? The Company was in bankruptcy and had renounced responsibility. Was the county to pay?

Upon investigation it was found that the Company owned only half a mile of the land over which the road ran. The rest of the land was neither leased, owned nor licensed by the Company, which had merely been granted the right to use it by the Clinton County Board of Supervisors on July 10, 1849, which had issued the Company a charter to the roadway.

When the Company renounced the charter, with the justification that a grant of the use of the land could be given up at any time, county officials had a problem on their hands. The Supreme Court of New York was petitioned for a ruling, and upon recommendation of the Attorney General, Clinton County Judge Albert Bertrand was appointed receiver, to liquidate the Company and use any income to reimburse the county for the debts of the Company, including the liability awards.

The "pseudo-empire" of the 1850's was dead, and in the summer of 1893 the Plank Road became a memory when it was graded and covered with crushed stone by the prisoners at Dannemora. It is still called the Plank Road by many of the area's elders. Today there are but few remains of the road left; one in Plattsburgh is the foundation of the old gatehouse on upper Cornelia Street. A house now occupies the spot, but in the cellar there are sections of the old flagstone foundation.

Duane J. Lane, SUC, Plattsburgh

The Underground Railroad

(From the April 1965 NEWS LETTER of Ausable River Lodge No. 149, F. & A. M., Keeseville, New York, edited by Mr. Halsey R. Shields.)

Has our local Masonic Temple an historical connection with a noble pre-Civil War humanitarian project?

In front of the Colonial Nursing Home (the building just beyond our temple on North Sable Street) is a New York State Historical Marker reading: "Underground Railroad Station where Negro slaves were aided to escape to Canada." Mr. Roger Thew, who resides off the Douglas Road near the foot of Prospect Mountain, relates the following:

In the 1920's, when services were still being held in our temple by the Congregational Church, a young lad, Fred Perham, was janitor. (Fred afterwards enlisted in the marines and was killed in the accidental explosion of a sack of grenades in the mountains of Nicaragua.)

Mr. Thew says that Fred asked him to help sweep out the Sunday School room (now the Masonic Lodge room). On raising the carpet, they discovered a trap door in the floor near the center of the room. An opening or tunnel about three feet square was discovered. They crawled down it a short distance and saw that it opened into a small room. Fred went still farther and said that the tunnel continued on in the direction of the adjoining building.

It would be costly now to tear up our new tile floor to trace this mysterious opening, but it seems logical to assume that it was used in some way to aid the frightened fugitives from the South.

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David K. Martin, Secretary

West Chazy, New York