

# A History of Seneca County Until About 1830

by  
Seneca County Historian Walt Gable  
February 9, 2009

Seneca County was established on March 24, 1804, by action of the NYS Legislature and Governor, by separating the western part of Cayuga County off as a new Seneca County. At the time of its creation, Seneca County stretched from Lake Ontario to south of Ithaca. Today, Seneca County is smaller and is often referred to as the “County Between the Lakes.”

The present Finger Lakes were formed after the retreat of the latest glacier, about 10,000 years ago. Glaciers had made steep valley walls to the rivers that ran basically north-south. Glacial debris dammed up these rivers at their northern ends. Streams flowing into these rivers with the steep valley walls rapidly cut into the soft shales of the hillsides formed the present-day gorges that most of these streams have with in one mile of Cayuga and Seneca lakes.

## **A. Before European American Settlement**

Before the Revolutionary War, the area now covered by Seneca County was not settled by whites (European Americans). As early as 3500 B.C., we have the so-called Lamoka culture, based on evidence found at Tyrone in Schuyler County, Frontenac Island in Cayuga Lake and the Lawson Site in northern Seneca County. Significantly, Frontenac Island is the only island in the Finger Lakes. Excavations there in 1939-40 by William Ritchie of the Rochester Museum, suggest that the people of the Lamoka culture used this one-acre island for fishing and hunting, had the knowledge of use of fire, and used such musical instruments as flutes and whistles.<sup>1</sup>

The Iroquois Confederacy was founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in what is now central New York State.<sup>2</sup> Our present Seneca County was the home of the Cayuga and Seneca Indians, two of the six tribes making up this Iroquois Confederacy. The Cayugas ranged on both sides of the lake which was given their name and the Senecas on both shores of Seneca Lake.

Jesuit missionary priests were the first white men to reach this area, carrying on their work in the period 1656 to 1684. They established missionary stations among the Cayuga nation. One of these was called St. Stephen and was located at the Indian village of Tiohero situated on the east side of Cayuga Outlet (Seneca River), a short distance from the north end of Cayuga Lake. Another was located at St. Rene (Onontare) near the present village of Savannah in the town of Galen, near the north boundary of the present-day Seneca County.<sup>3</sup>

In May 1656, Father Rene Menard accompanied a French expedition to Onondaga (near Syracuse today) and then to the Cayugas in August. He remained with the Cayugas for two months until he was recalled to Onondaga. Soon thereafter he returned and remained until the missions were broken up in 1657. His early missionary work largely explains why the Free Bridge on Routes 5 and 20 is named the Father Rene Menard Bridge.

From a journal entry of Father Raffeix in 1671, we get an early white man’s report of the beauty of what is today Seneca County. Using the word “Goigouen” to refer to this area, he said the following:

Goigouen is the fairest country I have seen in America. It is a tract between two lakes and not exceeding four leagues in width, consisting of almost uninterrupted plains, the woods bordering it are extremely beautiful. Around

Goiogouen there are killed more than a thousand deer annually. Fish, salmon, as well as eels and other fish are plentiful. Four leagues from here I saw by the side of a river fine salt springs.<sup>4</sup>

Two Moravian missionaries, Bishop Cammerhoff and Rev. David Zeisberger, passed through the territory in 1750. They visited the Onondagas, then the Cayugas near Union Springs, crossed Cayuga Lake and then proceeded on foot upon a short spiritual mission to the Seneca Indians.

Another missionary, the Rev. Samuel Kirkland, provided much insight into this area and the Indians. He made the acquaintance of Sir William Johnson, the British agent for Indian affairs, in the fall of 1764. In January 1765, escorted by two Senecas, Rev. Kirkland commenced a journey of some two hundred miles to the Senecas. He noted the bitter cold and the snow so deep that snowshoes were required. On the twenty-third day of his journey, he reached Kanadasaga (Geneva) which was then the capital of the Seneca Nation. He stayed there for eighteen months. He was adopted by the chief sachem. He was subjected to attempts to take his life. He became familiar with the language of the Senecas. He visited neighboring towns such as Skoi-yase (present south Waterloo). During the early years of the American Revolution, George Washington used Kirkland and his friendly scouts to obtain information about the Indians' intentions and activities in this area. In 1779 he was a chaplain in the army of General John Sullivan and came to Kanadasaga with the army.<sup>5</sup>

There were some other isolated contacts of European white American traders with the Indian natives in this area prior to the American Revolution. One can easily imagine the Indians' interests in securing blankets, liquor, etc. Trading had its advantages, but the Indians did not want white settlers. The Iroquois became increasingly irritated over the white settlers taking the best lands along the Mohawk and upper Susquehanna Rivers.

Another noteworthy contact was made by Sir William Johnson, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the British. He called a conference at Fort Stanwix (where Rome is today) in 1768 to make a treaty between Indians and the colonists. Chiefs and colonial leaders attended this conference from as far south as Virginia. After several weeks of meeting, a treaty was signed that forbade white settlers from settling west of a line that ran from Rome, NY south to the headwaters of the Delaware River and west of the Alleghany Mountains. For \$10,000 and other gifts, the Indians gave up western Pennsylvania and Kentucky.<sup>6</sup>

Sir William Johnson himself visited our area in 1769. He left his home in Johnstown on June 26, 1769, to visit the Senecas. He crossed Cayuga Lake near Canoga and proceeded to the Indian village of Skoi-yase. Using a Seneca's council site--under a group of six oak trees located at the foot of Locust Street--he held a council with the Cayugas and the Senecas. Johnson reported that "the Cayugas and Senecas here made known to him their grievances, the murder of their people by the whites, and frauds and abuses perpetrated upon them."<sup>7</sup>

The Iroquois were not happy with the various encroachments of whites into their upstate New York territory. The advent of the American Revolution forced the Iroquois to try to determine their best strategy to prevent further encroachments by white settlers. Apparently they decided that siding with the British was their best hope.

The first in-depth historical data on the area can be found in the journals of the men of the Sullivan Campaign of 1779. The Iroquois tribes had allied with the British in the American Revolutionary War. The Iroquois were a major source of supplies for the British troops and the Iroquois conducted numerous "raids" on colonists in New York, Pennsylvania, etc. General

Washington realized the strategic need to eliminate the Iroquois aid to the British efforts in the war. So, he ordered General Sullivan to lead a group of American soldiers to conduct raids on the Iroquois settlements in northern Pennsylvania and the Finger Lakes region of New York. Iroquois settlements and their crops and fruit orchards were to be destroyed. Following their victory at Newtown (Elmira), Sullivan's forces were largely uncontested as they marched northward into the Finger Lakes, cutting their path of destruction. Sullivan's men entered the present Seneca County on September 3, 1779. They traveled along the east shore of Seneca Lake to Kanadasaga, now Geneva. Later a group of Sullivan's men would travel east to present Seneca Falls, and then south towards present Ithaca. Although no more than 40 Indians died as a result of the expedition, the destruction of the Indian villages and farms was so complete that it helped drastically to strengthen the position of the Americans in the war.

### **B. Early Settlement by European Americans**

Actual white (European American) settlement of what is today Seneca County came after the Revolutionary War. Besides largely eliminating Iroquois villages, the Sullivan Campaign of 1779 had helped spread the news of the great economic potential of the area. Revolutionary War soldiers were to be given lands as rewards for their war services. A Military Tract of about 1.5 million acres was surveyed into 28 townships of 60,000 acres and each township was further divided into lots of 600 acres. What is today Seneca County made up the western-most portion of this Military Tract. An additional comment needs to be made here--that when the Military Tract was laid out, about 64,000 acres were set aside around the northern half of Cayuga Lake as the Cayuga Indian Reservation. This is the area that the Cayugas in 1980 filed their lawsuit to regain.

Hundreds of veterans settled in this new Military Tract after the war, with more than 300 in Seneca County. They arrived following two major routes. The first route was from the east through old Indian trails and rivers (such as the Mohawk) and lakes (such as Oneida). The second route of access to Seneca County was more southern-- travel along the Susquehanna and Tioga Rivers to Newtown (Elmira), then portage to Seneca County. The travel was difficult and time-consuming. A person, for example, coming from New York City, could expect to take as much as four to six weeks of poling, rowing, floating, and portaging.<sup>8</sup>

Possibly the first white man to set up a temporary establishment in what is now Seneca County was Horatio Jones. As a young soldier he was captured by the Indians. At the end of the war, when he was released, he came to this area. During 1786 he set up a trading post along the river in what is now the Town of Waterloo. Soon thereafter he relocated to the west bank of Seneca Lake near to what is now Geneva, and sold to John Jacob Astor his first lot of furs.<sup>9</sup>

Job Smith was the first settler upon the Military Tract, erecting a cabin upon the flats (the area just east of the falls) at Seneca Falls in 1787. The Indian name for Seneca Falls was Sha-so-onse, meaning running or swift waters. Allegedly he came to this area to escape the law. He traded with the Indians and helped people transport their boats around the falls. He soon moved on to Waterloo and still further west. Another man named James Bennett came from Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, in 1789, and was soon engaged in running a ferry across northern Cayuga Lake.<sup>10</sup>

Lawrence Van Cleef, however, who came in 1789, is considered the first permanent settler. He had been part of about 100 men ordered by General Sullivan late in his campaign of destruction to proceed east from Geneva towards Albany. Having camped the first night on the north bank of the Seneca River at Seneca Falls, Van Cleef was impressed with the beauty and natural advantages for settlement. Upon discharge from his army service, he returned to the area

in the spring of 1789. Buying Job Smith's one hundred acre claim, Van Cleef set up settlement on the flats, erecting a double log house. His early efforts at growing corn were disrupted by the Indians, who were jealous of the intrusion upon their ancestral lands. That fall, he returned to Albany to bring the rest of his family to his new home in Seneca Falls. Van Cleef became famous for piloting boats over the rapids of the Seneca River. He continued this business until the locks were built in 1815, and he boasted that he never lost or injured a boat—unlike many other pilots.<sup>11</sup>

Samuel Bear was the first permanent white settler in what is today the village of Waterloo. He came in 1792, from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and settled in the Skoi-yase area south of the Seneca River. He purchased acreage mostly in Military Lot Number 4 but also some in Lot Nos. 5 and 3, all bounded on the north by Seneca Outlet. A miller by trade, Bear set up a grist-mill. More will be said about this later.<sup>12</sup>

The first pioneer of the southern part of Seneca County was George Faussett, of Pennsylvania. Leaving his wife and child behind, he set out in spring of 1789, came to Ovid, and built a pole cabin thatched with bark, and cleared a small patch of ground. Feeling he had completed the customary way to lay "ownership" to his land—the "right" of "tomahawk improvements"—he then returned to Pennsylvania for the winter. In spring 1790, he returned with his family. Among others who sought a home in southern Seneca during 1789 were the Dunlap brothers, Andrew and William, and James Wilson. Andrew arrived in May and located upon lot No. 8 in the town of Ovid. Andrew is known as the first man to plow any of the ground in what is today Seneca County.

According to one Seneca County historical account, by 1793 there were "30 families in the south and small groups at Seneca Falls and Waterloo." The following year the first flour mills in the county were established in Ovid and Waterloo. By 1796, the 45 foot drop in the Seneca River at Seneca Falls was tapped by the Bayard Company which bought up large acreage at that site and built several mills. By 1800 there were nearly 5,000 people in Seneca County. These early settlers were of many nationalities and portions of the American colonies. Mostly, there were German and Scotch Irish from Pennsylvania. Holland and Dutch and English settlers came from New York.

The Seneca County area was well on its way to becoming what a 1791 traveler passing through the area had said:

The map of the world does not exhibit two lakes equal in magnitude to the Seneca and Cayuga, which are so happily situated. The country between these two lakes rises gradually in symmetry from the opposite shores towards the center, producing a pleasing effect. Whenever it reaches a state of cultivation it will become the "Paradise of America."

### **C. Establishment of Seneca County and its Towns**

Now that we have talked about the many early settlers in present Seneca County, we need to understand the history of the evolving government structure for this area. Prior to March 24, 1804, Seneca County was part of various counties. When counties were established in New York State in 1683, the present-day Seneca County was part of the vast Albany County. A portion of Albany County became Tryon County on March 12, 1772. This county was named for William Tryon, colonial governor of New York. In 1784, following the peace treaty that ended the American Revolutionary War, the name of Tryon County was changed to Montgomery County in honor of the American general, Richard Montgomery.

As more and more whites settled in upstate New York after the Revolution, we have a trend of breaking off the western part to make a new county. On February 16, 1791, portions of Montgomery County became Tioga, Otsego, and Herkimer Counties. Onondaga County was established from a portion of Herkimer County on March 5, 1794. The western portion of Onondaga County became Cayuga County on March 8, 1799. At that time, Cayuga County included the present Seneca and Tompkins Counties and part of Wayne County.

Seneca County was established from the western part of Cayuga County by an act passed by the New York State Legislature and signed by the governor on March 24, 1804. At that time Seneca County stretched all the way from Lake Ontario to south of what is today Ithaca. More specifically, it was bounded on the north by Lake Ontario, east by Cayuga County, south by Tioga County, and west by Steuben and Ontario Counties. It was a strip some sixty-three miles in length with an average width of eleven miles, totaling 744 square miles or about one-half million acres.

It needs to be understood that Seneca County was the western-most portion of New York State for many years, as Massachusetts had gained preemption rights to lands west of Seneca Lake, in 1786, in accordance with the Hartford Convention. In 1788 these rights were sold to a group of New England investors led by Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham. These investors at a council held at Buffalo Creek (in present Erie County) purchased the Senecas' lands east of the Genesee River for \$5,000 and an annual annuity of \$500. Because of their financial difficulties, these New England investors sold nearly all of their landholdings to financier Robert Morris in 1790 for 8 cents an acre. In 1791, Morris sold the bulk of his purchase to an English syndicate led by Sir William Pulteney. Under the direction of land agent Charles Williamson, the area was enhanced with roads and bridges, mills, etc. So rapid was the population growth of Geneva and Canandaigua, that Ontario County was created in 1789 out of Montgomery County. Ontario County had a population of 1,075 according to the 1800 census.<sup>13</sup>

Getting back to Seneca County specifically, there was this huge Seneca County created March 24, 1804. Its boundaries, however, were to change as more settlers came into upstate New York. The southwestern portion of the town of Ovid was taken away on March 30, 1802, to become part of the town of Hector. On April 7, 1817, the town of Ovid was divided, with the southern portion becoming the town of Covert. That same date, the town of Covert was taken away from Seneca County and become part of Tompkins County. Then the former town of Covert was returned to Seneca County on April 13, 1819. The northern portions of Seneca County (the towns of Galen and Wolcott) were taken away from Seneca County on April 11, 1823, creating the Seneca County boundaries as we know them today. At this point, Seneca County totaled about 197,500 acres of land.

Within Seneca County itself, there was an evolution from four towns to a total of the ten as we know them today. When Seneca County was created in 1804, it consisted of the towns of Ovid, Romulus, Washington, and Junius. The towns of Ovid and Romulus had been created March 5, 1794. These Military Tract townships preceded the establishment of Seneca County. Continuing on, the town of Washington had been formed from the northern portion of the town of Romulus on March 14, 1800. The town of Junius had been formed from the northern portion of Washington on February 12, 1803.

The town of Washington was renamed the town of Fayette on April 6, 1808.

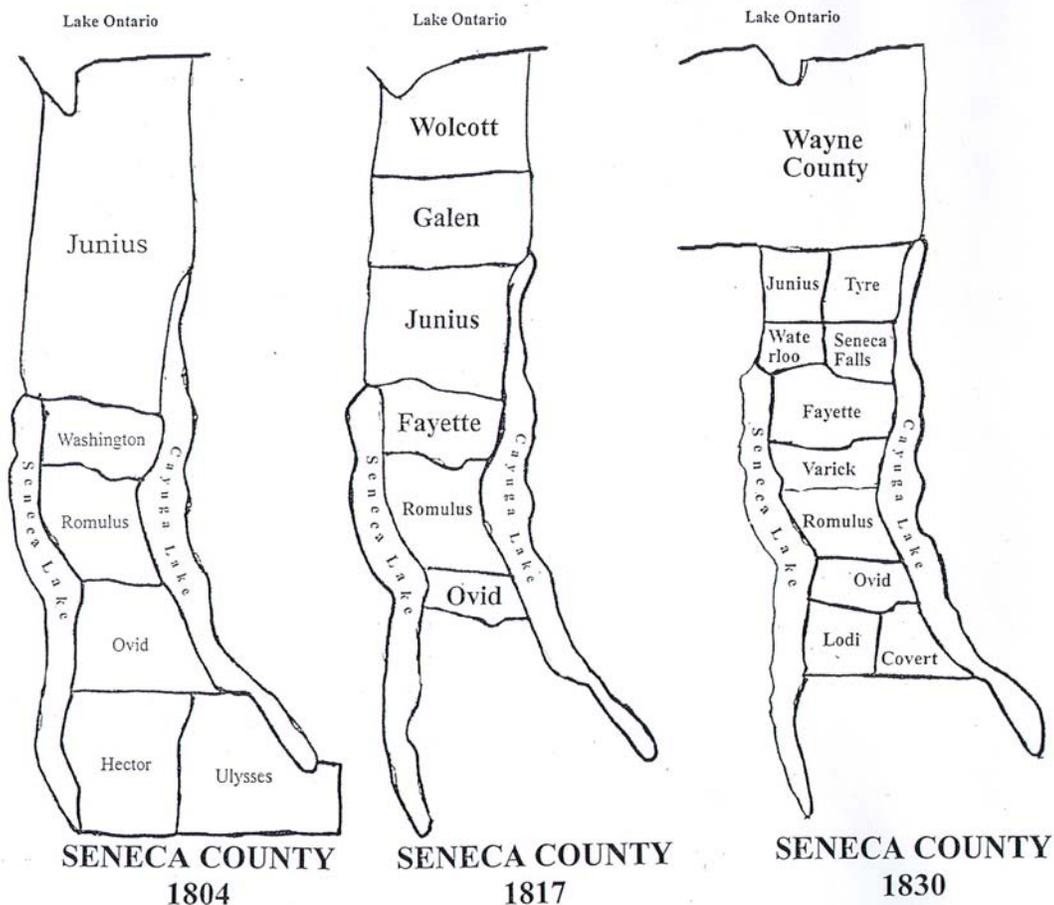
The town of Covert was formed from the southern portion of the town of Ovid on April 7, 1817. On March 30, 1823, Military Lots 34, 40, 41 and 42 were transferred from the town of Ovid to the town of Covert.

The town of Lodi was formed from the western portion of Covert on January 27, 1826. On May 5, 1837, the north line of the town was advanced one mile with the annexation of Military Lots 26, 35, 36, 37, 38 and 39 from the town of Ovid.

The towns of Seneca Falls, Tyre and Waterloo were formed from portions of Junius on March 26, 1829.

The town of Varick was formed from the then northern portion of Romulus on February 6, 1830.

These maps help you to understand all these changes:



With this territorial structure in place, we need to next need to deal with the establishment of the county government. Seneca County has been one of a very few counties in New York State that has more than one county seat. The reasons for having two county seats and the controversy regarding having these two county seats helps us to understand much about the history of Seneca County.

Even before Seneca County was created in 1804, some court sessions were being held in a barn belonging to Andrew Dunlap at Ovid. This was largely because the Ovid area was the most populated portion of what is today Seneca County. At the time of its creation as a county in 1804, Seneca County stretched to Lake Ontario on the north and included parts of what are today Tompkins and Schuyler Counties on the south. The county was a strip of territory some sixty-three miles long and an average width of eleven miles. In area it was 744 square miles or about half a million acres. This was a large area at a time when there were no automobiles and no

telephone and no electricity. It is necessary to remember these geographic and technological realities to understand the dynamics of where the county seat would be located.

Upon becoming a separate county, it became necessary for the county Board of Supervisors to designate an official county seat. Nathaniel Hinchman, who began a village called Plymouth on the shores of Seneca Lake where Sampson State Park now lies, dreamed of “the ideal spot” for the county seat there. Romulus Supervisor John Sayre advocated the establishment of the county seat at Plymouth. The other supervisors, however, split between Ovid and Waterloo. There were many long heated sessions in 1804 and 1805 as the supervisors endeavored to reach an agreement. Realizing that he couldn’t get Plymouth chosen as the seat, John Sayre sided with the pro-Ovid group. The capital of the County was located at Ovid Village—sometimes called Verona—upon Lot No. 3, near the north line of the town of Ovid. Realizing that the pro-Waterloo supporters would continue their efforts to secure Waterloo as the court-house site, the pro-Ovid group reportedly went to Albany. The result was a state law which basically made Ovid the county seat by declaring that “the county may not build a court house a greater distance from Ovid than two miles.”

In 1806 a court-house was built and a park laid out in front. The property was donated by John Seeley. Ovid at the time was the most populous town in the county, with the 1810 census listing 4,535 persons out of a total county population of 16,609. This 1806 Ovid court-house structure was on the site of the present-day so-called Mama Bear (the middle of the Three Bears complex) which was built in 1860.

Ovid might have been chosen as the county seat but the Waterloo supporters tried to make Ovid only a temporary site. When the southern portions of Seneca County were removed in 1817 (to become part of Tompkins County), Waterloo became about the north-south geographic center of Seneca County. A Mr. Elisha Williams in 1809 had purchased the 600 acre lot on which that part of Waterloo north of Seneca Lake outlet stands. On it he had built two saw-mills and several houses. The rapidly prospering villages of Waterloo and Seneca Falls were on the route of the new Seneca Turnpike from Syracuse to Geneva. Williams realized that there would be still greater potential personal economic gain to his property if Waterloo were to become the county seat. So, Williams successfully used his influence (perhaps not just coincidentally, Seneca County in 1817 was represented in the NYS Senate by the Honorable John Know of Waterloo), to move the County courts from Ovid to Waterloo, which thus became the shire town. Williams felt this made great sense in that clearly Waterloo was going to continue to grow in size and wealth and that Waterloo was more the geographic center of the county. Several Waterloo businessmen—Reuben Swift, Daniel Mosher, Colonel Chamberlain, Quantus Knight and others—immediately set about the erection of large, fine taverns and the County began the erection of a new court-house and clerk’s office upon the public square donated by Williams. All of these served as an economic check on Ovid and led to sectional tensions between Ovid and Waterloo.

The same 1817 state law that took Hector and Ulysses from Seneca County to form part of Tompkins County, and designated Waterloo as the county seat for Seneca County, also provided for plans for the new court house in Waterloo. John Know, Reuben Swift and John Watkins were named as a building committee to erect a court house and gaol (jail) for Seneca County on a site at Waterloo. Once \$4,000 was raised in voluntary contributions, the county board of supervisors would have to contribute a matching \$4000 for the project. On July 4, 1817, Elisha Williams and Reuben Swift deeded land situated on the public square for the court house site. The court house was completed in 1818 by John Sayre, John Lyon, and Luther R. La

Battelle. When the court house was finished, Waterloo became the sole county seat. The first court was held there on May 2, 1818, presided over by Justices John Sayre, John Burton and Benjamin Hendricks. This was the situation until March 29, 1822.

The removal of the northern portions of Seneca County (Wolcott and Galen) in 1823 meant that Waterloo—which had, in effect, become the county shire—was now near one end of Seneca County. Ovid area residents argued that it was now proper to move the county seat back to Ovid. Waterloo residents, however, refused to give up the advantage that Waterloo had as being the county seat. The solution was to maintain two county seats, one in Waterloo and a second in the more centralized Ovid. Chapter 137 of a March 29, 1822, state law provided for court to be held alternately at Ovid and Waterloo. Fayette and the towns north would constitute the northern jury district, and Varick and the towns south of it would constitute the southern jury district.

Although Ovid won back some of its former influence, it remained isolated from the major transportation routes. Completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 to the north reaffirmed Ovid's remote position and it could never again compete with the Waterloo-Seneca Falls area in population or economic development.

The controversy of two different county seats continued for many years. The completion of the Baby Bear in Ovid in 1845 as a new county clerk's office led to the Clerk's alternating his office every few years between Ovid and Waterloo. Imagine the difficulties of transporting official county records back and forth between these two locations! (For the rest of the story about these two county seats, see "The County Seat Story" article on the historian's portion of the Seneca County website [www.co.seneca.ny.us](http://www.co.seneca.ny.us).)

#### **D. Early Marriages, Births, Deaths, Doctors, Churches, Etc.**

As would logically be expected as more and more people were settling in the area, there were marriages, births, deaths, the need for doctors, the establishment of churches and schools, etc. To begin to deal with this topic, probably the first marriages of county residents took place in 1793, when three couples of the southern part of the county walked together to Seneca Lake, crossed over in a boat, and on the other shore found Justice Parker who performed the ceremony of marriage. These couples were Joseph Wilson and Anna Wyckoff, A.A Covert and Catharine Covert, and Enoch Stewart and Jane Covert.

Early births in Seneca County included Mrs. Jane Goodwin, daughter of Lawrence Van Cleef, who was born November 29, 1790, the first white child born in what is today Seneca Falls. A son was born to James McKnight in 1791, at Bearytown, now Fayette in the town of Varick. Some claim that the daughter born to George Faussett in Lodi was actually the first white child born in what is today Seneca County. (Note that no documented date of birth is included here, however.) David Dunlap was born on February 2, 1793, the son of Andrew Dunlap, upon Military Lot #8, in the northwest part of the town of Ovid. The first birth in Tyre, was Daniel Crane, the son of Ezekiel Crane in 1794. The first birth at Scauyes was that of John S. Bear in 1797, the son of Samuel Bear.<sup>14</sup>

The first white settler in Seneca County to die was George Dunlap, brother of Andrew Dunlap, on September 24, 1791. In 1793, the wife of Job Smith died. Two Revolutionary War soldiers, John Gregory and James Hull, who had lived on Lot 97, were the first persons buried on the north side of the Seneca River at Waterloo.

The burial customs of the time differed much from today. When a death occurred, neighbors would call in, take the measure of the body, and get a plain coffin at a cost of rarely

more than five dollars. A neighbor possessed of a team would bring the coffin to the house, and carry the body to the grave. The charges of the sexton were two dollars, and grave-stones were cheap. The stones were dark cobble-stone, and were taken from the west side of Seneca Lake. The headstones and coffins of the rich were of the same material as were those of the poor, differing only in the size of the stone. Marble tombstones were introduced when the Erie Canal was finished in this area, about the year 1824.<sup>15</sup>

The earliest physician in Seneca County was Silas Halsey. He had practiced medicine on Long Island prior to the American Revolution. In May 1792, he came with his slave to Lot 37 in the Military Tract township of Ovid. In May 1793, he returned with seventeen other family members, including sons-in-law and grandchildren. He was not, however, just a practicing medical doctor. He was a judge for the newly-created Onondaga County in 1794. He served in the New York State Assembly, representing first Onondaga County and then Cayuga County when that county was created in 1799. Following the creation of Seneca County in March 1804, he served as its first County Clerk. He also served in the New York State Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives. Besides his medical and political activities, he was also a businessman. In 1794, he built the first sawmill and grist mill in the southern part of what is today Seneca County. Prior to that time, the nearest mills were at Fort Stanwix (Rome) and at the outlet of Crooked Lake (Keuka Lake).

Another early doctor in the county was Alexander Coventry who settled in 1792 on 600 acres of Lot 11 and 300 acres of Lot 17 in what is now the town of Fayette. Although he intended to devote the rest of his life to his farm, which became known as Fair Hill, he repeatedly answered calls from the sick in that part of the county. In 1796, he resettled in Utica and resumed a full medical practice. He served as President of the New York State Medical Society in 1823, 1824, and 1825. His son Charles Coventry, Jr. was one of the founders of the Geneva Medical College.

James C. Baldwin was another early doctor, settling on Lot 11 in the town of Ovid in 1795. Later, he built a saw mill at Lodi Center. In 1801, he resettled in the town of Lysander in Onondaga County, where he laid the foundation for the community of Baldwinsville.

In 1796, Dr. Jared Sandford settled in Ovid, near to the home of Dr. Silas Halsey. He married Silas Halsey's daughter Sally Radley in 1801. Soon thereafter, he took over the large medical practice of Dr. Halsey, who, as discussed above, was devoting much of himself to politics. Dr. Sandford also took on some political responsibilities. In April 1804 (Seneca County had been created the previous month), he became the first postmaster for the town of Ovid. At the time of his death, he was the County Treasurer. As a doctor he was very successful, with a medical practice extending to Geneva and Waterloo to the north, and as far south as what is today Watkins Glen. He traveled entirely on horseback, carrying medical equipment in one saddle bag and U.S. mail in the other saddle bag. It is believed that the exposure to the weather in his travels and his overwork led to an early death in August 1817, at the age of 42—a victim to the hardships of the pioneer physician.

As for church history, the 1876 history of Seneca County begins its chapter on early church history this way: "Wherever the smoke of the settler's cabin rose, there soon came the circuit rider, bound on his mission of good. Traversing swamp, trail, and forest path, he found cordial welcome everywhere. Arousing strong opposition, he had power in the truths of the gospel, expressed in plain speech, and illustrated from the boundless volume of nature. The first ministers who visited this region were Methodists. Upon mules or horses they went upon their extended circuit, preaching day and evening. The early circuit embraced a journey

of four hundred miles. Private house and school-house were used wherever the people could be called together.”<sup>16</sup>

Some of these early itinerant preachers were James Smith (1793), Alward White, Joseph Whitby and John Lockby (1795), Hamilton Jefferson and Anning Owen (1796), Johnson Denham (1797), James Stokes and Richard Lyon (1798), Jonathan Bateman (1799), Daniel Dunham and Benjamin Bidlack (1800), David James and Joseph Williamson (1801), Smith Weeks and John Billings (1802), Griffin Sweet and Sharon Booth (1803), and Roger Benton and Sylvester Hill (1804). “But what a life was theirs! A pair of saddlebags contained their wardrobe and their library. Often their sleep was in the woods; reckless of the wolf, they laid them down, and rising, journeyed on to preach in school-house, barn or wood.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1794, the first formal religious services ever held in the county were conducted at the house of Abraham Covert in the town of Ovid. In 1797, Methodist Episcopal itinerants held services in Seneca Falls. The first settled preacher in the county was the Reverend John Lindsley who started serving as pastor of a Reformed Protestant Dutch Church in Ovid in 1800. The first regular minister in Seneca Falls was the Reverend Matthew Stewart, a Presbyterian, in 1804. The first organized churches in Seneca County were the Baptist churches in Covert and Tyre in 1805. A Society of Friends (Quaker) church was organized in the town of Junius.<sup>18</sup>

The first Methodist church in the county was built at Taunton (now Townsendville) in 1809 or 1810.

The 1876 history of Seneca County says that the first church building in Seneca County was probably the structure built at the Thomas’s settlement, about three miles north of Trumansburg. In a revival in the winter of 1809-10, Elder Thomas baptized twenty-two persons in Cayuga Lake.

A Presbyterian society was organized in the town of Junius, on August 10, 1807, by the Rev. Jedediah Chapman. The congregation (known as the First Presbyterian Church of Junius) met in the large frame barn owned by Colonel Daniel Sayre, on the north side of the turnpike, a short distance west of the old Cayuga Bridge.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of education, one-room “country schools” existed throughout the county. In 1789, the New York State Legislature passed an act requiring each township to set apart two lots of public land to be used for gospel and school purposes. As early as 1812, the state was providing funds to help the towns operate their country schools or “common schools” as they were then known. For students planning to go on to college, three “academies” arose in Seneca County—at Ovid, Seneca Falls and Waterloo. The Ovid Academy was incorporated in 1826. The Seneca Falls Academy originated in 1832. The Waterloo Academy opened in 1842.<sup>20</sup>

### **E. Early Transportation and Industrial Developments**

When Seneca County was created out of the western portion of Cayuga County in March 1804, Seneca County was not an industrial area. People knew of the agricultural potential of this area and they knew about the falls/rapids on the Seneca River at what would become later the community of Seneca Falls and Waterloo. It was not easy for potential settlers, however, to reach Seneca County. It could easily take as much as six weeks for a person to come from New York City whether he chose the “southern” route up the Susquehanna River and then overland or the “northern” route of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers and then basically overland.

A series of important transportation developments “opened up” Seneca County for settlement and economic development. As early as 1789 the State of New York had begun development of the Genesee Road westward from Utica. Basically using old Indian trails and

widening them a little by cutting down trees, people moving west could use this turnpike and travel by their own wagon or by stagecoach. This usually meant stopping about every ten miles so that the horses could be rested, watered and fed, as well as the people. Typically there was a toll house every ten miles. Travel was fairly easy but slow until one got to our county area. Then a major obstacle arose—getting across Cayuga Lake or through the Montezuma marsh. It was easier to cross the lake by ferry boat but that was no easy task. As early as 1789 James Bennett and John Harris were operating a ferry between what is today Cayuga and Bridgeport. This was a pretty rudimentary facility—a rough boat propelled sometimes by oar and sometimes by sail. One can easily understand its limited capacity—be it passenger or cargo—and how it slowed down westward movement because of the need to transfer from stage coach or loaded wagon to the ferry and then reloading again on the other side of the lake. It was the only real option, however, for about eleven years.

In 1800 the first bridge across Cayuga Lake was completed to avoid use of the existing ferry service. At a reported cost of \$150,000, this Cayuga Lake Bridge was one mile and eight rods in length—the longest wooden bridge at the time in the entire western hemisphere. It was wide enough for three carts to pass at a time. The tolls were as much as \$1 for a four-wheeled pleasure carriage with two horses; 37.5 cents for a sled and horses; 25 cents for a man and horse; 6 cents for a cow and 1.5 cents for a hog, sheep or calf. All persons living within one mile were to pass over on foot free at all times. All persons going to or from public worship on the Sabbath were exempt from payment. Until the advent of the railroad after 1841, this Cayuga Lake Bridge was a major link in the westward movement of people.

Economic development in the Seneca Falls-Waterloo area was greatly stimulated by the waterfalls/rapids on the Seneca River. These waterfalls, however, were an obstacle to transportation on the river. Businessmen realized the need for canal locks to get around the existing waterfalls in both Seneca Falls and Waterloo. The Seneca Lock Navigation Company opened portions of the first Cayuga-Seneca Canal in 1818. The first loaded boat passed through the locks at Seneca Falls on June 14. It came from Schenectady and carried a cargo of 16 tons. The lockage toll was fifty cents. The entire canal between the lakes, which was completed in 1821, made use of 8 stone locks and 1.72 miles of dug canal in addition to sections of the river. Through Seneca Falls there was a lock for every important mill site, raising or lowering the boats through Seneca Falls a total of 42 feet.

The Erie Canal was completed in 1825 and passed through the northeast corner of Seneca County. The State of New York quickly realized the economic importance of connecting the existing Cayuga-Seneca Canal with the Erie Canal. New York State paid the Seneca Lock Navigation Company \$53,603.53 for the rights to the existing Cayuga-Seneca Canal and paid out \$160,396.78 in new construction costs to make this link, which was completed in 1828. In this twenty-one mile distance from Seneca Lake, there were a total of eleven locks providing a total lifting and lowering of 83.5 feet between Seneca Lake and the Erie Canal at Montezuma.

This new Cayuga-Seneca Canal had momentous economic impact upon Seneca County. The Waterloo and Seneca Falls areas were now connected with the outside world by a very practical and improved transportation system. The towpath constructed along the canal route meant that now boats were towed by mules and horses rather than polled by man power. Fleets of canal boats bearing farm produce and merchant goods floated to and through the villages of Waterloo and Seneca Falls. Rates on the Erie Canal (5 mills per ton-mile) were much less than the nearby competing Cayuga Lake Bridge (30 cents per ton-mile). Packet boats carrying people for business or pleasure were competing with the stage coach. One can hardly emphasize enough

the economic impact of this. Now it was possible for Pennsylvania coal to be brought north via the Chemung River and Seneca Lake to Geneva and then via the Cayuga-Seneca Canal to the Erie Canal and then to Albany and New York City. Imagine!

The Erie Canal stimulated the economic growth and population growth of New York State, making it truly the Empire State. The counties surrounding the Erie Canal in Western New York were the fastest growing portion of the entire United States in the years 1825-1835. The success of the Erie Canal stimulated the building of many other canals throughout the country.

#### **F. What Life Was Like in These Early Years**

Of course, the main concern of settlers was to make a shelter for himself and his family. The initial farmhouse was a log cabin—notched logs with the openings between them chinked and plastered with mud. The chimney consisted of rudely-piled stones. The cabin floor was made of split logs with the flat side up. Blankets suspended from the ceiling served to divide the cabin into separate sleeping quarters, etc. It was not until about 1817 that glass was introduced for windows. Furniture was typically hand-made.<sup>21</sup>

The farmers of olden times generally clothed themselves in garments made in their own families, both as a matter of necessity and economy. Sabbath and holidays were occasions when “boughten clothes” were used, although it was not infrequent that Sabbath-day suits made by mother, wife, or daughter, were worn with laudable pride. A calico dress was the most common fashion.<sup>22</sup>

Clearing the land was a major task. Trees would be cut down and burned, but the tree stumps were usually left in place. The typical field was dotted with tree stumps.

In terms of transportation, horseback riding, both for business and pleasure, was common for both sexes. This was mainly because horses could pass where trees and stumps precluded the use of wheeled vehicles.<sup>23</sup>

A brief discussion about grist mills gives us more insight into what life was like in these early years. Early settlers had to travel some distance to a grist mill. For example, the settlers in the Ovid area around 1790 had to go to Newtown (now known as Elmira), a distance of forty miles, to buy groceries, seed, and provisions. Another option was to go east to Rome. Then there was a new mill at Penn Yan, but that meant going across the lake or around it.<sup>24</sup>

It was about 1793 that Samuel Bear established the first grist mill in what is today Seneca County. The mill located on the Seneca River, basically in the southern part of present-day Waterloo village. In 1794, Silas Halsey started a mill on Lodi Creek.<sup>25</sup>

Not surprisingly these grist mills became the focus of commercial life. The first roads were cut to the mills, which were few and distant from each other. Bear’s rude mill was soon replaced by a larger, more durable and more efficient mill at the same location. Grist was brought to this mill from distances up to thirty miles, by horseback over the old trails and by boats from the east and west. Every man had to wait his turn, whether a whole day or longer. Those bringing grists would come with provisions enough for any emergency, using stumps of trees for tables and lodging in the mill when there was no other room. Because of the numbers of people coming to use the grist mill, Bear started a general store and thus became the first merchant in town. It is reported that some of Bear’s customers came from twenty to thirty miles to get grinding done. In some cases, these potential customers had to wait a whole day or longer for their turn. Let me also add in passing that the two original mill stones had been found near Ovid and had been floated down the lake to the Seneca Outlet and then hauled to the mill site itself.<sup>26</sup>

As another aspect of life for these early settlers, we can proudly say that the first known town meeting in present Seneca County was held on April 1, 1794, in Ovid. (Remember this was when we were still part of Onondaga County.) At that town meeting, local officers were chosen, including Silas Halsey as supervisor. The men at that town meeting also voted that hogs would be allowed to run wild for the ensuing year, and that fences were to be 4.5 feet high. The freeholders also voted 6 pounds for the support of the poor in their area.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

So, the above information is the basis of Seneca County's history until about 1830. By that year, Seneca County as we know it today was largely established. All ten towns were created, as were schools and churches. Waterloo and Ovid were functioning as county seats. The villages of Waterloo and Seneca Falls were becoming important economic centers. The county population was 21,041. Seneca County was on the verge of major economic growth and reforming zeal, but that is another story.

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Original Tenants of Seneca County" by Betty Auten, Seneca County Historian

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tolatsga.org.iro.html> "Iroquois History"

<sup>3</sup> John C. Becker, *A History of the Village of Waterloo*, Waterloo: Waterloo Library and Historical Society, 1949, p 14.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. James Sullivan, ed. *The History of New York State*, Book VII, Chapter IV, online edition [www.usgennet.org/usa/ny/state/his/bk7/ch4.html](http://www.usgennet.org/usa/ny/state/his/bk7/ch4.html)

<sup>5</sup> Becker, p 15.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice L. Patterson, *Between the Lakes*, Interlaken: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1976, p 5.

<sup>7</sup> Becker, p 16.

<sup>8</sup> *History of Seneca Co., New York with Illustrations Descriptive of Its Scenery, Palatial Buildings, Public Buildings, Fine Blocks, and Important Manufactories*, Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign & Everts, 1876, p 8.

<sup>9</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, pp 8, 11.

<sup>10</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p 11.

<sup>11</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p 11.

<sup>12</sup> Becker, pp 32-35.

<sup>13</sup> "Ontario County," *The Encyclopedia of New York State*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005, pp 1150-51.

<sup>14</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, pp 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p 29.

<sup>17</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p 29.

<sup>18</sup> *Manual of the Churches of Seneca County*, Introduction.

<sup>19</sup> *Manual of the Churches of Seneca County*

<sup>20</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, pp 55-57.

<sup>21</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p 29.

<sup>24</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p 12.

<sup>25</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> John C. Becker, pp 34-35.

<sup>27</sup> *History of Seneca Co.*, p. 15.