

Chapter Five -- Early Settlement in Seneca County

The natural beauty of what is today Seneca County was probably first reported in 1671 by a Jesuit missionary priest named Father Raffeix. He used the word "Goiogouen" to refer to this area and said the following:

Goiogouen 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 (Seneca) ten extremely fine salt springs.

Actual white 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. The Junius township constituted what is today the towns of Junius, Tyre, Waterloo, and the north part of Seneca Falls; Romulus is now known as the west parts of Fayette, Varick, four lots in Seneca Falls, and the town of Romulus; and Ovid became what is today Ovid, Lodi, and Covert. 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.

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.

Probably the first white man to settle even temporarily in what is now Seneca County was Horatio Jones. 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 banks of Seneca Lake near to what is now Geneva, and sold to John Jacob Astor his first lot of furs.

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-sonse, 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.

Lawrence Van Cleef, however, who came in 1789, is considered the first permanent settler. He had been part of about 100 men order 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 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.

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 Numbers 4 but also some in No. 5 and 3, all bounded on the north by Seneca Outlet. A miller by trade, Bear set up a grist-mill. This fulfilled a big need for the area settlers. 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.

The first pioneer of the southern part of the 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."

[Note: This unabridged version formed the basis of one in a series of monthly articles on the history of Seneca County published in the weekly newspapers serving Seneca County as part of the celebration of Seneca County's bicentennial year in 2004. These articles were written by Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian.]