

Chapter Four -- What's In a Name?

One can hardly begin to delve very far into the history of Seneca County without asking the question “What’s in a name?” This is true whether we are talking about the county, or various towns and villages within the county.

Confusion surrounds the name “Seneca County” itself because Seneca County was not always that name. What is today Seneca County was part of Albany County from November 1, 1683 until March 12, 1772, when it became part of Montgomery County. On February 16, 1791, it became part of Herkimer County. On March 5, 1794, it became part of Onondaga County. On March 8, 1799, the western portion of Onondaga County was separated into a newly-established Cayuga County. Seneca County was officially formed on March 29, 1804, out of western Cayuga County. Seneca County at that time stretched from Lake Ontario on the north to parts of the present Tompkins and Schuyler Counties on the south. This was an area some sixty-three miles in length with an average width of eleven miles, an area of about 740 square miles or about one half-million acres. Ulysses and Hector (the southern portions of Seneca County) were taken away from Seneca County in 1817, although the northern portion of Ulysses (i.e., Covert) was returned in 1819. Galen and Wolcott (the northern portions of Seneca County) were taken away in 1823. This meant that the present geographical Seneca County has about 197,500 acres.

The evolution of the towns within Seneca County is also somewhat confusing. Sometimes this confusion arises because of our use of the word “town” when we really mean “township” and not “village.” For example, although it is reported that the first post office in Seneca County was in Ovid, it was actually in Farmerville (as the locals referred to it) which became Farmer Village which in 1892 was renamed Farmer which is today the village of Interlaken in the township of Covert. One also needs to remember that in 1802, the probable year of the establishment of this first post office in Seneca County, that it wasn’t Seneca County—it was actually Cayuga County! A second factor contributing to the confusion about townships is that the original townships were divided up to form other townships. Ovid township, for example, at one time included what are today the townships of Ovid, Lodi and Covert. Covert township was formed out of a portion of Ovid Township on April 7, 1817, and then the western portion of Covert township became the Lodi township on January 27, 1826. Similarly, Junius township was divided on March 29, 1826, into the towns of Junius, Tyre, Waterloo, and the northern part of Seneca Falls. Some of Romulus became Fayette (which was called Washington until April 6, 1808) on March 14, 1800, and another part became Varick township on February 6, 1830.

Sometimes names come from people’s knowledge of classical history and mythology and this is reflected in many of the township names in Seneca County. Shortly after the American Revolution much of central western New York was organized as a Military Tract and surveyed into 28 townships. Each of the 28 townships created in this Military Tract has a classical origin name. Township Number 11 was Romulus; Number 26 was Junius, and Number 16 was Ovid. Other classical names included Hannibal (2), Cato (3), Pompey (10), etc. This use of classical names is not surprising in that classical studies were so important a part of the education at the time.

World events also played a role in the names of places. The village of Waterloo gets its name from the famous battle at which Napoleon's forces were defeated by the forces led by Britain's Duke of Wellington. This name change occurred in 1816, just one year after the battle. Prior to that date, there were two separate settlements in what is today Waterloo. Skoi-yase (spelled in various ways depending upon the group and date) was the portion mostly on the south side of the Seneca River as a result of Samuel Bear's original settlement in 1793. This Skoi-yase portion was also known as Jefferson after early 1815, obviously getting that name from the famous U.S. President. This was initially the thriving economic center of what is today Waterloo village. As late as 1810 census data there was no mention of a settlement on the north side of the river. The northern settlement was known as New Hudson and underwent rapid economic growth. In 1816 there was a meeting of people of both sides of the river to decide on a common name for the entire settlement. Several substitute names were suggested. The greatly celebrated victory of Wellington over Napoleon was fresh in people's minds so it is not surprising that that name would be chosen. So, the intermingling settlements of Skoi-Yase (Jefferson) and New Hudson joined together and became Waterloo village.

A very interesting story is how Farmer Village became the village of Interlaken. As had been said earlier, the first post office in Seneca County was established in Ovid sometime before 1803. The U.S. Postal Service records show that a doctor named Jared Sanford was the first postmaster. His appointment as postmaster was for the town of Ovid and not for any settlement in particular. Popular stories depict him as a doctor traveling on horse with a bag of mail over one shoulder as he traveled the route from Geneva to Ithaca, stopping overnight at a tavern. Each such stopover, besides the rest and refreshment for himself and his horse, would be a time to drop off mail for that area and to pick up mail to deliver elsewhere. His "home" Ovid post office site was McCall's store in what is today the village of Interlaken. On July 1, 1815 the post office name was changed to McCall's Store, a building that still stands today, and at that time was a popular tavern. This came at a time when the township of Ovid was growing and would be split up into the townships of Covert and Ovid, with the residents of the village of Ovid pushing for a post office of their own. The people living in the community around McCall's Store called their settlement Farmerville. On May 8, 1819 the U.S. Post Office changed the name of the McCall's Store post office to Farmer—not Farmerville. An obvious question this raises is why wasn't the name changed to the Farmerville name that the local residents used?

The confusion between having a post office name of Farmer and the people calling their community Farmerville led to some sad stories during the Civil War. Young soldiers fighting for the Union cause would send letters home addressed to Farmerville, NY, assuming they would be delivered to their parents and families in the south Seneca County community. Many of these letters instead were sent to the Farmerville, NY in Cattaraugus County which had an official U.S. post office with the name Farmerville. As this problem with the mail continued, the village residents petitioned to change the name of the post office and the village to Farmer Village. This became effective November 20, 1865, after the end of the Civil War—too late for the timely receipt of letters from sons to their parents.

The story does not end there. What is today Interlaken was officially Farmer Village starting in 1865. The Lehigh Valley Railroad, however, wouldn't use the name Farmer Village

on its station sign because that name was too long! So, the official village name and post office name were Farmer Village but the railroad's name for the community was simply Farmer. After more petition efforts by local residents, the U.S. Postmaster General on July 1, 1892 changed the name of the post office to Farmer. Farmer, NY was one of six post offices with the name Farmer in the United States at that time.

In the 1890's Cayuga Lake became a popular summer tourist trade location. This is not surprising because of the lake area's natural beauty and summer recreational opportunities. It became the fashion "to go to the lake," a phrase that many Seneca County residents use yet today. The railroad saw Farmer as a main depot for that summer travel, especially as new hotels along the lake would provide housing and food, and built a new railroad depot at Farmer. Farmer residents had voted on March 2, 1904, to incorporate as a village and whatever named applied to the new railroad station would also be applied to the village and post office. Feeling that the station name should be more in keeping with its gateway location to a summer resort, the railroad started a contest to come up with an alternative name to Farmer. A Miss Georgiana M. Wheeler, a teacher in the Farmer High School, is credited with suggesting the name Interlaken. The railroad thought that name would be very suitable for the growing summer tourist trade—indicating the position between the lakes and suggestive of the famous European summer resort of Interlaken, Switzerland. Although the village residents were reportedly almost unanimous in their desire that the railroad station, village and post office name be changed to Creston, the railroad's desire for the name Interlaken won out. One can only imagine that the earlier years of having the railroad station known by one name and the village by another name contributed greatly to the willingness of the village residents to go along with the railroad's wishes. After all, the new rail station being built was not just for the benefit of the roughly 700-800 residents within one mile of the depot—the station was being built to accommodate the many people who would be traveling by rail to Interlaken to partake of the summer recreation on the lake. Although the village residents may have embraced the name Interlaken, apparently neighboring communities were much more reluctant to do so. Other communities could also lay claim to being "between the lakes."

How Farmerville became the village of Interlaken illustrates well the significance of the question "What's in a name?" in talking about the history of Seneca County. Names can be a source of local pride and can be based on classical studies and/or current events. One needs to know, however, what year you are talking about to be able to give the correct name for a county, town or village within that county. Names change over time often for logical or very interesting reasons.

[Note: This formed the basis of the first in a series of monthly articles on the history of Seneca County published as part of the celebration of Seneca County's bicentennial year in 2004. They were written by Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian.]