

The Flats: A Brief History

Much of the early economic development of Seneca Falls was based on making use of the mile-long rapids constituting the forty-two foot drop in the Seneca River. The islands located within the Seneca River in that area of rapids became known as The Flats.

The first white settler in our region was Job Smith who settled on the Flats in spring 1787. Our first permanent settler in Seneca County was Lawrence Van Cleef, who built a log house in the Flats in 1789. He built both a sawmill and grist mill in 1795.

For many years, much of the land and water power rights were owned and controlled by the Bayard Land Company. The land was held at high prices, thereby restricting the development of businesses in this area. To further develop industry, the rapids were dammed to form the Upper, Middle, and Lower Falls from which a number of mill sites and races were developed.

The Bayard Company was dissolved in 1825, leading to rapid development of industry. The first industries were several large flour mills. Growing industry sparked a need for better water transportation, so the Cayuga and Seneca Canal was completed in 1821. There were eight 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 a total of 42 feet. In 1828, the Cayuga and Seneca Canal was linked to the Erie Canal.

Approximately 50 residential houses existed in the Flats along lower Fall Street, and Dey Street. These were the homes of some prominent people of Seneca Falls.

As the nineteenth century progressed, many industrial changes evolved in the Flats, in keeping with the needs and economics of the times. The flouring mills gave way to diversification and the emergence of the pump building industries. The Rumsey Works was an important plant in the lower industrial area. Upstream from there was the Silsby Manufacturing Company, started in 1848 on Dey's Island and known as the Island Works, which became world-famous for the manufacture of steam-operated fire engines. Further west was the Downs and Company, another pump manufacturer.

Every pump manufacturer in town made other metal items—stove parts, sausage stuffers, meat choppers, bootjacks, corn shellers, flatirons and bells--especially in "slack seasons." Just prior to the Civil War, Downs and Company fell on hard times, so it started making knitting machines and running knitting machines to make socks and arms and legs for long underwear. Soon after the death of Abel Downs in 1869 the three remaining partners incorporated the business as Goulds Manufacturing Company. Another pump builder, Cowing & Company, had a plant located on the upper island, west of the Ovid Street bridge.

The Cayuga and Seneca Canal became antiquated, and a decision was made by New York State to upgrade water transportation into the Barge Canal System. The five tiny locks would be replaced with a large two-lock combine of 49 foot lift. These new larger locks needed a great supply of water, so an artificial lake named Van Cleef Lake would be created, spelling the demise of the Flats. Some residences were moved out of the Flats and some businesses, such as Goulds Manufacturing Company (on West Fall Street) and Rumsey Pumps, Ltd. (on Prospect Hill, later to become the Sylvania Factory), relocated. On August 20, 1915 the flooding of the new waterway was completed.

Gone was The Flats as an area of industry and private residence. In its place, however, was the beautiful Van Cleef Lake. A picture of this artificial lake, with the Trinity Episcopal Church in the background has become one of the most beautiful tourist photos for all of New York .

[This article was written by Walter Gable, Seneca County Historian, on February 14, 2005. The information was taken largely from *The Flats, Including The Canal and Industries*, a 1981 publication of the Seneca Falls Historical Society.]