

ROCHESTER HISTORY

Edited by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck

City Historian

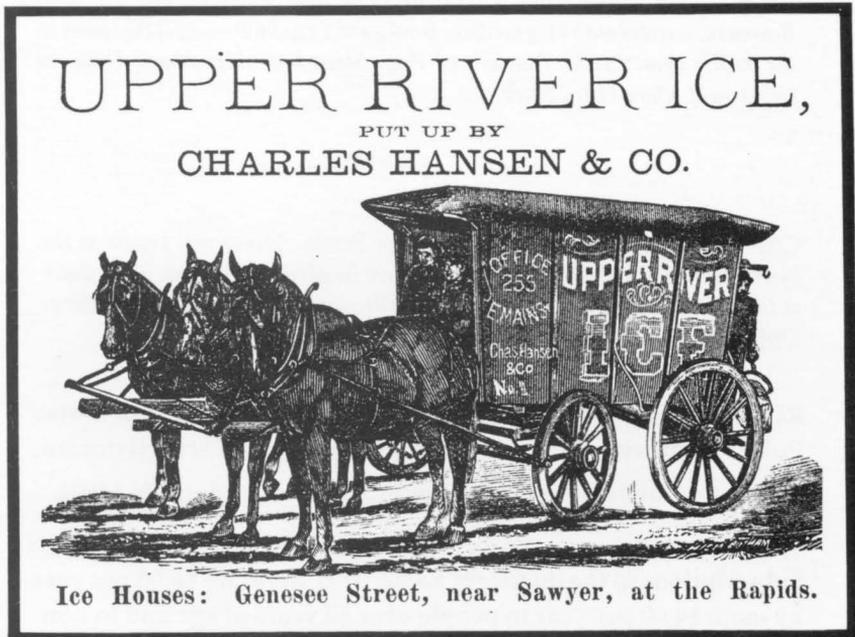
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At the Rapids on the Genesee Settlement at Castletown

by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck





Above: Calvin Brooks and his wife (both seated) with three generations of their family. Fanny Brooks Paige is standing third from the right. Her husband, Benjamin, is seated with his grandson. Brooks and Paige built many of the houses in the Rapids area. Brooks Avenue and Paige Street bear their names. From the collection of Mary Helen Sneek.

*Cover: The area around Genesee Street and Brooks Avenue was known as the Rapids into the twentieth century. Upper River Ice advertised Genesee River water at the Rapids as pure and "especially fit for drinking purposes." **City Directory**, Office of the City Historian.*

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The Genesee Rapids Hotel (at the far left) in the early 1900s stood at the corner of Brooks Avenue and Genesee Street. "Canawlers" made the hotel a lively drinking spot. Many tall tales were told within the walls of the hotel and many arguments were settled with fists. The building on the right was once a horse barn. From the collection of Mary Helen Sneek.

Castletown: Settlement at the Rapids

A few headstones are all that remain as reminders of what was once the settlement of Castletown. Most people knew it as the Rapids. Beneath the earth in a lot along Congress Avenue, the early residents of Castletown lie buried in the nearly two acre Rapids Cemetery. Many of these people were pioneers who had come to the Genesee country when it was a wilderness. The lives of these people reflect the changes and development of the settlement of Castletown that grew into the 19th and third wards of the City of Rochester.

In 1790 James and William Wadsworth purchased 2,000 acres of land from land speculators Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham for eighty cents an acre. They later purchased an additional 4,000 acres of wilderness land for fifty cents an acre. Wadsworth owned so much land that he could walk from Genesee to Rochester without leaving his own land.

James Wadsworth envisioned boats from the upper Genesee Valley, loaded with lumber and grain, transferring their cargo at the rapids where the waters of the Genesee picked up speed as it rounded the bend in the river. He rightly thought this to be a good location for a settlement. Most of the settlers arriving in the Genesee country forded the river at this point. In 1800

Wadsworth built a tavern and store at the Rapids and hired Isaac Castle to manage them. It may have been the first tavern opened in the Genesee country.

Settlement had just begun in the newly opened wilderness. Farmers poled their grain, lumber and other goods from the upper Genesee Valley to the Rapids where it was transferred to ships at the Lower Falls. Castletown stood at the juncture of trails connecting Irondequoit Bay to the Genesee River by way of Pinnacle Hill, Cobb's Hill, Highland Park, Mt. Hope Cemetery to Brooks Avenue. Indians traveling between the Genesee country and the Ohio River Valley crossed the Genesee at the rapids and for that reason La Salle thought it a good location for a trading post. From the west came the trail that is today Brooks Avenue. Another that is today Scottsville Road came from the south. Two trails that are today Plymouth Avenue and Genesee Street cut through the wilderness to the north.

In the first decade Castletown boasted a tavern, a church, a school and a handful of houses. Durham boats, heavily loaded with lumber, pork, barrel staves, flour and grain were poled along the Genesee River from the rich agricultural land in the Upper Genesee Valley. Teamsters were busy unloading at the rapids to forward the goods to the Lower Falls where they could be carried by schooner to foreign markets.

The success of the small settlement was short-lived, however. It had scarcely progressed a decade when in 1817 New York State enacted legislation to construct the Erie Canal. After surveyors determined that the best route for the canal was through the One Hundred Acre Tract, the economic center of the Genesee country was sure to be Col. Rochester's settlement. Rochester promptly moved to organize the Tract into a village annexing the two hundred acre tract of Frankfort to the north. In doing so he had gained what was to become the most powerful race on the Genesee River. Four years later, the county of Monroe was formed and the county seat was Rochesterville. The growing village had grown to 1,049 by 1817.

Castletown suffered a second major blow in 1822 when the feeder canal was built to supply Genesee River water to the Erie Canal. It was dug on the east side of the river at the site of today's pedestrian bridge at Brooks Avenue. Boats traveling downtown no longer had to unload at the rapids, they turned off the river and poled up the feeder to Rochester near the present intersection of Mt. Hope and South Avenues where the feeder joined the

Erie Canal. Castletown lost its identity and over time came to be referred to as the Rapids.

According to the 1845 records of the Genesee Baptist Church (originally Rapids Baptist Church), the west side settlement two miles south of Rochester's business center, was peopled by those who were neither city nor country, "a people by themselves and of themselves peculiar... and almost peculiarly bad."

"The neighborhoods (in 1845 referred to as a neighborhood rather than a settlement) has been kind of insulated... The men were generally laborers, teamsters and boatmen—largely scattered in summer, and at home chiefly idle in the winter, given to gossip, intemperance and contention. And thus spending in the winter the earnings of the summer which left them in moderate circumstances or poor. And with limited school advantages, no Sabbath, and no sanctuary the place became notorious for its bad morals. At one time in this small place were five hotels, "putting their bottles to their neighbors' mouths to make them drunken... and five fiddles inviting them to nightly dances, which were marked by drinking and fighting, and sometimes bloodshed..."

In 1845 Otis Turner founded the Baptist Church at the Rapids to mission to these notorious characters who lived at the rapids.

The Character of a Settlement

Raised from the dead through historical records, Ben Streeter represents the kind of character that gave the Rapids or Castletown, its reputation as a stop along the river for hard-drinking, fighting, notorious men and women.

Less than three months after the War of 1812 began, Streeter was born to Thomas M. Streeter and Ruth Wilson in a cabin at the rapids at the bend in the Genesee River, just four miles south of Rochesterville. His parents had built a cabin there double-wide and opened half of it as a grog shop or tavern. There were few neighbors, the McVeans near Red Creek, Isaac Castle and two other families along the river between the Streeters and Rochesterville.

Streeter started as a boatman when he was only eight years old. He worked as a cook and cabin boy on his father's boat, *Frolic*, in 1820. The boat was built on the St. Lawrence River to hold 150 barrels of cargo. Ben recalled that the boats were "poled" along the river. No sails, no oars, no electricity or mule power. Poles were made of white ash with buttons and sockets mounted on the boat.

"A 'poler' would stand on the side of the boat, and prod it along for miles, using one shoulder, then the other."¹ Their shoulders became sore, but their endurance and strength reflected their manhood so they never complained and they struggled to build themselves.

From 1820 until 1840 when the Genesee Valley Canal opened Streeter was a Genesee River boatman. Carrying lumber and pork, grain, he floated with the current when the water was high and when it was low, he poled and paddled. He made his home at the Rapids and in the winter, passed his time idly or with odd jobs. He passed much of his time at the Ensworth Tavern on the site of the present Powers Building... and he said he frequently visited a woman named Duncan who lived in a log cabin behind the tavern.

Streeter was a six foot, boisterous and strong river boatman who never stepped away from a fight, who kept bad company and maybe told tall tales. But he was certainly a bold adventurer. In the Spring of 1841, he was on the *Northumberland* with General Beach, Captain John Mills and eight other boatmen on the west side of the new second aqueduct (now the Broad Street bridge). The General, he said, wanted desperately to be the first to cross. On the east side another boat awaited the signal. Streeter recalled that the men on the *Northumberland* poled hard and fast and "before you could say Jack Robinson we were more than half way across and the other fellows gave up."² It was manpower, not mule power that propelled the first boats across the Erie Canal aqueduct.

Streeter claimed later to be on the first boat to go to Mt. Morris on the Genesee Valley Canal in May of 1842 and when it closed in the fall of 1881, he was the last boat to travel its waters. On his own boat, *Fred Eaton*, he carried a load of lumber from Tonawanda to Mt. Morris, passing through the first lock in Rochester just a few hours before it closed. He sold the boat at Mt. Morris for \$50 because he could not get it back.

In the Spring of 1855, Streeter was called to testify to the character of a man who had worked on his boat for the two previous seasons. The man, named Martin Eastwood, was charged with murdering another man in a drunken brawl. Streeter testified that he knew him as a hardworking man who did not drink, but who would never walk away from a fight. He told of an incident at the Macedon Lock where Eastwood was attempting to pull into the lock when another boat tried to "hog" ahead of him. The crews of both boats engaged in a brawl and Eastwood won. But he didn't start it, Streeter emphasized.

Constable Joel W. Burdick said he knew Streeter for about fifteen



Around 1914 Mary Helen Sneck's mother photographed this wagonload of potatoes picked fresh from the Sneck farm in Mumford. The cows walking up Brooks Avenue were unloaded from the railroad at the Rapids and herded to a farm up the Avenue. From the collection of Mary Helen Sneck.

years and he did not have a good reputation. I "have not heard as many speak well as ill of Streeter,"³ Burdick said. Other men like Leonard Kingsley, said Streeter's reputation was bad but he did not feel that that should jeopardize his testimony on behalf of his boatman. There was, apparently, an expectation of river boatmen and canalers to be fighters and heavy drinkers.

Streeter's boatman was convicted of murder and sentenced to death only to be granted a last minute stay. He was granted a new trial based on Judge Henry Selden's error during the trial. Though he was convicted of manslaughter in his second trial, he was sentenced to serve seven and a quarter years. In 1864 he was pardoned from Auburn after seven years and became proprietor of the Railroad Hotel on Exchange Street in 1865. Five years later he was murdered in Wyoming.

Streeter, however, left Rochester after his testimony in 1855 to live among the Blackfeet Indians in the Dakota Hills. He traveled from Buffalo in a prairie schooner, hiked through the woods of Illinois and Michigan in the winter and survived a three day blizzard in Nebraska.

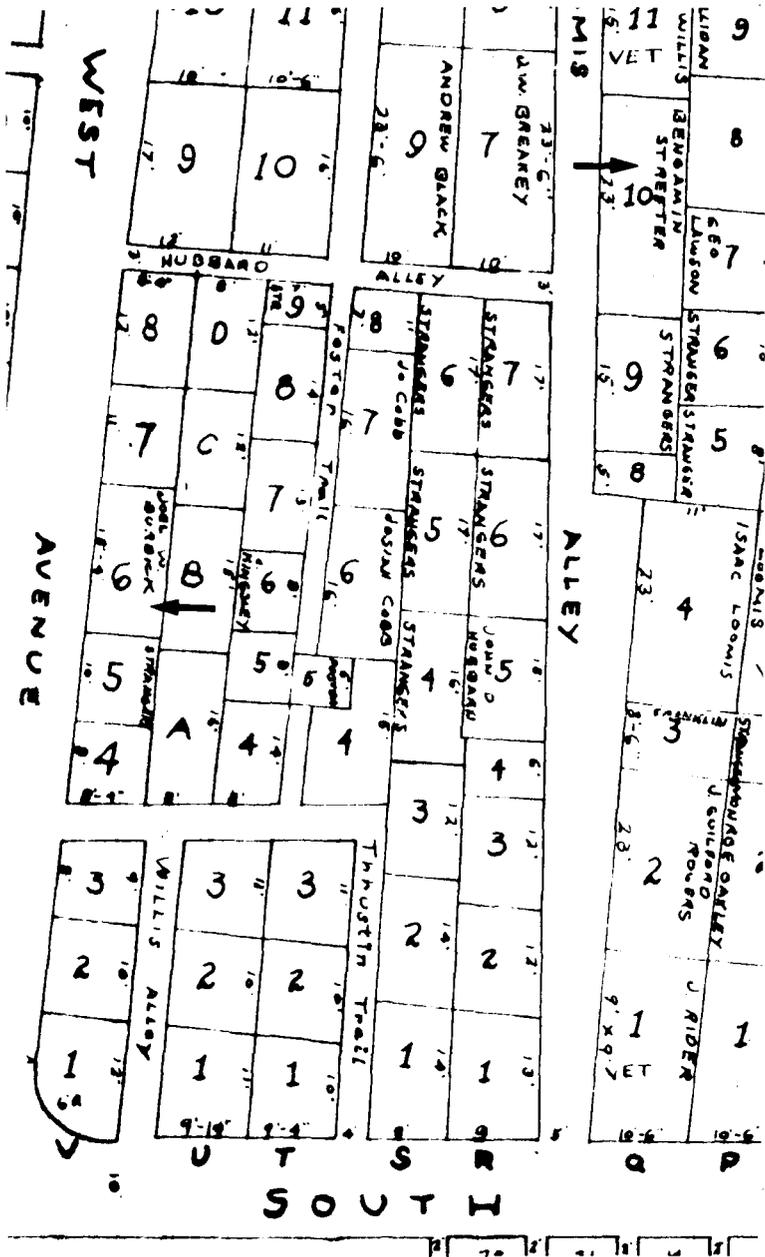
Streeter was not back in Rochester long before he was arrested for forgery and jailed in July of 1856. Five years later, he was again

arrested along with Ben Cobb and Charles Vaughn for pirating 483 bushels of oats from a canal boat frozen into the Genesee Valley Canal near the Rapids. The men had been hired to cart the oats from the boat.

As the name of Castletown became less known and the Rapids changed from a community to a neighborhood, Streeter became a man of a bygone era. He was sought after for interviews and stories of the old days. Though he no longer worked the boats or pirated on the river, he did not give up the lifestyle of the old-time "canawler." At the age of 92, Streeter was found unconscious on a pile of tile at the foot of the stairs leading from the Erie Railroad to a bar. The police were summoned at 9:45 that night in July of 1904. Streeter claimed he was assaulted, but police thought he probably mis-stepped after drinking that night. Streeter died that night in the City Hospital. He had two wives and eleven children, six of whom were still living at the time of his death. His youngest son was only ten years old.

Streeter's grave lies not far from the men and women he lived among. His life and many others illustrate the times in which they lived. Constable Joel Burdick, who arrested Streeter on occasion, lies buried a little to the west of Streeter. Isaac Loomis who surveyed the cemetery, lies buried on the east side of Loomis Alley near the center. Ben Streeter lies just north of him.

There are many veterans in the cemetery. Paul Baker served in the American Revolution. Many fought in the Civil War: William Willis, James McGuckin, James Pamment, John Rider and Marquis Streeter. Pamela Harrison served as a Civil War nurse, married Dr. S.M. Prentice and returned to Rochester where she died in 1882. Frederick Peiffer fought in the Spanish American War. Many other veterans must be researched. The story of old Castletown, the Rapids and the neighborhood it became lies beneath the ground in this important and historic cemetery.



The lives of the people buried in the small cemetery on Congress Avenue reflect life at the Rapids. Benjamin Streeter now lies buried not far from Joel Burdick who had arrested him on occasion. Detail of cemetery map from Tim O'Connell, Maps and Surveys Dept., City of Rochester.



Settlers had to be ferried across the Genesee River near the Rapids before the Main Street bridge was built. Some settlers drowned or nearly lost their lives crossing the river. From the Office of the City Historian.

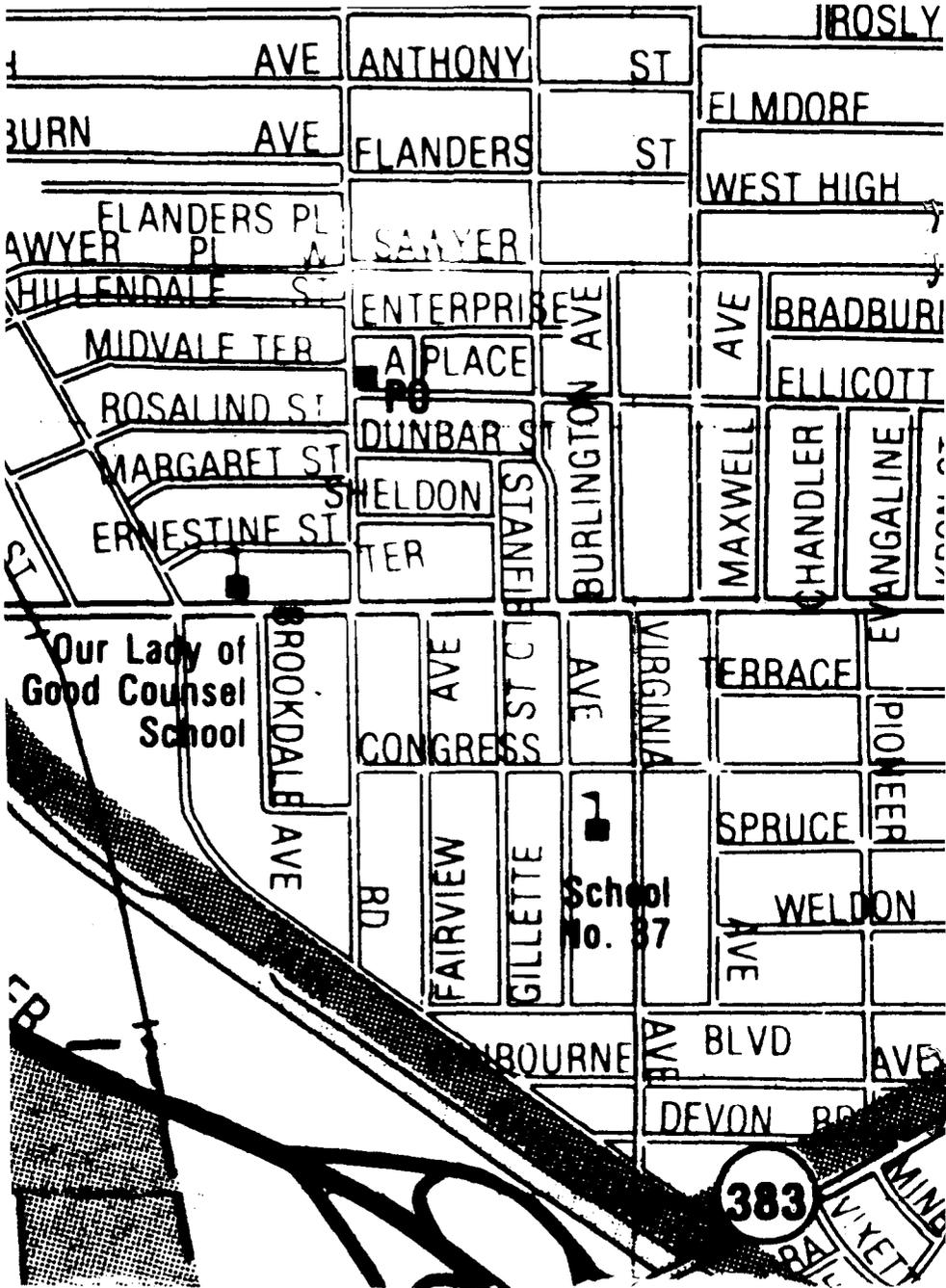


Crossing the river before bridges were built was dangerous. From the Office of the City Historian.

Early Incidents at the Rapids

The Goodhues

Crossing the Genesee River was dangerous at any time of the year, but without bridges, the pioneers preferred to cross in the winter when they could cross on the ice. Before the Main Street bridge was built, many settlers crossed at the bend in the river where the water was so low that it created a rapids. In February of 1802 George Goodhue was traveling by ox sled with his family from Canisteo. He traveled for two weeks over rugged trails and by the time he reached the Genesee, the ice had begun to melt. Goodhue led his family and ox sled over a bridge he constructed from the bank to the frozen ice on the river. He unharnessed the oxen, but as he began to lead them they broke through the ice, they swam with some difficulty, but safely reached the riverbank. The ice on which Goodhue had left his wife and sled, suddenly broke and began to float away. If Goodhue did not act quickly his wife would go over the falls as a few other pioneers had done. He threw a pole and rope to her. She tied it to the sled and was pulled to safety. The Goodhues could watch with relief as the ice continued swiftly downriver toward the falls.

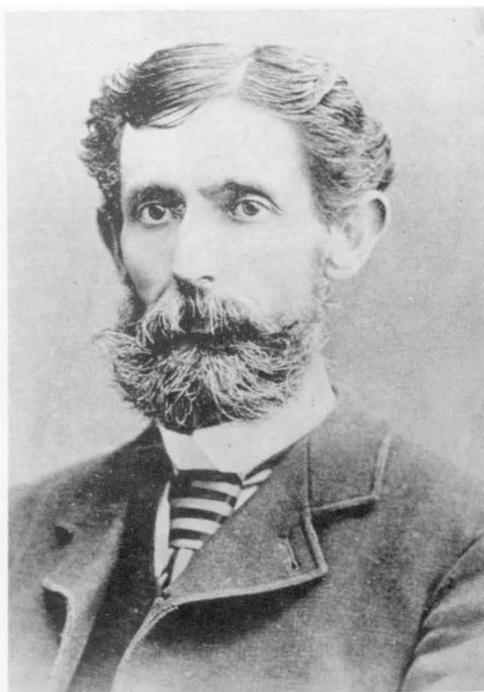


The Rapids of the Genesee River gave its name to the area centered around the river by a number one. The Rapids Cemetery is marked by a number two.



the intersection of Brooks Avenue and Genesee Street. The location is marked in the
Map from the Department of Community Development, City of Rochester.

*George Harris. Local
History Division,
Rochester Public
Library.*



George Harris

George Harris spent much of his time fishing in the Genesee River not far from his home on the plateau overlooking the river (near the present University of Rochester). One day he heard two shots fired in rapid succession which he recognized as a danger signal. He ran to the river where he saw two or three Indian children racing swiftly down river. They had lost their paddles and would soon be overturned in the rapids. Harris motioned to them to use their foot as a rudder to steer the canoe toward the bank, but the current was too strong for the young boys. Harris grabbed one of the fishing lines that he kept ready at his favorite fishing site. He stood on the flat rock that extended into the river and threw one of his fishing line spears. When it pierced the side of the canoe deeply, he pulled hard, reeling it toward the bank. When the children reached the shore safely, Harris collapsed in exhaustion. He awakened to see his father and an Indian named Tall Chief standing over him. One of the boys he had saved was Tall Chief's son. This meeting began a friendship between the families and started Harris on a lifelong study of the Iroquois. The Senecas who traveled the trails that converged at the Rapids, had frequently stopped at the Harris home for shelter. Harris learned the language, the culture and the skills. He was adopted by the Senecas and named "Hotarshannyoh," the Pathfinder.

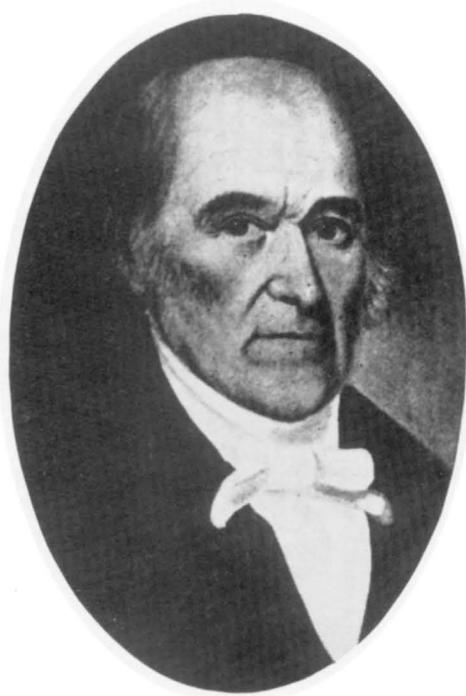
Riot at the Genesee Valley Canal

On Friday June 30, 1838, the Chili superintendent and several constables attempted to serve summonses on men digging the Genesee Valley Canal requiring them to work off their road taxes. The laborers raised their picks and shovels and chased the officials from the rapids. The officials, who complained to the sheriff, were overheard by George Dawson, captain of the Pioneer Rifles, the local militia. He called his men to arms and rushed to suppress the brawling canawlers. But by the time he reached the Rapids, the laborers were gone. The local tavern keeper called out to the militia, "Are yez all dhry?"

The militia set up headquarters at the tavern, sent out small patrols and captured 24 men. Only ten of them could be identified by the officials. Bail and a hearing date were set and after shaking hands, the rioters invited the soldiers back to the Rapids for a drink.



The Genesee Valley Canal followed the route of the Genesee River. It intersected the old Erie Canal in Rochester. Detail of map from **Facts on File**.



Hamlet Scrantom was the first permanent settler on the One Hundred Acre Tract. His son, Edwin, left recollections of the family's crossing at the Rapids. Local History Division, Rochester Public Library.

Hamlet Scrantom, First Permanent Resident on the One Hundred Acre Tract

Hamlet Scrantom arrived at the rapids of the Genesee River in April of 1812. He fastened his oxen and cart to the ferry and crossed the river poled by Gid Allen. On the west side of the river was a poorly built cabin with a sign hanging crooked that stated this was Isaac Castle's Tavern. The Scrantoms spent the night in the tavern/inn, but they hardly slept, for all night they heard the sounds of voices and settlers' wagons passing by. The next morning, Scrantom and his sons walked downriver to the Main Street bridge which was under construction. Most of the men had fled an outbreak of Genesee fever. Scrantom found that the men had stopped work on his cabin also. He crossed the river on the beams of the bridge and spoke to Enos Stone, agent for Col. Rochester and owner of land on the east side of the river. He had just completed a frame house he built with wood from his own sawmill. He offered the Scrantoms use of his abandoned log cabin until their own could be finished.

In July of 1812, the Scrantoms moved into their own cabin, becoming the first permanent settlers on the One Hundred Acre Tract. That fall the Main Street bridge was completed so that settlers like the Scrantoms no longer had to risk their lives crossing the Genesee River. This further drew settlers from the Rapids.

The Rapids Cemetery

Wadsworth set aside nearly two acres of land about 1810 for a cemetery. A road four rods wide was cleared from the river to the cemetery. Today that road is Congress Avenue.

The cemetery is nestled among the houses on Congress Avenue. Inside the cemetery are wide avenues named for the side of the cemetery on which they run, North, South, East and West Avenues. Along the outer edge of the East and West Avenues are east and west Trails. Alleys run north and south giving access to lots deep in the cemetery.

Loomis connects North and South Avenues on the west side of the cemetery and Oakley Alley connects North and South Avenues. Burns and Hart connect South Avenues to Bartlett, an alley that runs east-west from the center of the cemetery to East Avenue. Several smaller alleys, Rogers, Willis, and twelve small trails Foster, Thrustin, Edwards, Monroe, McQuain, Harrison, Nelson, Brooks, Penoloy, Halin, Smalley and Butler run north-south giving access to plots.

Cobb, Lewis, Streeter and Balentine Trails on the east side of the cemetery connect North and South Avenues. Only Hubbard Alley on the west side and Bartlett Alley on the east side run east-west.

The prices of the lots depended on the location. In 1881 lots on the avenues were twenty cents per square foot, alleys were eighteen to twenty cents, trails were sixteen to eighteen cents. Where there were no trails or walkways, lots could be purchased for ten cents per square foot.

The main gate stood at the center of the south side of the cemetery facing Congress Avenue. A potter's field was set aside in the southwest corner of the cemetery. A description of a fence or gate that probably surrounded the cemetery could not be found, though the evidence of the gate posts remained in the earth.

The 1854 map of the cemetery as surveyed by Isaac Loomis was taken from the Wadsworth subdivision, town lot number 47 in Gates, liber number 116, page 500 in the deed book of the Monroe County Clerk's office.

In 1881 the Rapids Cemetery Association was formed. It was active until the 1950s.

The Rapids Becomes a Neighborhood

There was limited development at the Rapids until 1888 when the Elmwood Avenue bridge was constructed and the Genesee Valley Park opened, drawing crowds for summer recreation. The Rapids became a desirable residential area. It was subdivided, streets were laid out and houses and schools were constructed. In 1902 it was annexed by the city of Rochester. Today, the neighborhood bears little resemblance to the settlement at the Rapids as it was a little over a century ago. And it is not as the Wadsworths envisioned their settlement of Castletown. It is a desirable residential neighborhood in the 19th Ward of the city. Just as they did a century ago, the important routes of Genesee Street, Plymouth Avenue, Thurston Road, Chili Road and Scottsville Road still carry much of the traffic in what was once "The Rapids."

Some residents like Ben Streeter lived into the 20th century to see the wilderness become a city, to see electricity, steam and gasoline replace man and animal power and to see Wadsworth's Castletown grow to become a part of Rochester.

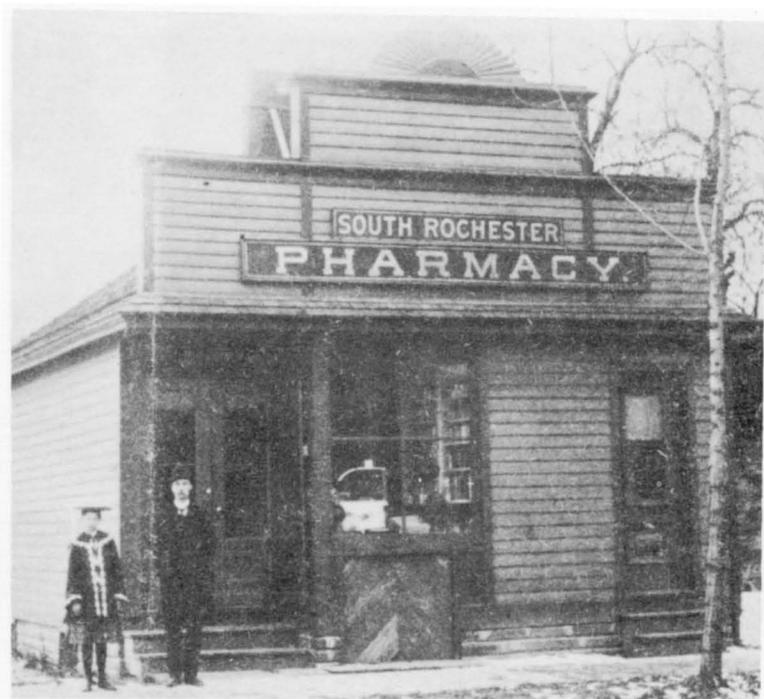




Mary Helen Sneck as a child in her back yard at Brooks Avenue and Marsh Street in what was once an apple orchard. From the collection of Mary Helen Sneck.



"Aunty" Wallace ran a penny candy store at the Rapids. School children bought candy and small school supplies from her store from the early 1900s until the 1920s. She and her sister lived in the rear of the store. From the collection of Mary Helen Sneck.



The South Rochester Pharmacy on Brooks Avenue in the early 1900s. From the collection of Mary Helen Sneek.



Above: The Brooks family homestead at the northwest corner of Brooks Avenue and Marsh Street about 1912. A man named Carpenter who bought the Brooks home posed with his horse and (L-R) Jim Cook, James Paige, Teddy Eshelman and Alton Cook. From the collection of Mary Helen Sneek.

End Notes

1. Cober, R. LaRue, "Castletown," pg. 21, 1935, Local History Division, Rochester Public Library.
2. Rochester **Post Express**, September 12, 1903, Local History Division, Rochester Public Library.
3. Ibid.

Other sources used in this article:

Union & Advertiser: April 17, 1861, 2-3; May 30, 1867, 3-4; November 16, 1881, 2-3.

Rochester Daily Advertiser: July 28, 1851, 2-2.

Rochester Telegraph: August 29, 1820, 3-4.

Rochester Daily Union: May 11, 1855, 2-3; July 25, 1856, 3-1.

Post Express September 12, 1903; July 18, 1904.

Tengwall Scrapbook 5, pg. 97. Local History Division, Rochester Public Library.

Peck Scrapbook 2, pg. 37. Local History Division, Rochester Public Library.



Copy edited by Hans Munsch.

Back cover: The American flag was designed by Mary Helen Sneck's grandfather, an upholsterer from Renova, Pennsylvania. It was hung for this special occasion in 1919 to celebrate the homecoming of Ms. Sneck's cousin, Philip, from France after World War One. From the collection of Mary Helen Sneck.

