

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck, *Editor*

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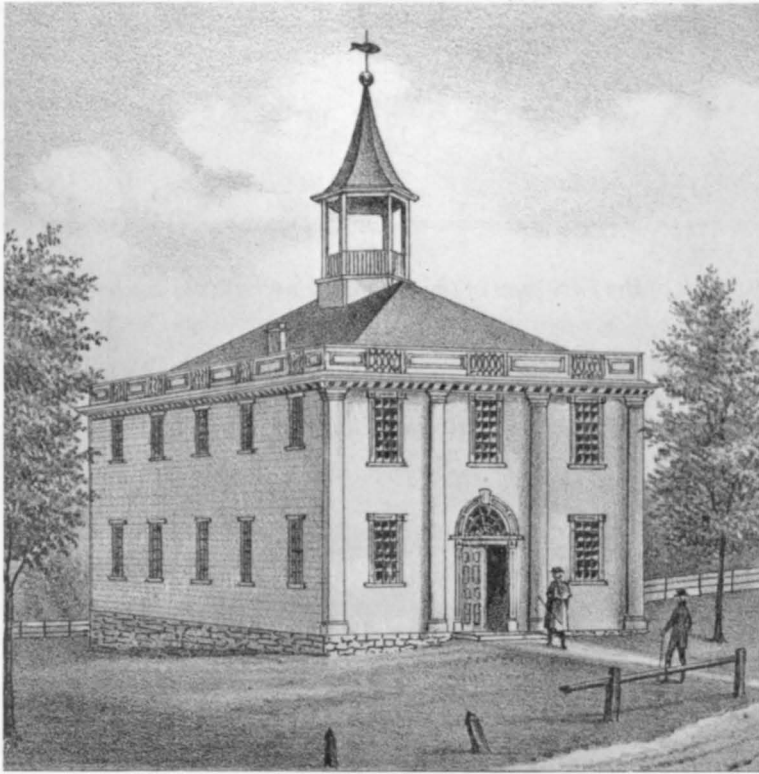
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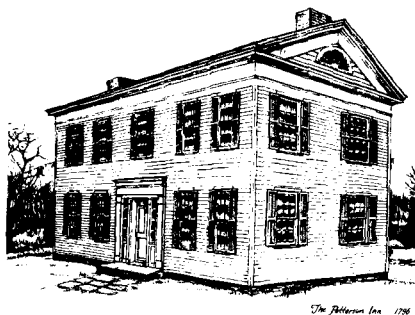
## The Genesee Country Villages In Early Rochester's History

*by Blake McKelvey*



*The First Ontario Courthouse built in 1794.*





*Benjamin Patterson Inn, named for its first innkeeper, was built in 1796 by Charles Williamson near Painted Post. (courtesy Jerry Wright and the Corning-Painted Post Historical Society)*

## The Genesee Country Villages In Early Rochester's History

When we reflect on the early collapse of Ebenezer Allan's milling venture at the Genesee falls in 1788–90, and on the remarkable success of Col. Nathaniel Rochester's settlement at the same 100-acre site some twenty years later, the significance of intervening events and developments commands attention. The contrasts between the two promoters were, of course, striking and relevant. Allan was a restless and venture-some trader, familiar with the Indians and the rough life of the frontier, uncertain in his loyalties, and erratic in his domestic arrangements. Col. Rochester, on the other hand, was an enterprising townsman, experienced in the commercial and political affairs of thriving villages in North Carolina, Maryland and New York, and animated by strong family ties and national loyalties. Yet a closer look at their contrasting fortunes reveals that, while the site was the same, the surrounding circumstances were so radically different as to belie any fair comparison.

When Allan got his saw and grist mills in operation early in 1789 his nearest neighbors and potential customers were building crude log cabins some ten to fifteen miles distant. The first federal census a year later found only 1,075 pioneers scattered throughout the vast forest that covered the western portion of New York state, and most of them were clustered on partially cleared tracts near the outlets of Seneca and

Canandaigua lakes. Already in 1790 two rival mills at small but more accessible water falls were serving these distant settlements, and business at the Genesee millsite was practically nonexistent, prompting Allan to sell his 100 acres to a distant speculator.

When Col. Rochester rode down to survey his 100-acre tract in 1811 the situation had changed dramatically. The third federal census had counted 72,000 residents in the same vast territory; the Genesee country, no longer a wilderness, was now organized into three large counties—Ontario, Steuben and Genesee—with well constructed buildings housing county and land offices in their respective seats. Moreover, enterprising hamlets at a dozen other sites scattered throughout the area made the new promotion launched by Col. Rochester at the Genesee falls appear like that of a latecomer rather than a pioneer. But if Rochester's settlement in the backwoods around the lower Genesee inspired expressions of scorn from some older neighbors, it would nevertheless reap advantage from the productive region they were building and contribute mightily to its prosperity. Rochester-ville would also profit from the experiences of its predecessors, which brings the early development of the Genesee country villages within the proper scope of Rochester's history.

## Early Settlement Efforts

The prompt action of Oliver Phelps, after the successful conclusion of his negotiations with the Indians at Buffalo Creek in July 1788, in ordering a survey of the 2,060,000-acre tract thus acquired into ranges and townships, was designed to promote its speedy and orderly sale and settlement. He opened a land office at the foot of Canandaigua Lake in 1789, the first in America to be located in the midst of a projected settlement. With Nathaniel Gorham, his principal partner, he reserved two of the six-mile square townships, one at Canandaigua and one at Geneseo, for their development; several lesser associates in the land company made down payments on other selected townships, and each endeavored to recruit settlers to develop them. Hardy pioneers began to arrive over the Indian trails from the east in 1789, and many staked out and made down payments on farm sites, notably in the townships of Bloomfield, Honeoye, Lyons, Parma and Pittsford, as well as Canandaigua and Geneva. But the expected flood of settlers did not materialize, and the arduous task of clearing a few acres and erect-

ing and occupying primitive log cabins prompted some of the first arrivals to abandon the effort and to return home.

As the proceeds from outright sales and down payments on prospective titles failed to meet the land company's obligations to Massachusetts, Phelps and Gorham accepted an offer from Robert Morris, the country's most venturesome land speculator, who paid \$200,000 for the unassigned portions of the Phelps and Gorham tract in 1790 and disposed of it two years later for \$360,000 to a group of British speculators headed by Sir William Pultney. The Pultney Associates, as they were called, sent Captain Charles Williamson to America to undertake the promotion and sale of their 1,264,000-acre estate, which encompassed all of the southern half of the Phelps and Gorham tract and several uncommitted townships to the north. While Capt. Williamson was launching his promotions up the Susquehanna valley from Philadelphia and Baltimore in the early nineties and competing with the Phelps and Gorham proprietors for settlers in the eastern half of the Genesee valley, Robert Morris, through his son Tom, was negotiating with the Indians for the title to lands farther west, and his success at Big Tree in September 1797 brought the promoters of the Morris Reserve and the Holland Land Company's vast estate into active competition for settlers.

Most of the pioneers trekking west or north into the Genesee country in the 1790s and early 1800s were attracted by its fertile and relatively cheap lands. They hoped to acquire sufficient acres for prosperous farms. Many came in extended family or neighborhood groups, the women in lumbering wagons drawn by oxen and loaded with farm and household equipment, while the men drove a few cattle and sheep along in their wake. A remarkable record of this migration was made fifty years later by Orsamus Turner who incorporated the reminiscences and letters of many of the 5000 pioneers whose names and locations he identified in two fat volumes: *History of the Holland Purchase*, and *History of the Phelps and Gorham Purchase and Morris Reserve*. There we read of the ventures they undertook, the hardships they suffered, and some of their accomplishments. They were ever ready to shelter a new neighbor while his cabin was being erected and to take part in a nearby barn or mill raising.

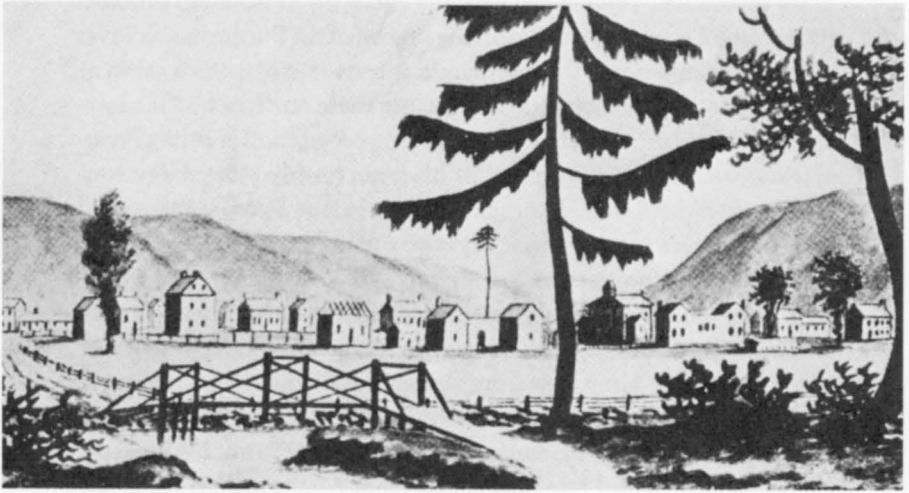
Some arrived with sufficient resources to buy their acres outright, but most acquired title claims with down payments. Only the opportunity to sell part of their first crops of corn or wheat to hungry new-

comers enabled many of the early settlers to meet their recurring payments. Many supplemented their meager first crops by fishing and hunting or by laboring for a spell for a more affluent neighbor; some pulled up stakes for a new start on a virgin tract. Clearly the economic fortunes of the region, both those of the actual settlers and even more urgently those of the land companies extending credit, depended on a continued and accelerated influx of new settlers, and Charles Williamson took the lead in founding and nurturing villages to promote a speedier settlement of the Pultney estate.

The hard-pressed Phelps and Gorham Associates had made little or no effort to promote or subsidize the development of villages. Though hailing almost entirely from New England, they apparently had no recollection of the "covenanted town" pattern of settlement in colonial days there. Indeed, the only close approach to that pattern occurred in the independently inspired settlement already established by the followers of Jemima Wilkinson, the Universal Friend, in 1787 at Apple Town and Jerusalem in the disputed Gore tract west of Seneca Lake. The only example of a church-dominated settlement among the Phelps and Gorham ventures was that of a group of dissident Friends or Quakers, chiefly from the Berkshires, who acquired and settled the Farmington township in 1790. The cooperation these devout migrants rendered to each other in raising the frames of barns and houses on their scattered properties and in helping to build a gristmill at a small cataract in one section, and a meeting house in another, helped to assure the early settlement of this rural township, described years later by Orsamus Turner as the most comfortably settled of the early Genesee townships.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Page Smith, *As A City Upon A Hill: The Town in American History* (New York, 1966), provides an able study of the "Covenanted Communities" in early New England, but his major thesis, that they supplied a major pattern for new settlements across the country, does not seem to hold for the Genesee country.



*Village of Bath, 1798*

## **Captain Williamson's Promotion of Villages**

Williamson, of course, had no knowledge of the "covenanted town" model. He hastened to authenticate the Universal Friend's title to her Jerusalem and Apple Town claims when a second survey of the Pre-emption Line brought these properties within the bounds of the Pultney estate, but he did so, not from religious motives or in deference to tradition, but because of the economic benefit these established settlements rendered to his promotions at Williamsburg and Bath. Backed by the substantial resources of the Pultney Associates, Williamson was eager to promote and ready to subsidize pioneer villages designed to stimulate a flood of migrants. He also rendered great benefits to the entire region by pressing the state for assistance in the opening of roads and by inducing the federal authorities to extend postal services into the area.

Unfortunately his first ambitious village, proudly named Williamsburg and planted in 1792 at the junction of the Canaseraga Creek with the Genesee River, a few miles south of Big Tree, soon encountered

*(Photo from Voyage dans l'Interieur des Etats-Unis et au Canada par Le Comte de Colbert Maulevrier as in the Rochester Historical Society Publication Fund Series, Vol. 19)*

grave difficulties. Williamson partially corrected its isolation problem by opening a road from the Lycoming branch of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania north through virgin forests to a squatter's cabin at Painted Post on the Tioga River and from there north to his Canaseraga site. After launching that 100-mile long project and enlisting Pennsylvania's aid on portions of it, Williamson hastily plotted developments at Williamsburg. His original plan called for a store, a tavern and a school facing a central square, and two rows of cabins to line its sides, leaving the fourth side open to the river. Placed in charge of construction, John Johnstone, the able assistant Williamson had brought with him from Scotland, engaged a surveyor to lay out a street pattern for a 30-acre village, hired men from scattered settlements to cut logs for the cabins and other buildings and to raise the frame of a large barn and a frame house on Williamson's nearby Hermitage Farm. He boated a supply of boards and other timber up from Allan's mill, recently acquired by Williamson and in temporary operation again, and had construction fitfully under way by fall when Williamson returned after hasty visits to Geneva, Albany and Painted Post where he had lain prostrate for several days in a settler's cabin recuperating from an attack of Genesee fever.

Unfazed by the unfinished work at his instant village, Williamson hastened south again to greet a contingent of German settlers recruited from among the vagrants of Hamburg by Patrick Colquhoun, one of Pultney's junior associates. The contract secured from the Pultney Associates by their leader, William Berczy, the only one who could speak English, assured them free transport to America and to the Genesee frontier where they were to be supplied with land, houses, animals, tools, meat and flour for the first winter. Nothing had been said in the contract about laboring on a road, but to get the carts loaded with their belongings to their destination they had to join in the work of clearing trees from the partially opened trail north to Painted Post. Snow was falling when they reached that hamlet, and only 39 of the first 50 men felt strong enough to push on to Williamsburg, where they crowded into the two completed cabins. Williamson proposed farming some of them out for their keep among neighboring settlers, but Berczy objected and hastened to the Friend's settlement at Apple Town to fetch a second contingent of Germans who had arrived by way of New York and Albany, thus bringing the total up to 70.



While some of the Germans disgruntledly assisted Johnstone's workmen in completing the first row of cabins, most of them tramped around in the snow to keep warm. Berczy, claiming authorization under his contract, ordered supplies to carry the settlement through the winter, despite Williamson's refusal to accept his mounting bills. Baffled by the situation, Williamson confronted the assembled Germans with an interpreter but failed to win their confidence. The meeting in fact produced a disturbance that may have threatened Williamson's life and prompted a dispatch to the sheriff of Ontario County who eventually arrived with a sufficient number of freshly appointed deputies to conduct the rioters to the jail at Canandaigua, a temporary action which ended with their removal to Canada.<sup>2</sup>

That unfortunate imbroglio in the developments at Williamsburg was the closest approach any Genesee country settlement made to the later practices of some land speculators in the west who enticed settlers to purchase sites in uninhabitable swamps or even nonexistent projects. If there was some of the same frustration at Williamsburg, there was none of the chicanery so graphically depicted by Charles Dickens in his fictional account of Martin Chuzzlewitz's entrapment in Eden, or more recently by Garrison Keillor's amusing portrayal of *Lake Wobegon Days*.<sup>3</sup>

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2. The best account of this dramatic and disturbing episode in Genesee country history was published by Helen I. Cowan in an early issue of *ROCHESTER HISTORY*. Miss Cowan, a scholar residing in Baltimore, had completed her excellent study of Charles Williamson's career in 1940, and its appearance as Vol. XIX of the Rochester Historical Society's *Publications* brought word from a scholar in Ottawa of the discovery in the archives there of William Berczy's *Journal* and relevant letters. The Rochester Historical Society welcomed the opportunity to publish that *Journal*, edited by A. J. H. Richardson, in its XX volume, and Miss Cowan seized the occasion to reassess the events at Williamsburg, balancing the Berczy account against her previous finding in the Williamson papers. Her brilliant article, "Williamsburg: Lost Village on the Genesee," was published as the July 1942 issue of *ROCHESTER HISTORY*, marking the 150th anniversary of Williamson's first excited visit to the site.

3. Charles Williamson, in his "*Letters From a Gentleman to His Friend*," printed at Albany in 1798 for wide distribution in his eager efforts to promote the sale of Pultney lands, described them with excessive optimism but not falsely.

In his first letter, dated 1793, Williamson describes his exploratory visit to the Genesee country in 1792 when he found it an almost uninhabited wilderness. Its rich potentialities had impressed him despite the impassable roads, the bleak and crude facilities available in log cabins in isolated clearings. Yet, like the hardy pioneers who were already venturing in, he accepted these conditions as a challenge. In his second letter, dated 1796, he notes improvements:

Unruffled by the Berczy fiasco, Williamson hastily completed preparations at Hermitage Farm for the expected arrival of his wife and children and pressed forward with plans for a widely advertised fair at Williamsburg. At his direction Johnstone laid out a racetrack, prepared corrals for the exhibit of cattle and sheep, and equipped the inn to accommodate affluent visitors expected from a distance. The fair, duly held late in September 1793, attracted a crowd of astonished settlers and visiting horsemen as well as a gallery of curious Indians. The cattle, hogs and sheep on display found ready buyers, and prizes rewarded the winners of the horse race and other contests. Many in the happy throng feasted on roast ox and madeira, marveling at the generosity of Capt. Williamson and his backers, but the impact on land sales remained uncertain.

Williamson's enthusiasm for Williamsburg was, however, already overshadowed by his plans for Bath. Planted on a flat basin adjoining the Cohocton River a few miles above its junction with the Tioga which feeds into the Susquehanna, with rafting potentialities up and down that lengthy water route, and within easy portage in one direction to the headwaters of Seneca Lake and in another to the Canaseraga and

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*"Much pains having been taken to induce the different settlements to erect mills at an early period of their settlement, and great encouragement having been given to put it in their power to carry them into effect, in no new country were the settlers so well accommodated with mills; the consequence was evident both in the appearance of their houses and farms; a greater number of framed houses and barns were to be found in their settlements than in many that were twenty years old. . . ."*

*In Williamson's third letter we get clear hints as to the type of settlers he is seeking:*

*"The rapid progress of this country in every comfort and convenience has not only caused the emigration of a vast number of substantial farmers, but also of men of liberal education, who can find here a society not inferior to that in the oldest settlements in America. The schools are far from being indifferent, and even the foundations for public libraries are already laid. The Gentleman fond of a rural life or the amusements of the field may here gratify himself: he may find a situation for a county-seat that will please the most luxuriant fancy; the excellence of the climate and soil will afford him every certainty of a great return for his trouble and expense as a farmer, and with little trouble his garden may equal any gentleman's in England. . . ."*

*In his fourth and fifth letters Williamson supplies some practical details for prospective settlers: a good log house with two rooms can be built for \$100; a yoke of oxen will cost \$70, a cow \$15, and essential farming utensils—a plow, harrow, 2 axes, a hoe, 2 chains—\$20. A farmer will harvest 25 to 30 bushels of wheat per acre and sell it at \$1 a bushel; he will get 30 to 60 bushels of corn per acre and sell it at 50 cents a bushel.*

*Williamson optimistically envisioned an industrious agrarian society spreading out over the spectacular hills of Steuben County, highlighted in accord with the prevailing English pattern by the occasional country estates of affluent gentlemen, and served by scattered hamlets and an elegant county seat.*

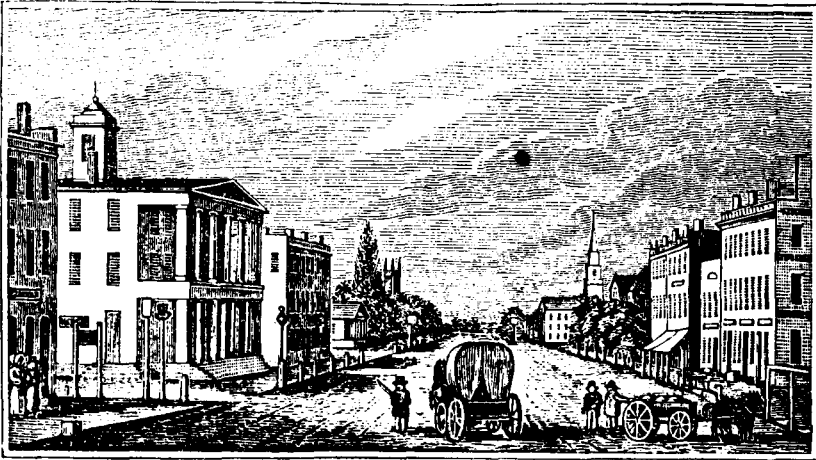
the Genesee valley, the projected village offered an ideal location for the estate's main land office and a fit seat for the proposed new county. At Williamson's direction Johnstone enticed a number of workmen up from Pennsylvania to build a saw mill, a tavern, a store and a number of log cabins for their shelter that winter. Plans for a gristmill, a tannery, a printing house and newspaper office (the first in the area), a school and a theater were soon under way. Ground was cleared for a race course and for a court house and a church facing a spacious Pultney Square. Williamson was determined to make the new settlement a worthy offspring of the famed Bath where Sir William Pultney had made his home.<sup>4</sup>

The settlements at Williamsburg and Bath, though criticized by some as hot-house developments, set a new pattern for village promoters. Only the most well-healed land companies could adopt such a pattern, but Williamson proceeded to apply it again at Sodus Bay and to a degree at Geneva in his newly acquired Gore tract. We need not recapitulate the full record of Williamson's dramatic promotions, so admirably covered in Helen I. Cowan's excellent book, *Charles Williamson: Genesee Promoter*, except to note that, of his four major projects, Geneva was the most successful. There he hastily absorbed the crude beginnings of the Lessees by purchasing most of their claims and superimposing a more elegant village plat inspired by his earlier visit to Geneva in Switzerland. He opened postal service from Albany to Geneva and beyond, built and launched a schooner on the lake, and established the second weekly newspaper in the area; his crowning gesture was the erection in 1794 of the Geneva Hotel, the most sumptuous west of Albany, which provided a worthy gate-house for the entire Genesee country. While the returns to the estate on his expenditures there were gratifying, those on his Sodus Bay project proved disappointing as that port village, despite its good harbor, lost out in competition with Oswego to the east and new developments at the Genesee port on the west, both fed by large river hinterlands.

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4. Williamson's comments on Bath in the third of his *Letters From A Gentleman to His Friend*, dated 1796, are revealing:

"The town of Bath has this season increased considerably, and the roads leading to it from every direction are repairing. The opening [of] a market to Baltimore for our lumber and fat cattle has also raised a spirit among the inhabitants to improve the navigation of the Cohocton. A handsome court-house and a very secure and convenient goal is added to the number of our buildings, and the inhabitants have this season encouraged a clergyman to settle among them; this is the fifth establishment of the kind in the country. Thus from year to year we improve."



*Main Street in Palmyra looking East*

## Country Villages

In contrast with Williamson's vigorous promotion of villages ahead of land settlement, which overtaxed his backers and led to his replacement by the less aggressive Robert Troup as agent of the Pultney Estate in 1807, the less affluent Phelps and Gorham Associates and the lessees hastily sold their townships to groups of settlers eager to stake out and clear farmsteads. In the distribution of land claims, sometimes by lot, among a group of migrants a few lucky pioneers acquired convenient water falls or found themselves at a road crossing and seized the opportunity to build a mill or open a tavern or store. In Farmington, as noted previously, the Quaker pioneers scattered these improvements and maintained a rural township.

The settlement of the township of Phelps followed a different course. John D. Robinson, its pioneer settler, had assisted Oliver Phelps in bringing in a herd of cattle and in building his land office and, in payment, received title to a 100-acre lot on the outlet of Canandaigua Lake in Phelps township. He built a mill and opened a public house and sold sites for a store and an ashery, creating a hamlet named Vienna. Another early pioneer in the township, Jonathan Oaks, erected a large frame tavern at a crossroads several miles to the east, the second west of Gene-

*(Photo from the Historical Collections of the State of New York by John Barber)*

va, which attracted vigorous neighbors who built a store and laid out a race track that brought modest but lasting fame to Oaks Corners. Other early pioneers in the township laid the foundations for rival hamlets at Clifton Springs and Phelps which competed for leadership, but none achieved dominance.

A group of pioneers hailing from Long Island adopted a more concerted pattern in the settlement of Palmyra township. Organized as the Long Island Company, they sent agents to the Genesee to appraise the land and establish a claim. They secured a provisional title with a down payment on 5500 acres in the Palmyra township in 1791 and launched a surge of migrating farmers into the area during the next few years. When John Swift, one of the original party, erected a sawmill on Mud Creek and Seymour Scovell, a recruit from Vermont, built the Eagle Tavern at a nearby crossroads, the nucleus for the village of Palmyra was provided which quickly attracted two stores, an ashery, a schoolhouse, a blacksmith and two doctors, one of whom opened a drug store. Continued growth brought the organization and construction of both a Presbyterian and a Baptist church, the provision of a post office, a town hall, and the establishment of a weekly newspaper. Spafford, in his 1813 *Gazetteer*, would recognize Palmyra as one of the five principal villages in the original Phelps and Gorham area, and it was destined to experience a new boom with the opening of the Erie Canal a decade later.

Enterprising pioneers took the lead in supplying essential services to the scattered settlers in half a dozen other Phelps and Gorham townships. By erecting taverns as in Avon, mills as at Honeoye Falls and in Penfield, they started hamlets that soon boasted a school house, one or more churches, a store or two, the shops of varied craftsmen and eventually a post office—by 1810 the Phelps and Gorham area would have 25 such local offices.

Among the able promoters of township settlement the Wadsworth brothers, James and William, were outstanding. Indeed they introduced a new promotional pattern and steadily expanded the scope of their operations. They had been granted a title to some 3000 acres in the Genesee township by their uncle as an inducement to undertake the management and sale of his other lands acquired in that and neighboring townships as an original Phelps and Gorham investor. On their arrival at Big Tree in June 1790 they built a cabin on the flats and soon attracted several neighbors, but the planting of a village was not their chief interest. William, an experienced farmer, began to clear the land

for agricultural uses; he had brought some cattle with him and proceeded to increase his herd and added a flock of sheep. Rather than selling their lands, they began to expand their holdings. James, a recent graduate of Yale, took off on horseback in search of workmen and tenants for his brother and settlers for his uncle's lands. He pressed his search so effectively in New England and abroad as to impress Sir William Pultney who commissioned him to manage the settlement of his newly acquired Mill Tract lands west of the Genesee. Thus James Wadsworth became the promoter of settlements in Ogden, Parma, Wheatland and Greece and, rivalling Williamson in wide-ranging operations, supplied potash kettles to some, seed and cattle to others, and granted free 100-acre plots for the support of a school or a church. Yet he did not match Williamson in building taverns, as at Painted Post, or in subsidizing the development of villages. Even at Geneseo, the Wadsworths' headquarters, they were content with the construction of their private mansions, which overshadowed the nearby hamlet that boasted only a dozen frame houses, two taverns, a shoe shop and hatter by 1805. Perhaps the most revealing document on early Geneseo was a town record of 1796 listing the names of 101 settlers who had chosen earmarks for their cattle.

The enterprising horseback journeys by Williamson and James Wadsworth throughout the Genesee country were emulated by other land promoters, notably by Tom Morris in his efforts to settle the Morris Reserve and by the successive agents of the Holland Land Company. More surprising was the mobility of the early settlers, many of whom, after a season or two in one township, pulled up stakes in order to lead or participate in still another pioneer venture. Thus Elisha Church, an early pioneer in Phelps in 1797, sold his clearing there in 1805 and led a band of settlers west to present Churchville where Wadsworth granted 100 acres for the support of a church.

Samuel Latta, an early settler at Geneva, moved west to purchase land in Greece and became one of the active leaders in the development of the Genesee port. Richard Stoddard and Ezra Platt, householders in Canandaigua in 1800, sold their properties there a year later and acquired fresh acres in LeRoy where they built the first cabins on the site of that village. As the reminiscences assembled by Orsamus Turner reveal, still more of the sons and daughters of the pioneers moved to new settlements nearby or in some cases west into Ohio or Michigan. Others, however, gravitated to Canandaigua or Geneva, and after 1815

to Rochester, attracted by the opportunities enjoyed in these most thriving villages.

Micha Brooks, as described in the "Reminiscences of James Sperry" and elsewhere by Turner, was a capital example of the enterprising mobility of the early settlers. Hiking westward from Cheshire, Conn. with a pack on his back at the age of 22, Brooks reached Bloomfield in the fall of 1797 and announced himself as a schoolteacher. He helped build the second log school in that township and taught, in addition to the Three Rs, a few lessons in natural history. On one memorable occasion, as recorded by Sperry, he demonstrated the unorthodox theory, that the earth is round and rotates as it revolves around the sun, by spinning his hat (in lieu of a globe) on a slightly inclined stick as he walked slowly around a lamp. The demonstration aroused the indignation of some parents who could plainly see that the earth was flat, and Brooks, baffled by the skepticism, journeyed west to Batavia and Niagara the next summer and joined Joseph Ellicott's surveying team for a season plotting townships in the Holland Purchase. He soon returned to Bloomfield where in 1799 he organized a library company and resumed charge of the school, offering instruction in surveying in addition to the regular subjects.

He purchased a farm nearby, paying the then high price of \$6.00 an acre, erected a small frame house, and made a hasty trip back to Cheshire to fetch his two sisters, who served as housekeepers until they found homes of their own in nearby settlements. Brooks soon married the sister of a Bloomfield neighbor, also from Connecticut, and raised a family of seven children, one of whom would in time become the wife of Henry O'Reilly and another the wife of George Ellwanger, both of Rochester. As the years progressed Brooks served his community as Justice of the Peace, County Judge, and Representative to the Legislature before removing, at 48 in 1823 to a new farm he purchased on Mary Jemison's Gardeau tract on the Genesee flats above Mt. Morris. There he established a new hamlet known as Brooks Grove.

Canandaigua was, of course, prospering as settlements progressed throughout the area. It did not receive or require the promotional efforts exerted by Williamson at Bath and Geneva. Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham, Jr., son of the original partner, were listed among the householders there in the early nineties, but they delegated the management of their land office and other interests to agents, some of whom left to lead settlers into outlying townships. General Israel



From The Collection of  
The Ontario County Historical Society

MAIN STREET, CANANDAIGUA

*(from a painting by Agnes Jeffrey, Collection)*





ALBANY, NEW YORK, Circa 1830

Agnes Jeffrey  
1806 - 1896

on of the Ontario County Historical Society)

Chapin, who arrived with the pioneers in 1789, chaired the first five annual town meetings and conducted negotiations with the Indians he assembled at Canandaigua for their annual payments and repeated conferences. He played a leading role in village affairs, many, of course, centered in the leading tavern operated for many years by Nathaniel and Hanna Sanborn. Indeed, Nathaniel Sanborn set a pattern for the keepers of leading taverns in other townships who provided facilities for and participated in the early town meetings. They were not only glad to accommodate farmers and other settlers gathering from outlying parts of the town, but they were as interested as the farmers in the opening of roads, the maintenance of fences, and other matters that commanded town meeting attention. The erection of a town hall could be deferred for several years as the taverns sufficed; it proved unnecessary in Canandaigua where county buildings soon provided adequate accommodations.

The selection of Canandaigua as the seat of the newly formed Ontario County in 1790 assured its priority. Lawyers such as Judge Nathaniel Howell and Vincent Mathews took up residence there, and several doctors hung out their shingles. The editor of the Geneva weekly was persuaded to relocate in Canandaigua where he was soon replaced by James D. Bemis, whose long service as editor and publisher of *The Western Repository*, training a succession of apprentices who drifted off to establish other village weeklies, won him the title of "Father of the press of western New York."

Canandaigua's 18 householders in 1790 increased sevenfold during the next two decades. John Melish, a visitor from Britain who arrived by stage from Niagara Falls in 1811, provided a firsthand description:

*"On entering Canandaigua, I was really surprised at the beauty of the place. . . . Canandaigua was laid out from 20 to 21 years ago. The main street is 130 feet wide, and extends north and south a mile and a half, and there is a center square and several cross streets, but the principal buildings are on the main street. The village lots are 22 rods in front by 66 deep, having outlets of 30 acres annexed to them; and this ground, which was bought 20 years ago for from one to two dollars an acre, is now, by the improvements and progress of settlement, worth from 500 to 1000 dollars per acre for the village lots, and from 80 to 100 for the outlots. . . .*

*"Canandaigua consists of about 120 houses, containing about 600 inhabitants. There is a handsome brick court-house in the cen-*

ter square, a jail, and on the most elevated ground in the village an elegant academy, exhibiting at a distance a beautiful appearance. There is no church, but an elegant one, for which funds are provided, is about to be built. . . . The houses are handsome; they are mostly of wood, painted white; but a good many have of late been built of brick.

"As Canandaigua is in the center of a remarkably well settled country, it has a very considerable retail trade, and supports six stores. . . and there are six taverns. A great deal of land business is transacted here. . . . There is really a fine society at Canandaigua. Of the learned professors they have an ample supply—indeed I should be inclined to think that six doctors and six lawyers were too many; but it is to be recollected that in an agricultural village they. . . can have their principal supply from their farms. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Two years later Spafford described Canandaigua in his *Gazetteer* as the largest village, next to Utica, west of Albany. He credited it with 1000 inhabitants, three churches, and a thriving trade as the chief provisioning center serving the stream of settlers into the west. With a steady income from fees and services, Canandaigua did not yet feel the pinch that was gripping settlers in neighboring towns struggling to make payments on their lands. The Pultney Associates, the Holland Land Company, and the backers of Thomas Morris were becoming increasingly aware of the paucity of their returns.

The Genesee country was suffering from an unfavorable balance of trade—a term not yet in use for a situation that was becoming hazardous. Williamson had hoped to solve the problem by promoting trade down the Susquehanna valley from Bath, but that broad but shallow river proved unsuitable for safe shipments even by rafts except during the week or two of spring floods. His alternate plan for lake trade through Sodus Bay failed to develop an inland feeder and quickly fell into decay. His replacement by Robert Troup signaled the close of an era of aggressive promotional investments.

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5. John Melish, *Travels in the United States of America in the Years 1806 and 1807 and 1809, 1810 and 1811* (Philadelphia, 1812), pp. 519–520; quoted in *Rochester Historical Society Publications*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 15–16. Several other travel journals reproduced in this volume describe early visits to other Genesee country villages as well as Rochester.



*Buffalo Street in Rochester*

## The Search for a Commercial Outlet

Improvements on the main roads from the east by newly chartered turnpike companies in the early 1800s facilitated the use of carriages and the introduction of a stage route west from Albany to Canandaigua, but the transport of heavy loads of produce eastward by ox carts was still more costly than most cargoes would produce in Albany's well-stocked market. Only barrels of high-grade potash or pearlash would show a profit even in good sleighing weather. The practice of both Williamson and Wadsworth in supplying potash kettles as an inducement in some of their settlements reveals their awareness of the problem, as did the appearance of asheries at many burgeoning hamlets. The construction of distilleries was another familiar frontier method of converting surplus grain into a more easily marketed product, and the third federal census reported the existence of 76 of them scattered throughout the region, but in this case local consumption reduced the transport problem. The same census of household manufactures reported the operation of 1,903 looms and the production of 524,530 yards of cloth, which would hardly have kept the 72,977 inhabitants properly attired. Yet the productivity of area farms was mounting, prompting a renewed search for an export route.

*(Photo from the Historical Collections of the State of New York by John Barber)*

The first independent effort to solve this problem was made by John Tryon who acquired a 200-acre lot near the head of Irondequoit Bay, including the site of an old Indian landing of Irondequoit Creek, and opened a store there in 1799. He soon attracted neighbors who built a crude tavern, an ashery and a blacksmith shop. His early trade was mostly by barter, but Tryon Town, as it was called, was only a short portage from the Genesee where the rapids above Allan's old millsite halted rafts and barges coming down the river. As settlement up the valley increased, the number of such rafts increased, and Tryon Town flourished as an outlet for potash, staves, whiskey, salted pork, and flour from the nearby Penfield mills. Unfortunately a sandbar at the mouth of the bay discouraged schooners from venturing into the port, and Tryon had to barge his shipments through the bay and westward to the Genesee River where another pioneer hamlet, known as Charlotte, offered a safe harbor for lake schooners.

Williamson, who had sold Allan's old 100-acre mill lot to three prospecting Marylanders in 1803 (partially because of its relative inaccessibility due to the rapids above and the succession of falls below, but chiefly because the surrounding lands were not a part of the Pultney estate), had since acquired an interest, together with Wadsworth, in the northern portion of present Greece and engaged Samuel Latta as agent for its development. Latta, appointed customs agent in 1805, reported shipments from the port valued at nearly \$30,000 the next year; as the effect of the federally imposed Embargo diverted trade from the Susquehanna route to the Genesee, exports from the Charlotte port jumped to \$100,000 by 1808.

The three Marylanders who had bought the 100-acre tract in 1803 had also made deposits on large tracts up the valley at the sites of Williamsburg and Dansville, but like many other speculative investors they had returned to their homes to await a time when further settlements would make a removal there more agreeable. When, however, the Jeffersonian Embargo on trade with embattled France and England brought stagnation to Hagerstown, Maryland, where Rochester was a leading citizen, he determined to move his large family to the Genesee for a new start in 1810. He chose the established hamlet of Dansville for his settlement and soon became its most vigorous resident. There he purchased its small grist mill and store and erected the first paper mill in the area. He considered selling his interest in the 100-acre tract, but on riding down the valley on horseback he became impressed by the number of rafts and barges tied up for unloading above the rapids;



*By 1840 Batavia was connected to Rochester by the railroad tracks in the foreground. The white building in the center is the original county courthouse built in 1800. (from History of Genesee County by Lockwood Doty)*

he soon returned with surveying instruments and laid out the 100-acre tract in streets and quarter-acre lots, with mill sites designated along the course of the natural race formerly used by Allan. He was projecting a more substantial village than any yet developed in the area, and he engaged Enos Stone, his only near neighbor who had built a log cabin on the east bank the year before, as his agent.

We need not recapitulate the full story of Rochesterville's development, which I have recounted in many connections. It is important to note, however, that Rochester benefited by lessons learned in other Genesee villages. The prices set for Rochester's quarter-acre lots, \$100 along the two principal streets, \$50 on back streets and \$200 for the choice lot at the four corners, where the Powers Block now stands, seem fantastically low today, but except for Canandaigua in the 1810s they were high at the time and very high in comparison with starting prices in all Genesee country villages a few years earlier. Yet he asked only a \$5 down payment and offered generous credit on the balance adding, however, an important proviso that the contract would be voided unless the buyer built a house or shop on the lot within a year.

Rochester wanted only residents ready to put their shoulders to the wheel. Moreover, Rochester was ready to cooperate with nearby developers of town sites. He modified his street plan somewhat to fit in

with the streets plotted by the Brown brothers for their adjoining 200-acre development at the main falls, and he joined the Browns in pressing improvements in the road north to the Hanfords Landing, thus assuring access to lake shipping. He joined with Elisha Johnson, who had acquired Stone's property on the east bank, in building a dam across the river to serve an east-side as well as a west-side raceway, thus further increasing the local competition for millers.

Clearly Rochester was not projecting a country village to serve nearby farmers, nor a promotional village such as Williamson's Bath designed to stimulate settlement. He was planning a commercial town which would process the grain and forest products of the fertile valley above it and prepare them for shipment through the Hanfords Landing or Charlotte ports. Though the early development of Rochesterville was checked by the outbreak of the War of 1812, its growth resumed at a rapid rate in 1815 as the construction of lumber and flour mills and the resumption of trade with Canada finally opened a burgeoning market for the increasing produce of the Genesee country. Jealous of its rapid growth, leaders in Canandaigua and Batavia, the two controlling county seats, blocked the application Col. Rochester carried to Albany for a new county in 1817, but with 700 residents already domiciled on the west bank they could not deny his plea for a village charter similar to those already granted to Geneva and Canandaigua.

A curious recognition of the basic reasons for Rochesterville growth appeared that year in Canandaigua as several of its leaders, headed by Elisha B. Strong and Elisha Johnson banded together to back the establishment of a rival settlement on the east bank at the lower falls. They plotted a road from Canandaigua and an inclined lift to carry goods up and down the cliff to the docks below, and they actually built a single-arch bridge across the gorge, the longest in the world in its day, to connect with the Ridge road to the west, hoping thus to bypass Rochester. With the collapse of that bridge, built of logs, 15 months later, the prospects of Carthage, as it was named, faded, and most of its leaders as well as others from Canandaigua, including Vincent Matthews and other professional men, gravitated to the falls to participate in Rochester's development.

Of course the big boost came with the opening of the Erie Canal in the mid-twenties. It not only provided a fabulous new outlet for Rochester's flour and lumber mills, which now multiplied, but gave it a secure place on the main water-level route into the west. It both cut shipping costs by an estimated 90%, thus greatly increasing the vari-

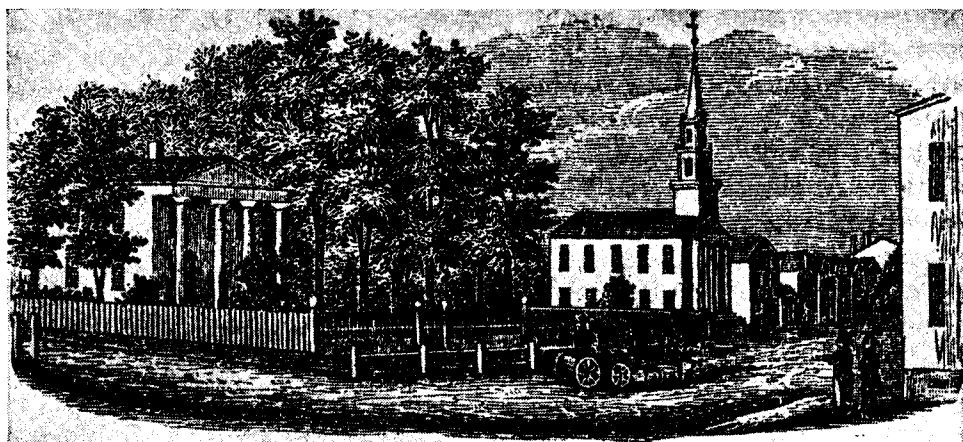
ety and volume of marketable products, and assured Rochester a continuing influx of newcomers who transformed it into one of the nation's leading cities, ranking 18th in size in 1840. The canal's booming impact was shared modestly by Palmyra, Lyons and others to the east, and to the west by Brockport and Lockport, and most abundantly, of course, by Buffalo with its port on the upper Great Lakes. Moreover, most of the earlier country hamlets, with their marketing problems now, at least, partially solved, grew into thriving villages, and a dozen scattered throughout the Genesee country would acquire village charters by the time Rochester secured its city charter in 1834. They were supplying the community services useful in farming districts, including by the thirties, town halls, banks and weekly newspapers, and they were benefiting from, as well as contributing to, Rochester's development as the commercial and industrial center of the Genesee country now divided into seven counties with a population of 250,000 in 1835.<sup>6</sup>

But if Rochester's emergence as America's first boom town, growing within two decades into the thriving Flour City, was chiefly due to its vigorous exploitation of the abundant water power of the Genesee falls and the timely arrival of the Erie Canal, there were other contributing causes. Early settlers at the falls, bypassed by the first state-charted stage lines that rumbled west through Canandaigua, Avon and Batavia to Buffalo, petitioned for a second line through Rochester and along the Ridge Road to Niagara. Enterprising local leaders were soon organizing additional stage companies, and by the mid-thirties Rochester was the busy hub of six stage lines fanning east, west and south, which, with the packets on the canal, provided daily mail and passenger service to ten of the region's incorporated villages and to many lesser hamlets as well.

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6. *The Genesee country has never had any precise and firm boundaries. If we accept the Preemption Line as the eastern border, we must lop off the eastern townships of present Wayne County. As to the western border, while Genesee County is generally considered an integral part of the Genesee country, its original expanse, extending to the shores of Lake Erie, encompassed vast areas that never developed close ties to the Genesee valley; we have therefore included in our tabulations only the townships in present-day Genesee County. And to the south, while most of Steuben County drains into the Susquehanna, its historic association, under Williamson's leadership, with lands to the north has won its inclusion in the Genesee country. Allegany County, on the other hand, though crossed by the upper Genesee River and for a time by the Genesee Valley Canal, has been more closely linked with territories to the west, and we have not included it in our tabulations. We have conceived the Genesee country as comprised of the present counties of Ontario, Steuben, Yates, Livingston, Genesee and Monroe, and the western half of Wayne County.*





*Dansville about 1840*

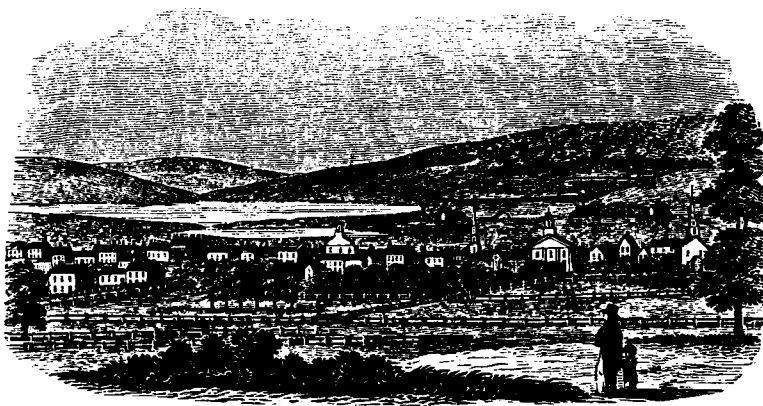
Although Rochester's boom days ended in the recession of 1829, its stable growth as the commercial and fabricating center for the Genesee country would continue for another two decades. Indeed its population would treble, reaching 43,800 by 1855, when that of the seven counties would peak at 338,000, served now by 15 incorporated villages whose inhabitants numbered 37,600.<sup>7</sup> And while the four locally promoted steam railroads that made their appearance in the late thirties and forties, providing little more than passenger service, threatened only the markets of the stage lines rather than the canal, consolidations and improvements in the fifties already gave warnings of commercial and industrial transformations that would link Rochester's future with that of more distant cities in America's emerging urban economy.

7. A listing of the Genesee country villages in the order of their incorporation, noting their rank and population, as recorded in French's *Gazetteer* of 1860, is instructive:

Village	Rank	Population	Village	Rank	Population
Geneva, 1812	(1)	5,076	Geneseo, 1832	(12)	2,000
Canandaigua, 1815	(2)	4,154	Penn Yan, 1833	(8)	2,277
Bath, 1816	(11)	2,012	Honeoye Falls, 1833	(14)	1,100
Palmyra, 1819	(7)	2,310	LeRoy, 1834	(10)	2,181
Batavia, 1823	(6)	2,868	Dansville, 1845	(5)	2,897
Pittsford, 1827	(15)	702	Corning, 1848	(3)	3,626
Brockport, 1829	(9)	2,245	Phelps, 1855	(13)	1,278
Lyons, 1831	(4)	3,036			

*continued*

(Photo from *The Development of Central and Western New York* by Clayton Mau)



*Penn Yan looking Northeast*

Yet if Rochester was destined to outgrow its reliance on the productivity of the Genesee country, it would long retain characteristics derived from or influenced by the villages that nurtured its early development. Williamson's plans for Bath and Geneva anticipated some features of early Rochesterville as laid out by Col. Rochester, Matthew Brown and Elisha Johnson, but they provided not only three rival sites for a court house, but also three rival millraces to fuel their more ambitious designs. Indeed Rochester's early development was more in keeping with that of the cumulative country villages of the Phelps and Gorham townships where vigorous individuals independently built taverns, stores, mills and craft shops and combined to erect churches and academies, only in Rochester's case these efforts were multiplied several fold.

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*continued*

*A close look at this table will reveal the surge of confidence that prompted Pittsford, Lyons and Brockport to apply for charters shortly after the arrival of the canal. In like fashion Dansville and Corning were responding to the approach of the Erie Railroad. Only Pittsford, overshadowed by Rochester, faltered in its growth.*

*The total population of the area did not, of course, level off in the mid-fifties, but most of its subsequent growth occurred in the city and in the villages served by the canal or the new railroads. Most of the farmers continued to prosper, some by diversifying their crops, and the great majority replaced their original cabins with substantial frame or masonry houses, yet 5,000 log houses were still in use in 1855, 1,923 of them in Steuben County.*



*Lyons from the east*



*Canandaigua from the Southwest*

*(Photos from the Historical Collections of the State of New York by John Barber)*

Not content with one village weekly, Rochester nurtured several, two of which quickly launched daily editions, the first west of the Hudson. Like Penn Yan, which proclaimed its dual settlement by Pennsylvanians and Yankees in its name, Rochester drew its inhabitants from these sources and more generously and increasingly than any of the towns from abroad. And like the most thriving villages, Rochester harbored churches of diverse creeds, and if their relations were not always harmonious the multiplicity of their disagreements generally muted hostilities. Competition would reign there as in the commercial and industrial spheres where enterprising merchants and craftsmen vied in supplying the growing city's needs.

By providing ample scope for diversified leadership, Rochester drew enterprising men from neighboring villages—Strong and Johnson among others from Canandaigua, Dr. Levi Ward from Bergen, the Browns from Utica, to mention only a few of its early leaders. But if the city profited from the mobility of the Genesee settlements, it experienced an even more dramatic mobility among its early inhabitants as 70% of those listed in its first village *Directory* in 1827 failed to appear in the 1834 *Directory* despite an increase in the number of names listed from 2,300 to 3,213. Rochester was functioning as an important stop-over port of the westward movement that animated America in these years, and as it was prospering from the widely shared enterprise of the young nation, its ties with the Genesee villages would for a time become secondary, and like the river itself would be partially hidden from view. With its growth to metropolitan proportions in recent decades, Rochester has not only rediscovered the river, reopening vistas for its appreciation, it has also forged new links with the villages in its sprawling metropolitan area.

*Blake McKelvey is a former city historian of Rochester.*

*Copy edited by Hans Munsch.*

## A Scrapbook from Genesee Country Village

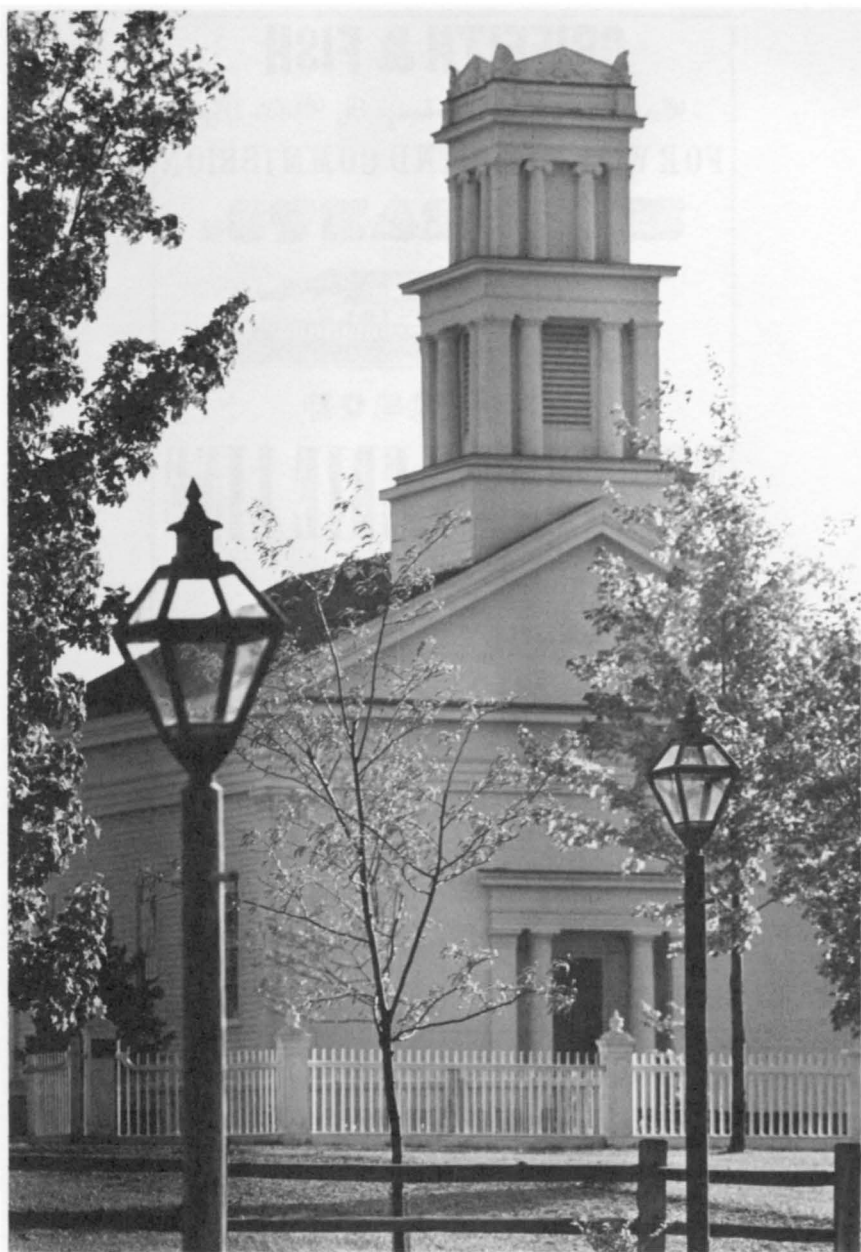
*The Genesee Country Village in Mumford has taken its place among the several institutions that are winning recognition for Rochester as a museum center. We are pleased to include the following three pages of photographs of its authentically restored structures assembled from scattered sites, as illustrations in this issue of **Rochester History**.*



*Pioneer families lived in cabins like these in this early homestead.*



*Sylvester Hosmer built this two story frame inn in 1818 near Avon. The inn has a kitchen, a taproom, a public dining room, a ladies dining room, and a ladies private sitting room on the first floor. The second floor has an owner's apartment, four sleeping rooms and a combination meeting and ball room.*



*The Brooks Grove Church was built about 1844 on land bought from Mary Jemison by Micah and Elizabeth Brooks.*

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*Rochester was functioning as an important stop-over port of the westward movement that animated America. (1841 Rochester City Directory).*