

Steuben County: The First 200 Years, a Pictorial History

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Located almost in the center of Steuben County, bordered by Bath, Savona, Campbell, Cameron, Rathbone and Addison, the Town of Thurston was formed on February 28, 1844, when 22,000 acres were split off from the eastern section of Cameron. Rolling hills with small farms and houses blanket its countryside. A deep valley runs through the town. A creek makes its way from Risingville flowing through the Thurston Pond with its white lily pads and continues down the Campbell. There it empties into the Conhocton River, part of the Susquehanna River Basin. Thurston has many winding country roads that lead to the hills overlooking a spectacular valley view below.

Thurston was named for William Thurston, a principal landowner in the area. The first town supervisor was Joseph Cross. In what was previously Indian country, Luke Bonny or Bonney, as some historians indicated, and William Smith established the first settlement on Bonny Hill adjacent to the Town of Bath in 1813. Luke Bonny cut the road from Bath south to the present Risingville. In 1822, Stephen Aldrich and his four sons from Rhode Island settled in the southern part of Thurston near Friends Pond, later called Cranberry Lake because of the abundant cranberry bogs available to the settlers.

James and William Jack also moved from Maryland to the Friends Pond location in 1822.

Edwin Merchant, from Herkimer County purchased land, which became known as Merchantville, from the Pulteney Estate. He opened a blacksmith and wagon shop in 1841. Merchantville became a business center between Campbell and Risingville. It grew to twenty-six houses, two churches, four stores, a schoolhouse, a saw and shingle mill two blacksmith shops and a wagon and paint shop. The schoolhouse, built in 1832, was utilized until the late 1930's when the district became part of the Campbell Central School. In 1966, the school building was deeded to the Christian Church which now uses it for Sunday School activities.

The Christian Church in Merchantville, built for a cost of \$600 on land donated by Edwin Merchant, was dedicated on June 27, 1852, and is still utilized for weekly services. Oliver P. Alderman was the first pastor in the new church. A Methodist Episcopal Church erected in 1861 was closed in the early 1900's. In 1919, the Merchantville Grange #346 moved from the hall over the general store to the vacant church building where it continues to hold monthly meetings. The Grange was organized in 1875 with Thomas S. Aldrich as its first master.

In the late 1800's, the name Merchantville, was changed to Thurston, thus creating a small Village of Thurston within the larger Town of Thurston.

About three miles from Merchantville is the other major hamlet, Risingville, which was named for Nobel Rising, an early settler and first postmaster. In 1852, Joseph Thrubell and Charles Osborne bought over 2,000 acres of heavy pine timber in the area.

They built a large up-to-date sawmill. It was powered by two forty-horsepower engines and thirty saws constituting a “gang”. Lumber was hauled to Campbell for shipment on the railway. Based on the thriving lumber business, Risingville evolved with nineteen houses, a store, school and church, a large boarding house, and Masonic Lodge. As the lumbering ceased, within the next several decades the land was gradually sold off into small farms.

The Methodist Episcopal Church in Risingville was erected in 1864. In the 1960's except for a few homes, the church was the sole survivor in what had been the booming Village of Risingville of the late 1880's. Church attendance had declined and expenses had risen so there was a possibility of closure by the Genesee Conference district superintendent. Through the efforts of Pastor Clifford Whitehead and determined parishioners, the church has since thrived both physically and financially. In 1979, the church sponsored RISE (Risingville Intercommunity Service Effort), a work program started by Chatham United Methodist Church in New Jersey. Workers donate their time each summer to repair and paint homes of the needy in Stueben County.

Many Thurston residents served in the various wars from the U.S. Civil War to the Persian Gulf Conflict. There were ninety eight residents in the Civil War, almost ten percent of the population. Leonard Platt was killed at Gettysburg, Alonzo Johnson died at Antietam, John Jack and John Carter, both died at Andersonville prison camp. After the Civil War veterans returned, the Logie Post #469 of the Department of New York Grand Army of the Republic was established. Monthly meetings were held in the hall on the second floor of the store where the Merchantville Grange also met. The post was named for William Logie , a Corning lawyer, who rose to the rank of colonel and was

killed during the war as head of the 141st Regiment. Several Thurston soldiers served in his regiment.

Through the years, numerous cheese factories were located in the town to process the milk of the thriving dairy business. Fred Kohler sold his cheese factory to Albert and Louis G. Pollio of Brooklyn, NY in 1926; thus, the beginning of Pollio Dairy Products, a major cheese producer. The factory existed in Thurston until the 1950's when all operations were moved to the plant in Campbell which had been built in 1936.

Thurston Pond was the scene of ice cutting in the 1930's and 1940's. Charles Phillips ran the business which cut ice for the farmer's ice houses and Pollio's large ice house. The ice was cut by hand saws at first and later by an engine-driven saw. Horses pulled the heavy cakes up the platform onto the trucks prior to the utilization of a mechanical conveyor. The ice had to be cut quickly near the end of the season when it was the thickest. One winter they worked three days and two nights to accomplish this demanding task. Ice cutting, a very important business in the country, rapidly disappeared after the advent of the refrigerator.

Thurston boasts of two individuals, Thomas Congdon and Ada Irene Vose Congdon, who had major artistic reputations in both the United States and Europe. Ada Irene Vose was born in Thurston in 1854 and was educated in the schoolhouse still standing adjacent to the Christian Church. She lived there until her marriage to Thomas Congdon of Addison in 1884. Ada Irene's grandmother, Sabra Wilkinson Vose, was a relative of Jemima Wilkinson, the prophetess and "Universal Friend" who founded the Yates Country Town of Jerusalem. Thomas and Ada Irene studied and painted extensively in France and Spain. Ada Irene later wrote her name as Adairene. Their

major studio was in New York City but during World War I, they lived in Thurston in a house the affectionately called “Villa Vose” to which they added a large studio. Ada Irene painted in the impressionistic style while Thomas was primarily a portrait painter. Their paintings are included in the permanent collections of the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, the Library of Congress, and the New York Library.

Dorothy Lewis Dickson, life-long resident of Thurston and wife of Leo Dickson, founder of the Leo Dickson and Son’s farm on Bonny Hill, has written numerous poems for various occasions. Three of these, “ Is This Heaven?”, “Disconsolate” and “Conscience” were selected for inclusion in The Best Poems of 1994, 1995, 1996 published in the yearly Outstanding Poets.

Strategically located in the watershed between the Canisteo and Conhocton Rivers, Thurston was selected by the National Weather Service as a site for recording rainfall. Marguerite Wilson acted as an official rainfall recorder from her farm near Risingville for more than fifty years. Presently, Thurston has several people who report the rainfall totals to the National Weather Service.

The Thurston Volunteer Fire Department was incorporated in 1954 and utilized the former Pollio cheese factory building in Thurston as an early site. The first fire truck the department employed was a 1928 chain-drive American La France. In 1922, the residents voted to form a fire district with a board of commissioners to oversee the fire department.

In its early days, Thurston was an important lumbering area, especially in Risingville. Then, overtime time, small farms emerged. Now, except for several large farms, it is

primarily a “bedroom” community for residents working in nearby towns, including Corning, Painted Post, and Bath.

The population had decreased in the early 1900’s to around 600, but has had a steady increase each census year since 1930. By 1990, there were 1,054 people living in the Town of Thurston. This number was comparable to the population during the latter part of the 1800’s when lumbering was prospering.

Thurston has also become a center for different recreational opportunities. Goodhue Lake, located partly in the Town of Thurston, was an early site for settlement called “New Michigan.” During the first half of the 1900’s, Goodhue Lake was a favorite resort with cottages, a dance hall and eating establishment. The Thomas Homestead has been the site for folk music and bluegrass gatherings for almost fifteen years. These festivals are organized by Dorothy Thomas on land originally settled in 1837 and later owned by her parents. Nearby, Cardinal Campsite developed by Russell Stevens and Arthur Risley, is a popular summer camping area. In the 1980’s, Tanglewood Lake was developed when Malcom Lane purchased 304 acres from Art Flick and subdivided it into 60 recreational plots.

Thurston celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding on September 10, 1994, with a community picnic, parade and craft demonstrations. Line dancing and walking tours of historic sites were also part of the Thurston –centered day.