

A Good Country, A Pleasant Habitation

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The Abraham Dox Home, 1825

C-358-2

/A GOOD COUNTRY, A PLEASANT HABITATION/

An Outline History
of
YATES COUNTY

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Dedicated to the memory
of

Stafford C. Cleveland

who knew how to ask good questions

INTRODUCTION

On a hopeful September morning 202 years ago the Universal Friend took up her pen. Her followers had found a "good country..., a pleasant habitation," and she agreed to join them. People have been coming from elsewhere to live in Yates County ever since.

This is an outline history of the county, a sketch that needs filling in. But it does, I hope, provide a proper framework for such future endeavors.

I once heard historical research described as the act of holding a damned dim candle over a damned dark abyss. The work that went into uncovering even such facts as are presented here lends credence to this definition.

The extensive help rendered by numerous individuals is credited in the Sources; this work quite simply could not have been completed without the assistance of many people. The project was funded in part by a Historic Preservation Fund subgrant authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act and administered by the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, through the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic preservation. The maps and the cover were drawn by Patricia Rios. Jennifer Rios helped with the graphs and the county maps. Martha Gibbs took the photographs.

Stephen Vincent Benet in the Foreword to *John Brown's Body* said, "What I was trying to do was to show certain realities, legends, ideas, landscapes, ways of living, faces of men that were ours, that did not belong to any other country." Benet was writing poetry, and I have tried to show women's faces as well as men's; but otherwise our goals were similar.

No one can poke through the remains of 200 years of human energy without realizing that every life that's spent leaves its mark on a place. Most who went before us were hardworking and never looked beyond the next day, the next meal, the next harvest. Some were failures, some criminals, some found their names in print, some stood for a moment upon a larger stage. Most are now forgotten.

They left us something though, they left us their homes and their land; there's no way to thank them now, but they made this special place.

Frances Dumas
June 1990

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HOW TO USE THIS OUTLINE

Think of this as a Field Guide to the History of Yates County.

The emphasis is on what remains, the things we can still see. Even Theodore Roosevelt (who perhaps of all men most lived in the present) noted that a nation that neglects its history is like a person without a memory.

It will become evident to the reader that various themes are revisited in each section of the narrative. The formation of modern Yates County did not happen in outer space, but here on earth and subject to molding by various powerful pressures.

Among these are geography and terrain; development of agriculture; development of industrial capacity; changes in transportation; influences exerted by population changes (ethnic and other immigrants, presence of free blacks, presence of women in the workplace and so on); and political influences (war, reform movements, party politics and the like).

These themes are intertwined in complex ways that can't completely be analyzed in such a brief study: particularly agriculture, industry, terrain and transportation; also politics and population. Whole books could be written for example on the effect of various immigrant groups on agricultural practices; or how women's activities in the reform movements changed both local politics and the local industrial picture; perhaps someday they will be.

Meanwhile the text and commentary reflect these themes in various ways. Look for broad exegesis of themes in the text segments and for more specific details - particularly on effects and remaining evidence - in town modules and map commentaries.

The maps illustrating the Early Settlement period (1788-1810) show as closely as possible where people actually settled when they moved to the County. Some half to three-quarters of all settlers' locations were found and are marked on the maps. Village and hamlet maps for the Consolidation period (1810-1855) also show individual structures. It's important to realize again that there were undoubtedly more buildings and residents during the earlier years than could specifically be located in a limited time.

Similarly, the only roads shown are ones for which surveys still exist. A good guess as to where other roads lay can certainly be made by noting where people lived. The reader should not assume that a road was not laid down yet just because it isn't shown on the map; many roads existed unofficially long before the town surveyed them.

Only information that is known can be displayed. The compiler welcomes documented proof of settlement by persons or in places not shown here; outlines exist to be filled in.

A WORD ABOUT GEOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES

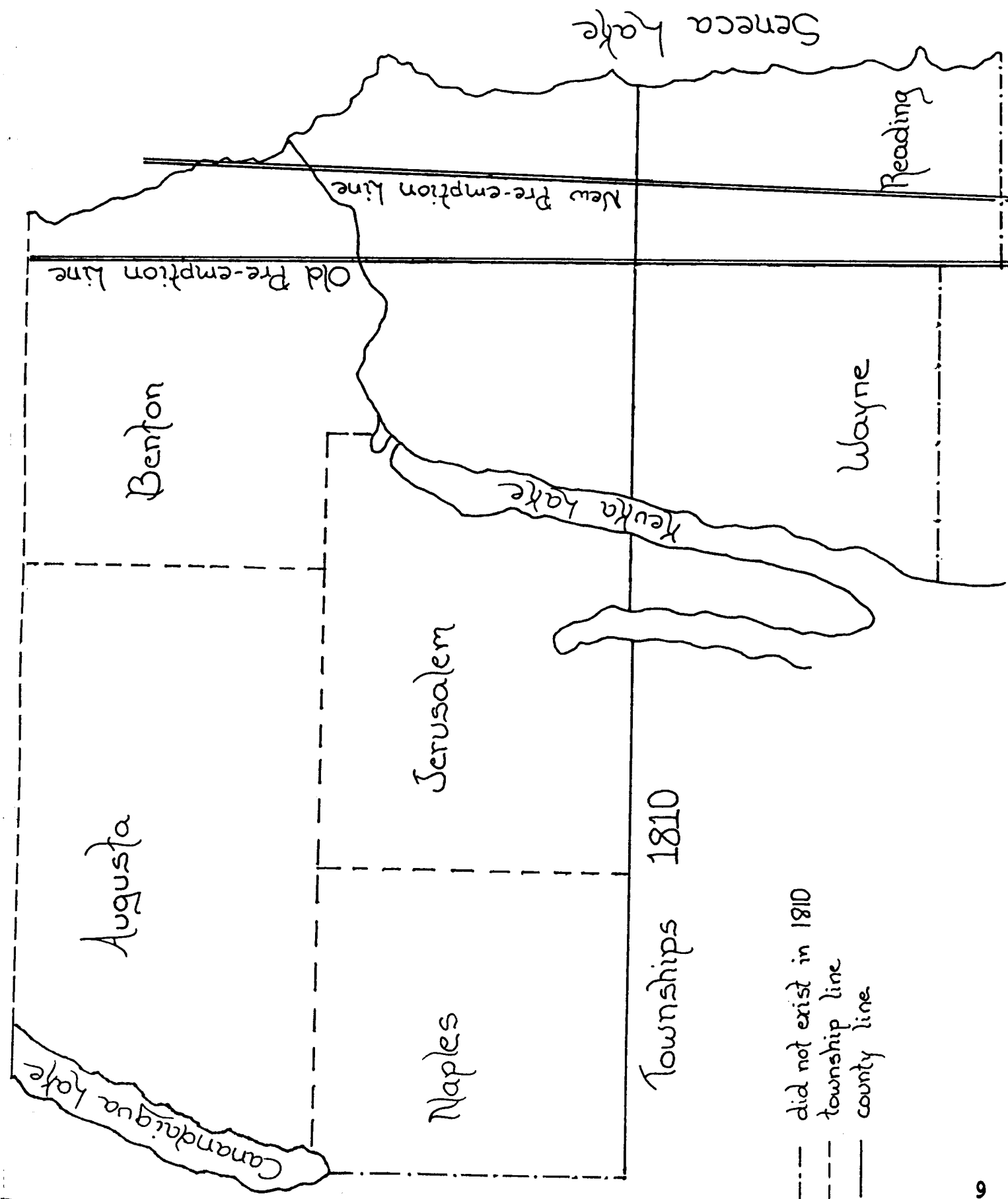
The maps and text refer to events and structures within *modern* town, village and county boundaries. In many cases, obviously, the modern municipality did not officially exist as of the date the map represents. It was felt that a history of, say, the town of Milo would mean more under that heading than to attempt to lead the reader through the maze of previous names and boundary changes. For those interested in such things:

In 1790, all of New York State west of the Pre-emption Line was Ontario County. This enormous area included (among others) three districts, parts of which were later made into Yates County: Canandaigua, Jerusalem and Erwin.

A portion of Canandaigua district was set off as Middletown in 1798 and renamed Naples in 1808; part of this town was split off as Italy in 1815. Another section of Canandaigua district was organized as Augusta in 1797 and renamed Middlesex in 1808. In 1832 this town was further subdivided and Potter formed from it, leaving the older name attached only to its western segment.

Jerusalem district was split into the towns of Jerusalem and Vernon in 1803. The latter name, however, was already taken; in 1808 the town was renamed Snell and when this too proved unsatisfactory it was renamed again in 1810 as Benton. In 1814 Bluff Point (then part of Steuben County but inaccessible from the rest of it except by water) was attached to Jerusalem (still part of Ontario County). In 1818 Benton was subdivided and Milo organized from part of it. Five years later, in 1823, Yates County was formed from the five towns of Italy, Benton, Milo, Jerusalem and Middlesex (which still included modern Potter). Torrey was formed nearly 30 years later, in 1851, from parts of Milo and Benton.

Erwin district - which included in 1790 the entire Southern Tier - was part of Steuben County when the latter was formed from Ontario in 1796. Frederick's Town was formed in 1796 from part of the district, renamed Wayne in 1808 and split to form Barrington in 1824. Reading was added to Steuben County from land east of the Pre-emption Line (hence part of the old Military Tract). The town was organized in 1806 and divided in 1824 to form Starkey. Both Barrington and Starkey were added to Yates County in 1826.



- did not exist in 1810
- township line
- county line

BEGINNINGS

In 1787 a committee of three men visited the Genesee Tract to find a suitable place to found a new settlement. They had a nearly empty wilderness to choose from.

Not that no one thought the country worth settling in; for several thousand years people made use of the area's rich resources of wildlife, abundant water, timber and fertile soil. The latest of these people, members of the powerful Seneca Nation, built one of their villages - surrounded by cornfields and hundreds of apple trees - a short distance from the mouth of Kashong Creek, one of the many small watercourses that tumbled over limestone ledges into Seneca Lake.

This village, like all the other permanent Seneca towns, was destroyed in 1779 during the white colonists' war for independence; when the committee saw it in 1787 the place was inhabited by two French-Canadian traders and their Cayuga wives.

Elsewhere a few other white people lived at the sufferance of the Senecas. Near the foot of the Crooked Lake was a man whose name has since been forgotten, who secured and repaired firearms for the Indians; he is supposed to have been of Spanish or French extraction. Another man named Hollenbeck lived nearby, as well as the fugitive Jacob Fredenburgh, a survivor of the abortive Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts.

Fredenburgh, who left for a time when the country began to fill up and then returned to live near Kinney's Corners, said he came to the site of Penn Yan with his wife "and an urchin or two" in 1787 and lived near where Alfred Brown later built his house (destroyed when Rte. 14A was built south across South Avenue). Hollenbeck lived near where Uriah Hanford's house was later built and the gunsmith's dwelling was in the grove of pine trees near the channel. Fredenburgh - known in his old age as "Uncle Jake" - said no other white people lived anywhere around. Their activities were restricted by the Senecas, who still frequented the area. Uncle Jake was permitted to angle only in the creek that later bore his name - Jacob's Brook; but allowed that the speckled trout were so numerous there he never wanted for more.

The committee who stopped in at Kashong in the summer of 1787 had already come a long way. Their names were Thomas Hathaway, Richard Smith and Abraham Dayton. All three were New Englanders, followers of Jemima Wilkinson, the Public Universal Friend. She was the first American-born woman to found a religious group, a former Rhode Island Quaker who had decided to seek refuge in the wilderness for her people, away from worldly temptation. For more than a year now her attention had been drawn to the new country opening up in the west, and her emissaries had been looking it over. The 1787 trip was supposed to result in an actual location being found for the colony.

Hathaway, Smith and Dayton travelled to Philadelphia - nearby was the home of David Wagener, a prosperous and ambitious man who was another of the Friend's adherents - and from there explored on horseback the mountains and valleys of western Pennsylvania. They visited the Wyoming Valley (site of the famous massacre) and there heard good reports of the country around Seneca

Lake. They followed the old track of Sullivan's army, up the east side of the lake to Kanadasaga (Geneva) and down the west side to Kashong. The traders evidently convinced them that the country was a good one. The following summer a party of pioneers located on a knoll a mile inland from a convenient landing and near an excellent millseat on the outlet of the Crooked Lake, a stream soon dubbed "Mill River."

Within two years this settlement had grown to include about 60 families, and was by far the largest in the Genesee Tract. A satellite group colonized the area around a millseat on the inlet creek to the Crooked Lake's west branch. A few scattered families lived elsewhere in the tract, drawn not by the dream of religious separatism, but by the fertile and empty land.

The proprietors of the Genesee Tract, first Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham, then Robert Morris, and finally the Pulteney Associates and their agent Charles Williamson, all moved as fast as possible to fill up their purchase with settlers. A population explosion ensued, unmatched in succeeding history. This was part of the first large westward migration after the initial settlement of the English colonies in North America. The Revolution had been fought, in part, over the British government's refusal to allow settlement west of the coastal plain. Now that the war was over, a new Constitution in place and agreements being negotiated with the native people, white settlers began to pour in. The excellent soil and abundant water power of the Genesee Country, plus the immediate availability of hardwood timber drew settlers at an amazing rate.

By 1800 four dams were built on the Mill River, commonly known later as the Crooked Lake Outlet, now as the Outlet of Keuka Lake. At least two mills were operating on the west branch's inlet (Sugar Creek). The as-yet-unnamed crossroads near the foot of the Crooked Lake (now Penn Yan) was beginning to grow into a settlement; it had an extremely tough reputation, though, and was evidently avoided by the more sober local farmers.

Williamson's hard work was pulling in settlers from the south. In 1796 Ontario County (then comprising all of New York west of Seneca Lake) was split, with a large portion going to form Steuben County (further split later - as was Ontario - into a number of smaller counties). Williamson established his headquarters at Bath and within a short time people began coming in from New Jersey and Pennsylvania to populate the new country.

The Pulteney Associates' rivals in land development, the New York Genesee Land Company, better known as the Lessees from their audacious plot to lease the Senecas' land for 999 years (rather than purchasing it outright, which would have been illegal), received several townships as part of a compromise settlement. They too moved as quickly as possible to bring in settlers, many of them from the Lessees' home Columbia County and others nearby in the Hudson Valley.

The pattern of settlement throughout this early period was directed by two big forces: one was geographic and the other was political.

The history of the Pre-emption Line is too complicated to go into very thoroughly here, except for a brief account: New York and Massachusetts solved a long dispute arising out of conflicting land grants from the days of

the Stuart kings by agreeing to draw a line due north from a certain location on the Pennsylvania border. West of this line New York would have sovereignty (that is to say, the state could collect taxes from the inhabitants) and Massachusetts would have the pre-emption rights (the right to deal with the Indians and buy from them their original title to the land).

The line setting the eastern boundary of this vast tract (six million acres, about; later split into smaller pieces) was drawn during the summer of 1788. At the same time, Massachusetts having sold her pre-emption rights to Phelps and Gorham, the latter were trying to make a treaty with the Senecas. This task was complicated by the machinations of another very influential group of New Yorkers and Canadians (the Lessees); and by the fact that the boundary line - the Pre-emption Line as it was called, from which the original survey of the whole tract was being measured on a six-mile grid - was in the wrong place.

A new line was drawn in 1793 but meanwhile the title of everyone who bought land in the disputed area, including the Society of Universal Friends, was clouded.

Some members of the Friends evidently meant from the beginning to carve their own domain from the wilderness. The Potter family in particular bought a vast empire between the ridge east of Sugar Creek and the shore of Canandaigua Lake, and proceeded to sell off farm lots there.

The rugged terrain, of the western part of the county particularly, channelled settlement up the stream valleys. Since the earliest roads generally followed old Indian paths (which for the most part followed the line of least resistance), this also tended to direct the flow of settlers into the country.

Being New Englanders, the settlers established schools before any other civil improvements. Schools at City Hill (1791), Pine Corners (1796) and other places certainly antedated the formation of any of the county's municipalities.

Most of the settlers who came into the country at this early date belonged to what we would call the middle class. They may have had to do without many comforts at first, but as soon as possible they improved their condition. The first water-powered mills were sawmills, so real lumber could be used to erect frame houses. Dominic DeBartsch lived in a frame house at Kashong and it was in this structure (still standing) that the Universal Friend's committee of three consulted the traders about a good place for settlement.

It's safe to say that log houses were the first structures erected in most places throughout the county, soon replaced (though many continued to be built and inhabited for decades) by small saltbox-style frame houses. Most were built without much embellishment; the only remaining exceptions from this early time are Arnold Potter's mansion in the southeast corner of his domain, built in 1790; and George Green's house somewhat west of Potter's, erected a few years later. These were built in the new Federal style; indeed Potter's house was so grand and conservative in its details that some people have called it Georgian.

Farms were of course very small during this period - and almost everyone was a farmer. Potash was the first major cash export, made from the ashes of

the thousands of hardwood trees that had to be disposed of before the land could be worked. The trees were usually girdled first to kill them, then burned. The stumps evidently remained for a long time, particularly in roadways, which didn't have to be plowed. In 1801 "field ashes" sold for up to nine cents a bushel. It took 600 bushels to make a ton of potash, which marketed for about \$150; this at a time when laborers' wages averaged around \$10 a month plus board, a suit of clothes might cost \$5 and a pair of shoes \$2.50.

Each farm family raised enough food for their own needs (if they could), plus a little for barter. Cash was very scarce. Wheat, rye and corn were the main grain crops. Some cheese and butter was made, apple trees were planted and gradually the scattered clearings coalesced.

Besides potash, and superseding it once the trees were gone, the major cash export was whiskey. Grain was bulky and expensive - almost impossible - to ship any great distance. Distilling was an easy and cheap way to reduce the bulk and increase the value of the grain crop. It was apparently a very widely-practiced industry in the area, as it was in other regions with a grain surplus a long way from cash markets.

Transportation was by water whenever possible. Road-building was however undertaken very early throughout the region. Routes were surveyed either by the land agency (some of Charles Williamson's roads are still in use) or by municipalities. Property-owners paid highway taxes by means of labor on the local roads; a few accounts remain of such labor assessments, large landholders owing more days on the road-building crew.

It's safe to say that in the earliest years road routes determined the location of settlements and not vice versa. However, as some of the town maps made for this study show, there must have been roads other than the officially-surveyed ones; one of the best examples is present Route 364 through Potter. Dwellings were built in the Nettle Valley area very early on, and it's obvious from their alignment that a highway of some kind linked them, though no record of an early survey survives.

Along these roads sprang up almost at once a crop of public houses, taverns and inns - as they variously styled themselves. David Wagener built a public house near the falls of Mill River in 1791, early enough to be used and described in unflattering terms by the Duke de Liancourt on his tour of the frontier.

By 1810 a few settlements had gotten started; some have prospered and survived (Dundee, Penn Yan, Rushville), some prospered for a time and still survive but as hamlets or country crossroads (Milo Center, Lakemont, Yatesville, Benton Center), and others have vanished (Hopeton - the "lost village" - is best known). It's not easy to tell exactly why some settlements "made it" and others did not, but relative difficulty of transportation coupled with continuing industrial capacity might be one of the keys.

In early days, just getting from one neighborhood to another was so time-consuming that stores, taverns, artisans' shops and other components of the typical settlement cropped up at every major (and many minor) crossroads. If water power for a mill could also be had nearby, then at least some long-

term survival seemed assured.

All millstreams in the county were exploited as soon as settlement began - Keuka Outlet, Big Stream, Plum Point Creek, Sugar Creek, Flint Creek and Kashong Creek. The very earliest mills on most were sawmills, but almost if not quite coeval were gristmills. Without the latter, grain was converted to flour by pounding it Indian-style in a hollow log mortar or by carrying it to the closest mill - at Tioga Point in Pennsylvania, south of modern Elmira - by a lengthy and harrowing trip.

By the end of the early-settlement period the county also had water-powered asheries, distilleries, tanneries and carding machines; all establishments that converted raw materials produced on the farm into useful (and valuable) products capable of relatively easy export to markets outside the immediate local area.

Even in this period the population of the future county wasn't quite homogeneous. A very few free black families - the best-known are the Mingoos in Torrey, manumitted by John Nicholas, and the Smiths in Potter, possibly brought in by the Potter family from Rhode Island - and a few black slaves, mostly but not exclusively the property of the Potter family, lived in the area. The first few members of the Dutch Settlement in northeast Potter had arrived from Germany by way of Pennsylvania, and other German immigrants were in Torrey. A few Irish natives - the Shearman brothers of Penn Yan may have made the biggest mark - were here as well.

The population, unlike that of later frontiers farther west, consisted of families. The entire farm family was needed to work the small plots. The usual division of labor had the men working in the fields, the women caring for the animals and doing the housework, with the children performing whatever jobs they were capable of. Nonfarmers were rare, but the evidence is that in most stores, public houses and shops the entire family was involved as well. It was not uncommon in this as in later periods for widows to remain unmarried and to continue in their husbands' occupation. A special case is also provided by the Universal Friends, among whom were many single women who kept their own households and farms.

In 1790 the largest concentration of population in the area one day to be known as Yates County was within three miles of City Hill. Some of the original settlers there moved west to the high ridges above what they called Brook Kedron (Sugar Creek) in modern Jerusalem; others settled northward into Arnold Potter's purchase. In large part, however, the followers of the Universal Friend remained on the good farms west of Seneca Lake.

But the rich and beautiful land they came to - the land on which they thought to live out their lives untempted by worldly desires - that land called others, too.

THE FRIENDS' SETTLEMENT

The first permanent settlement in Yates County was begun in the summer of 1788 by a party of 25 pioneers sent by the Society of Universal Friends under the leadership of James Parker. Their first winter was spent in a single communal log structure, probably just to the east of the site of the house later built for the Friend in what's now the town of Torrey. In 1789 several other log structures were built, as the colonists took up farms. The Friends called their settlement Jerusalem.

The Friend herself came to the tract in 1790 and a frame house was erected for her use. She had a sizeable household; and some of her close followers also undoubtedly built homes nearby. Because of the confusion in title arising from the mistaken survey of the original Pre-emption Line, most of the original deeds are extremely difficult to locate, but working from a tax assessment list drawn up in 1792 (the Settlement wasn't counted in 1790, joining Geneva and Watkins Glen in the limbo caused by the eccentric placing of the Line), some approximate locations can be defined.

The Friends settled at first almost exclusively in what is now Milo and Torrey. There was a group of dwellings at City Hill near the Friend's house, another hamlet formed at what today is known as Milo Center, and a third around the Friends' Mill on the Outlet. These with Charles Williamson's commercial venture at Hopeton were the "villages" in Yates County as the eighteenth century waned. Thus Milo Center, the only one of these to survive, is among the very oldest communities in western New York.

The Universal Friend and her followers undoubtedly hoped their settlement would be augmented. They really did think of themselves as the New Jerusalem - the "City on a Hill." However, there's no evidence the group gained many new members (if any at all) after 1790.

The Friend's doctrine apparently appealed mostly to women, among whom were her most faithful adherents. The Reynolds sisters of Rhode Island are good examples of the devotion the Universal Friend aroused in women who heard her message. Martha Reynolds remained unmarried throughout her life, building a house in Milo Center where she lived with her sister Sarah until the latter's marriage, later removing to Jerusalem. Hannah Reynolds Card, though married, remained a Friend even after her husband Stephen backslid; she had persuaded him to come to the Genesee Tract in the first place - he and her brother John were among the pioneers of 1788. Mary Reynolds Gardner left her husband George in Rhode Island, brought her large family of children into the wilderness, raising them herself and adhering to the Friend as long as she lived.

In fact, so many women gathered around the Friend, most in their own independent households, that Stafford C. Cleveland (whose 1872 history of the county is still one of the best sources of information about the Universal Friends) coined the term "Faithful Sisterhood" to describe them. His section enumerating them, at the beginning of his *History*, uses words of high praise for their industry and intelligence. It's clear that the Universal Friend's ability to draw this individualistic group with her, holding their love and respect beyond the grave, was an endowment of

peculiar and enduring power, the quality we would today call "charisma."

In 1794 the Universal Friend herself removed from the original settlement and built a second home on land a few miles further west, on a tract whose ownership was unquestioned, in the modern township of Jerusalem. Most of the people who actually started farms in the original Milo and Torrey settlements stayed there - though some did follow her, particularly the less prosperous ones. The Friend's household, her sisterhood and the other faithful families had all the backbreaking work of clearing farms in the wilderness to do over again.