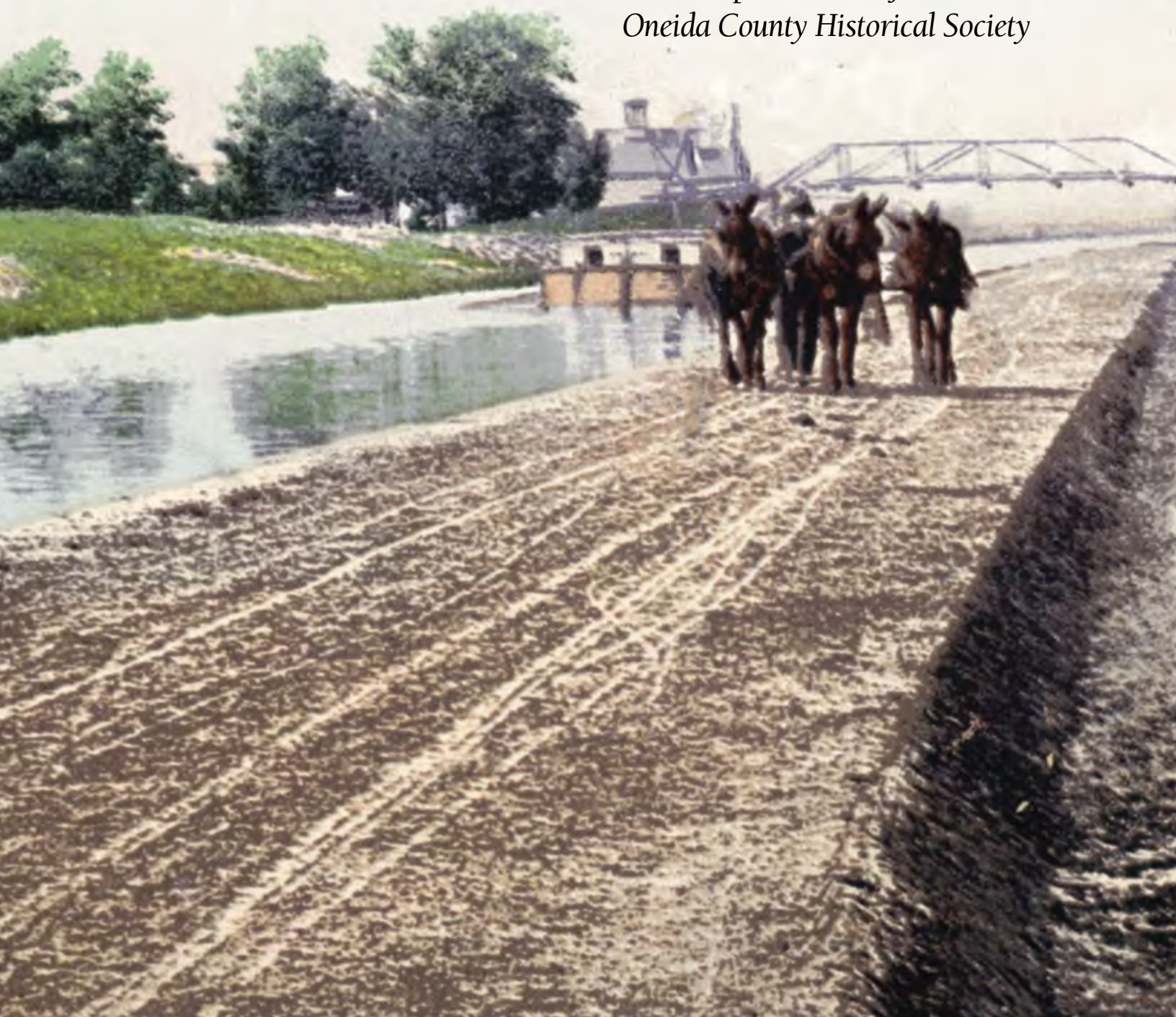


ONEIDA COUNTY

An Illustrated History

*A publication of the
Oneida County Historical Society*



ONEIDA COUNTY

An Illustrated History

Commissioned by the Oneida County Historical Society

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San Antonio, Texas



The original Latus Lumber and Feed Mill was one of the area's oldest buildings built in 1802, a gristmill on Sauquoit Creek between Clayville and Cassville. There were two wheels affixed to three grinding stones, which ground grist, buckwheat and wheat flour. The mill remained in the Latus family for three generations. During the 1930s, lumber sales were added to the feed business.



First Edition

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Thomas R. Proctor High School was one of three in Utica from the 1930s through the late 1980s. With Utica's declining population both John E. Kennedy High and the Utica Free Academy ceased operations and consolidated their students at Proctor, which exists today as the sole high school in the city.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Oneida County: An Illustrated History is the result of a collaborative effort by local historians, authors, and organizations dedicated to the preservation and promotion of our region's unique heritage.

The section contributors deserve the lion's share of the credit for bringing together a compelling narrative. All five—Joseph P. Bottini, Joan Klossner, Lou Parrotta, Janice Reilly, and Dennis Webster—are accomplished authors, each with several titles already to their credit. Special thanks are extended to Mary Bottini, as well, for her suggestions and assistance.

Virtually all of the selected photographs come from the Oneida County Historical Society archives. Accessing these photos was facilitated by Carl Saporito's multiyear effort to digitize the entire collection. Society volunteer Robert Steffenson deserves credit for completing the scanning process; organizing the digital files occupied the time of several summer interns from the Upstate Institute Field School at Colgate University. Other photographs came from the collections of Mary Centro and Janice Reilly.



*Student foot races were a part of
Utica's public schools "Field Days"
at the end of the school year in
June 1915.*





INTRODUCTION

The history of Oneida County, New York is a tale of challenge, triumph, heartbreak, innovation, and grit. Since long before 1798, when Oneida was partitioned from the then-much-larger Herkimer County (itself an offshoot of Montgomery, partitioned from the original Tryon County) the area's experience has mirrored our national story.

The first colonists of European descent arrived in the fertile Mohawk Valley seeking to establish farms and commercial enterprises, far removed from their ancestral homes on the eastern seaboard. This region owed its prosperity largely to its waterways—the Mohawk River, Wood Creek, and Oneida Lake, among many—that had been traversed for centuries by native Americans and early explorers. In the time before railroads, this area of upstate New York offered the most convenient access from the east coast to the North American interior.

The ensuing generations would see war—literally in their own backyards—twice during the 18th century. The French and Indian War (1754-63) established England's dominance over the region while the American Revolution (1775-81) resulted in the birth of the United States of America. The rebel victory over the English was due in no small part to the August 1777 Battle of Oriskany, which took place a mere ten miles northwest of where I am now writing. Both conflicts had implications for the native Americans in the region. The Iroquois Nation would be irrevocably changed, the peoples displaced and marginalized, and their culture largely lost as Europeans continued their incessant migration across the continent.

The coming of the Erie Canal revolutionized the way people, goods and ideas traveled. Completed in 1825, the canal enabled mass overland movement and united New York City with the Great Lakes. America's interior was opened. Settlements that existed along the Erie grew; Utica and Rome became major factory towns, drawing tens of thousands of immigrants during the pre-Civil War Years and on

into America's second industrial age of the late 1800s. Branch canals connected Utica with Binghamton (the Chenango) and Rome with Lyons Falls (the Black River), bringing prosperity to the towns and villages that many residents still call home.

The canal system was a springboard for the transportation routes we know and use today. Rail lines parallel the Barge Canal across upstate, as does the New York State Thruway (I-90). Utica's North-South Arterial (NYS Routes 5, 8 & 12) rides above the old Chenango Canal while State Route 12B follows the towpath south from New Hartford and through Clinton, Deansboro and Oriskany Falls. All of this, from the first shovel of dirt that was turned for the Erie Canal in Rome on July 4, 1817.

The wave of prosperity brought by the canals, the textile industry, hops and dairy farms, and military installations from the colonial fort system through Griffiss Air Force Base, would not last. With one notable exception (many thanks, F.X. Matt!), Prohibition pretty much ended the area's hops farming and brewing industries. The advent of air conditioning and cheaper labor drew the county's textile mills south after World War II. The end of the Cold War led to the closing of Griffiss in 1995—at that time the county's largest employer. The population drain of the late 20th century was not isolated to the immediate area, of course. The entire northeast

was hit by a similar malaise. Time and again, Oneida County's residents have faced economic hardship and been forced to reinvent the area.

History is circuitous—the themes that our authors have addressed on the subsequent pages resonate as strongly today as they did over two centuries ago. Transportation, communication and commerce are the underpinnings of economic vitality. Formal education is critical to an informed populace. Oneida County is filled with opportunities for recreation, assistance, and self-improvement. Our multicultural region is reinvigorated with every generation of immigrants, from the Irish canal workers of 1817 to the Somali, Burmese and Bosnian refugees who now call this area their home.

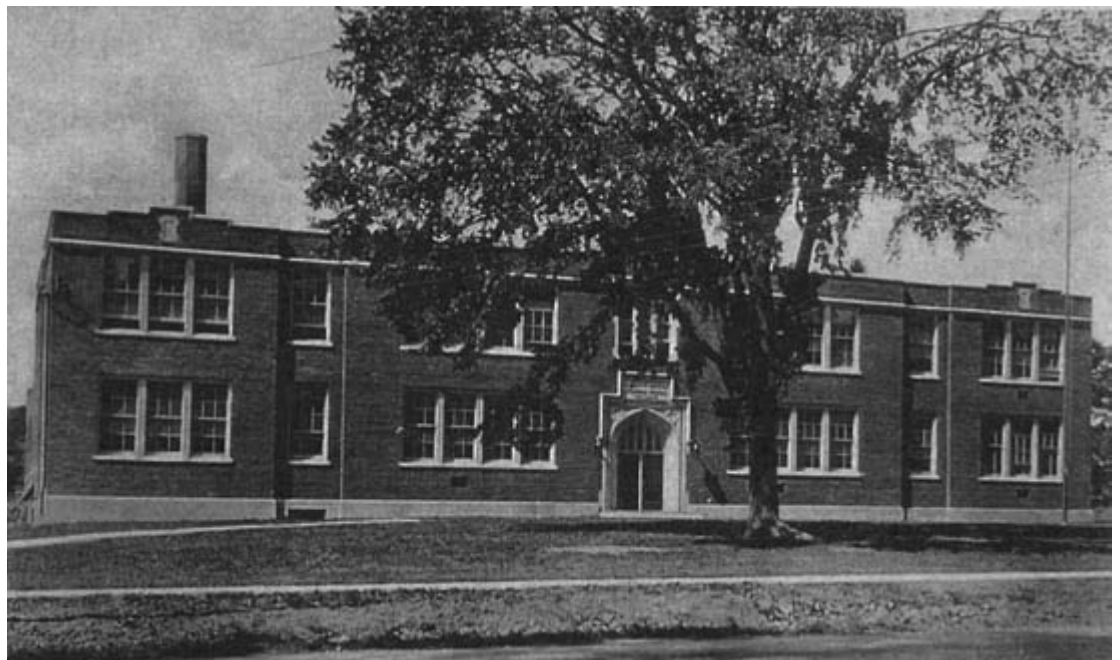
I rest knowing that the spirit of reinvention is alive and well in Oneida County. It is easy to lament what has been lost, but that is a fruitless endeavor and dishonors the achievements of those who made the Mohawk Valley worth writing about in the first place. It is through the study of our shared heritage that we can glean the lessons of our forebears to build a better future.

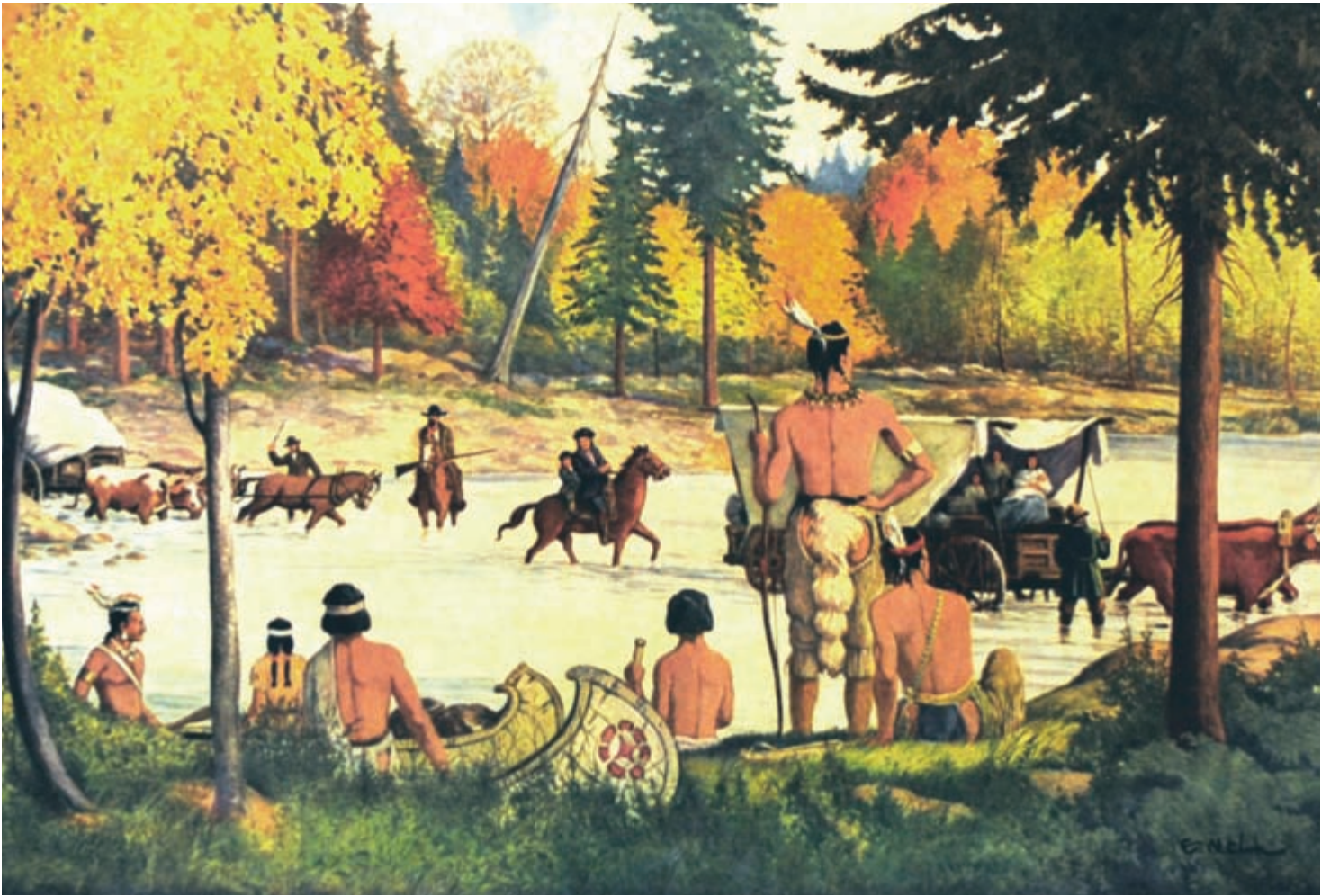
I hope you enjoy the book.

Brian J. Howard
Editor and Executive Director,
Oneida County Historical Society
Utica, New York
September 2014



Bridgewater Central School's building still exists along Route 8 South, just north of the intersection with State Route 20. Several businesses have existed in the facility since its last use as a school in the late 1960s.





CHAPTER 1

ONEIDA COUNTY TRANSPORTATION & COMMUNICATION

BY JOSEPH P. BOTTINI

INTRODUCTION: “THE GREAT PASS”

Oneida County, portioned off from Herkimer County in 1798, became the center of trade, transportation and communication owing to its geographical location and its topographical features.

The Appalachian Mountain Range running from Maine to Georgia was a hindrance to transportation inland. With this impediment to expansion settlers were confined to the coastal region. One natural break in the mountain range with a semi-level, navigable river provided the only feasible access. Thus, the Mohawk Valley with the Mohawk River opened development. Oneida County, sitting in the middle of this valley, prospered and grew in importance through transportation (western lands) and communication (news carried by settlers and early newspapers).

The American Indians, mid 1400s, were the first to use this “Great Pass” through the Appalachian Mountains. The “ford” of the Mohawk River was provided at this location by its meandering path slowing the current, fed by two creeks—Reals Creek to the north and Ballou Creek to the south) that



Pioneers, under the watchful gaze of earlier inhabitants, cross the Mohawk River at the “ford” of the North-South/East-West trails.



Right: A map displaying the central location of Oneida County.

Below: X-Y is the path of the Mohawk Valley to the interior of the continent through the only level navigable water route in the mountain range from Maine to Georgia.



ONEIDA COUNTY TRANSPORTATION

deposited silt lowering the riverbed and reducing the height of the banks. At this location, with the juxtaposition of divine, geographic gifts providing the “ford,” the community of Old Fort Schuyler (Utica) began in Oneida County.

Following the arrival of the Dutch and then the English (1500s-1600s), the fur trade became a viable industry. This “furs-for-trinkets-and-guns” trade between the pioneers and the Iroquois developed into a thriving business in early Oneida County. This trade opportunity was added to pioneer travel, military transportation, communication, and land development.

The importance of this opening in the mountains was first understood by General George Washington on his nineteen-day tour (post Revolutionary War) through the Mohawk Valley to see where the war played-out its part. He was impressed with its possibility as an approach to the uncharted and uninhabited interior of the continent. He envisioned the improvement of internal communication of the nation through the Mohawk Valley.

Overwhelmed with his findings, Washington said:

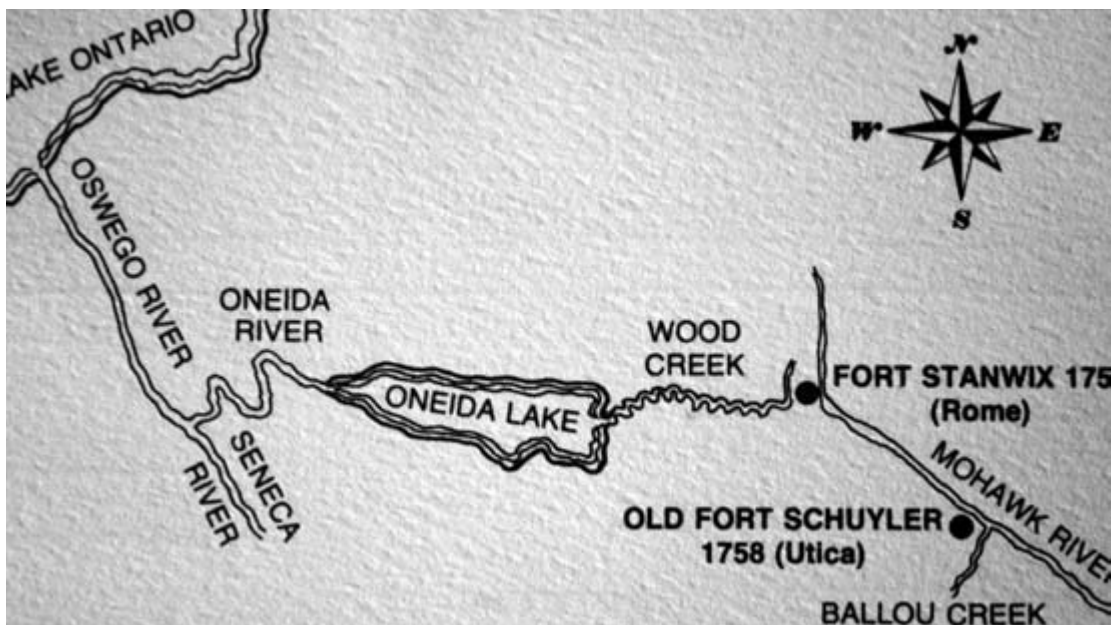
Prompted by these actual observations I could not help taking a more...extensive view of the vast inland navigation of these United States ...Would to God we may have wisdom enough to improve them....

Transportation began with the river system. Traders and settlers came north up the Hudson River and west (at Albany) onto the Mohawk River. They then traveled westerly on the Mohawk River to Fort Stanwix (Rome). Here the Mohawk River curves northward to its source in the hills north of Rome. This created a “Carrying Place” (De-O-Wain-Sta in Iroquois) where travelers had to unload their boats and carry them west for approximately one mile to westerly flowing Wood Creek. They then reloaded their boats to continue the journey to Oneida Lake. From Oneida Lake they traveled on the Oneida River to the Oswego River to Lake Erie and beyond.

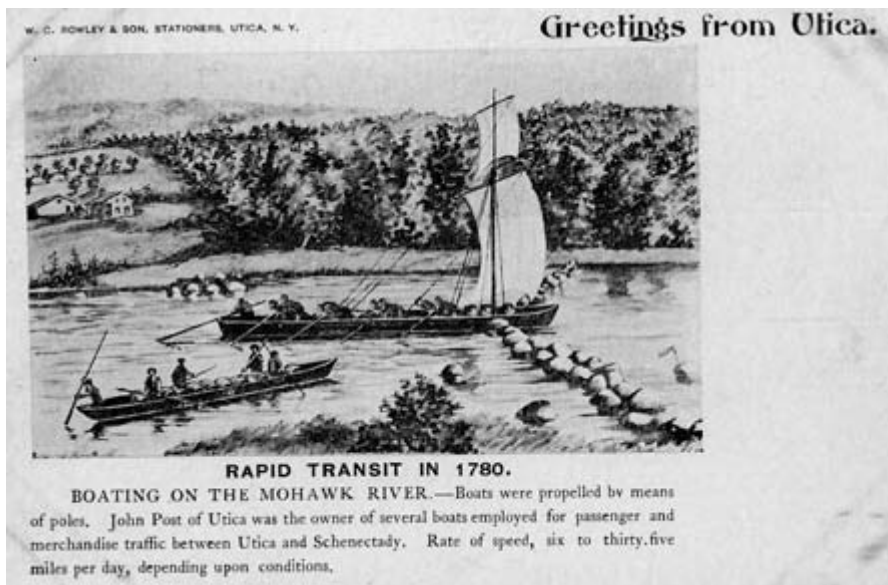
The “Carrying Business” of moving goods and passengers from the Mohawk River to Wood Creek became the occupation of those living near Fort Stanwix (Rome). Owing to its features of waterways and “The Great Carry,” commerce preceded farming and settlement in Oneida County along the Mohawk Valley.

The few farm settlements and people in the “carrying trade” abandoned the area at the approach of the Revolutionary War. This transportation route became solely a military transport of troops and supplies to western outposts.

Following the Revolution, a trickle of immigrants from New England became a stream of pioneers into Oneida County. This influx of



The Mohawk Valley water route to the interior of the continent began with the Mohawk River. It traveled west to Rome, to the “Carry” (Deowainsta in Iroquois) approximately one mile to Wood Creek, onto Oneida Lake, to Oneida River, to the Oswego River, onto Lake Ontario of the Great Lakes.



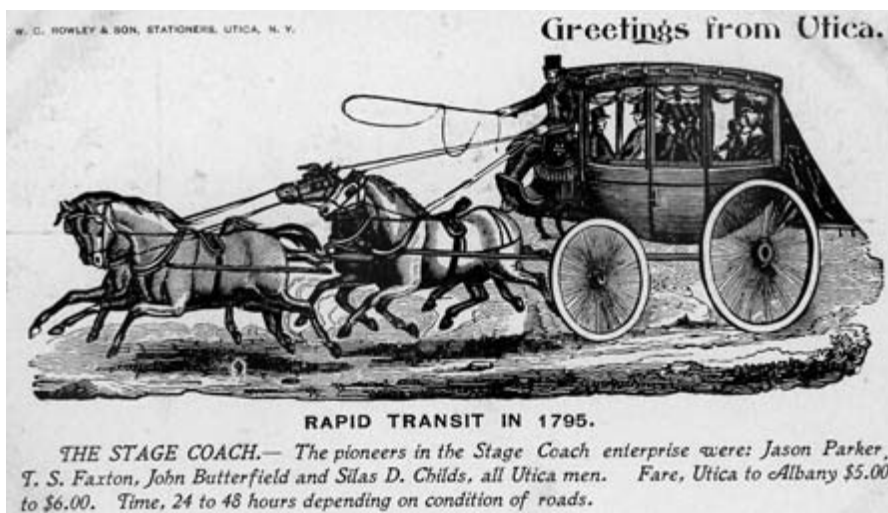
❖ Above: Early river transportation necessitated “polling” the bateaux up-river requiring physical strength and mental perseverance.

Below: The early stagecoach (rapid transit of 1795) connected communities with a crude mode of passenger and mail routes requiring skilled drivers and hardy passengers.

settlers to central Mohawk Valley brought a huge increase of traffic on the waterway. An initial step to close the “carry” from Mohawk River to Wood Creek (1797) was a two-mile canal of The Western Inland Navigation Company.” During the 1790s the company constructed many short canals throughout Oneida County so small boats could bypass rougher waters.

Boats were a slow, inconvenient way of travel. With the size restrictions of boats (Bateaux) the freight capacity was limited. The laborious method of “pike polling” the boats up-river became a job for physically strong and mentally tough men.

At the same time (1798-1800), a company was engaged to construct a few crude roads—carved out of the wilderness—that ushered in the turnpike era. Early roads included the opening to the Genesee Country in 1790, a mail route between Albany and Whitestown in 1792



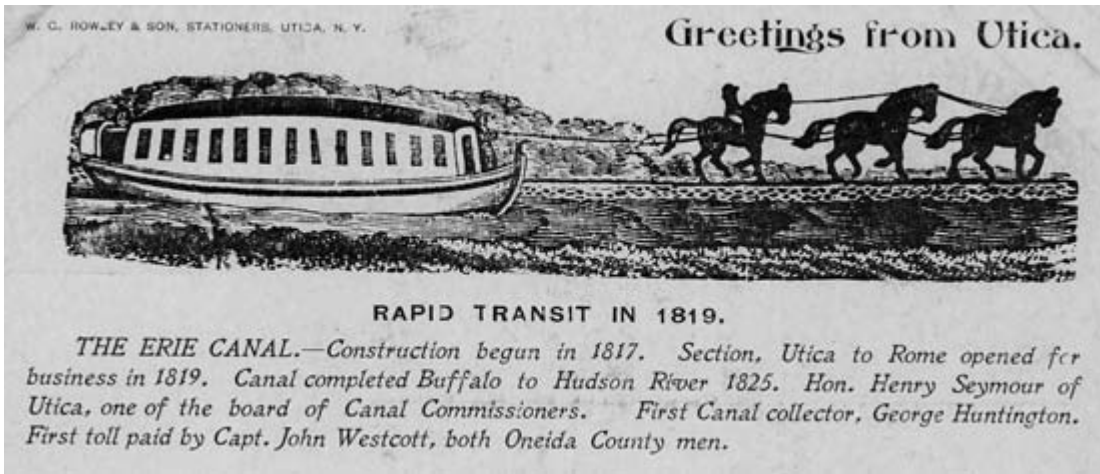
and a stage route between Albany and Whitestown the next year.

One of the first to be built was the Seneca Turnpike (Route 5) that extended from the ford (at Utica) to the frontier of western New York. Another turnpike was begun, the Great Western Turnpike (Route 20), across the southern portion of Oneida County. Although seasonal roads at best, they did provide a beginning for the vast network of roads that crisscross the County today. The state legislature provided for the incorporation of private companies to construct and improve plank roads in 1847 to help farmers get produce to market. Close to a dozen plank-road companies formed in Oneida County.

The Seneca Turnpike was the better road because it was more level, and prudent for heavy loads, than the Great Western Turnpike with its frequent undulating hills. Because of water level inconsistency and inaccessibility during the winter months, turnpikes became more popular than water travel. Between 1847 and 1854, about twenty plank roads were built in Oneida County. Due to the cost of replacement and competition from railroads, most plank roads were abandoned by the late 1870s. Bicyclists and then automobile owners first agitated for better roads. By 1952 over thirteen hundred miles of improved roads comprised the road system in Oneida County.

During the War of 1812, Oneida County held the major transportation routes. Both the Seneca and Great Western Turnpikes were used to transport supplies to military outposts in the western part of the state while the Mohawk River-Wood Creek waterway was used to send supplies to Sackets Harbor.

The Erie Canal was born out of a need for better water transportation. Neither natural waterways nor land transportation proved adequate. It was inexpensive by water, but rivers were not dependable. Land transportation was more dependable, but very costly. Both land and water deficiencies provided reasons to support George Washington’s vision for a man-made waterway through the Mohawk Valley. The stage was set for the long-debated canal transportation system. Thomas Jefferson doubting the wisdom of such a huge canal project said, “Making a canal 350 miles through the wilderness is a little short of madness.”



❖
 Left: The early success of small canals connecting natural bodies of water fostered the notion of a cross-state canal. Not accepted by all folks, this 363-mile “ditch” containing over 30 locks became the catalyst for early trade and pioneer travel. This far outperformed the coach or natural waterways and brought a boom to any community on its path.

The first leg of a 363-mile “ditch” from Albany to Lake Erie was begun in Rome in 1817 and reached completion at Utica in 1819. Flat-bottomed boats (Durham) carrying heavier cargoes (75 tons) in shallow water passing directly through the valley enhanced the growth of Oneida County, home of the first completed section. By the total completion of the Erie Canal across the State in 1825, Oneida County had a five-year head start over the other counties.

From 1825 to 1845, New York State witnessed a canal building boom. No less than ten sections of canals and three complete canals were constructed in Oneida County. Although useful for a short time in the growth of Oneida

Below: This map from 1913 displays the result of efforts made by an Oneida County Automobile Association to encourage funding of road development and improvements. In fifteen years, Oneida County went from impassable dirt paths to a “groomed” road matrix.

Until the completion of the Erie Canal at \$19,679 per mile, transportation was slow and laborious. The Erie Canal created an opportunity for more complete travel from the east coast to the interior of the continent. This man-made “river” allowed increased load from 2 to 6 tons, reduced the cost of freight from \$95-\$125/ton to \$4-\$6/ton, and shortened the journey from 4-6 weeks to 6 days, for cross-state travel.

It was enlarged just five years after its completion. At a cost of \$96.7 million dollars, it was enlarged again and the route altered to its present location in 1918, accompanied with a name change to Barge Canal System (recently renamed back to Erie Canal).

Today, the Erie Canal is the cross-state, east-west route of the New York State Canal System. In 2000 the United States Congress designated the Erie Canalway a “National Heritage Corridor.” This distinction recognized the national significance of the canal as the most successful human-built waterway work of civil engineering construction in North America. At that time The Erie Canal was referred to as the “Eighth Wonder of the World.”





❖
Above: At 4 feet deep and 40 feet wide this placid body of water became the “rapid transit” of its day, decreasing travel time considerably.

Top, right: The son of Whitestown founder Hugh White, became Chief Engineer Wright’s primary assistant.

Below: Beginning his career as a coach driver, Butterfield became a transportation entrepreneur with passenger and freight companies. In 1859, he took the government’s challenge to establish a transportation system for freight and passengers from the Mississippi River to the west coast. At \$600,000, it was the largest contract let by the federal government.



County’s textile industry, neither the 97- mile Chenango Canal (abandoned in 1870s), or the 78-mile Black River Canal (until 1924 connecting Boonville with Rome) resulted in a great impact.

It is prudent to note that early canal “engineers” began their work with little or no prior training. Civil engineering was yet unheard of and when named Chief Engineer of the Erie Canal project, Benjamin Wright of Rome had minimal experience. Wright went on to achieve national prominence and noted as the Father of American Civil Engineering. Canvass White, son of Whitestown founder Hugh White, ably assisted Benjamin Wright.

Working as a laborer, rising to an engineer’s position, John B. Jervis of Rome became known for promoting much advancement in transportation. He earned the reputation as the leading American engineer of pre-Civil War era.

Two other Oneida County men played major roles in the development of transportation and earned national reputations. John Butterfield created the American Express Company (1850) and the Overland Mail Company (1858)—the first transcontinental stagecoach.

Squire Whipple, forever linked with bridge building and the iron truss, became known as the Father of American Bridge Building.

During this canal period, another transportation system—the railroad—was emerging. The first railroad to add to the commotion was the Utica-Schenectady Railroad in 1836. Three years later, a second railroad



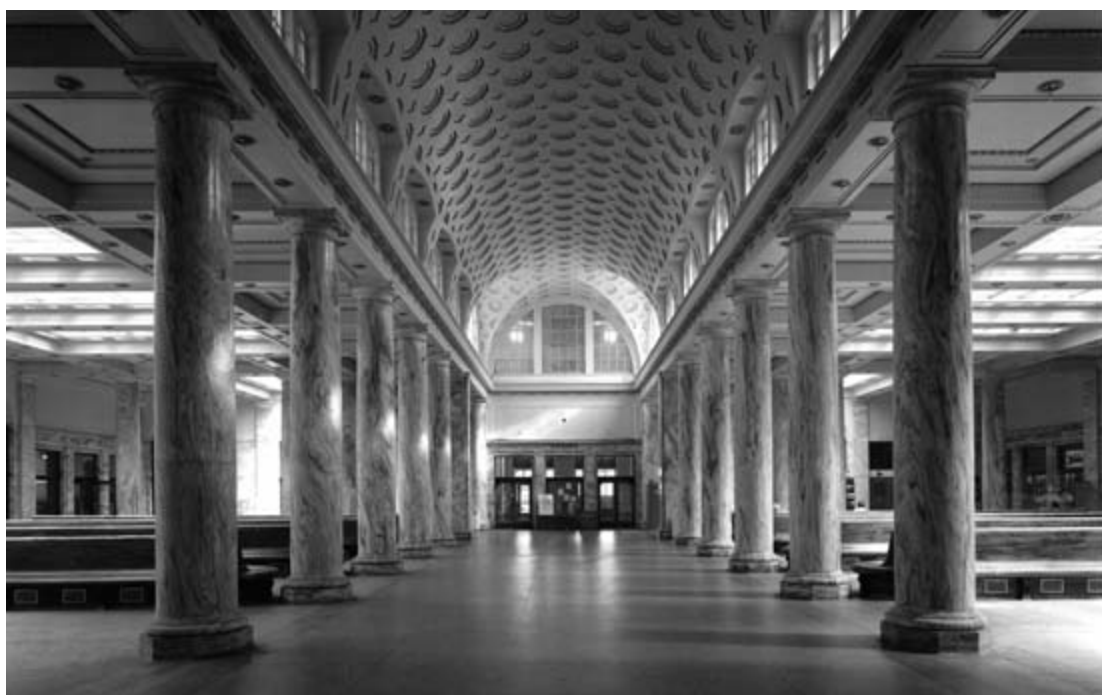
entered Oneida County, the Syracuse and Utica (through Rome). Utica and Rome, Oneida County’s two largest urban centers, competed for railroad supremacy between 1836-1840.

By 1850, seven railroads originated in—or ran through—Oneida County including the Utica-Black River Railroad. With other smaller lines they were consolidated into the New York Central in 1853. In 1869 the New York Central absorbed the Hudson Central Railroad. In 1891, the New York Central further consolidated other smaller railroads—such as the Clayton and Ogdensburg lines. An agreement between the New York Central, the Delaware-Lackawana-Western, and the New York, Ontario-Western railroads for use of the facilities in Utica gave the complex a name—“Union” Station; a jewel in the crown of many historically significant Oneida County places with a direct connection to the development of America.

Union Station, an influential force linking a glorious past with present-day transportation in Oneida County, remains following a successful effort by the Landmarks Society to save it from the wrecking ball in 1978. The Adirondack Scenic Railroad continues to transport tourists to the North Country as it did in transporting many wealthy folks to their Adirondack “Great Camps” during the 19th century. With better

highways and improved motor vehicles, the railroad business was infringed upon during post World War II. Many bankrupt railroads combined including: Pennsylvania with New York Central (Penn-Central) as well as the Erie with the Delaware, Lackawana and Western (Erie-Lackawana). The Penn Central and Erie-Lackawana then combined with other bankrupt railroads becoming Conrail in 1976.

In the 1860s (horse car) trolley lines were evident in Oneida County. Many inter-urban and intra-urban trolley lines were constructed between 1826 and 1886.



Top: One of many small community train depots that dotted the landscape in the later 1800s. It became (and still is) a “Community Building” used for meeting purposes.

Middle: Now named The Boehlert Center, Union Station was built in 1914 as the intended headquarters of the New York Central Railroad. Never achieving this goal, it was named Union Station when it became the depot for many smaller lines and consolidated railroad companies. Following a restoration project to save it from the wrecking ball in 1978, it remains a jewel in the crown of the Bagg’s Square Corridor in Utica. Today, it serves residents as a train and bus center as well as housing Oneida County offices on the second floor and the Oneida County Motor Vehicle Bureau in the southwest section of the magnificent lobby.

Bottom: A view of the stately marble columns in the main lobby of Oneida County’s largest railroad depot. The county’s central location was once considered a prime site for the headquarters of the New York Central Railroad Company.



the 1890s. The electric trolley changed people's lifestyle. Living close to employment in crowded neighborhoods was no longer necessary. Pleasure time activities were made available with the building of amusement parks at the end of trolley lines.

In 1910, Car 502 took 21 local entrepreneurs and others on a 2,000-mile promotional/fact-finding journey through 6 states. Both urban and inter-urban transportation served the public until 1933 when the inter-urban trolley gave way to buses. With aid of the federal Civil Works Administration (1933) trolley track removal began. A 21-gun salute was given the last trolley run on the Whitesboro line in 1938. By May 12, 1941, the last trolley left the transportation scene. Immediately, the new autobus and personal automobiles displaced the trolley system. For a number of years the horse and buggies, trolleys, bicycles and new-fangled automobiles grudgingly shared space on the roadways.

Bicycling, a new craze took center stage in Oneida County in the late 1800s. Although used as a means of transportation—doctors making house calls, mayors and judges pedaling to government halls and society ladies making social visits in 1893—it was more a hobby.

Good highways became a concern as early as 1902, when the Utica Automobile Club and many bicycle clubs petitioned for better roads. The Automobile Club of Utica, and eight other automobile clubs, met in Chicago to initiate the Automobile Association of America. New York State regulated “automobiling” in 1907 with the first motor vehicle law instituting speed limits of 20 miles an hour in the country, 15 miles in communities and 10 miles in heavily populated areas.

Early 1900 automobile companies in Oneida County included: W. H. Birdsall and A. Vedder Brower Company (Buckmobile); Remington Automobile and Motor Company, (Remington); Utica Carriage Company (formerly Willoughby of Rome), manufactured frame bodies for Packard, Cadillac, Rolls Royce, and Lincoln; and Charles Mott's Wheel Works producing automobile tires and axles.

In the 1950s, with the need for good highway transportation between states, in anticipation of any Cold War eruptions, an interconnected highway system was



Oneida County became one of only five locations (Boston, New York, Philadelphia and New Orleans) with an electric trolley system in



Opposite, top: Horse drawn trolley in Deerfield prior to 1893. Deerfield was an independent community in eastern Oneida County at this time, prior to becoming part of Utica city.

Opposite, middle:

Taken late in the life of Utica's system, this trolley sits in front of the "Trolley Barn". The barn was first used for the horse powered, and then electrical trolleys followed by the motorized buses was located on Main Street across from Union Railroad Station (Utica).

Opposite, bottom: This photo is of a time, (1893-1910) before the automobile became a competitor with the electric trolley and personal horse-drawn buggy for road space.

constructed giving New York Interstate 90. This highway (Thruway) directly through the center of Oneida County provided for potential military needs, but also served as a boom to the progress of civilian business and industry. Oneida County became the terminus of the first section of the Thruway opened to traffic (1954) when West Henrietta to Lowell (115 miles) was dedicated.

The North-South Arterial opened at cost of 4.5 million in 1958. A section is presently undergoing a renovation. In 1961, the new Route 49 was opened and in 1971 a revised Route 5S was constructed, as well an improved Route 12 north and Routes 8 and 12 south in central Oneida County. A more recent highway improvement, an extended Route 840 West and an improved Route I-790 increases highway transportation safety, speed and convenience for travelers. Urban road improvements also added to the changing of a community's landscape.

On the list of future improvements in transportation are Solar Roadways using solar panels that harness the sun to keep roads and runways clear of ice and snow.

Airline service in the county was begun in 1929 in Marcy (Utica Municipal Airport built for \$250,000). A notable landing was that of Amelia Earhart who came to Oneida County in

1929 to visit her sister, a teacher at the Utica Country Day School in New Hartford. In 1933, at the Utica Municipal Airport, unemployed relief workers cleared land and extended runways to accommodate mail service planes. By 1945, this facility, with sod-field runways, was inadequate to accommodate newer planes. In the early days of Oneida County aviation, any expanse of open field became potential for "airport" use, as with the land now occupied by Mohawk Valley Community College.

Looking to encourage industrial progress in Central New York, Oneida County sponsored constructing a larger facility near Oriskany, (county's share was \$750,000) and passenger service began there in 1950—with planes of the Robinson Airlines becoming Mohawk Airlines in 1958 that operated 28 flights daily out of Oneida County Airport.

This facility has since ceased operation and many components have been relocated to the former Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome, now the Griffiss Business & Technology Park, with hangar facilities for refurbishing airplanes. Recently, (2014) Griffiss International Airport at the Park received approval for a \$500,000 Customs and Multi-Purpose building. The future of regular passenger service in Oneida County remains a vision.

Above: Utica's inner-city trolley system strated with horse-drawn wagons in the 1860s. By 1941 the system—now using electricity for power—was obsolete.



Top: Sharing the roadways in the early part of the 20th century were electric trolley public transportation, the last of the horse and buggies, and the newest contender for space, the personal automobiles, with “pedestrians beware” implied.

Middle: Most early roads were dusty in summer, muddy in spring and dangerous in the winter. Most of these dirt roads were not graded for water run-off or to minimize hills and curves. As recent as the 1940s, rural roads were anything but comfortable or inviting. This view of a road going south through Bridgewater is indicative of the conditions early motorists faced.

Bottom: The entrance to the newly completed New York State Thruway, c. the 1950s. The Thruway continued Oneida County’s prominent place in transportation begun with the “Great Pass” (1790s) followed by the Erie Canal (1825), early roads (1910) and major interstate highway systems initiated by President Eisenhower (1950s).



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