

## A History of Providence

There are no records of the very first Europeans to settle in what would become the Town of Providence, but it appears likely that such settlement began in the mid-1700s along Fish House Road in the western part of the Town. Fish House Road is a portion of the route from Cranesville to Fish House which began as an Indian trail from the Mohawk Valley settlements to summer fishing grounds along the Sacandaga Valley. This route was improved in the 1740s by Sir William Johnson, opening the way for future settlement.

Settlements remained sparse until independence from Great Britain and termination of the colonial land grant system. Expansion outward from the established population centers occurred rapidly after the Revolution as people sought to establish themselves in wilderness areas. The earliest settlers in Providence were subsistence farmers, and small-scale farming continues today, but the land, in general, is not well suited to farming. The many miles of stone walls and house foundations scattered throughout the Town's woodlands bear mute testimony to the successive waves of homesteaders that tried farming and either changed occupations or moved on westward in search of better land.

The names of many of the early settlers continue in Providence today through their direct descendants: Armitage, Shaw, Craig, Barker, Sowle, Chase, Bills, and Packer, to name only some of them, are familiar to us all while names like Cadman, Hart, Hagedorn, Trevett, Clute, Sleezer, Kilmer, Potter, Crannel, and Taber slide easily off our tongues because they have become an indelible part of our history as place names associated with early settlers.

You can follow the progress of settlement in Saratoga County by the dates of creation of new Towns in the post-Independence era. The County itself only came into being in 1791 and consisted of only four Towns -- the so-called "Mother" Towns - Stillwater, Halfmoon, Saratoga, and Balls Town as Ballston was then known. Additional Towns were created when there were sufficient people to administer local governmental functions coupled with a desire to determine their own destiny. Originally a part of Balls Town and then of Galway when it was created in 1792, Providence successfully petitioned for separate status in 1796. At the time of its creation Providence extended further to the north including what is now the Towns of Edinburg and Day. With the creation in 1801 of Edinburg - then called Northfield - our Town became the size that it still is today, 200 years after its establishment.

The history of Providence is really the history of small waterpower manufacturing in America. The Town is blessed with a number of small creeks flowing from east to west. These watercourses - the Kenyetto, Alder and Cadman Creeks; Frenchman's Creek; and Hans Creek - and their various tributaries were small enough to be dammed by one or, at most, a few landowners to create a pond and a steady head of water to drive all sorts of mills and manufacturing enterprises. The earliest were saw mills and grist mills to satisfy local demand for building lumber and grinding of grain crops. As time went on, manufacturing of goods for widespread sale became more important, and by the middle of the nineteenth century Providence was a busy manufacturing area.

Waterpower wasn't Providence's only natural resource. Land that wasn't well suited to farming was, and is, well suited to timber

production, and the major manufacturing enterprises exploited that resource as well. Species of wood with characteristics suitable for particular uses were utilized until the local supply was exhausted. Perhaps the best example of this over-exploitation was that tanning industry which flourished in the town from the 1840's into the late 1870s by which time the native stands of hemlock which provided the tanbark had been almost obliterated. The largest of the tanning mills, located at Glenwild on Hans Creek, had more than one-half acre under roof. The foundations of this immense complex are still visible today but all other remains of the Town's largest single business have long since disappeared.

Many of the products that were manufactured were unique to their age and are no longer of any commercial value. Among products manufactured locally were wood shingles, butter bowls, cheeses boxes, sets of measures, lath, brush backs, scythe snaths, pails, butter pads, chairs, handles, rolling pins, clothes pins, table legs, all types of furniture, coffins, and on and on. Two of these products stand out as major industries in the Town - Scythe Snaths and chairs.

In the year 1850 one manufacturer in present day Barkersville reported producing 168, 000 scythe snaths, among other goods for sale. Now I'm not an expert on manufacturing monopolies but it would seem that such a level of production would have placed Providence-made snaths throughout much of the northeast.

While history hasn't recorded the Town's fame as a producer of scythe snaths, it has recognized Providence chair makers. More than a quarter million chairs were manufactured in Providence and sold in distant towns and cities. Most prominent among the many

manufacturers was the Trevett family, and today a Trevett chair is a valuable antique as well as a prized heirloom. Much of the chair production took place in Hans Creek mills and when that area and the water rights were purchased by the City of Amsterdam around 1890 much of the remaining production was shifted to Broadalbin. By the end of the century chair making had ceased to be a major occupation in the Town and ended entirely about the time of the First World War.

While the over-exploitation of specific species may have doomed their associated industries we should recognize that wood is a renewable resource. The forests of Providence have regrown and timber and lumber products continue to be the Town's principal economic resource and industry. Today there is only limited manufacturing of wood products within the Town but hardwood from local timber stands is being distributed throughout the world and much of our softwood is utilized in the production of paper products.

Mills and industries provide jobs and a livelihood but they don't create or define a town. The list of town officers elected at that first town meeting in April, 1796 gives us a sense of what the citizens expected from their municipal government. Supervisor, Clerk, Commissioners of Highways, Assessors, Constables, Collector of Rates - remember that we weren't very far past our break with England and the word TAX was not very popular, Commissioners of Schools, Overseers of the Poor, Fence Viewers and Pound Keepers. Most of these officers still exist at the town level and their functions are familiar to us, but a closer look at the last four will give us some insight into the peoples' needs and desires.

From the very beginning our forbearers were committed to providing an education for their children as a means to improving their lives and opportunities. Local schools were quickly started and a town-wide school system was initiated in 1812. Local education continued from that time until completion of the centralization of the Broadalbin and Galway school districts in the 1950's. Many schools came and went during that long period and some of the fondest memories of our older townspeople are of their years in these small, local schoolhouses and of the dedicated teachers that guided their education. While we may have increased educational opportunities for our students and increased our operational efficiency by moving to larger, consolidated schools, we also seem to have lost some of the warmth and personal commitment that characterized our smaller, local schools. We need to find a way to recapture that.

Overseers of the Poor were established because we were a compassionate people, concerned for the welfare of those who are less fortunate in circumstances or ability. Today this function has been taken over by larger and more remote governmental agencies, and although we may be providing the material needs of the poor and disabled, much as in centralized, de-personalized school systems we have lost some of the personal involvement and neighborly commitment that benefitted us all in simpler times. Again, we need to find a way to recapture that sense of community and neighborly concern.

Fence Viewers and Pound Keepers were extremely important functions in an era when every household raised animals for food and other material needs. Property boundaries were established by marking corners and were only rarely surveyed in the early years. Later surveys utilized these corners to record the metes and bounds

of parcels which had only been crudely measured at the time of their subdivision from larger tracts. Fence Viewers had the job of periodically walking the boundary lines - frequently marked by fences of stone or wood or other materials - and assuring that the fences were in good condition and in the proper location. With this knowledge they were called upon to adjudicate boundary line disputes.

When animals escaped from their home pastures they could end up either on neighboring properties or on municipal lands. Not only could this cause a loss of valuable pasturage but it could also cause unwanted breeding. Any animals found in such circumstances without approval of the municipality or the invaded property owner were subject to impoundment and their owners had to pay a fine to gain their release. This was serious business - too early breeding of sows and ewes could cause the loss of their young in bitter winter weather. Assessors and Pound Keepers worked together to determine the value of losses and damage created by roaming animals, and the owners were held accountable. Good fences have always made good neighbors, and good administration made for good fences.

Our churches, while not part of municipal life, are nonetheless a cornerstone of our community. The early settlers were devout people who brought their churches with them into the wilderness. Several churches had been established in the Town by the time of its erection.

The Providence Baptist Church can trace its roots back to that time. Over the years the Town has been home to Baptist, Methodist, Christian and Presbyterian Churches as well as Quaker Meetings. The Town's Catholic population and other denominations and religions are served by places of worship in neighboring communities. Today, as in

the early days of the Town, religious observance is an important part of people's lives.

Over the years the Town has continued to meet its own needs without looking to outside assistance. Because of our rural setting and low-density development, even in the settled hamlets, fire protection for a long time was primarily a matter of bucket brigades among neighbors. With the building of the first wing of the TB Hospital above Barkersville in 1914 and subsequent additions, fire protection took on an entirely different priority and the employees and staff of the Hospital were commandeered into the fire fighting force. Fortunately, there was never a major fire at the Hospital, or later after 1960 when it was converted into the Saratoga County Infirmary. In 1957 the first town-wide fire protection began with a public referendum to create a municipal fire district coterminous with the boundaries of the Town. Almost forty years later the Fire District continues to provide first class fire protection to the Town and its residents through the efforts of over 35 volunteers utilizing five pieces of equipment operating out of stations at Hagedorn Mills and Barkersville.

Our rural setting has also meant that we were distant from hospitals and medical centers. During the high population period of the 1800s the Town frequently enjoyed the attentions of resident medical doctors. But, as the new century approached and the population continued to fall with the decline of manufacturing jobs, the Town became dependent on remote medical assistance. People relied on family, friends, and neighbors to help them reach these facilities until 1966 when Providence joined with Galway in the creation of a combined Volunteer Ambulance Corps. Seeking even greater local responsiveness Providence volunteers established our own Ambulance Corps in 1969.

Galway and Providence continue to work closely together, backing each other up, reflecting their common heritage.

Leaving much unsaid, and many of the key people involved in the creation and development of the Town unrecognized, I would like to look very briefly into the future. The Town's economic fortunes and its population have risen and fallen over the years from a high of over 1600 in the early part of the nineteenth century to fewer than 400 in the 1940s and 50s. But one thing has remained constant - the willingness of the citizenry to be involved in the life of their Town, to work together for the common good.

Today, with our population once again approaching 1500 people it is becoming harder and harder to find people willing to become involved and to work with our volunteer organizations. The Town Board has an increasingly difficult task of finding people willing to serve in the many non-remunerative, appointive positions that allow a town of our size to function smoothly and efficiently at a cost we can afford.

This Bi-Centennial celebration is being used as an opportunity to recognize the cumulative effect of the hundreds of people who have given so freely of their time and talents over the years to allow us to reach this point in our history. But, if we don't rededicate ourselves to that task, if we can't interest more of the younger adults in the community to get involved, the Town won't be able to meet the challenges that a third century and a new millennium will surely present.

The 200 year history of our Town has encompassed many changes. What is amazing is that our guest of honor tonight has personally experienced more than half of that history. Mrs. Florence

Craig is a truly remarkable woman, and other than for her reticence to speak before such a gathering, it is she who should be up here tonight recounting the history of Providence. More than any other person she has actually lived the history of the Town, she has personally known many of its leaders, and she has actively participated in many of its functions. Through a quirk of fate she was the last local district school teacher, a dubious honor she would not have chosen. In the months ahead take the time to visit Mrs. Craig and get a first-hand view of what life was really like at the beginning of this century. An hour spent with her can only cause admiration for those who came before us. Let it also cause us to want to emulate their sense of community.

NOTE: A scythe snath is the proper name for the handle of a scythe which is generally about 4 to 6 feet long, sinuously shaped like an elongated letter "S", and had a metal collar for attaching the scythe blade. They were, and continue to be, made of ash which is a tough durable wood that is easily shaped by steam bending.

NOTE: This historical account was delivered by William W. Daley at the Town of Providence Bi-Centennial Celebration Dinner on February 17, 1996.