A Brief History of Delaware County

By Tim Duerden

Delaware County's history has been shaped to a large degree by its geography and the perseverance of the people who have settled and stewarded the county's upland terrain. Many early settlers farmed the rocky hillsides and narrow valley bottoms, others sought the raw materials in the forests.

Before the mid-eighteenth century Mohawk tribes of the Iroquois Confederation called the region around the two branches of the Delaware River home. Beginning in the 1740's, however, Europeans began to move into the area from the east and northeast, traveling overland through the Catskill Mountains, or utilizing the region's many waterways. For the most part, these new arrivals constructed rude log cabins in clearings hewn into the forests and occupied themselves with hunting and trapping.

By the time of the American Revolution most of the region had been apportioned out in tracts to wealthy speculators from the cities along the eastern seaboard and even among some who lived in Europe. Patent holders sold some of this land to pioneering settlers, such as Gideon Frisbee, while large tracts, sometimes consisting of thousands of acres, continued to be owned by the likes of Dutchman Johannes Hardenburgh.

By the 1770's many Scotch-Irish settlers began to find their way down the West Branch of the Delaware River, establishing tiny communities of log homes in Kortright, Stamford and Harpersfield. Many of these settlers were drawn to the county with the offer of 150-acre farms free of rent for the first five years.

The Revolutionary War slowed the settlement of the future Delaware County; indeed, many settlers fled to the relative safety of more populated areas in present-day Otsego and Schoharie counties. As in other frontier areas of the time, it is likely that most pioneer families along both branches of the Delaware River wished merely to be left alone by the warring factions – and their respective Indian allies. The Revolution left the territory "virtually depopulated," according to W.W. Munsell's *History of Delaware County* (1880).

After the war, survivors and new settlers returned to the region. Among these hardy newcomers were numerous groups from the "Old World," including Scotch-Irish and Germans. In addition, a great many of these post-revolutionary pioneers made their way to the Catskills from lower New York State and New England, particularly Massachusetts and Connecticut. These new settlers tended to be second and third genera-

tion descendants of original pioneers in America who now found their path to economic success blocked at home by what was considered, for the time, an over abundance of people and an under abundance of land. Delaware County did not suffer from these "afflictions"!

As scattered communities grew in the clearings of the forests and along the rivers of present-day Delaware County, buildings of a more communal nature and function joined the individual log cabins. One-room schoolhouses, churches, water-powered grist and sawmills, and eventually a general store here and there were constructed to fulfill the needs of a growing settlement.

By the 1790's, with war becoming a distant memory for younger pioneers, the population of the region had increased to the extent that the New York State Legislature was petitioned to establish a new county. In 1797, when enough support in the legislature had been secured, the region officially became known as Delaware County, breaking away from Ulster in the south and Otsego County in north.

This new political entity was made up of a mere six towns, and representatives of each town met in March 1797 to begin the work of constructing the county's necessary political and legal infrastructure. By October 1797 the first jury of the Court of Common Pleas began to meet at the home and tavern of Gideon Frisbee, located at the spot north of the village of Delhi where Elk Creek joins the West Branch of the Delaware River (presently the Delaware County Historical Association). Court continued to be held at this site until construction of a new courthouse in the village of Delhi was completed in 1799.

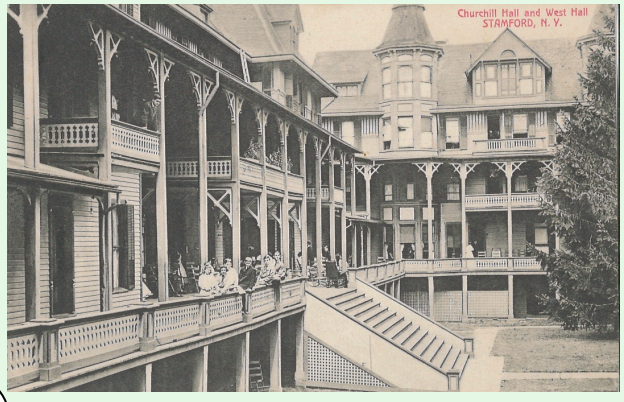
Delaware County's geography and mountainous terrain made it difficult to transport goods to the expanding European-American population – a situation that was not to change much until the mid-nineteenth century. As a result of their "isolation," settlers relied on a far-reaching subsistence economy in which most important commodities were produced locally, either within the household, or at the hands of local artisans and craftspeople.

Men and women, and sometimes, even children, shared equally in production for this subsistence economy. On local farms, men and boys tended to the larger livestock, while their female counterparts maintained the household

and looked after the smaller animals. In addition to vegetables and grains, most households produced flax and wool, cut their own timber and in spring tapped the maple trees for their sap. Trees also provided the raw material for products such as potash and tannic acid. These isolated communities frequently had cabinetmakers, joiners, tinsmiths, blacksmiths, and basketmakers – craftspeople specializing in trades that farmers could not.

By the early decades of the nineteenth century acid factories were flourishing in the southern part of Delaware County and sawmills proliferated across the entire county. Soon resourceful residents were utilizing the region's waterways to transport their products. Enormous rafts of floating timber were lashed together for transport southward along both branches of the Delaware to Trenton and Philadelphia. Cargoes of bluestone, wheat, potash, wool and whiskey were often loaded onto the rafts for transport to the cities.

Delaware County continued to attract new migrants through the first quarter of the nineteenth century. However, the rugged topography of the region, combined with accessibility problems, hindered any large-scale migration. After 1800 and the construction of the Jericho Turnpike (connecting Rhinecliff in the Hudson Valley with Bainbridge on the Susquehanna) and the Catskill Turnpike (from Catskill in the east to Unadilla in the west) the county gained slightly easier connections to the outside world - for people and products alike.



Still, population growth in the new county was slow. In 1800 the population stood at 10,000; some 60 years later it had reached 40,000 - and it has continued to hover around this mark ever since. The opening of the Erie Canal, well to the north of the county in 1825, while providing an easier transportation route between the Hudson Valley and Buffalo, only served to divert trade and population growth away from the Catskills and Delaware County.

The rugged nature of the land also delayed the arrival of railroads into Delaware County. While other areas of the state were becoming increasingly accessible by train, most towns in Delaware County had to wait until the 1860s and 1870s for regular service.

The advent of rail service, however, when it came proved a boon to the region's dairy farmers. Now large quantities of butter, milk and other dairy products could be shipped in refrigerated cars rapidly and directly to urban markets hundreds of miles away. The creameries that received and shipped the milk from local farmers flourished in those communities along the rails. "Milk trains" departed early every morning bound for urban markets, and the dairy industry continued to be the mainstay of the local economy until well into the twentieth century.

Rail transportation, and later on, the automobile, provided the catalyst for a tourism industry in Delaware County. Local boarding houses and, later, large hotels provided summer accommodations for throngs of city-weary vacationers seeking the cool freshness of the mountains.

Newcomers, many paying their first visit to Delaware County as tourists, have continued to settle in the region. Today Delaware County may be described as having a mixed population of "locals," many of whom are able to trace their lineage all the way back to the original pioneers, and the numerous "city folk," denoting the segment of the community that has arrived more recently (many in this second category are part-time residents).

Today, as during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these groups have often failed to see eye to eye over questions of land use. Despite the different ideas about the county's future, however, one phenomenon remains indisputable: As the local dairy industry has declined during the last couple of decades, the forest has once more spread its sylvan blanket over the hills and fields of Delaware County, returning this small corner of the world to an appearance much closer to a time before the arrival of the first European pioneers.