

2.0 HISTORIC OVERVIEW

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Location

The Town of Amherst is located in Western New York State in the northern section of Erie County. To the north, Tonawanda Creek divides the town from Niagara County. The Town of Clarence is at its eastern border, with Transit Road as the dividing line. Amherst is set off from the Town of Cheektowaga, to the south, by Wehrle Drive and the NYS Thruway, I-90. At its western border, Niagara Falls Boulevard separates Amherst from the Town of Tonawanda; and the city of Buffalo borders it to the southwest near Main Street and Kenmore Avenue at Grover Cleveland Park. Amherst is 53.28 square miles or 33,600 acres and has a population (as of July 1, 2017) of 124,733.¹

Setting and Geography

Geography played an important role in the development of the Town of Amherst. Settlers were attracted by rich soil and timber resources and the water power of the creeks. Mills along the creeks were important to the farm economy of Amherst during the nineteenth century. Ellicott Creek, once called Eleven-Mile Creek, enters the town south of the Village of Williamsville and flows northwest, emptying into Tonawanda Creek not far from the Niagara River. Tonawanda Creek on the town's northern border flows west to the Niagara River and eventually became part of New York's Erie Canalway system. Both Tonawanda Creek and its main tributary, Ransom Creek, drain the northern and eastern parts of the town. One of the most prominent topographical features is the Onondaga Escarpment, an east-west hard limestone bedrock formation that lies in the southern portion of town. Ellicott Creek cascades down the escarpment providing a waterfall that was a source of water power in the early days.²

Today, the northern section of Amherst is typified by suburban development with a few farms still in existence near the northern border. Amherst's southern area is largely urbanized and suburbanized.³

Pre-Historic and Native American Occupation

The first evidence of human habitation in Western New York goes back about 12,500 years when much of the area was an open grassland. The earliest inhabitants were hunters and gatherers following roaming herds of caribou, mastodons, moose, elk, and musk-ox. During the Archaic Period (12,500 to 3,500 years ago), nomadic bands of 25-30 people, possibly related families, traveled from one campsite to the next depending on the season and availability of food.

The natural environment of Amherst area favored pre-historic occupation in the Archaic Period and beyond. Lands along Tonawanda, Ransom, and Ellicott Creeks were

¹ Joseph A. Grande, *Glancing Back: A Pictorial History of Amherst, New York*. Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company Publishers, 2000, 8.

² Grande, 270.

³ KTA Preservation Specialists, *Updated Reconnaissance Level Survey of Historic Resources, Town of Amherst, Erie County, New York*. Town of Amherst, 2011, 7-8.

suitable for habitation. The creeks provided a water supply and transportation, and the nearby lands had a variety of plant and animal resources necessary to support inhabitants. Higher locations along the Onondaga Escarpment became hunting camps and quarry sites.

There is no evidence of a pre-historic or Native American village in the area now comprising Amherst, but there were documented Native American villages in other towns such as Clarence and Lancaster. The Senecas, one of the original five nations of the Iroquois Confederacy lived further east in the Genesee River Valley. By the mid-1600s, all of Western New York, including Amherst, became Seneca hunting grounds.

As the Senecas made their way through the area now known as Amherst, hunting, fishing, trading and procuring resources, footpaths or trails were developed. The Great Iroquois Trail, later called Buffalo Street and today known as Main Street, crossed westward through Clarence and into southern Amherst atop the Onondaga Escarpment enroute to Buffalo Creek on Lake Erie. A second route, today known as North Forest Road, ran northward along Ellicott Creek to Tonawanda Creek and then onto Lake Ontario and Fort Niagara, an important trade center. A main trail that led to Native American villages to the south became Cayuga Road. These Native American trails were later used by European settlers to develop the early road system.⁴

Pioneer Settlement

During the American War for Independence, the Iroquois joined British forces and ravaged American settlements in central New York and Pennsylvania. To retaliate, in 1779, General John Sullivan and his army marched from Pennsylvania to the Genesee Valley, destroying crops, slaughtering livestock, and burning villages. Native Americans fled to Fort Niagara, which continued to be occupied by the British until 1796. When the British finally withdrew forces from Fort Niagara in 1796, some Iroquois fled to Canada, others settled near the mouth of Buffalo Creek near Lake Erie. In the summer of 1797, Iroquois chiefs in Western New York were convinced to cede all their land rights in the area, except for 200,000 acres set aside for reservations. Iroquois lands in Erie County consisted of a 70-square-mile reservation along Tonawanda Creek near Akron, a 130-square mile reservation on Buffalo Creek near the present city of Buffalo, and a 42-square mile reservation along Cattaraugus Creek.⁵

Prior to 1788, lands in western, central and eastern New York were claimed by Massachusetts. In 1788, Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham, financiers from New England, purchased a six-million-acre tract from Lake Erie to the Genesee River for \$30,000 or five cents an acre. This became known as the Phelps and Gorham Purchase. In 1791, Philadelphia banker Robert Morris, purchased the rights to that land and divided it into five tracts (Figure 1). After the Iroquois relinquished title to most of the lands of Western New York at the Treaty of Big Tree in 1797, Morris purchased all the Seneca land in Western and Central New York for \$100,000 or 2.5 cents per acre. In turn, he sold most of his holdings to a group of Dutch financiers from Amsterdam,

⁴ Grande, 11-13.

⁵ Grande, 13.

known as the Holland Land Company. Joseph Ellicott, from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, was hired to direct the survey of what came to be known as the Holland Land Purchase (Figure 2). Ellicott had been trained by his older brother, Andrew, who helped to plan the new federal capital of Washington, D.C. The survey of the purchase of 3,300,000 acres began in 1798 and was completed by 1801. Once the survey was completed, Ellicott was appointed resident agent to direct sales on the Holland Land Purchase (Figure 3). He started out by laying out a village plan for Buffalo, based on the design of Washington, D.C., and then moved the company's central office to Batavia, a settlement more at the center of the purchase.⁶

The earliest recorded transaction of land sales in Amherst by the Holland Land Company was the purchase of 300 acres of land around the waterfall at Ellicott Creek where it crossed Buffalo Road in 1799. Partners Benjamin Ellicott (brother of Joseph) and John Thompson paid \$2/acre for the property. Knowing the value of water power, lumber and agricultural potential, they erected a sawmill, log house and stable. However, their partnership did not last long. In 1804, David Evans, nephew of the Ellicotts, and Jonas Williams, both clerks of the Holland Land Company discovered the falls on their way to Buffalo and sought to buy out the owners. In 1811, Williams rehabbed Thompson's sawmill and built a grist mill, which is still in operation today (Figures 4, 5, 6). He erected dams and raceways to power the mills, a tannery, furnace, distillery and carding works. Eventually other log homes began to dot the land and people began to settle in what was then known as Williams Mills, the first settlement in what would eventually become the Town of Amherst.

War of 1812 and the Establishment of a Town

The threat of war with the British in 1812 discouraged land sales and settlement in Amherst. While no battles took place in Amherst during the War of 1812, the conflict was near and troops gathered in the area. It became an important supply base for soldiers operating on the Niagara Frontier and a training camp for new troops. Drill grounds, barracks and an arsenal were constructed near what is now Garrison Road. In 1813, the barracks were expanded and the area became a hospital base for the wounded. During the burning of Buffalo in 1813, residents fled from the British to Amherst and beyond.⁷ By 1814, 5,000 to 6,000 troops were quartered in Amherst. The presence of troops helped to profit taverns, stores and other business enterprises.⁸

In the years following the war until the middle of the nineteenth century, Amherst evolved from a wilderness frontier to a thriving community. The town of Amherst was created by the New York State Legislature on April 10, 1818. It included the village of Williams Mills (later known as Williamsville) and, until 1839, part of the Town of West Seneca and Town of Cheektowaga. Amherst held its first town board meeting on April 6, 1819. The new government consisted of a town supervisor, Timothy S. Hopkins, town board, and departments of tax assessment, highways, public welfare, peacekeeping

⁶ Grande, 15; Sue Miller Young, *A History of the Town of Amherst, New York 1818-1965*. Town of Amherst, New York: 1965, 4-5.

⁷ Young, 16-17.

⁸ Grande, 25.

and education.⁹ The origin of the town's name may have come from Amherst, Massachusetts. Many early settlers came from New England, including the area where the Massachusetts Amherst is located. It may also have indirectly been named for Sir Jeffrey Amherst, a hero in the English colonies and commander-in-chief of British Forces in America from 1759-1760.¹⁰

A portion of the Erie Canal in Western New York uses Tonawanda Creek, located at Amherst's north border. When the Canal opened in 1825, it brought development and settlers in large numbers to northern section of town and settlement expanded rapidly. Shipping on the canal was quicker and less expensive; travel by boat was more comfortable than by horse, wagon or stage. The canal opened new markets for area farmers and manufacturers and led to the increase growth of existing farms, industries and commercial enterprises. It led to a shift from subsistent farming to commercial farming. In 1821, Amherst became part of Erie County and by 1830 the population was 2,489. Local manufacturing consisted of two gristmills, five sawmills, four carding machines, one ironworks, five distilleries and one ashery (Figure 7).

Hamlets

Settlers came from New England, New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, including the Pennsylvania Dutch/Mennonites, Germany, Ireland, and the Alsace-Lorraine Region of France. New inhabitants who were drawn to the area clustered around stores or sections with common interests. Hamlets began to take shape, springing up around crossroads, post offices, mills, and stores and were often named after local prominent landowners or businessmen.

Williamsville/Williams Mill, named after Jonas Williams who developed the mills along Ellicott Creek near Buffalo Road/Main Street, was the largest of the hamlets. It became the political, industrial and business center of Amherst by 1850 and the only hamlet to be incorporated. (Figure 8). Snyderville (now Snyder) at Main Street and Harlem Road and Eggertsville at Main and Guideboard (now Eggert) Road were named after postmasters and store owners Michael Snyder and Christian Eggert. Getzville gets its name from Joseph Getz, who owned a cooperage. Amherst Center was located along North Forest Road in the town's geographic center. Snearly's Corners straddled the Clarence town line on Transit Road in the southern section of town. While Swormville, named for Adam Schworm who owned a store and hotel, and Mill Port, now Millersport, were located to the northeast along the Clarence town line. Pickard's Bridge was located on the northern fringes of the Erie Canal on Tonawanda Creek. The French Settlement, later re-named Vincent's Station, was on Ellicott Creek on the western end of the Canandaigua Niagara Falls Railroad, while Transit Station (East Amherst) was at the eastern end of the line.¹¹

Small, one-room schoolhouses and churches were erected where a concentration of population could support them, usually soon after the first settlers had established

⁹ Grande, 31; 2011 Survey, 11.

¹⁰ Young, 21-22.

¹¹ Young, 53.

themselves. School houses were typically erected on donated land. Later, brick school houses were built to replace wood plank or long structures. By the 1850s, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Mennonite, Lutheran and Methodist churches could be found in the town, mostly along Main Street.

By the middle of the nineteenth century (1850), the population of Amherst had reached 4,153 and 25 percent of the land had been improved.¹² The town had seven grist mills and several saw mills, two forges, a tannery, carding works, a bedstead factory, blacksmith and harness shops, cooperages, stave factory, lime kilns, tailor shop, paper mill, broom factory, wagon shops, maltsters and brewers, a planning mill, cabinet makers, vinegar factory, two potteries, slaughter houses, taverns and inns.¹³ The Village of Williamsville was incorporated on June 26, 1850, consisting of a one square mile stretch of land along Buffalo Road/Main Street. Benjamin Miller was elected the first president of the incorporated village. (Figure 9)

Roads and Transportation

By the middle of the nineteenth century significant developments occurred in Amherst in local transportation, agriculture and industries like quarrying limestone, cement production, and saw and grist milling. Main Street/Buffalo Road developed from an Native American trail, to a log road, plank road, and a macadamized toll road by 1840. Daily stagecoaches and freight wagons passed through Amherst on their way to Buffalo and often stopped in Williamsville and the hamlets of Snyderville and Eggertsville.¹⁴ At the north end of town, canal boats passed through Amherst from Buffalo heading to Rochester and points east on Tonawanda Creek and the Erie Canal.

The railroad came to Western New York in the 1850s, which led to the decline of areas along the canal, like Pickard's Bridge, and the increase in development of areas near the new railroad lines, like Getzville and Transit Station. The railroad arrived in Amherst in 1854 with the completion of the Canandaigua and Niagara Falls Railroad, which traveled through the center of town. The New York Central took over operation in 1858 and it was often referred to as the "Peanut Line" because of its narrow-gauge tracks and because a New York Central employee once referred to it as "a peanut of a line." (Figure 10). At the end of the nineteenth-century, in 1896, the Lehigh Valley Railroad Company built another railroad through town that passed through Williamsville as it crossed town from Depew to Tonawanda.¹⁵

Agriculture, Milling and Industry

Agriculture continued to be an important occupation in Amherst during the 1800s and into the twentieth century. The nature of Amherst's rural economy evolved from 1850 to 1900 into more complex agricultural patterns, moving from subsistence to commercial

¹² Grande, 32.

¹³ Young, 40.

¹⁴ 2011 Survey, 12.

¹⁵ 2011 Survey, 12.

farming. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, several thousand acres of new farmland was reclaimed in the northern half of the town when the low-lying swamplands were drained. German immigrants farmed the newly reclaimed loamy soil. Amherst produced large quantities of wool, pork, dairy products and fruit. By the dawn of the twentieth century, farm production had shifted to grain with large crops of oats, corn, wheat and rye. Potatoes, apples, plums, peaches, cherries and grapes were also grown. Agricultural produce was sent to nearby markets in Buffalo, Williamsville and Tonawanda.¹⁶

Mills were an important part of the Amherst economy in the nineteenth century. The earliest settlers recognized that the area around Main Street and Ellicott Creek in Williamsville was an excellent site for water powered mills. By the 1850s, saw and grist mills lined Ellicott Creek, especially in Williamsville near Main Street, where the creek flows over the Onandaga Escarpment. Another early mill site was located on Ellicott Creek near the intersection of Millersport Highway and North Forest Road where a saw and grist mill were in operation throughout the nineteenth century. Other mills in Amherst were powered by water springs, gas, or steam engines. Mills that dotted the town landscape included: the Williamsville Water Mill (still in operation today), Dodge Mill, Reist Mill, Getzville Mills and Wolf Mill. Other industries in the town during the mid-to-late nineteenth century included limestone quarries and cement production, a broom factory, tannery, brewery, forge, hub and spoke factory, planing mills and a gelatin factory.¹⁷ Chalmers Gelatin Factory on Evans Street, was one of the largest in the nation and Amherst's largest industry. Its gelatin was marketed throughout the east for jellied salads, meat, ice cream, marshmallows, candy and, during the early twentieth century, for munitions and photographic supplies.¹⁸

Suburbanization

Amherst's Main Street led to the center of Buffalo, making access to both communities much easier with the development of new forms of public transportation. As stagecoaches and wagons were replaced by more rapid methods of travel like trolley lines and commuter trains, people were able to live a distance from their workplace.¹⁹ In 1893, the Buffalo and Williamsville Electric Railway trolley system was built along Main Street (Figure 11). This improved mode of transportation, along with an increase in the urban population, spurred the growth of suburban residential neighborhoods away from the centers of Buffalo and Williamsville into former rural areas. The trolley was extended to Transit Road by 1903. In the 1910s, many of the old farmsteads in that area were being subdivided to create large estates for wealthy businessmen and residential subdivisions for middle class families. Schools, churches and fire companies followed the population out of urban areas and into the newly formed suburbs. Early suburban neighborhoods that started before 1920 include Rosedale Park, Amherst Estates, College Hill and Aurora Park. In 1903, the Country Club of Buffalo, moved from the city of Buffalo to Amherst to serve the wealthier new residents. Amherst began to change

¹⁶ Grande, 85.

¹⁷ 2011 Survey, 12.

¹⁸ Grande, 96, 171.

¹⁹ Joseph A. Grande, *Images of America: Amherst*, Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2004, 47.

from a rural community to a residential suburb, first along Main Street and then all over town (Figure 12).

With the widening of Main Street in the 1920s, automobiles and buses became the major form of transportation and the use of electric street cars began to decline. The rate of suburbanization in Amherst, especially in areas adjacent to Main Street, accelerated during that decade and beyond. Auto repair shops and filling stations replaced the nineteenth century wagon and blacksmith shops. In the southern part of town, real estate entrepreneurs subdivided most of the remaining farms as well as the large estates that were associated with the first phase of suburbanization. To encourage buyers, developers built several model or demonstration homes and real estate offices, laid utility lines and sidewalks, and constructed many of the subdivision entrance structures that are found along Main Street today.²⁰

By the 1920s and 1930s, larger buildings replaced the fire companies, schools, churches and commercial buildings that were constructed during the first phase of suburban development to meet the needs of a new surge in population in the area. The Amherst Central School District was formed in 1930, consolidating the nineteenth-century one and two-room school houses that dotted the town. Most of those school houses were demolished or moved to the Amherst Museum (today known as the Buffalo Niagara Heritage Village). Amherst Central High School and Sacred Heart Academy, were among the new and larger schools built on Main Street. At the same time, the size of residential building lots and the houses built on them after the 1920s became more modest in size.²¹

Increased consumer demand for single-family homes and suburban living in the late-1930s led to improvements and construction of major roads like Main Street, Sheridan Drive and Millersport Highway and the rural center of the town was opened to new development. In the home building market, prior to World War II, home buyers were on their own to deal with several housing contractors such as plumbers, carpenters, landscapers and electricians when building a home. That changed after the war as developers acted as an agent for the home buyer, overseeing all aspects of construction. Following national trends, housing construction picked up again in Amherst after World War II, starting in the southern half of town and moving north. In the decade of the 1950s, the population of Amherst grew by nearly 30,000. The upward trend toward the suburbs was due to regional population growth, high savings rates, federal mortgage incentives, and the automobile. To meet the needs of the growing population, two new school districts were formed: the Williamsville Central School District in 1948 and the Sweet Home Central School District in 1950.²²

Along with the population growth came the need for additional housing, commercial buildings and infrastructure. The Town of Amherst approved its first apartment complex in 1941 and by the 1970s apartments and town house construction became 68 percent

²⁰ 2011 Survey, 13-14.

²¹ 2011 Survey, 14.

²² 2011 Survey, 14.

of the total of all new family units in town.²³ Along with residential neighborhoods came the shopping centers to provide goods and services to the new residents. University Plaza, one of the nation's first shopping plazas opened in 1941 at Main Street and Kenmore Avenue. Northtown Plaza, between Sheridan Drive and Eggert Road, and Sheridan-Harlem Plaza opened in the late 1950s. The Boulevard Mall at Niagara Falls Boulevard and Maple Road, one of the first enclosed malls in the country, opened in the early 1960s. Gas stations lined the major roads in town and auto dealers built showrooms first on Main Street and then moved out to Transit Road. Major department stores brought their suburban branches to town and Amherst became home to banks and national business chains.

Major transportation projects also spurred the transformation of the once-rural town into a largely suburban one. Former two-lane roads were widened. The New York State Thruway at the southern border opened in 1953. Highways like I-290 in 1963 and I-990 in the 1980s made it easier to access the northern half of the town, resulting in these areas being open to residential and commercial development (Figure 13).

Amherst Today

With a population of approximately 125,000, Amherst is a major economic hub in Western New York, consisting of malls, corporate parks, industrial parks, business headquarters, hotels and motels (Figure 14). It has numerous medical and medical-related facilities, such as Millard Fillmore Suburban Hospital. Higher education is also a major enterprise in town. Daemen College was founded as Rosary Hill College, a women's liberal arts college in 1947. Today it is a private, nonsectarian, co-educational, comprehensive college of 2700 students located on Main Street in Amherst. Erie Community College, with a current student population of 14,000, was founded in 1946 and moved to its campus on Main Street in Williamsville in 1960. Amherst is also home to the State University of New York, University at Buffalo's 1,000-acre North Campus with a student population of 29,800. The opening of the north campus in the early-1970s had a profound effect on the character of the town. Other institutions of higher education include the graduate campus of Medaille College and a satellite campus of Bryant and Stratton College. Amherst is also home to four libraries in the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System: the Audubon, Clearfield, Eggertsville-Snyder and Williamsville branches. As far as its agricultural and milling roots, most of the farms that are still in operation in Amherst are located in the north and eastern part of town. The Williamsville Water Mill remains in operation at the center of the village as the one reminder of the once vital industry of the town's past.

²³ Grande, 232.

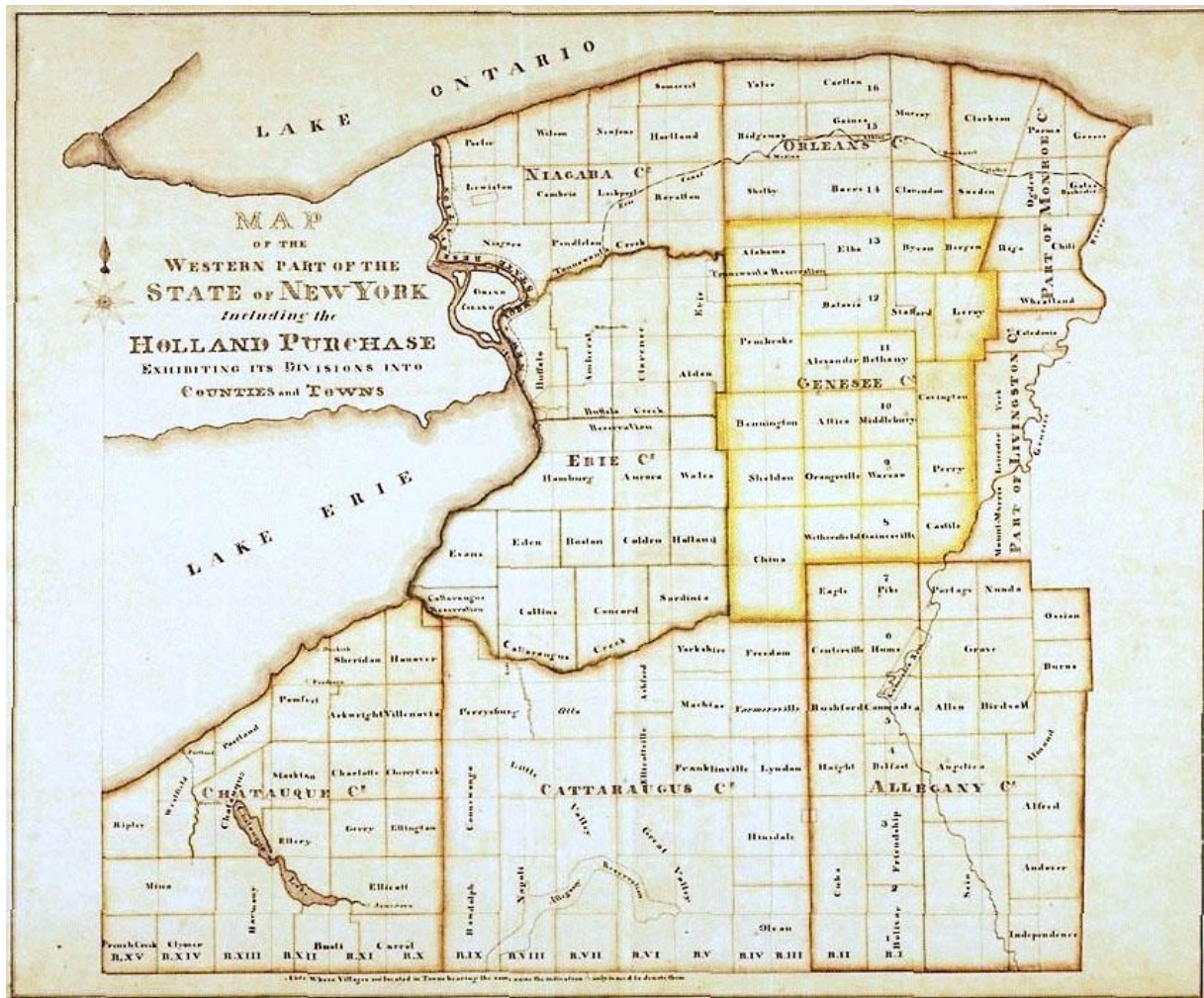


Figure 1: Map of the Western Part of the State of New York including the Holland Purchase Exhibiting its Divisions into Counties and Towns, from University at Buffalo Universities Libraries Map Collection.

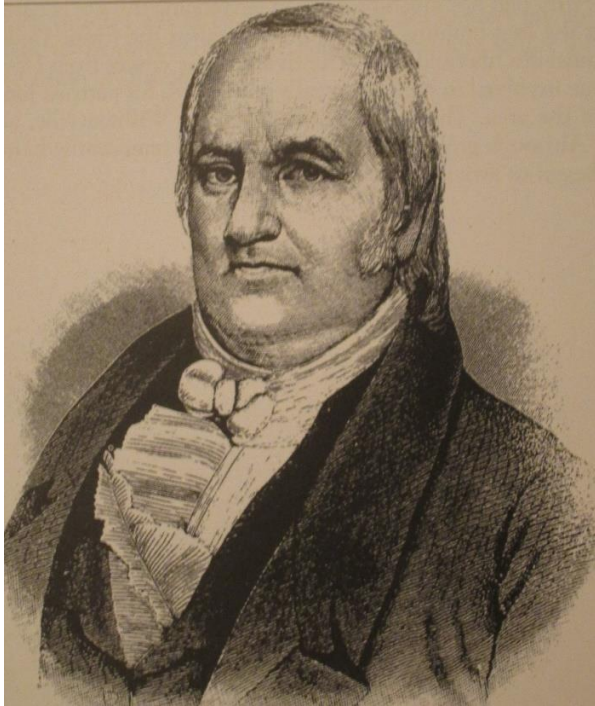


Figure 2: Joseph Ellicott was the chief surveyor and then resident agent for the Holland Land Company. Under his direction the first sales of land in what is now the Town of Amherst were made around the Ellicott Creek Falls. From *Images of America: Amherst* by Joseph A. Grande [page 10].

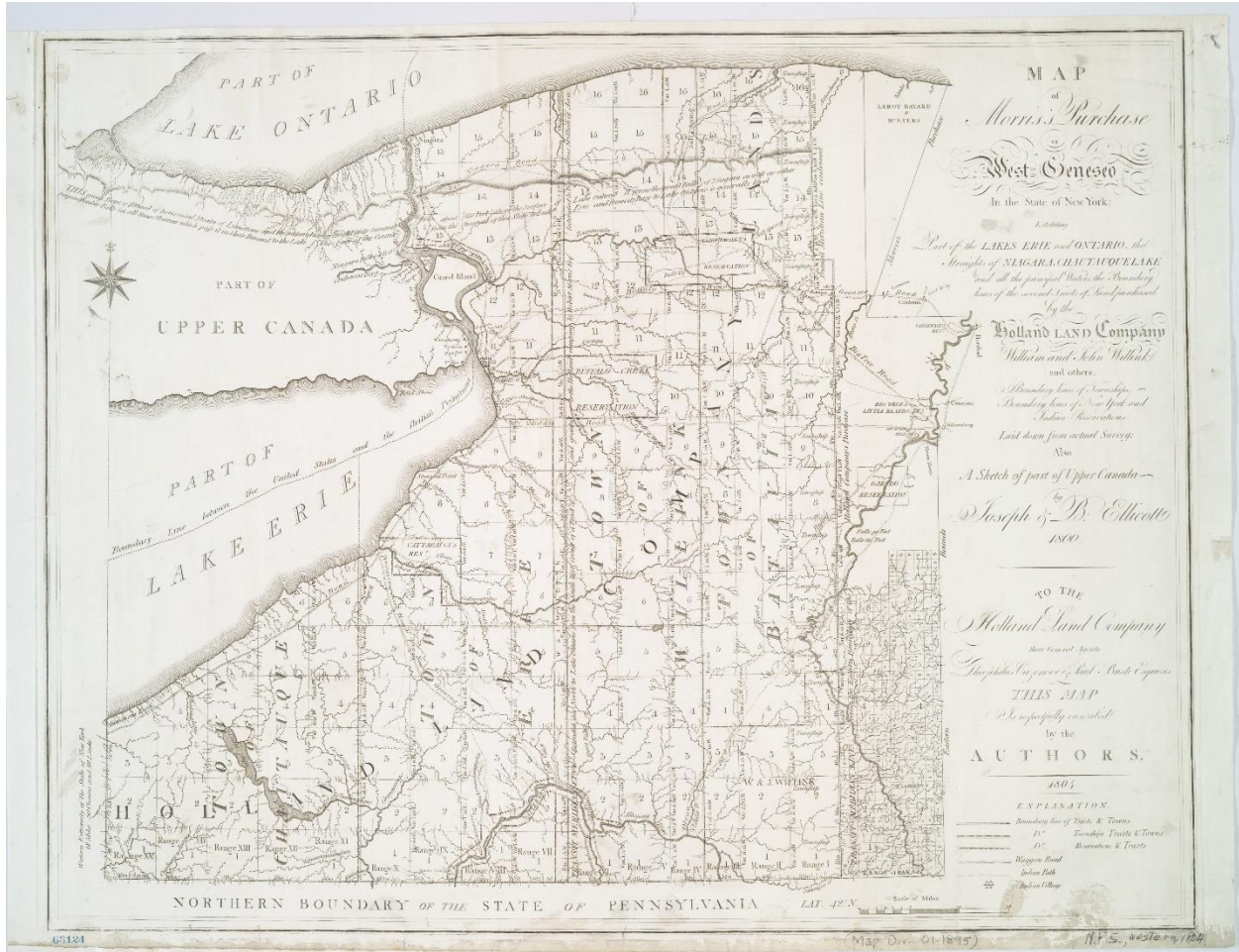


Figure 3: Map of Morris' Purchase or West Geneseo in the state of New York, 1804. From New York Public Library Digital Collections, Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division.



Figure 4: The Williamsville Water Mills on the west bank of Ellicott Creek Falls around 1866.

From *A History of the Town of Amherst, New York* by Sue Miller Young. [page 175]



Figure 5: The Williamsville Water Mill was constructed in 1811 by Jonas Williams. This illustration shows the raceway that brought the water from Ellicott Creek to turn the large waterwheel in the 1850s. Courtesy Amherst Museum/from *Glancing Back: A Pictorial History of Amherst, New York* by Joseph A. Grande [page 17].



Figure 6: The Williamsville Water Mills, date unknown, is still in operation today. From *Images of America: Amherst* by Joseph A. Grande [page 10].

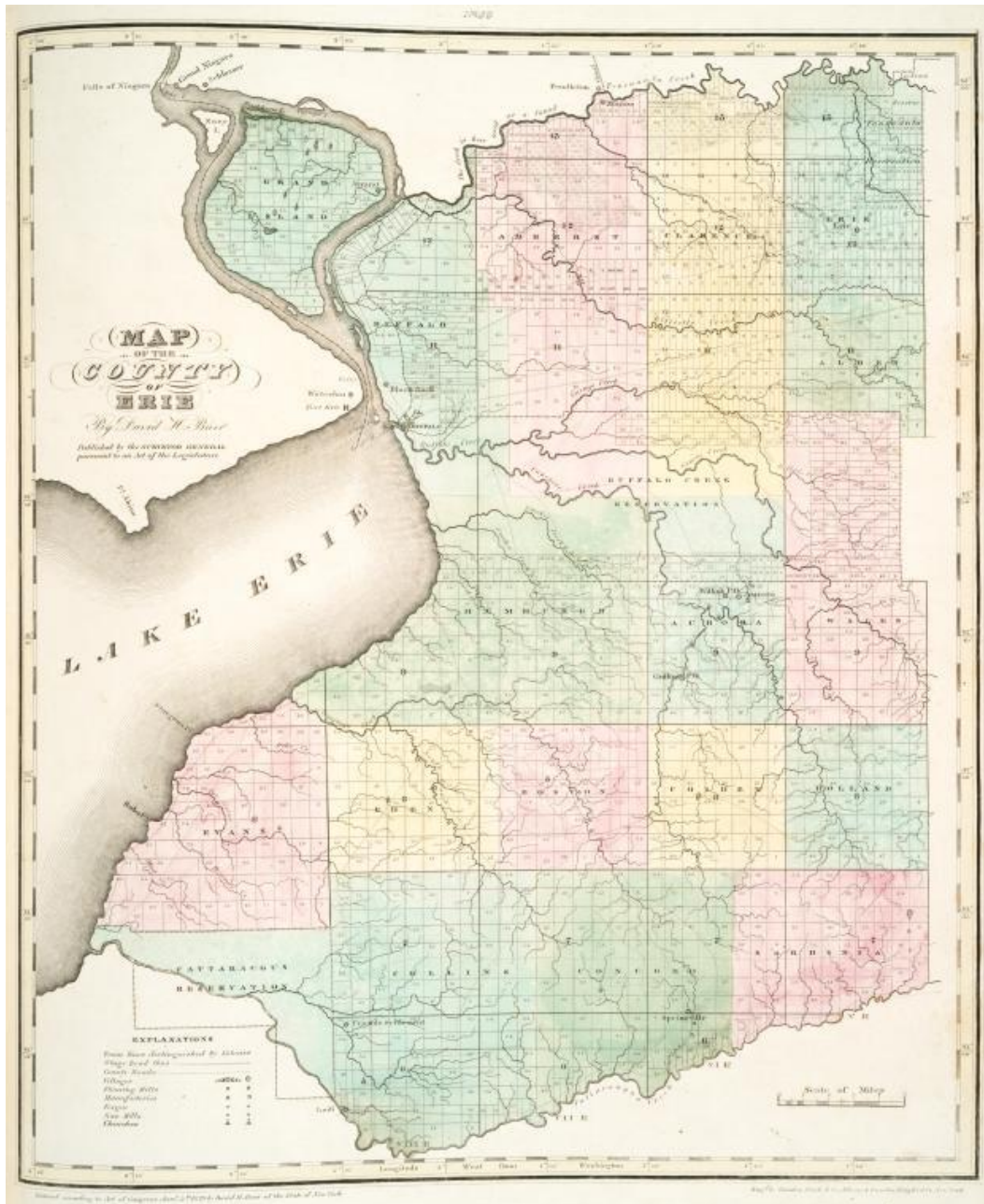


Figure 7: Map of the County of Erie, 1829. From New York Public Library Digital Collections, Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division.

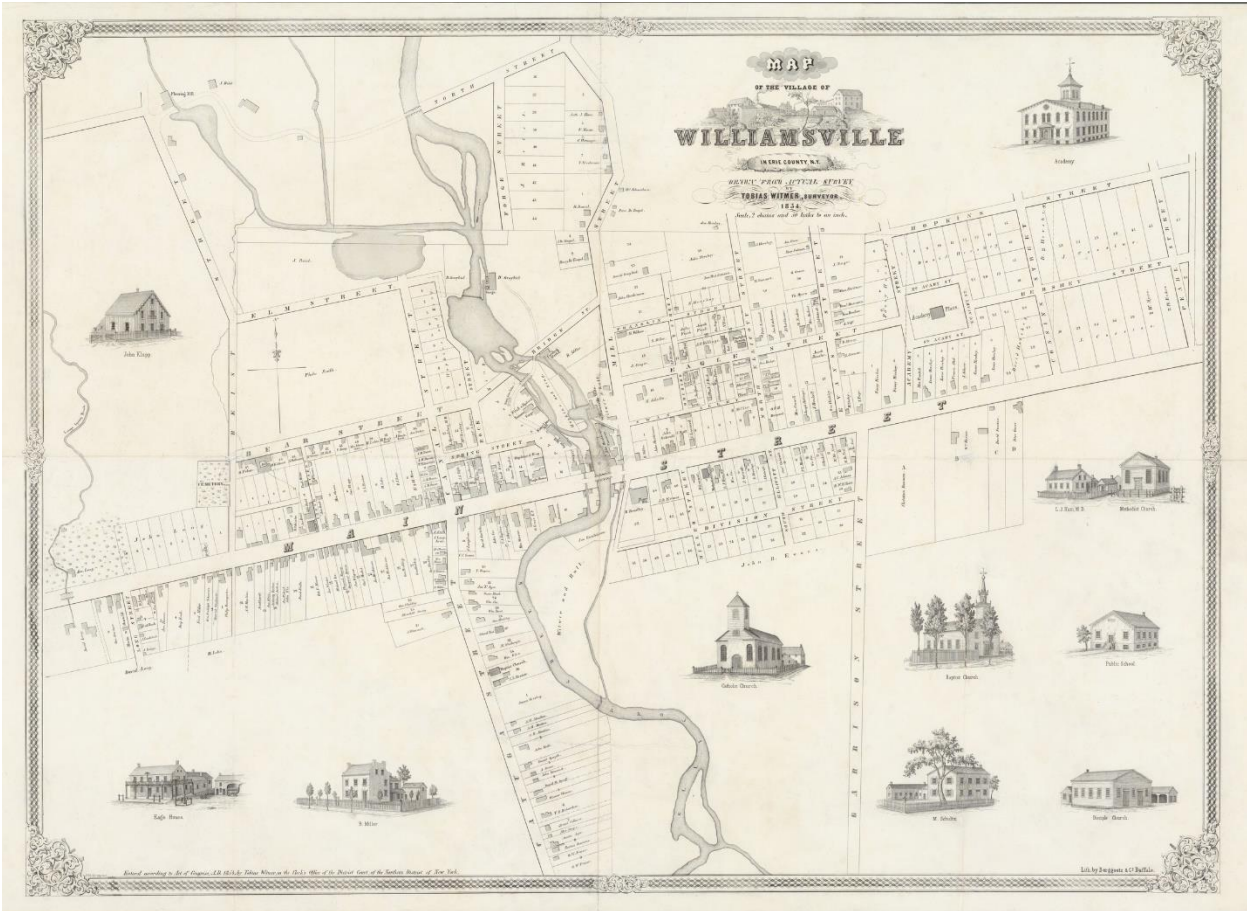


Figure 8: 1854 Map of Williamsville in Erie County, New York. From New York Public Library Digital Collections, Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division.

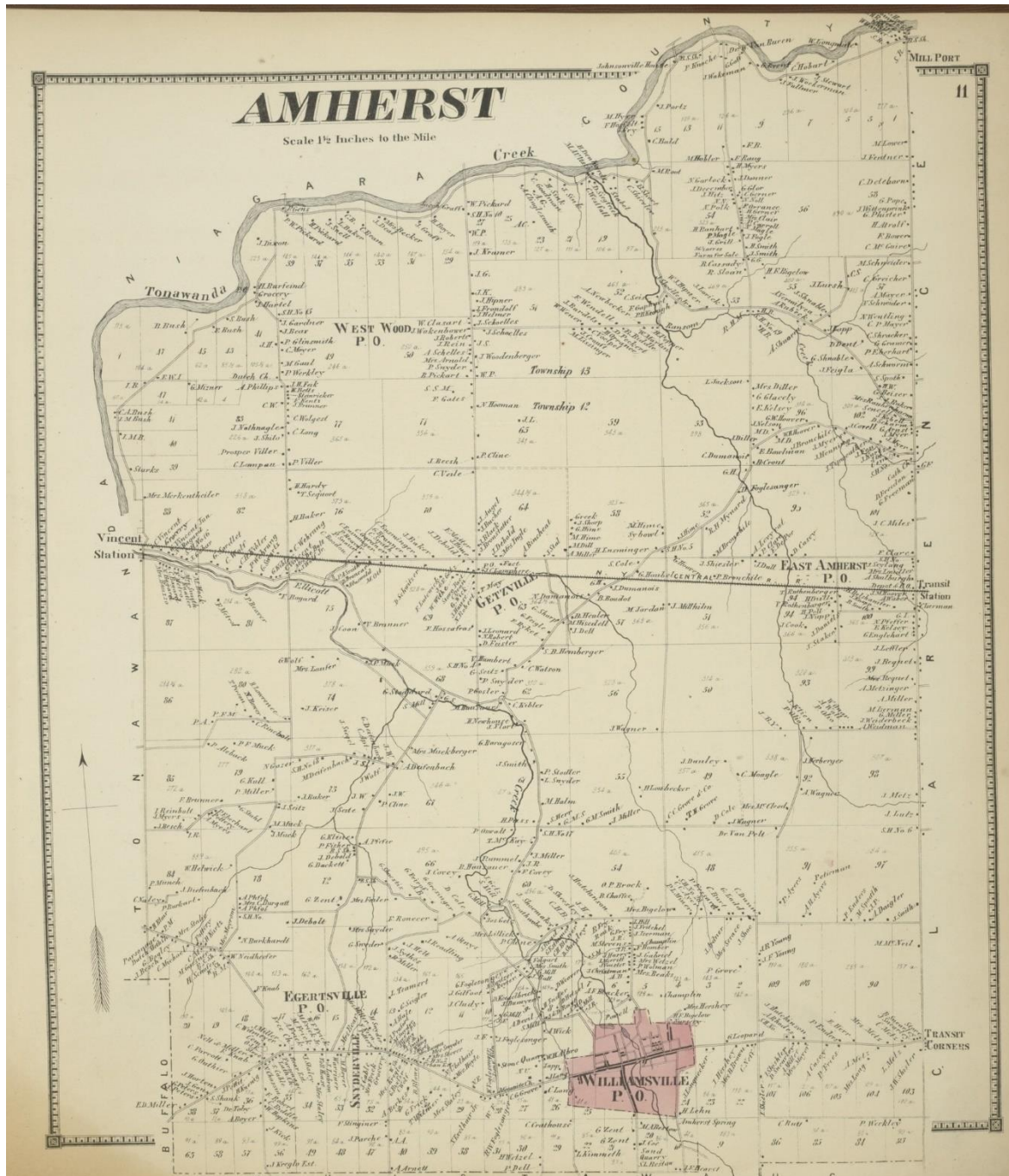


Figure 9: Amherst [Township], New Topographical Atlas of Erie County, 1866. From New York Public Library Digital Collections, Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division.



Figure 10: Map of Amherst showing hamlets, railroad lines and major roads. From: *Images of America: Amherst* by Joseph A. Grande [page 48].



Figure 11: The Buffalo and Williamsville Railway Company opened in 1883 and eventually extended from the Buffalo city line through Amherst to Transit Road and Main Street. From *Images of America: Amherst* by Joseph A. Grande [page 51].

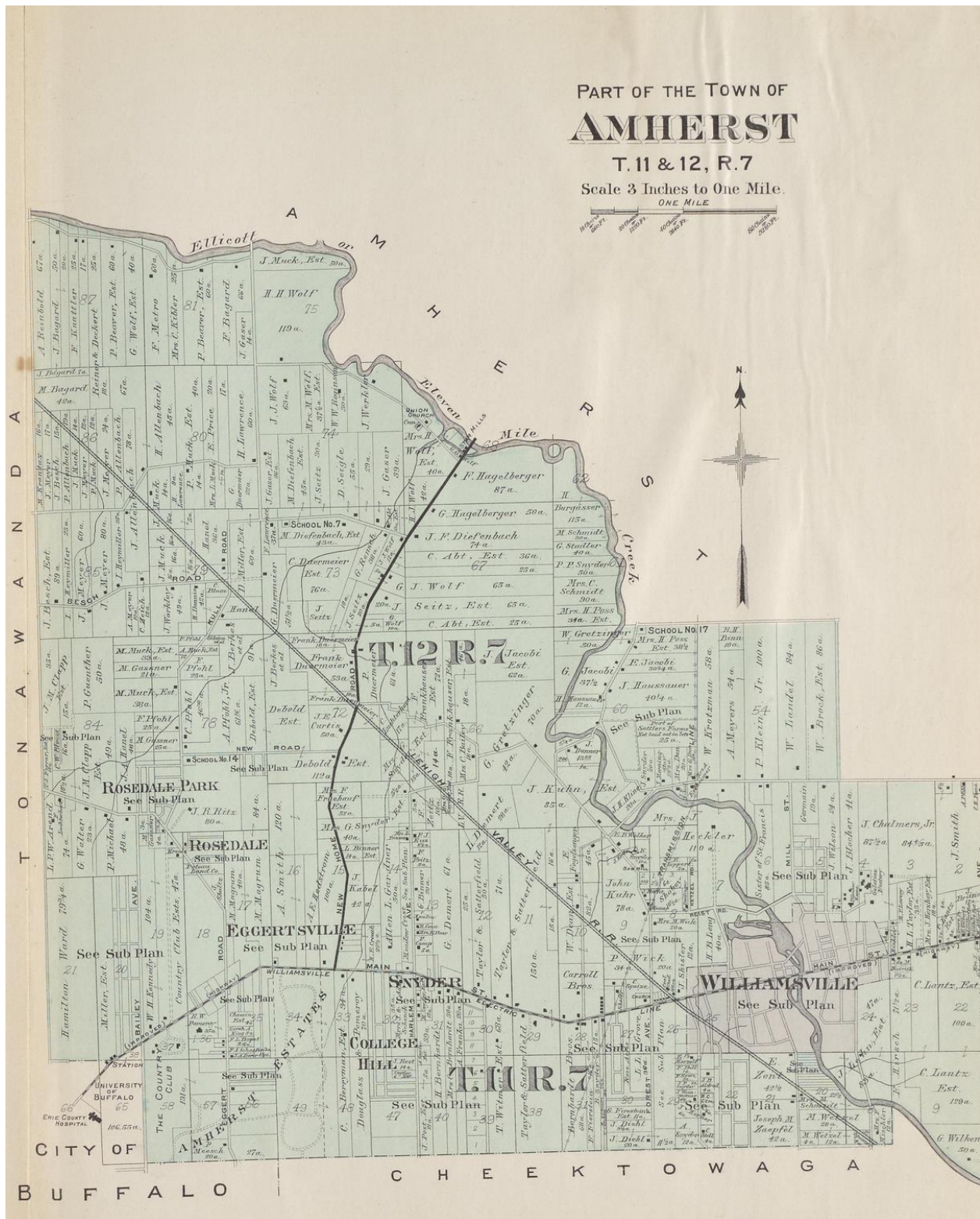


Figure 12: Part of the Town of Amherst, Century Atlas Company, 1915. From New York Public Library Digital Collections, Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division.

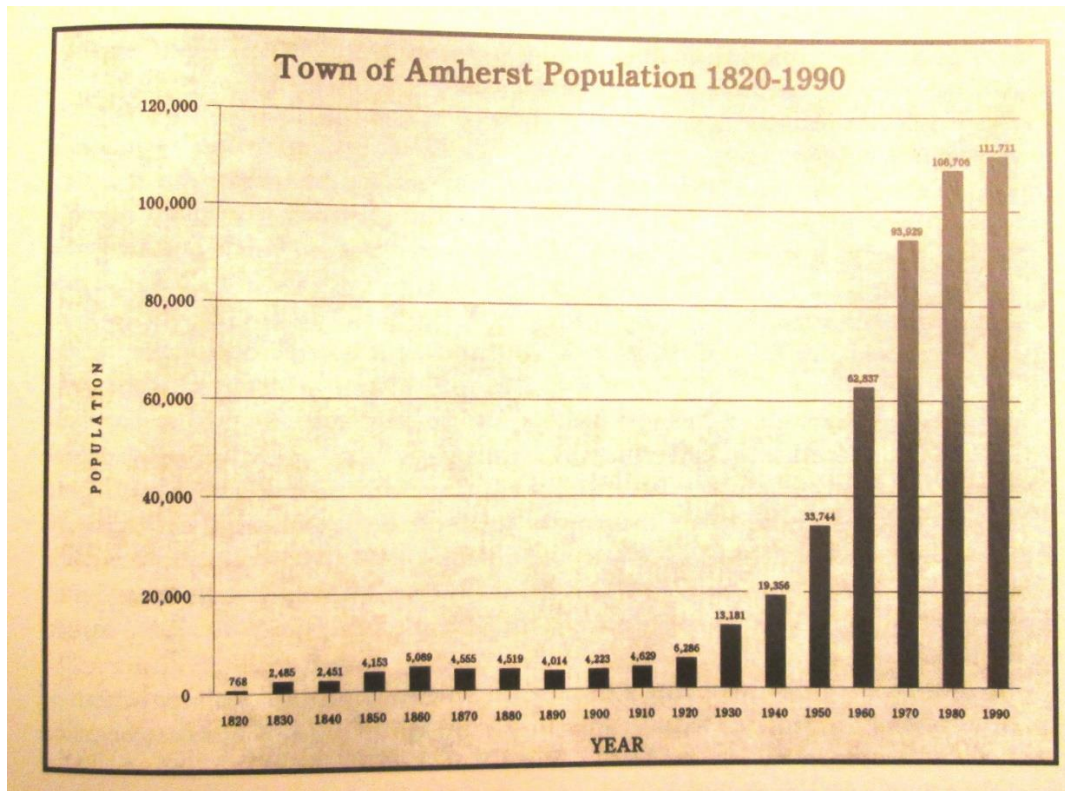


Figure 13: Town of Amherst Population 1820-1990, from *Glancing Back: A Pictorial History of Amherst, New York* by Joseph A. Grande [page 269].



Figure 14: Town of Amherst Road Map, 2016. From Town of Amherst, http://map.amherst.ny.us/PDF/Maps/RoadMap_ArchD.pdf.