

A Brief History of the Town of Amherst

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Over 400 million years ago, Eurypterus Remipes, an extinct relative of the modern King crab, lived in the shallow sea that extended across New York State, roughly along the route of the Thruway. Fossils found in limestone quarried in Amherst are evidence of this former inland sea. E. Remipes is now New York State's official fossil.

Glaciers were responsible for shaping the landscape of Western New York. About 13,000 years ago, after the last ice age, there was a huge glacial lake, called Lake Tonawanda, covered much of what would become Amherst. When this lake dried up, the land in Amherst, north of Williamsville, was left a swampy, wetland area.

Shortly after the final retreat of the last ice sheet the first people came to this area. These Native Americans fished in the creeks and hunted game in the woods. The last Native Americans to control this area were the Seneca Indians of the Iroquois Confederacy.

In 1798 the Holland Land Company acquired most of the land in Western New York. Benjamin Ellicott and John Thompson, agents for the Holland Land Company, purchased all of what would become Amherst for \$2.00 per acre. In 1801, Joseph Ellicott, who worked for this company, was sent to survey the land so an accurate map could be used to sell the land to settlers.

Ellicott also began planning roads in Western New York. Before this time the roads were mostly narrow Indian trails like the "Great Iroquois Trail" which crossed New York State from Albany to Lake Erie. Ellicott hired men to improve this trail between Batavia and Buffalo so settlers could travel to Western New York more easily. This improved road was first called the Buffalo Road. It is now called Main Street. Another major road that Ellicott surveyed was Transit Road. It is named for the instrument used by the surveyors that helped make the road so straight. Ellicott hired a Seneca Indian, "White Chief" (also called "White Seneca") to blaze through the forests a straighter trail on higher ground from south of Orchard Park to Lake Ontario, paying him \$10 for this work.

Sometimes when roads passed over swampy areas, logs were laid close together to make a corduroy road. In Amherst, part of Hopkins Road, where it crossed the Great

Baehre Swamp, was originally a corduroy road. The building of roads was slow because no one wanted to pay for them. Some early roads were made by laying down planks of wood to make a better road surface. This kind of road was called a plank road. To help pay for the improvements to the Buffalo Road (Main Street), a toll booth was built on Main Street near Getzville Road in the 1830s and operated until 1899.

The Holland Land Company offered several lots, about ten miles apart along the road to Buffalo, to "any proper man who would build and keep open taverns" which could serve as inns and stopping points for the settlers who had to travel slowly overland with loaded wagons and ox-carts. Most of the earliest settlers came from New England or eastern New York State.

In 1799, John Thompson built a small log house at Main Street and Oakgrove Drive. This house, later known as the Scott-Evans House, is believed to be the first house in Erie County, and served as a tavern and inn as well as the local Holland Land Company office. It was also the site of the first recorded marriage in Erie County when Timothy S. Hopkins married Nancy Ann Kerr on April 28, 1804.

Williamsville was the first and largest settlement in the Town of Amherst. The village was settled first because of its location on the main road to Buffalo and because it was next to Ellicott Creek (first known as Eleven Mile Creek). The waterfalls on Ellicott Creek were used to power mills for sawing wood into lumber, wheat into flour and corn into cornmeal. These mills were very important to the early settlers.

Williamsville derived its name from one of the first settlers, Jonas Williams, who came in 1805 and who owned two mills on opposite banks of Ellicott Creek. The settlement was called Williams Mills until after the War of 1812. In 1811, Jonas Williams purchased the mill on Spring Street which today is known as the Williamsville Water Mill.

During the War of 1812, American troops were stationed in Williamsville in the area between Garrison Road and Ellicott Creek. American soldiers and British prisoners were treated in a field hospital and log barracks that lined Garrison Road. A small cemetery, located on Aero Drive between Wehrle and Youngs Road, was used to bury the men who did not survive their wounds or illnesses. General Winfield Scott used the Evans House as his headquarters in the Spring of 1813 when his entire army of 5,000-6,000 men were stationed in Williamsville. In 1813, when the British burned Buffalo, people fled to the safety of Williamsville and nearby Harris Hill.

After the War of 1812, Williamsville had a grist mill, a saw mill, a general store, and a tavern. Isaac Bowman, appointed Postmaster of Williamsville in 1813, owned the first store. Samuel McConnell kept the tavern, and Dr. David S. Conkey, who arrived in 1807, was the first physician in Amherst. Money was scarce immediately after the war. Settlers also endured the cold summer of 1816, known as the "summerless summer." Snow fell late in May, and there were killing frosts each month through July. Crops failed and people had little food to eat that winter.

On April 10, 1818, the Town of Amherst was officially created by an Act of the Senate of the State of New York. This new town was named for Sir Jeffrey Amherst, an English lord who was Commander-in-Chief of the British troops in America in 1758-1763, before the American Revolution. King George III rewarded Lord Amherst by giving him 20,000 acres in New York, but Lord Amherst never visited his new lands. Timothy S. Hopkins was elected the first Supervisor of the Town of Amherst in 1819. In 1820, 768 people lived in Amherst.

Other communities grew in Amherst. Except for Williamsville, which became an incorporated village in 1850, these communities, known as hamlets, have no formal boundaries but were often designated by their post offices. Snyder was named Snyderville as Michael Snyder was this hamlet's first postmaster and also operated a store at the corner of Harlem Road and Main Street. Eggertsville was named for Christian Eggert, the first postmaster of this settlement. Getzville, located in the northern part of the town, received its name from Joseph Getz, owner of a cooper shop, mill and postmaster. Swormsville commemorates Adam Schworm, a prominent landowner and businessman. East Amherst was originally called Transit Station and Millersport was Mill Port because it was located along the important early water transportation route of Tonawanda Creek.

The Erie Canal opened across New York State in 1825. It passed along the northern edge of Amherst. Many Amherst farmers sent their crops to markets in Buffalo and elsewhere on canal boats. The canal also made it easier for settlers coming from New England and for immigrants from Europe to travel to their new home in Amherst.

After the Erie Canal was completed, the northern part of the town began to be settled. Many of these new settlers in Amherst had German origins. They cleared the forest, drained the land, and established farms. Well into the 1800s families in the northern section of Amherst still spoke German at home and at church.

The Mennonites were a German speaking religious group. In Amherst, many Mennonites lived very simply on farms and worshipped in a limestone building in the Village of Williamsville. Built in 1834 with limestone from the nearby Fogelsonger quarry, this Mennonite Meeting House is still standing today on Main Street at North Forest Road. If you look closely you can see fossils in the stone.

By the 1850s, Amherst was a prosperous farming community. Williamsville was the center of commercial activity since Ellicott Creek furnished fine water power. Along Ellicott Creek there were seven grist mills, several saw mills, a tannery and boot and shoe factory, carding works, bedstead factory and two forges. There were also blacksmith and harness shops, lime kilns, a tailor shop with thirteen employees, a broom factory, paper mill, breweries, cabinet makers, a slaughter house, taverns and plenty of saloons, schools and churches. In Getzville, there was a stave factory and a cooperage, important because barrels were needed to store most food stuffs and beverages such as cider and beer. There was a pottery in Eggertsville and one in Snyder, as well as a brick factory. The Fogelsonger Quarry west of Williamsville near the present Main Street entrance to the NYS Thruway provided limestone for building and for making hydraulic cement.

Schools were important to the early Amherst residents. It is believed that the first schoolhouse, for a private school, was erected in 1812 near Main Street and Garrison Road. In 1817, a school was erected on Main Street west of Grove Street by Caleb Rogers. In 1840, Timothy S. Hopkins funded the construction of the stone school house on Cayuga Road. In 1857, the Williamsville Classical Institute, a private school, was opened. As Amherst grew, other schools were organized and constructed. The farmers in the northern section of the Town also donated land and money to build schools before the 1850s.

Houses of worship representing all denominations are located in Amherst. The first Lutheran Church, located in Eggertsville, was opened in 1825; the first Mennonite Meeting House in 1834; the first Baptist Church in 1844, and the first Methodist church completed in 1847. In 1836, Rev. John N. Neumann founded a Roman Catholic mission at Main and Grove Streets that eventually became SS. Peter and Paul Church. The first Jewish congregation was formed in 1955; Temple Beth Am was built in 1960 on Sheridan Drive east of North Forest. In 1996, a new Hindu temple opened on North French Road.

As Amherst grew in the 19th century, its residents needed their own newspaper so that they could know what was happening in town and what goods and services were available for purchase. The first issue of the Amherst Bee appeared on March 27, 1879. This weekly newspaper is still being published today. The first telephone lines, linking Williamsville with Buffalo, were also installed in 1879.

The first public conveyances were stagecoaches which began operating on a regular schedule around 1830, carrying passengers between Batavia and Buffalo, and occasionally as far east as Albany. As roads slowly became improved with macadam surfaces, transportation became easier. In 1854, the single track of the new "Canandaigua-Niagara Falls Railroad" opened with a station at Getzville. This railroad became known locally as the "Peanut Line." It was later operated by New York Central until it was discontinued in the late 1950s.

In the 1920s, farm land had begun to be sold so subdivisions could be built. In the Snyder and Eggertsville area, families began to live closer together in brand new subdivisions. A new style of house, called a bungalow, became very popular. People could ride the Electric Trolley to work in Buffalo. The invention of the automobile allowed more people to commute longer distances to work. In 1930, the population of Amherst was 16,300.

Today, there are only a few farms in the Town of Amherst, mostly in the northern section of the town near Tonawanda Creek. Farmland has been used to build many new houses. The completion of the University at Buffalo campus in Amherst, along with the construction of major access roads such as the 1-290 (Youngman Expressway) and 1-990 (Lockport Expressway) made it easier for people to live in Amherst and commute to jobs in Buffalo or other nearby communities. Rapid growth in population created the need for more houses, highways, shopping centers, schools and recreational facilities. In 1990, over 110,000 made their home in Amherst.