

# Town of Nassau, New York

1806-2006

Celebrating 200 Years of History and Counting

## An Early History

On March 31, 2006, the Town of Nassau celebrated in grand style, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding. The town was formed from portions of Schodack, Stephentown and Petersburg on March 31, 1806. Its original name was Philipstown, in honor of Patroon Philip Van Rensselaer. The name was changed to Nassau on April 6, 1808.

The natural beauty of the Town of Nassau is evident to any visitor. This beauty is found not only in its rolling farmland and mountains but also in the numerous creeks, streams, ponds and lakes that have aided the settlement and development of the town over the last two hundred years.

Arguably, Nassau's first permanent settlers were Joseph Primmer who settled in the area known as Hoag's Pond in 1760 and Hugh Wilson who located near the present site of the Village of Nassau. Other early settlers included John W. Schermerhorn, near East Nassau; John McCagg, near Brainard; Henry Post, about three miles east of the present Village of Nassau; Thomas Hicks, Titus Husted, Abraham Holmes, Major Abijah Bush, Daniel Litz, David Waterbury and Reuben Bateman. Major Bush served in the Continental army during the War of the Revolution, crossing the Delaware River with General George Washington.

One of the most famous early visitors to the area that is now Nassau was missionary David Brainard who came as a missionary to the Indians in 1743.

The first tavern in the Village of Nassau was kept by Thomas Hicks in a log hut built before the Revolution. About the same time a grist mill was built at the outlet of Tsatsawassa Lake by John W. Schneider, who also kept a tavern and a store. He also erected a grist mill on the Kinderhook Creek.

In the northern part of the town one of the earliest settlers was John B. Adsit, who located in what is now the hamlet of Alps before the Revolution. The hamlet which surrounded his home was for many years known as Adsit Corners. In 1781 Arnaziah Bailey located on the hill near the hamlet of Alps. Other early settlers in that area were Isaac Dunham, Elmer Sedgwick, Ebenezer Sedgwick and Titus Sedgwick. John Turner made an early settlement in the extreme eastern part of the town as did Benjamin Greenman. During the closing years of the eighteenth century William Root, Patrick McGee, George McGee, Jonathan Devereaux, Elijah Adams, Jonathan Emmons, Jonathan Williams, Jeremiah Fox, Timothy Vickery, Dr. James H. Ball, a soldier of the Revolutionary army who came from

Connecticut, Joseph Marks, Abiel Knapp, John Casey, Eli Vickery, William B. Hoag, Elnathan Quimby and Eliphalet Reed settled in the town.

Jonathan Hoag, who settled in Nassau in 1792, purchased of Patroon Stephen Van Rensselaer, several hundred acres of land on and adjoining the site of the Village of Nassau. The body of water now known as Nassau Lake was then named Hoag's Pond. It was created by Hoag by constructing a dam which covered "the Vlaie" or "Beaver Meadow" with water. Hoag became perhaps one of the most industrious and progressive of the pioneers of Nassau. Soon after he had built his dam he constructed a raceway which connected the waters of the pond to the mills in and around Nassau. He also erected a grist mill, a hotel, a store and a dwelling house.

For many years the leading hotel in Nassau was maintained by Peter Van Valkenburg. Its first proprietor was a man named Strong. Many visitors were entertained at this hospitable establishment. Among them were the Marquis de Lafayette, and Joseph Bonaparte, King of Spain, who spent portions of several summers there. Martin Van Buren, William L. Marcy, De Witt Clinton, Lewis Cass and Generals John B. Wool and Alexander McComb were also frequent patrons. Lafayette's visit to the hotel was made in 1825, when he made a tour of the United States.

As in any small town in eighteenth century America, the medical profession was central to the fabric of Nassau's community. Dr. Joseph Gale, who located at East Nassau, is believed to be the first physician to practice within the present limits of the town. Dr. James H. Ball, settled in the northern part of the town in 1790. He held several important offices and served in the State Assembly in 1812 or 1813.

The earliest lawyer in the town of whom there is any record was Samuel B. Ludlow, who opened an office in Nassau after 1815. Soon after, lawyers Cyrus Mason and Henry Ludlow were also in practice. Fenner Ferguson, a native of the town, was admitted to the bar in 1838, but soon after removed to Michigan, where he became a territorial judge and a delegate to Congress. Later attorneys included Judge Hugh W. McClellan, Robert H. McClellan, a former Surrogate; Judge B. Smith Strait. General John B. Wool resided in Nassau for many years as did John A. Griswold. Griswold, born in Nassau in 1818, moved to Troy, New York where he became Mayor, United States Congressman and candidate for Governor of New York.

The first official town meeting in Nassau was held April 1, 1807, the day following the organization of the town by the Legislature under the name of Philipstown. The meeting was held at the tavern of Pliny Miller. In true democratic form, at this meeting the following were chosen as the first officers of the Nassau:

Supervisor, Jonathan Hoag; Town Clerk, William C. Elmore; Assessors, Fenner Palmer, Joseph Finch, Elijah Adams, Joseph S. Gale, Titus Husted; Collector, Charles Mason;

Overseers of the Poor, Samuel Gale, David Waterbury; Commissioners of Highways, Fenner Palmer, Enoch Benedict, James H. Ball; Constables, Charles Mason, William King, Ebenezer Martin; Fence Viewers, Enoch Benedict, Fenner Palmer, Benjamin Mason, Titus Husted, Timothy Sibley, Gershom Tabor, Samuel Knapp, John Turner, Jeremiah Macks; Poundmasters, Jonathan Hoag, Abijah Bush, Isaac Dunham; and thirty-nine Pathmasters.

The discussion of the early history of Nassau is not complete without a brief discussion of Nassau' contributions to the Anti-Rent War. It was in Nassau that the Anti-Rent War in Rensselaer County had its center for many years.

The farmers of Nassau are said to have been the first to resist in an effective manner the attempts of the Patroon to collect their cruel rents on the lands worked by farmers of the day.

As early as 1843 an anti-rent society was organized at Hoag's Corners, and while its first members were confined principally to the farmers in that immediate locality it was not long before many farmers in all parts of Nassau, and even some from other towns, became secretly identified with the organization. The meetings were generally held at the old Martin tavern. It is said that efforts were frequently made by agents of the landlords to secure admission to these meetings. It might have been easy for some daring spirit to enter the inner circle on some occasions, for as a rule the anti-renters seldom appeared in public without disguise. These dissenters generally wore disguises that made them appear to be Indians. Those actively engaged in the anti-rent fight were frequently referred to as Calico Indians because of the homespun cloth used in their costumes.

During these secret meetings, these "Indians" addressed their leaders by Indian titles, and a member of the society was seldom addressed by his right name at meetings of any kind for fear that an enemy might be within listening distance.

Despite the many precautions taken by the anti-renters, the enemy eventually obtained the names of some of the leaders in the movement. The information was then used to prosecute the "Indians". It was soon common knowledge that Nassau's anti-rent movement was headed by Frank Abbott, whom the anti-rent society knew as Little Thunder. Dr. Smith A. Boughton of Alps was called Big Thunder and Thomas Thompson of Hoag's Corners enjoyed the distinction of being known in party councils as Tuscarora.

Gideon Reynolds of Hoosick, New York served as County Sheriff for one term, having been elected to that office in 1843. The Sheriff was thought to be an enemy of landlordism. However, at once he took an active part in the attempted suppression of the disorders brought about by the conflict between the anti-renters and the authorities. It became clear that Sheriff Reynolds was a staunch adherent of the letter of the law, and though he felt that the odds were against him, he summoned a posse of twenty-five men and proceeded to the vicinity of the hamlet of Alps, where he had been informed a body of anti-renters were in action. When he reached the scene of the disorder he and his posse were

overpowered, their horses turned loose and Sheriff Reynolds and his band of deputies were marched to the center of the hamlet. The deputy who had been entrusted with the legal papers was tarred and feathered and the entire body of men were ordered to depart. Soon afterward Deputy Sheriff Lewis, while attempting to serve warrants upon some of the "Indians," was also tarred and feathered and sent back to his home. From time to time similar actions were taken by the anti-renters, until the troubles reached New York's Legislature and the Governor. The underlying issues that prompted the revolt were eventually settled by the courts and public pressure.

Nassau has a proud military history. Our burial grounds hold the remains of veterans of the French and Indian War and many of the early residents fought in the War of the Revolution. Among our early settlers who served their country in this struggle were Major Abijah Bush, Simeon Griswold, Dr. James H. Ball, Robert J. W. Burroughs and Guy Lester.

In the War of 1812 Nassau was well represented. Major-General John B. Wool, one of the most respected soldiers in eastern New York in those days; Captain Simeon Tift, Captain David St. John, Rensselaer Bateman, Reuben Rogers, Varnum Babcock, Jacob Cole, Jeremiah Tift, Thomas Tobias, Isaac Wheeler and George Launt fought to protect the early Republic.

Nassau sent her full quota of men to the front during the Civil War and a large share of them lost their lives in the service. The list of those dying to protect the Union included: Jonathan Hoag, Judson Hoag, Rensselaer Palmer, Edward Stickles, Eleazer Knap, Marshal C. Knap, Asbury Bacchus, Arnold Dennis, Charles H. Ashley, Noah Ashley, Paul Roberts, Peter Roberts, Palmer W. Dunham, George Horton, Thomas H. Payne, James Brown, Darius Morris, James Dodge, Cyrus Gardner, Lyman Ostrom, Russell D. Ashley, Hiram Hotaling, Willard Reed, George Bailey, William Lasher, George Sheldon, Herman Beckstine, William Shofelt, Washington L. Taylor, Henry J. Knap, Henry Lopyy, Andrew Trumble and Ceno Och.

Nassau has proudly continued her service to our nation sending numerous men and women to protect freedom and America's shores through the wars and engagements of the last two hundred years. The current War being no exception.

From its earliest days to the recent past, Nassau was essentially an agricultural town. However, early inhabitants took advantage of the splendid water power afforded by the various streams flowing through the town. The first manufacturing enterprise of which there is any knowledge was the grist mill of John W. Schermerhorn, at the outlet of Tsatsawassa Lake. Soon after this mill was established a tannery was started by Jesse Smith. About 1778 Morgan Harris operated a large grist mill at East Nassau. Soon after 1800 Winthrop Root had a tannery at the same place, and about the same time a collar factory at that point was operated by Peter Van Buren, James Turner, Erastus Hemingway and others. An early saw mill and grist mill in the area of the Village of Nassau was run by Fenner Palmer. This was burned in 1817 but was afterward rebuilt. About 1830 William P.

Hermance had a significant carriage factory in the Village of Nassau where for a quarter of a century or more from thirty to forty men were given lucrative employment. The extensive paper mills of J. D. Tompkins on Kinderhook Creek, near Brainard, were established about 1847 by John B. and Peter C. Tompkins, who began the manufacture of straw paper there. The site was occupied early in the century by Marks's saw mill and subsequently Page's shingle factory was added. The mill was enlarged in 1854, under the proprietorship of Mr. Davis. These mills for a long time were one of the principal industries of the county outside of Troy. Another paper mill was established about 1855 by John Bullis the Village of Nassau. Gershom Turner had an early cotton factory at Brainard. In 1842 the Nassau cotton mills at Brainard were established by Seth Hastings of Albany. James Allen started a major foundry in the environs of the Village of Nassau about 1860.

There have been several other industries in the town from time to time, but these mentioned have contributed most prominently to the formation of Nassau as it entered the twentieth century.

From the early days of settlement, the largest village in the town was located at what is now the Village of Nassau. The village was located on the Valatie Kill in the southwestern part of the town. Nassau was originally known as Union Village. It was a famous summer resort in its early days and its hotels frequently entertained distinguished guests from various parts of the United States and other countries. The village received its first charter March 12, 1819. A new charter was granted April 17, 1866, conferring additional powers and duties upon the village. The post office was established about 1811.

East Nassau is located in the southeastern part of the town on the Kinderhook Creek. John W. Schermerhorn was one of its most conspicuous early inhabitants, and in his honor the hamlet for many years was known as Schermerhorn's. Mr. Schermerhorn was the proprietor of the first tavern at East Nassau. Pliny Miller was another early innkeeper. William Root opened a general store there as early as 1780. The post-office was established about 1830 with Jared Root as postmaster.

Hoag's Corners is situated in the northeastern part of the town on Tsatsawassa Creek. Its early inhabitants and industries were a vital part of Nassau's early development. Robert Martin and William Hoag were early tavern keepers there, beginning business about 1822. Mr. Martin also had the first store in the Hoag's Corners, running it in connection with his hotel. The area's post office was established in 1835 with William B. Hoag as postmaster.

Brainard is in the southeastern corner of the town and was named in honor of Joseph Brainard, who built a bridge over the Kinderhook Creek at that point. It was first called Brainard's Bridge. The Nassau cotton mills, for many years a prominent industry of the town, were located there in 1842. Gershom Turner is said to have been the first proprietor of a store at this point, and the first tavern was kept by Henry Stoddard about 1810 or 1812.

Dunham Hollow is located in the northeastern part of the town. It was named after Isaac Dunham, who settled there about 1800 and built a hotel and saw mill. An early hoe factory was owned by Jacob White and the first saw mill by a man named Adams. The first store was owned by Joshua Coleman.

North Nassau is in the northern part of the town. The first tavern was kept by a man named Burdick about 1810. William C. Elmore had an early store and tavern there. The post-office was established about 1844 with James H. Ball as postmaster.

Alps, so named on account of the mountainous character of the area in which it is situated, occupies the northeastern corner of the town. Miller's Corners is a small hamlet in the northwestern corner of the town.

*\*Developed in part with contributions from Landmarks of Rensselaer County, by George Baker Anderson; D. Mason & Co., 1897*