Clinton Historical Society Newsletter

September 2023

1 Fountain Street
PO Box 42
Clinton, NY 13323

315.859.1392
clintonhistory.org

Open
Wednesdays 1 – 4 PM
Saturdays 1 – 4 PM

Struggling to Survive in Clinton, 1787–1836

Sharon Williams

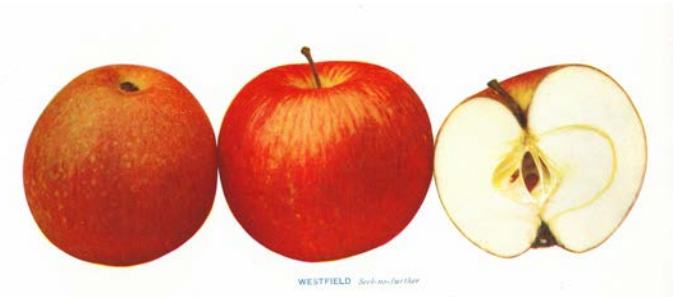
While it is impossible for us to imagine the struggles of Clinton's earliest settlers who arrived just after the Revolutionary War, some historical records provide a glimpse into their daunting challenges. Successful harvests were crucial, and failed harvests truly life threatening. In March 1787, a small group led by Moses Foote settled in the heavily forested wilderness they named Clinton. In *History of the Town of Kirkland*, A. D. Gridley writes that in the settlers' first summer, they planted vegetables and Indian corn to supplement wild meat and fish. At the first harvest, corn was carried on a narrow trail to the new gristmill in Whitestown. Later in 1787, not liking the arduous carry to Whitestown, the settlers, Gridley writes, built their own gristmill. "Before winter set in, Captain Cassety built a small grist-mill on the east side of the Oriskany Creek, near the site of the present bridge on College St." (25).

By summer 1788, the population of Clinton doubled with the arrival of 20 new families, including Rev. Samuel Kirkland, missionary to the Oneidas. The new settlers had to depend on themselves and their tiny community to clear land, build shelter, and plant a garden to survive the harsh winter. David Beetle, in *Along the Oriskany*, describes the real threat of food shortages. "People arrived faster than food. By the summer of 1789, the villagers were rationing cornmeal, shooting squirrels, foraging for nuts, and wistfully hoping for an early harvest" (108). Gridley describes the settlers' response to possible starvation.

> The summer of 1789 witnessed a great scarcity of food... Wheat flour... was exhausted. Cornmeal and the last-year's supply of potatoes were gone...When famine stared them in the face, a small company of men started for Fort Plain to see whether supplies could not be obtained. Flour and corn meal were obtained in Fort Plain, later paid for with ginseng roots, collected from the forest around Clinton and later shipped to Europe "as an antidote to the plague" (31–32).

The threat of starvation was averted, and new settlers continued to arrive. By 1793 most land within two miles of the center of the village of Clinton had been parceled into farms. Richard L. Williams's *Farms and Barns of Kirkland, New York*, notes that the York farm on Brimfield St. was one of the earliest Clinton farms, settled in 1792. The Champion Farm, settled in 1804 and still operating today as a modern dairy farm, was another of the earliest.

As the fledgling settlement expanded, diversification of crops increased. Many local farmers started fruit orchards, even though fruit growing was risky. Beetle notes, "For years in the



The Apples of New York, State of New York-Department of Agriculture, 1903

valley—until a series of nasty winters came along and killed a good many trees—there was a healthy interest in apple growing" (21). Gridley describes early apple varieties raised in Kirkland and records the types of apples received from Native Americans.

> The native Indian Orchard, in Stockbridge, Madison County, furnished several excellent varieties of fruit, one of the best being the summer apple, known as O'Toole's Indian Rareripe. While the young orchards of Kirkland were maturing, large supplies of apples and cider were brought to this market by the Indians at Stockbridge. Mr. Goodwell first introduced the Early Harvest apple, the Rhode Island Greening, Esopus Spitzenburg, Cornish Gilliflower, Seeknofurther, and Swaar. Rev. Dr. Norton introduced the Fall Pippin and English Pearmain and taught parishioners how to graft fruit (154).

Rev. Dr. Asahel Norton, the first pastor of the Society of Clinton (predecessor to the Stone Church) for 40 years, experimented with fruit tree cultivation and helped establish Oneida County as a leading fruit-growing region in the 1800s. Gridley writes that Dr. Norton "was much interested in the introduction of new and improved varieties of grains and fruits. Whenever he visited New England, he came back with new seeds and scions, and then went about among his people teaching the art of engrafting" (103).

One of the first markets for local farmers was the fledgling college on the hill. Using the Hamilton College archives, David Gapp, retired biology professor at Hamilton, researched the college's local food purchases from 1815 to 1818. In a work he prepared for publication, he notes:

> Prominent local farmers of those years provided substantial amounts of food for the dining hall. They had names readily familiar today: Pond, Stebbins, Bristol, Griffin, Page, Gridley, Kellogg, Kirkland, and more. However, when collating all the names of receipt signatories, one concludes that many, many members of the community sold food to the College, not just the prominent

The Apples of New York, State of New York-Department of Agriculture, 1903

farmers…. For example, in the period 1815–1817, the college bought grains from 34 different individuals in purchase amounts ranging from 2 bushels of oats to 47 bushels of wheat. In 1816 alone, 47 individuals sold butter to the college in single transactions ranging from 12 to 529 pounds, and in the three years considered here at least 74 individuals sold butter to the college. Thus, the college depended extensively upon the village and the surrounding area for much of the food and other wherewithal needed to flourish at the edge of the wilderness.

Trade between the farmers and the college was of mutual benefit. Students were fed, and the farmers received cash payment. This cash was critical in times of scarcity such as occurred in 1816 and the following year when both farm products and family incomes were severely diminished during the Year without a Summer and its aftermath (see accompanying article).

In 1836 life in rural Clinton changed with the completion of the Chenango Canal, reducing Clinton's isolation and bringing new economic opportunities. Wade Lallier, in *The Chenango Canal: The Million Dollar Ditch*, describes the canal's effects on the local economy. Hops and apples (the latter mostly as cider and vinegar) were among the earliest products exported by canal. The Franklin Iron Works depended on the new canal for coal as well as transporting its pig iron, and the Clinton Knitting Mill's growth was a direct result of the availability of coal. Storage and forwarding businesses sprung up along the banks of the canal in Clinton; a portion of the current Agway building began in 1837 as a canal warehouse, and the building adjacent to the canal at the College St. bridge also was a warehouse for local goods. With the advent of the Chenango Canal, the rural settlement of Clinton, once an outpost on the new frontier, was dramatically changed.

CHS Programs

<u>September 24, 4:00–6:00 p.m.</u>
Opening reception for "The Clinton Comets, 1948–1973: Celebrating 25 Years Through Pictures"

The Richard L. Williams Speaker Series

<u>October 8, 2:00 p.m.</u>
Phil Bean, President, Olmsted City of Greater Utica, Inc., presents "Utica, an Olmsted City and Proctor Park Restoration"

<u>November 12, 2:00 p.m.</u>
Joint meeting at the New Hartford Historical Society, "The Utica Country Day School"

Wade Lallier presenting "Son of Clark Mills; the Adolf Ptak Story"

If any program must be moved or canceled, members will be notified by email and by notices posted on the Society's website and Facebook page.

Clinton and the Year without a Summer

David Gapp

Climate change is of global concern today, and we have known it was coming. In the early 19th century, however, much of the world was not ready for an acute climate change that descended on the Northern Hemisphere in 1816. North America experienced unusual cold and drought, and the impact was felt in the years that followed.

In April 1815, Mt. Tambora erupted in Indonesia and ejected approximately 100 cubic kilometers of earth into the atmosphere; more than five times that of Krakatau and 100 times that of Mt. St. Helens. In addition, approximately 55 million metric tons of sulfur dioxide were released, producing a reflective shield of sulfuric acid and reducing the sun's input to the earth by one-half of 1 percent. Tambora's impact rippled worldwide in the following months. Atmospheric conditions were dramatically altered, and 1816 became the second-coldest year in the Northern Hemisphere in roughly 400 years. Drought and cold produced widespread crop failures throughout the American Northeast and Mid-Atlantic and southeastern Canada. Thomas Jefferson wrote to Albert Gallatin on September 16, "We have had the most extraordinary year of drought and cold ever known in the history of America."

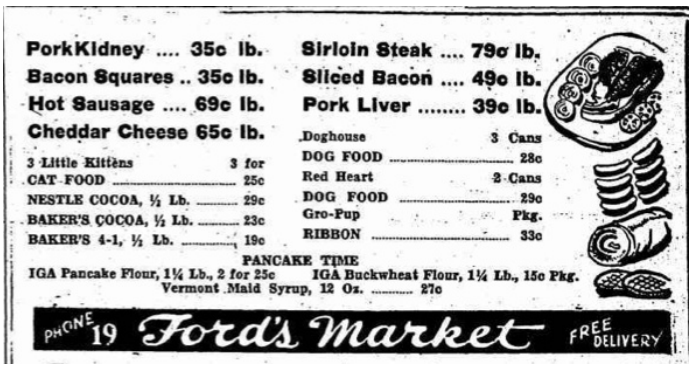
New York State newspapers of 1816 suggest there was a cycle of warm and cold after an especially cold spring. Several times during the growing season, hopes were raised for successful harvests only to be dashed by repeated cold and frosts in late summer and into early fall. Corn and hay crops seemed to be the most consistently affected in the area. Shortages of corn and hay meant food for overwintering livestock was in short supply going into the winter, leading to a culling of the herds. Drought, especially, was a significant part of summer 1816. *The Albany Advertiser* reported in June 1816, "The length and severity of drought checked the progress of vegetation to such a degree, that the grass in many places withered and became scorched, as it usually is in dog-days; and in some parts of the country, the crops of grain have been ruined, and the fields in which they were have been ploughed and planted over again."

Hamilton College's first president, Azel Backus, and his family documented the local impact of the Year without Summer in a number letters written to a son Frederick, a physician in Rochester. Theodore Backus, the gardener of the family, suggests a modest impact on the family garden in a July 12, 1816, letter. "Peas almost ready to pick, carrots a foot long, onions Bottoms as large as a shilling, hot Beds do not do as well as I should wish. Our corn looks finely considering it freezes every night. It appears as though we will not starve."

Theodore's garden seemed to be surviving despite that "it freezes every night." Later that summer, the signs were not quite so optimistic as President Backus wrote to Frederick on August 10, "Hay is 1/3 short of the usual crop, have to give $81/2 the ton. Wheat will be good. Corn poor." Later, he wrote to Frederick on October 28, "Farmers alarmed by their poor crops will not trade much for the year to come."

Area historians noted the unusual weather and its impact on Upstate New York, although Henry J. Cookinham, in his 1912 *History of Oneida County*, devoted only two lines to the unusual season. "The summer of 1816 was noted as being the coldest season ever known in this part of the country. Snow fell in the county several inches deep during the month of June, and crops were almost a total failure." And, curiously, *History of the Town of Kirkland* by A. D. Gridley mentions several extreme weather seasons, but not that of 1816.

When I first arrived as a new faculty member at Hamilton College in 1979, I distinctly remember a senior colleague telling me that there has been only one month of the year when there had not been a recorded snowfall in Clinton. Could that bit of lore harken back to the Year without a Summer? I wonder.



Ox-Eye Windows in Clinton

Brendan Marris

In the village of Clinton, ox-eye windows are all around us. While some are still in use, others have been sealed up, their eyes—in effect—shut. The ox-eye window creates a picture on the world unlike other windows, a distinctive circular aperture with a captivating place in architectural history as a symbol of functional innovation and symbolic expression. It

is an oculus that brings distinction to the exterior façade and a sense of airiness to interiors. Initially employed on religious buildings, the oculus represented the all-seeing eye of God.
As architectural styles shifted in 19th-century America, a renewed interest in classical ideals

brought back the ox-eye window's symbolic value, often appearing in the upper levels of residences and commercial buildings. The most notable examples of ox-eye windows in Clinton's historical district appear on the Artisans' Corner building (the Allen block), the rear of 16 West Park Row, the old Hogan's Corner building, and Lombard Hall.

The historical buildings of Clinton's commercial center present a fusion of architectural styles from Federal and Greek Revival to Victorian influences. All of which bring interesting architectural elements and accent to many buildings in town.

Scenes from History Camp 2023

Clinton Historical Society
P.O. Box 42
Clinton, NY 13323

315.859.1392
clintonhistory.org

Curator's Corner

Clinton's first arena on Kirkland Ave. burned to the ground on (perhaps, ominously) Friday the 13th, September 1953. The tremendous heat generated by the fire twisted and partially melted a thick bronze plaque mounted on the wall at the building's entrance, obscuring about half of the 15 names of the Clinton Rink Association's directors. Online sources suggest the melting point for bronze is somewhere around 1800 degrees F.

Not to be discouraged by that intense fire, Clinton's citizens rallied to replace the arena in record time. Construction on the building that still stands to this day began almost immediately and proceeded swiftly. The rebuilt arena hosted a Clinton Comets' home game on January 16, 1954, a mere four months after the fire.

Photo by E. Williams

This plaque from the arena's fire is on display in the Historical Society's latest exhibit, "The Clinton Comets, 1948–1973: Celebrating 25 Years Through Pictures."