

History of Wilmington, NY
HISTORY OF ESSEX COUNTY
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THE town of Wilmington was taken off from Jay, March 27th, 1821, and was first named "Dansville." On the 22d of March, 1822, its name was changed to Wilmington. St. Armand was formed from it in 1844. It lies between St. Armand on the west and Jay on the east, on the northern border of the county. The west branch of the Ausable river, whose head waters are found in the Indian Pass, between Mount Wallface and McIntyre, and a few feet from the source of the Hudson, flows in a northeasterly direction, nearly through the center of this town and forms the drainage of an extensive valley stretching with an irregular surface between two parallel ranges of the Ausable Mountains, which in the south rise to an elevation of 2,500 or 3,000 feet, the western range culminating in the isolated and majestic Mount Whiteface. This peak attains a height of 4,870 feet above tide and derives its name from a landslide which has laid bare the rocks upon its southeastern slope, giving it a whitish gray appearance. From the summit of Whiteface can be had one of the finest views in Northern New York, owing not more to its great height (which is exceeded by several mountains farther south) than to its singular isolation and the beauties of the Ausable valley stretching north from its base. On the eastern side, impending directly over the Ausable, rises a perpendicular cliff of solid rock to an elevation of 2,000 feet and opposite to it another mountain rises with scarcely less terrible grandeur, compressing the river into a narrow pass, but ---- feet in width, through which the water tumbles and plunges with a confused and incessant roar, in one place leaping down a perpendicular precipice of one hundred feet This is Wilmington notch. Another place worthy of note is Copperas pond, so named because its waters are strongly impregnated with sulphate of iron. The decomposition of iron pyrites has left also copious deposits of copperas among the rocks in the vicinity.

Thus the topographical aspect of Wilmington is seen to be rough, elevated, and mountainous, with long slopes descending to the Ausable and its tributaries and presenting a varied and picturesque scenery. The soil is a sandy and gravelly loam, and where it can be cultivated without danger from the frequent floods and overflows, occasioned by the numerous declivities which diversify the face. of the town, is very fertile and productive. Beds of iron ore are numerous but are only slightly worked. Sometime between 1815 and 1820 the Hon. Reuben Sanford, whose name will appear again, created an extensive iron manufacturing establishment on the site of the village of Wilmington, on the west branch of the Ausable. He suffered great losses through the violence of the elements and the fluctuations of business, and was obliged at last to transfer the property to others. It has since gone through a number of changes. In 1868 the site was occupied by a grist-mill and starch factory, a saw-mill with three gates and forty saws, and a forge owned by Weston & Nye, having two fires, but adapted to four, which in that year made about two hundred tons of iron. The ore was drawn from Palmer Hill. Wilmington and North Elba comprise about the only district of extent or value in the county which is occupied by the primitive forest of hemlock, spruce, and pine. Owing to the almost insurmountable barriers interposed by the mountains which environ this district, it is impracticable to export manufactured lumber from this region. Fifteen years ago it was estimated that this tract would yield a million of saw logs. In early times the tillage of the town was devoted almost wholly to the production of rye which was used to supply the distilleries. These works were far more numerous in Wilmington than in any other part of the county. During the war of 1812 the manufacture of whisky was a lucrative and therefore extensive occupation, and the revenue of the inhabitants of Wilmington not only, but of all the towns accessible to the genius of commerce, was greatly increased. (The most prominent manufacturer of whisky in the county was unquestionably Reuben Sanford, of Wilmington.) He was one of the earliest settlers here, having

come with his wife not later than 1803. He did not establish a residence on the site of Wilmington village, however, until about 1812. Among the other early settlers were Cyrus Wilson, Isaac Peck, Allen Peck, Reuben and Daniel Hamblin, Daniel Ray, John Blanchard, Z. Gray, and Nathaniel Warner.

Reuben Sanford, in addition to his other projects, was the first innkeeper in the town, Elias Wilson kept the first store, and Leonard Owen built the first mill. Esther Kellogg was the first school teacher. When Amos Avery, now living in the village of Wilmington, came here (1822) the region now embraced within the boundaries of the township was not yet reclaimed from the empire of nature. There was then only one frame house in the village of Wilmington, now the White House, formerly a hotel, where Mr. Weston lives. Reuben Sanford had a forge and saw-mill and potash factory here, all of which he had probably started soon after his arrival in 1812. There was a blacksmith shop here, in which Mr. Avery earned his living. He and a companion used at first to sleep in this old shop, and on winter mornings would frequently find their pillows and bed clothes covered with snow which had sifted through the crevices in the walls. Mr. Avery relates the manner in which he came into the country as being primitive in the extreme. He came from Burlington on horseback, using stirrups made of a rope tied in a circle and thrown over the back of the beast he was riding. About two miles south of the village were a number of Indian wigwams. Reuben Sanford had practically built the whole village since 1812. Besides the enterprises already mentioned which he was engaged in, he had a store and tavern adjoining the White House inhabited by Mr. Weston. He had two distilleries and Richard Owen one. Before 1825 Hiram Angepine started a sort of tavern in the building now occupied by Ira Storrs. He erected a sign (the first in town) in the form of an eagle, which is yet kept in the place as a testimonial of early enterprise. Angepine kept this old inn eight or ten years. In 1822 the school-house stood just below the Angepine Hotel. There was no church here, but religious meetings used to be held in the school-house and were made up of four stated attendants, two men and two women; Reuben Patridge and wife formed usually half the congregation. The first church edifice erected in the town was the Methodist Church in Wilmington village, which Reuben Sanford built in 1833 at his own expense and largely by his own labor. About the same time he built the store now used by W. F. & S. H. Weston. Sanford was the mightiest pioneer in the town, and one of the most prominent men, indeed, in Northern New York. He represented his district in the Assembly from 1814 to 1817, was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1821, and was a member of the State Senate for the four years following 1827. He died at Wilmington in 1855.

Wilmington and Jay went hand in hand into the war of the Rebellion, furnishing men when men were most needed and contributing money whenever money could be spared. The most thoroughly and permanently patriotic men are those who can feel and meditate upon the blessings of a good government without being aware from personal experience of anything that could be construed or tortured into a semblance of oppression. The rural districts are composed almost wholly of this class. The hot-beds of communism and socialism are in the larger cities; the idle, vagrant, worthless, and therefore discontented, malicious and seditious element of a country amalgamate and organize amidst the hum and bustle which screen them from observation, and permit their machinations to be prosecuted without let or hindrance. Consequently the best soldiers in time of war, as well as the best citizens in time of peace, hail from the more thinly populated districts of the land. This was exemplified by Wilmington and Jay and all the towns of Essex during the last war.

The first postmaster at Wilmington was Reuben Sanford. He officiated in 1822, and had then been in office for years. His successor was Elisha Adams. Walter Childs followed Adams and was himself succeeded by George C. White, who held the appointment until 1865. Then John Forbes, the present postmaster, was placed in charge of the office and has remained in the position down to the present.

When White officiated the post-office was in the same building now occupied by Forbes. Then until 1876 it was in the building now used as a hotel by Ira Storrs. Since 1876 it has been in the present building.

The Methodist Church mentioned above was the only one in the town until 1861, when Nathaniel Wardwell, a Wesleyan clergyman, built the Wesleyan Church.

The present business interests of the town and of the village of Wilmington are, except the agricultural interests, identical. The old forge and mills and stores have been mentioned, and it remains but to notice briefly those which are now running. The old forge of Reuben Sanford is succeeded by the present four-fired forge of W. F. & S. H. Weston, which was built in 1874. They have also a forge in Keene which has been described. They also built a saw-mill in 1872 which is now doing a thriving business. In connection with their iron manufacturing they conduct a general store both in Keene and Wilmington.

Ira Storrs, the proprietor of the only store in Wilmington besides that of the Messrs. Weston, started his mercantile business in 1873. In 1877 he fitted up the same building for a hotel which he still keeps. In 1882 L. M. Bliss enlarged a private house and opened the hotel now called the Bliss House.

Following is a list of the supervisors of the town from its formation to the present time with the years of service of each: - Thomas McLeod, 1821-22; Jared Pond, 1823 to 1826 inclusive; Charles Melbourne, 1827-28; Andrew Hickock, 1829-30; Jared Pond, 1831; Thomas McLeod, 1832; Andrew Hickock, 1833; Reuben Sanford, 1834; Benjamin H. Jaquis, 1835; Reuben Sanford, 1836; Nathan B. Markham, 1837-38; Andrew Hickock, 1839; Harvey Carter, 1840 to 1843 inclusive; John Melbourne, 1844-45; John Forbes, 1846-47; Elisha A. Adams, 1848 to 1851 inclusive; Horace Beach, 1852; John Forbes, 1853; Willard Bell, 1854; Daniel D. Kilbourn, 1855; Artemas Beach, 1856-57; Amos Hardy, 1858 to 1862 inclusive; A. Hickock, 1863; Henry C. Avery, 1864-65; Amos Hardy, 1866;. Sanford Avery, 1867 to 1869 inclusive; Raiza C. Lawrence, 1870 to 1872 inclusive; Charles Thayer, 1873-74; David B. Hayes, 1875-76; Warren Weston, 1877-78; Raiza C. Lawrence, 1879-80; John W. Nye, 1881-82; Elijah Weston, 1882-84; Henry Huntington, 1885.

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