

Also by Carol Kammen

What they Wrote: 19th Century Documents from  
Tompkins County, New York

Lives Passed: Biographical Sketches  
from Central New York

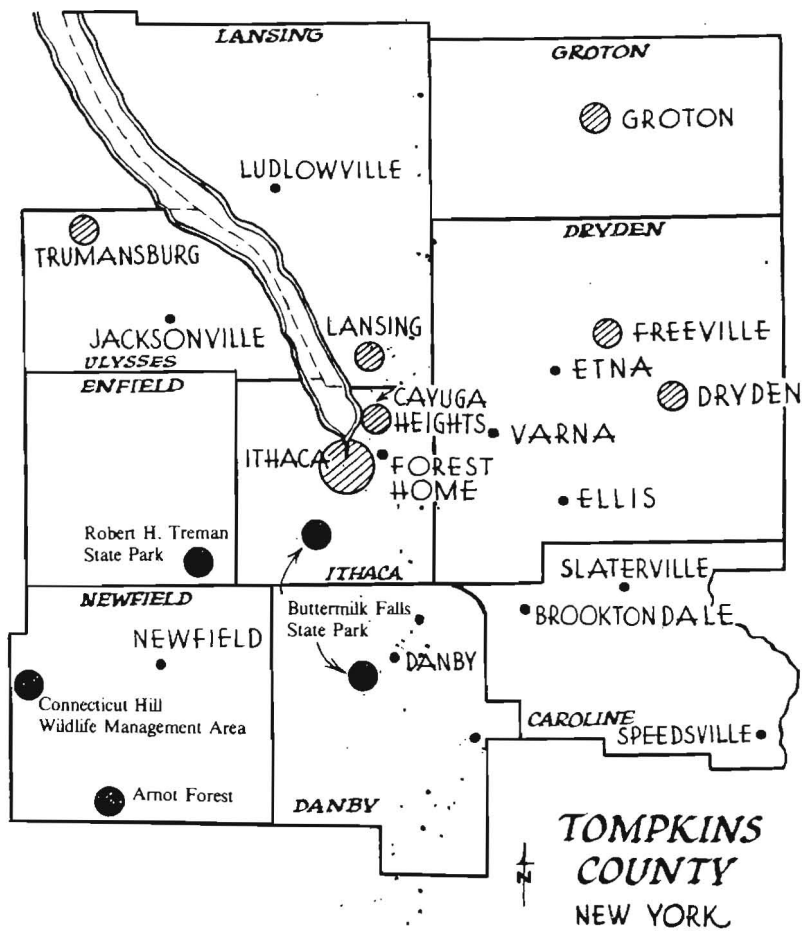
**THE PEOPLING  
OF  
TOMPKINS COUNTY  
A Social History**

by  
Carol Kammen

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## Introduction:

This history attempts to tell the story of the people who came to the place we call Tompkins County, why they came, and how they got along once here. It is also about the human urge to associate—that is, to join together in groups—in order to make a better life, and it is about the desire on the part of individuals and of the community to improve. This limited focus results in a thematic history of our county, but it certainly does not tell everything that ever happened here and it is not like any other history we have of this area.

Previous histories of the whole county have been few. There is the *History of Tioga, Chemung, Tompkins, and Schuyler Counties, New York*, known as the Four County History, which was prepared in 1879 by two compilers who were paid by a printing company in Philadelphia to canvas the county and write up—or accept writeups—of the various institutions to be found here. That history, which is undocumented, but nonetheless very useful, gives us sketches of the civic, religious, commercial, educational, military, and social institutions found within the county. Appended to these are short biographies and sometimes portraits of county residents who paid to be included in the book.

In 1894 John Selkreg produced his book, *Landmarks of Tompkins County*, which follows much the same formula but includes a long section on Cornell University. That history, when it appeared in 1894, received mixed reactions.

There are three other works that deal with the history of this area. In 1847 Horace King gave a speech that was turned into a pamphlet telling of Ithaca's earliest days, and in 1926 Henry Abt produced his admirable book, entitled *Ithaca*. Virginia Mayer also wrote a history of Ithaca in 1956 for school children in the district. Her project was supported by The Ithaca City School District.

Each of our towns and many of our churches have histories—some as short as a page or two, others extensive. I have used all this

## Enterprise: 1817-1837

In 1819 the Cayuga Steamboat Company bought an engine from Robert Fulton's factory in Jersey City, New Jersey. They hauled it to Ithaca and built around it a sturdy boat which they named the *Enterprise*. That was the cry of the day—enterprise and prosperity were linked in people's minds, and so began a bustling, energetic phase of life in Tompkins County.

The key to understanding manufacturers, farmers, shopkeepers, workmen, and speculators is to see their activities as forms of enterprise. Engaged in a constant struggle to improve their status in life, people worked hard to get ahead, and their economic activity from 1817 on helped the county as well as themselves prosper. County incorporation in 1817 infused the entire area with new energy, the beat of life quickened for most people, and the road to prosperity seemed assured to anyone willing to work. Enterprise was the word on every tongue.

The new county of Tompkins honored Daniel Tompkins, Governor of New York from 1807 until 1817, a former member of the Constitutional Convention, Judge of the Supreme Court, and in 1816 elected Vice President of the United States. The New York State Legislature created Tompkins County out of land surrounding the southern end of Cayuga Lake with Ithaca at its core. The Town of Ulysses, taken from Seneca County along with Hector and a small portion of Covert, formed the western edge of the new county. The southern portion of Genoa—which had been called Milton—became the northern boundary of the county, its name changed to Lansing. The legislature also divided the town of Locke in two, and in 1818 Groton filled out the northeastern corner of Tompkins County. Dryden was transferred from Cayuga County to Tompkins.

During the next five years, Tompkins grew with the addition of Danby, Caroline, and Cayuta (Newfield), all taken from Tioga. By a law passed in 1819, Covert returned to Seneca. The final geographical adjustments occurred in the 1850s when Hector and a portion of Newfield became parts of Schuyler County.

After the creation of Tompkins County, Simeon DeWitt's plans for Ithaca began to take shape. Along Owego Street (now State Street), designed to be the heart of the commercial district, there was activity. Twenty-nine stores lined the muddy, narrow road. Five were ladies' millineries—probably the only retail establishments run by women. There were also two bookstores, nine groceries, three printing offices, two book binderies, two gold and silversmiths, two men's hatters, three saddle and harness shops, eight shoemakers, five tailors, two bakers and two barbers.<sup>1</sup> All in all, a remarkable array of shops for such a new town. Two things in particular stand out: people—both men and women—wore hats; and printing was firmly established as a major industry.

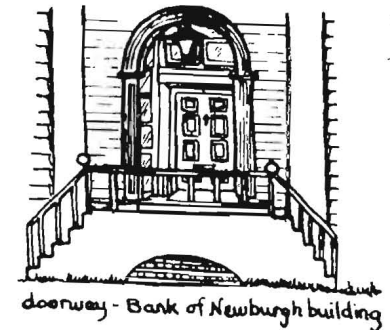
In 1814 a newspaper, *The Seneca Republican*, was published in Ithaca; it did not last long, however, and only one copy has survived. In 1818, using the ample water power of Fall Creek, a paper mill began operation.<sup>2</sup> Then came Ebenezer Mack, who arrived in Ithaca with just enough money to buy *The Seneca Republican*. He transformed it into *The American Journal*; in later years it became *The Ithaca Journal*. Applying industry and ability, Mack used the press as a civilizing tool on the citizens of the area, just as the farmers were using the plow to till the land.<sup>3</sup> Mack published his newspaper to educate and inform the public. He promoted the county of Tompkins and Ithaca, its county seat, and he supported village improvement and progress.

Mack also printed job sheets and handbills. His press was small: the type set by hand, piece by piece, the sheets assembled one at a time. Mack bought the Fall Creek paper mill, expanded the scope of the operation to produce book paper and even cigarette papers, as well as his newsprint. He advertised his own wares and took on a partner. Together Mack and Andrus published books in Ithaca, produced school texts and business ledgers, operated a bindery, and finally opened a book store. There they sold their own books along with stationery, musical instruments, state lottery tickets, globes, snuff boxes, hair oil, cologne water and shaving apparatus.

Mack and Andrus published some books written by local authors. Lyman Cobb, a Caroline school teacher, wrote a widely used series of spelling books, published locally. Many of the books the company produced were religious in nature: sermons, hymn books, and devotional books. Some were reprints of volumes published elsewhere, such as William Wirt's *Life of Thomas Jefferson*. In 1829 Mack and Andrus even published David Burr's *Atlas of New York*

State, which today is a collector's item. At that time there were many other presses in New York capable of producing the *Atlas*, so it is surprising to discover such an important book being produced in Ithaca. Burr's maps, however, were based on the survey notes made by Simeon DeWitt. Perhaps De Witt had a hand in the matter.<sup>4</sup>

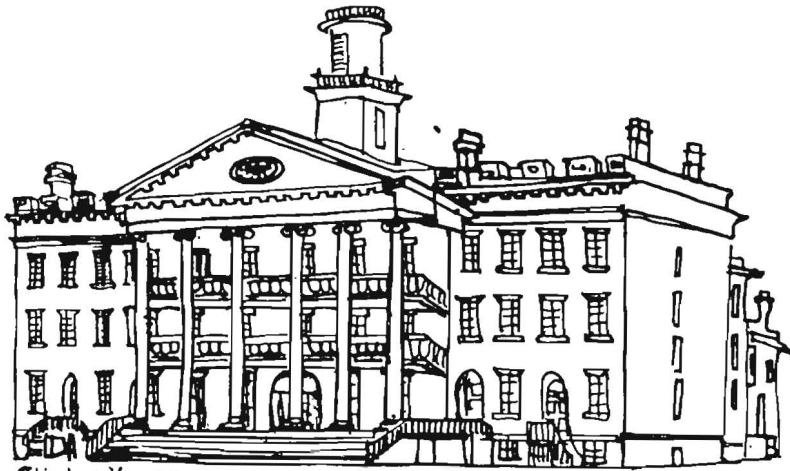
A major addition to the economic life of the County was the Bank of Newburgh, which opened its Ithaca branch in 1820. The bank loaned money, gave mortgages, and helped local manufacturers expand their facilities. The elegant federal style bank building stood for many years on Owego Street, just beyond the intersection with Cayuga. When the bank shut its Ithaca office, the building passed through a variety of owners and uses until finally it was moved to 106 East Court Street, where it sits today.



doorway - Bank of Newburgh building

Along Owego Street were the major hotels: the Tompkins House, the Ithaca Hotel, the Columbian Inn. As the numbers of travelers to Ithaca increased, four local men, counting on the growth of the community, decided to build another. They were optimistic about the future of the area and they staked their money on Ithaca's growth. What those four businessmen built in Ithaca was the Clinton House, a hotel grander than any other public building west of the Hudson River—or so people said. They spent \$30,000 on the hotel and built it in the Greek Revival style. A stage coach might deposit travelers on a muddy street, but the lighted hotel beckoned them inside with promises of good food and clean linens—things not generally found in America outside the major cities.<sup>5</sup>

While the other hotels were on Owego Street, in the midst of the commercial section of the town, the Clinton House was built on North Cayuga Street, only a block away from the others and close enough to compete with them—also elegant enough to outlive them all. The Clinton House bridged the gap between the two sections of Ithaca. DeWitt had clustered commercial activities on Owego Street, while to the north, along Mill (now Court) and Buffalo Streets, DeWitt sold land to religious denominations as they formed, and he donated land for the Court House and Jail. He created an institutional center for his village, clustering together the buildings of God, of the state,



Clinton House

and of education. Along Mill Street sat the First Presbyterian Church, the Court House and Jail, and at the Aurora Street corner, the Methodist Episcopal Church complete with the first bell in Ithaca. When the Episcopalian congregation formed St. John's Church in reaction to Rev. Wisner's stern Calvinist beliefs, they bought a lot at the corner of Buffalo and Cayuga Streets. Directly across the street from their church was the village school lot which housed a succession of school buildings. Today it is the site of the DeWitt Mall.<sup>6</sup>

Two additional church congregations had formed by 1830. The Baptists bought a lot on the eastern edge of the public green or park, that DeWitt had set aside and which today is called DeWitt Park. The Dutch Reformed congregation began when twenty families resigned from the Presbyterian Church. They built on the corner of Buffalo and Geneva Streets.

In this second section of Ithaca, Simeon DeWitt created a highly desirable residential area. The president of the Bank of Newburg, for example, built his house at the corner of Mill and North Cayuga Streets—he walked three and one-half blocks to work. Other citizens also sought these well-placed lots and the area became fashionable.

Many people could not afford to pay high prices for land, however, and to them DeWitt offered less costly and smaller lots beyond Mill Street, along Tioga and Cayuga and Aurora Streets. He placed notices in *The American Journal*, advertising village lots for which he promised good terms and liberal credit.<sup>7</sup>

DeWitt and his son, Richard Varick DeWitt, created another residential area during the 1830s centered around Washington Park, with the more desirable lots facing the park. This new neighborhood was close to city facilities and near the newly established district school on Geneva Street.

What must be kept in mind is that Ithaca in the 1820s and 1830s was a walking community.<sup>8</sup> People generally lived close to their work. They walked to church, to schools, and to shops. DeWitt's plan accommodated the needs of his villagers, and one's distance from the center of things depended upon what one could spend for a house lot.



104 East Court Street

Behind Owego Street the water from Six Mile Creek turned mill wheels, fed into tanneries and supplied the small businesses that quickly appeared. There were fifty mechanics' shops in the village—mostly on the creek and at the inlet. Much of the activity at the inlet centered on ship building, but there were also mechanics' shops, lumber yards, storehouses, and numerous docks. The major activity was the shipment of produce in and out of port—items exported included wheat, flour, pork, beef, lumber, and butter. Twenty-seven asheries in the county produced pot and pearl ash, while twenty-nine distilleries turned corn into whiskey. Tompkins County exported 400

barrels of whiskey in 1822; by 1827 the figure reached 1,000 barrels. Imported merchandise included dishes, fine furniture, glass, salt, lime, and plaster.<sup>9</sup>

The inlet workmen and their families lived on land near the water's edge. They did not own the land on which they built their shacks, they merely used it. No one minded, as the land appeared worthless and it was poorly located in terms of access in the village. These workmen labored in the boat yards and along the docks, but the work was seasonal. Shipping only moved along the lake from April until December, leaving the squatters to fend for themselves during the cold months. The Inlet retained its earlier reputation as a tough neighborhood.

Fall Creek was beyond the bounds of the village of Ithaca; there a number of industries tapped the ample water spilling over Ithaca Falls. Phineas Bennett erected a plaster and carding mill there, and in 1818 he built the paper mill. A saw mill and a grist mill were located along Fall Creek and the census report for 1823 also lists a shoe shop and a gun factory.<sup>10</sup> Twenty-seven families, consisting of 67 males and 69 females, lived close by the mills. Most adults worked in the factories, as did older children. In 1829, *The Ithaca Journal* ran an advertisement requesting factory help. The owner stated that "he would prefer a widow with three or four girls, 12 years old, and upwards; but others . . . might apply."<sup>11</sup> Most of these people at Fall Creek rented housing from the mill owners. They made infrequent trips into Ithaca, for the path connecting the two communities was rough, and it passed along the swamp, which many regarded as unhealthy.



In 1826 Miles Finch prepared the county's census. He found evidence of enterprise and industry; there were fifteen grist mills by then, and 145 saw mills. The lumber was used for barns and homes, and during this period many people, like the Tremans, moved from rude log houses into finer homes. The lumber also built bridges and plank roads, as well as frame buildings and factories. Rafts carried excess lumber to market. In addition, Finch counted thirty-four fulling mills where cloth was cleaned and thickened, and forty-eight carding machines. There were four woolen factories and one that produced cotton-woolen cloth.<sup>12</sup>

Finch's census revealed that the population of the county had grown to 32,908. He located seventy-three aliens; twenty-eight paupers were cared for by the county supervisor at the Poor House. He also counted 158 persons of color. Although the presence of blacks within the county throughout the 1820s has long been known, little has been discovered about their lives. A number of blacks lived in Hector, then a part of Tompkins County. Others resided in Caroline, some were in Ithaca.

Finding information about blacks in the earliest days of Tompkins County is not easy since material about them was not collected into area archives. The manuscript census, however, yields some specific information. We know that in 1820 there were two male and four female slaves within the county, while at the same time there were thirty free black men and thirty-five free black women. Of these, a total of forty lived in the Town of Hector, then a part of Tompkins County, where the sizeable Quaker population offered blacks land and aid. The remaining twenty-six blacks lived throughout the county. In the Town of Ulysses, for example, which in 1820 still contained Ithaca, there were eighteen blacks, while eight lived in Lansing. In a census of Ithaca taken in 1823 there were fifty-one blacks there, a rise of forty-one persons over the earliest known count taken in 1818.

Blacks in Ithaca lived on the fringe of the white population. We know that in 1825, of the blacks living in the Town of Lansing, one was Cato DeWitt in whose house eight others lived. In 1825 in Danby there was a black named George DePlessis or Duplase, who had an extensive family. Living with George were two females, one his wife and the other an unmarried girl under the age of sixteen, probably his daughter. In 1825 George was forty-three years old and he owned forty-five acres of land on which he kept sixteen cattle, one horse, fourteen sheep and three hogs. The worth of his household included fourteen yards of cloth and another eighteen yards not yet fulled—the products of his wife's labor. Both George and his wife Asneth, had been born in Connecticut and in 1860 were still listed as living in Danby.

Living next door to George was Prince de Plessis, who had served in the American Revolutionary War and was probably George's father. He and his wife, who is not named, owned a horse; the land on which they lived was deeded to George.

In Ithaca we know of a few free blacks. One was Francis Collins who was forty-five years old in 1825. Collins maintained a household

on seven acres of land where he had cattle, horses, and four hogs. Seven people, none of whom are named in the census, lived with Francis Collins. The census does tell us that Collins and his wife had both been born in New York State and were illiterate. Daniel Kipps was also an Ithaca free black. He lived on ten acres of land in a household of four males and two females. One of the women was his wife; of the adults in the house only Daniel was eligible to vote, which meant that he held land or property in excess of \$250 in value.

Henry Pigoit is also listed in the 1825 census as living in Ithaca. In his household was his wife and their three children. They kept a cow and hog. Henry does not appear in any later census but Rosanna, his wife, does. She is listed in 1850, age forty-nine, her birthplace, New Jersey. In 1850 she was living in the household of the Shadricks, probably her daughter, son-in-law, and their children.<sup>13</sup>

Slaves in Tompkins County lived in the Town of Caroline. In New York they legally gained their freedom in 1827 by an Act of the State legislature. Many slaves within Tompkins County were free before that date, because some wills from the Caroline area granted them freedom. John Cantine dictated in his will that his "negro man William shall after my Decease have his freedom and be free and should it so happen that During his Lifetime, he be in Want for any of the [necessities?] of Life it is my will and Desire" that Cantine's son Charles provide for him.<sup>14</sup> Peter Webb's owner hired him out to work in a nearby sawmill. The owner kept most of Webb's salary, but Peter saved his portion and eventually bought his freedom.<sup>15</sup>

In 1830 the census lists 104 blacks living in Ithaca. They were free blacks from the Hudson Valley area, or escaped slaves from the south, and some were descendants of the Caroline slaves who moved to the village to find work.<sup>16</sup> Most blacks probably worked at the Inlet, but they did not live alongside the inlet workers. Instead they had houses along Green and Clinton Streets, and they built their church close by. Discrimination kept them in the lowest paying jobs, and hostility forced them to keep to themselves. The community they developed skirted the larger white society—falling geographically between the growing middle class in the center of town, and the poor seasonal workers at the inlet.



The Old Courthouse, Ithaca

Ithaca prospered because of its status as the county seat. New people came to town, and so did new businesses and some industries. Ebenezer Mack acclaimed them all in *The Ithaca Journal*. In a poetic excess he wrote:

Beneath our feet the village lies,  
 Above, around, on either side  
 Improvements greet us far and wide.  
 Here Eddy's factory appears,  
 First of the hardy pioneers.  
 Yes, Ithaca, where from this brow  
 I gaze around upon you, now  
 I see you not as first I knew.  
 Your dwellings, humble, low and few,  
 Your chimney smokes I then could count;  
 But now my eyes cannot surmount  
 The splendid walls that meet the eye  
 And mock my early memory.  
 Yes, village of the classick name,  
 Wouldst thou had more of classick fame!  
 Go on and prosper! There are still  
 Plots to improve, and space to fill.  
 With private zeal, and public spirit,  
 No small proportion of your merit,  
 Build railroads, canals, roads, and banks;  
 Make money plenty, and my thanks  
 At least you'll have.—May education  
 Here also occupy its station.<sup>17</sup>

Mack applauded progress the village had already made, but he called for still more efforts to improve. He realized that the economic life of the county was a fragile thing that depended upon trade outside the county, and the infusion of new money into it. Farmers' produce, sold at market, allowed local residents to patronize grocers and barbers. Chairs from the Chair Factory or woolens from the Free Hollow Woolen Mill, when sold in New York or Philadelphia, enabled the factory owner to hire workers and expand his operation. Additional laborers in town required houses and food which meant business for those who provided such things.

The key to this activity was good roads within the county and cheap, competitive routes out of the county to the larger markets. The steamship *Enterprise* made its maiden voyage in June 1821 and became an important link to other markets. It traveled the length of Cayuga, from the Corner-of-the-Lake (or Port Renwick) to the wondrous bridge at Cayuga, which spanned the marshy northern end of the lake. The trip took eight hours and represented a considerable improvement over the older boats then traveling the inland waters. At Cayuga Bridge passengers could meet stagecoaches going west, thereby shortening the trip from New York City to Buffalo by one full day. Later on other boats joined the *Enterprise* on the lake, the *DeWitt Clinton* and the *Telemachus* (named for Ulysses' son). Stagecoaches connected Ithaca to Geneva and Auburn, and Utica, carrying passengers and mail. Most manufactured goods traveling overland went on heavy wagons.<sup>18</sup>

Completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 encouraged everyone. The canal traffic caused some new communities to appear such as Lockport and Weedsport, and other towns, such as Syracuse and Rochester, flourished because of their location. Every community hoped to be well-connected and well-served by access to "Clinton's Ditch," which spanned New York state from east to west.

As early as 1813 the Seneca Lock Navigation Company had been alert to talk of canals. The company received a charter to connect Seneca and Cayuga Lakes by means of a canal, and that waterway opened in 1821. Boats from the Seneca Canal could follow a series of natural streams leading to the Erie Canal when it opened. But this route, by canal and river, could not handle all the traffic from the two lakes, and residents of the region wanted a better approach to the Erie Canal—one that would ensure speed of passage and a competitive price on goods reaching market. In 1828 an improved route from the Finger Lakes to the Erie Canal opened.

Sadly, however, the Erie Canal did not work out as local folks envisioned. There had been dreams of county wheat reaching the New York City markets more cheaply if sent by canal rather than overland. Wheat and other products did make the trip to market more quickly and at less cost once the canal was in operation, but so, too, did the even more abundant wheat from the Ohio Valley. Tompkins County farmers discovered to their dismay that the Erie Canal rushed their grain into a market in which they could not compete, for county farming was done on poor land and on a smaller scale than in the Western Reserve. Tompkins County produce had to sell for more in New York than Ohio grain because there was less grain moving out of the county on which to make a profit. So, rapid transport only emphasized the problem of low production, and the prospects for local farmers looked grim.<sup>19</sup> The farmers learned a second lesson after the Canal opened: that being well-connected to markets also meant that fluctuations in market prices were felt sharply at home.

One way for Tompkins county to preserve a position of importance in the new interconnected water route was to link the Inlet with the Susquehanna River, for if that could be accomplished, Ithaca might thrive as a transportation center. Ithacans wanted New York City merchandise to flow into central Pennsylvania by way of Cayuga Lake, and Pennsylvania coal to flow north and east the same way, but the old route, over the Ithaca-Owego Turnpike, by which the gypsum had traveled, was too slow to be competitive. A canal would speed up the trip. As County residents planned a water link between the inlet and the Susquehanna River, the people of Seneca Lake had a similar idea. They also proposed a canal project, the Chemung Canal, which the state legislature approved. Tompkins County's hopes were dashed.

But not for long. The spirit of enterprise and of competition persisted, and by 1825 Ithacans talked of a rail link south. In 1827 a committee of citizens from Tompkins and Tioga formed the Ithaca and Owego Rail-Road Company; and in 1828 the state legislature granted them a charter. They investigated various routes south; and finally decided to send the railroad over South Hill, and from there on to Owego. This was not, however, to be a steam or coal driven train—they would come later. Rather, this was a train drawn by horses pulling cars attached to a track. It was argued that such a line could successfully compete with canals, having the advantage of year-round operation.<sup>20</sup>



To climb South Hill, a rise of 593 feet, work began on two inclined planes needed to draw the train to the top of the hill in the short space of one mile. The railroad opened in 1834 when a train of forty-nine cars—four of them loaded with passengers, the others with plaster and salt—made the trip from Ithaca to Owego. Crowds gathered to watch the departure. The entire trip took three hours and it was widely believed that when the horses became accustomed to the labor, the time would be shortened.

But operation of the railroad was expensive, and within a month additional money was needed. Some 3,300 passengers used the train during the first six months of operation, and it carried 12,000 pounds of freight, yet this was not enough traffic to generate adequate revenue. In addition, the train ran on an erratic schedule and was prone to accidents. Travelers were often injured, winter travel proved to be as difficult for the trains as for the canal boats, and the promise of prosperity dimmed—many people seeing better opportunities elsewhere left the area.<sup>21</sup> Tompkins County kept pace as best it could until 1837, when an economic depression that affected the entire United States stopped the railroad as well as every other venture.



The 1820s and 30s were years of hope. Many believed that the American people—who had, after all, so affected the history of government in the world—could successfully tame a wilderness, generate power from water, and send railroad cars to climb hills. Sam Patch was a man of this era. Patch grew up in Rhode Island where he spent his time diving into a river from great heights.

“Some things can be done better than others,” he boasted. In New Jersey he jumped into the Patterson River, and lived to boast again. He went to Niagara where twice he jumped into the Falls to help local hotelmen advertise the beauty of the place. *The Ithaca Journal* reported: This jump of Sam Patch at Niagara, a distance of 120 feet, “is the greatest feat of the kind ever effected by man. He may now challenge the universe for a competitor.”<sup>22</sup>

Patch was an embodiment of men’s dreams. He dared to be bold and he dared to jump. And jump he did—everywhere, until jumping was called, “doing a Sam Patch,” or “patching.” He captured the public imagination.

Men who challenge the universe, however, often have their hopes dashed to pieces, and, so too, railroads without enough capital, or communities too far off the major transportation routes. When the banks failed in 1837, money for new enterprise froze, and railroads and industry stopped.

Sam Patch challenged the falls on the Genesee River on his way east from his grand success at Niagara. In November of 1829, a large crowd gathered to watch Patch pit himself against nature. Sam Patch stood poised above the water, his red sash flying. He jumped, and his arched body soared through the air. At water’s edge—he crumpled.

The following spring they found his body, still wrapped in the bright red sash. They buried Sam Patch in Rochester. *The Ithaca Journal* changed its tune: “A large concourse of spectators,” said their last article on Sam, “assembled to encourage this fool hardy man to his death.” In 1870 when a “young fella” proposed to jump Niagara Falls, “a la Sam Patch,” *The Journal* snipped, “The sooner he meets Sam’s fate the better.”<sup>23</sup>



## 11

**Improvement: the 1820s and '30s**

One of the keys to understanding individuals in this period is to recognize their desire for improvement, for almost everyone was involved in the betterment of self. The store clerk studied math in order to become a store owner, the farmer studied agricultural texts and joined an agricultural society to learn how to raise better crops. Young boys apprenticed in various crafts, young women learned domesticity at home.

Most people viewed education as the means to betterment, yet people differed over who should provide schools: the state or private enterprise. Not until 1815 did New York attempt to resolve the question, and then it did so only partially. DeWitt Clinton had urged some form of public education provided by the state in 1782, but the law that was finally enacted in 1795 lapsed in 1800. During that five year period some 1,352 grammar schools appeared—including those collecting funds in the Township of Ulysses. A regents board, created by the governor, sought to encourage schools after 1800, and that board resorted to a state lottery to finance public education, but they accomplished little.

In 1812 the state required townships to draw up school districts so that free elementary education could be offered to all children. State money would match local funds to build and operate schools; parents had to pay a school tax to cover the teacher's salary. Parents without the necessary cash could pay in goods, or they might board the teacher at their home. The school law made provision for parents with neither money nor other means of payment, for they could declare themselves paupers, and their children could attend classes without cost. Among farm families, however, there was reluctance to accept this designation for they had food and plenty of work and they were optimistic about the future. They were poor, but they were not paupers.

*The Ithaca Journal* announced that “the Common School for this District will commence . . . under the care of Mr. Davis. For the ensuing quarter the school will be free to children residing in the district.”<sup>1</sup> Even so, among the poorer families—inlet workers and blacks—the labor of a child was often essential to the family’s welfare. Therefore, only a few of these children attended the District School.

The earliest schools within the county—such as the Dryden school which met in Amos Sweet’s house, or the Slaterville log school (built in 1802), or the school in Danby (1799) taught by Joseph Beers, or Enfield’s school erected in 1809, or the Groton hewed-log school of 1805—were all incorporated into district school systems as required by the state 1812 law. Most children who attended school at all went to these district schools. They were run by committees of parents who determined the length of the school year and the cost to parents. In 1839 the freeholders of Groton District #18 elected a moderator and school board officers. They voted for a four month school year paid for by an assessment of one-third of a cord of wood per student. The wood was to be stacked at the school ground no later than November 15, and anyone neglecting his cord of wood would be fined 75 cents. Other districts had to impose a length of 18 inches on the required wood because some families brought short logs—and thereby paid less than the rest. Those paying in pine wood had to add one-third more logs.<sup>2</sup>

Some school trustees had worries other than financial. At one school teachers fought a ferocious battle with head lice until the Board finally agreed to expel any pupil found to have nits. The Eight Square School District had a committee “to examine the itch,” and the supervisors voted in 1823 “that any person sending their children to school after being notified that they have the itch shall be liable to pay five dollars.” The next year students with the itch were dismissed until cured.<sup>3</sup>



eight square schoolhouse

School boards hired teachers who were quite young and barely out of school themselves. They taught as best they could, for teaching was neither an art nor a science, but more a matter of discipline imposed upon children. Teachers received meager pay, they generally boarded from home to home, and they tended to be transient.

Some village families had a choice of schools to which to send their children. Ministers might teach classes on weekdays, and sometimes an educated woman did so. Teaching very young children was one occupation allowed to women, probably because it was seen as an extension of their “natural” role which was mothering.

Mr. G. A. Starkweather taught a Select School in Ithaca which advertised in the newspaper in 1821. In his announcement for the second quarter, Starkweather listed offerings in reading, writing, and arithmetic for two dollars. More advanced students could take English composition, geography, grammar, and rhetoric for a cost of three dollars; and those students desiring geometry, surveying, math, and Latin paid a tuition of four dollars and fifty cents. Mr. Starkweather taught only boys.<sup>4</sup> A female school, charging two to three dollars per term, offered classes for young ladies: reading, writing, ‘arithmetick,’ grammar, geography, history, rhetoric, composition, needle work, painting, and drawing maps.<sup>5</sup>

Among a public that regarded education as knowledge that was useful, teachers had to defend their offerings. One wrote, “I teach all that is found in the school grammar, but I teach the practical portions first.” A catalogue issued by the Ithaca Academy stated, “although the design of this Institution is to give its pupils a substantial, rather than a showy education—to fit them for the responsibilities of life,” they nonetheless offered some music education. Critics of the schools, both public and private, were plentiful. One G. C., writing in *The Ithaca Chronicle*, complained that some pupils mumbled when they answered questions, and that in one school

children, between six and twelve years of age, are devoting nearly all their time to the orthography in the first part of the spelling book, which they have studied ever since they commenced getting lessons and know no more about it than when they first commenced.<sup>6</sup>

The citizens of the county were agog in 1821 over a new project proposed for Ithaca, for the small village was being considered as the site for a college to be called Ithaca College, or the American University. It was sponsored by the Methodist Episcopal Church of America, with whom the Ithaca Methodists were affiliated.<sup>7</sup>

Proponents of the college explained the plan at a series of town meetings. Ebenezer Mack, ever ready to promote progress, wrote a series of editorials in *The American Journal* about the school. He noted in June that at a recent town meeting a subscription book had been opened and many citizens had pledged their financial support. Mack pointed out that in a free society the first privilege or duty of the citizenry "is to diffuse the benefits of education," for he believed, as did many Americans, that only an educated public could be trusted to vote intelligently. The proposed college would educate local children who otherwise would have to go away in order to attend a university—a thing very few local families could afford. It would also attract 'foreign' students—that is, children from places outside the county—to come to Ithaca to study.<sup>8</sup> He pointed out that the plan included a branch devoted to

The education of females, [which] has been almost criminally neglected. It is in vain that woman is called the "fairest work of creation," so long as she is left to spring up in spontaneous ignorance, like a wild flower surrounded by thorns and brambles. Woman was designated as the rational companion of man. She had a commanding influence upon the morals and manners of community. Upon her virtue and refinement depend much of the harmony, respectability, and value of society—much of the quiet, the comforts, the endearments of domestic life. How important, then, are the first principals which are impressed upon her yielding and susceptible mind—that the tender vine should be directed in its growth—that it should not creep upon the ground, among low and poisonous weeds, but rise and extend to adorn, to strengthen and unite the various branches of society. This one object of the institution, does credit to its projectors; is a powerful appeal in its behalf; and will secure to its patrons the reputation of at least being just and liberal, if not enlightened.<sup>9</sup>

Mack's rival, *The Republican Chronicle*, viewed education as the cure for sloth and sin. Ignorance, the editor wrote, "has ever been the faithful parent of idleness and vice."<sup>10</sup>

The citizens of Ithaca were willing to donate money to support this venture because they viewed the college as a form of community enterprise. Its presence in the town would benefit everyone for teachers needed housing and supplies, students required transportation, laundry, and postal services. There were school buildings to be built and maintained. A college would add to Ithaca's reputation, and to the importance of the county.

Ithacans in 1821 were fostering or promoting their town in a spirit which has been called boosterism. Another example of this booster

spirit can be found in the names given to communities. A muddy road on which there were only a few houses and a mill was designated as Groton City. Yet "city" was historically a term defining a large urban area which was the center of an episcopal see (that is, a cathedral town). York and Durham in England were cities. Baltimore, the home of the only Roman Catholic Bishop in America, was a city. But why Groton City? It was so named in order to promote the area. In an age of enterprise, and in an age which believed in improvement, Groton City was named in the high expectation of what its residents hoped it would become. That was boosterism.

The American University, or Ithaca College of 1821, died stillborn. The Methodist-Episcopal Church decided to build elsewhere. Ithaca was, after all, a very insignificant spot. The college that might have taken shape on East Hill, did not.

Two years later, however, in 1823, citizens of Ithaca intent on going forward, and intent upon bettering themselves as well as conditions for their children, incorporated the Ithaca Academy. The result of private initiative, it was a non-profit institution supported by tuition. The curriculum was broad, preparatory for college entrance, and the Academy admitted both men and women.<sup>11</sup>

Ithaca was not the only community to set up such an academy, nor was it the only school to admit women. In 1819, the citizens of Cortland founded theirs, and the Homer Academy was long considered one of the finest secondary schools in the entire country. In time there were academies in Groton and Moravia and Trumansburg, as well.<sup>12</sup>

Tuition at the Academy was low, generally four dollars a term. For village children attendance was relatively easy; students could live at home, but rural children or students from elsewhere usually boarded in town for one dollar to one dollar and twenty-five cents per week. They went home, if at all possible, on weekends. But because of the fees, and owing to the loss of the child's labor, the Academy mainly educated children of the growing middle class.

Academy education, remember, was intended to prepare students for college entrance. In time, some young men from the Ithaca Academy attended Union College and Yale. What of the young women? Although they were equally prepared for college, there was no institution of higher education in the 1820s and 30s to accept them. What did they do, these Academy-educated women? Most of them returned to their homes, trained in domesticity, and married. Some took up teaching positions in district schools where the Trustees

would accept a female teacher, but not for some twenty years would teaching be regarded as a career suited to women, and at that point elementary school teaching became a low-paying and low-status occupation.

Older people who had never been to school, or who had attended only briefly, also sought to better themselves. Some, like Henry Sage of Dryden, studied alone at night reading popular books, such as Simpson's *On the Necessity of Popular Education*.<sup>13</sup>

Two debating societies founded in the 20s flourished in Ithaca for many years. Besides being a fine way to meet other young men intent on self-improvement, debate societies helped to develop speaking skills—essential if one hoped to become a preacher, lawyer, or politician. They sharpened the reasoning process, too, and helped to develop leaders among the members. Both Ithaca societies announced their topics ahead of time in the newspapers. Here are some examples:

Ought women to participate in the administration of government?  
(*The American Journal*, February 14, 1821)

Has religion more influence upon the moral conduct of men than human laws? (*The American Journal*, March 7, 1821)

Do males possess greater powers of the mind than females? (*The Ithaca Journal*, September 24, 1828)

Ought Imprisonment for debt be Abolished? (*The Ithaca Journal*, December 3, 1828)

Are the ordinary assemblages of gentlemen and ladies for social amusement, at Tea Parties, innocent, and calculated to improve society? (*The Ithaca Journal*, December 24, 1828)

Are females less qualified by nature for government than males?  
(*The Ithaca Journal*, January 21, 1829)

Was the discovery of America productive of more good than evil?  
(*The Ithaca Journal*, December 23, 1829)

The early urge to form organizations, which we found among the first county settlers, continued. Associations formed in the 1820s and 30s concentrated upon the improvement of self and the betterment of society, and Ithacans and residents of the county participated in a number of sweeping religious revivals. Their intensity involved people of all economic levels and from most of the churches. There is evidence that at one time Ithaca was consumed by revival fever—

enthusiastic religion was seen as necessary for the individual and good for the community. In one issue of *The Ithaca Journal*, the following groups all listed their regular meetings:

Tompkins County Bible Society,  
Young Men's Society of Ithaca for the Suppression of Intemperance,  
Tompkins County Tract Society,  
Tompkins County Sabbath School Union,  
Tompkins County Medical Society.<sup>14</sup>

Other organizations flourished as well. There was a Society for the Promotion of Drama, the Agricultural Society, and the Ithaca Total Abstinence Temperance Society. Fire companies, and even the Mechanics' Society, two organizations with a practical purpose, also served as fraternal organizations for their members.

There were also two colonization societies in the county, one in Ithaca, the other in Trumansburg. Members of these societies argued that freed blacks should be returned to Africa where they could colonize that continent—a useful program for Africa which was perceived to lack native leaders and an equally expedient plan for the United States as our black population would naturally decrease. In time, some blacks from both the United States and England did go back to Western Africa, where they established the states of Liberia and Sierra Leone.<sup>15</sup>

Ithaca blacks founded the St. James African Methodist Church in 1828. They met at Pastor Johnson's home in preference to attending services at the local white churches. One Ithacan remembered that churches provided "seats in them for colored people, since the prejudice against them, would not allow them to sit where they pleased." The blacks, however, "often refused to sit in their colored pews."<sup>16</sup> So in 1836 trustees David Nelson, Jonathan Dever, and Jacob Brooks announced in the *Ithaca Herald* that they had bought village lot #76 in block No. 118 on which the black congregation planned to build its own church. They hoped the public would support their effort with contributions.<sup>17</sup> County blacks also formed a political party called the Ebony Party. They met in 1828 and voted to support the



St. James A.M.E. Zion Church

presidency of John Quincy Adams for president. There were, however, few qualified black voters: in 1826, in Ithaca, there were only four.<sup>18</sup>

Within the Presbyterian Congregation there was a special Domestic Missionary Society founded in 1824. It was this society, encouraged by the Reverend Samuel Parker, that touched off an interesting chain of events. Reverend Parker had originally been sent to Danby by the Massachusetts Domestic Missionary Board. He labored there for some years, exchanged his pulpit with the Rev. Wisner one Sunday, as we have seen, and then moved to Ithaca himself. Parker taught school for awhile, and raised his family on what today is Parker Street, in Ithaca.<sup>19</sup>

Religious societies in the eastern United States received an odd but stirring request in 1832. Four Nez Perce Indians from the Oregon Territory traveled to St. Louis where George Rogers Clark lived. Clark, after his famed trip with Meriwether Lewis, had been appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the whole Northwest. The Nez Perce traveled east to request that Christian teachers come to live with them.

The Methodists, who first published the text of the Indian appeal in their newspaper, were slow to respond. But not Samuel Parker! Oregon was far from Ithaca and the trip would be costly, so Parker began an energetic letter-writing campaign to convince the Presbyterian Board of Missions to support such a venture and to accept his labor even though he was 56 years old and considered by many people not vigorous enough for such an expedition. Parker persisted and lectured everywhere to gain support and money for his dream of going west. The American Board of Missions finally accepted Parker as a missionary, and the Presbyterian Church of Ithaca promised its financial support. Parker's goal was to locate the Nez Perce Indians and to determine if a mission among them could be managed. With this in mind, Parker traveled to St. Louis, but found he had arrived too late in the season to join the fur traders who knew the way into the uncharted land. Parker returned to Ithaca, determined to start the next year in plenty of time.

In 1835 Parker arrived in St. Louis

... and found Doct. Marcus Whitman here, who is appointed by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to be my associate. He came through the central parts of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, and arrived a few days before me. On the seventh we had an interview with Mr. Fontenelle, who takes charge of the caravan sent

out by the American Fur Company. The caravan goes a very little beyond the Rocky Mountains, for the purpose of carrying out goods for the Indian trade, and for the supply of their men who are engaged in hunting and trapping in and about the mountains, and to bring back the furs which they have taken during the year. There are about three hundred men constantly employed in and about the mountains, and more than sixty who constitute the caravan. With a much less number it would not be safe to perform this journey, as there are hostile tribes of Indians on the way, viz. the Arickaras, the Crows, and Blackfeet. Mr. Fontenelle kindly offered to accommodate us with such advantages as may be afforded in his caravan.<sup>20</sup>

Their western trip is a thrilling story. The missionaries crossed the vast country, climbed the mountains and prepared the way for the many others who trudged west. Parker returned home to Ithaca by way of the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), while Whitman traveled back overland. Once home, Whitman married Narcissa Prentiss of Angelica, New York, and the two prepared to return to the Oregon Territory. In doing so, they step from our local scene into a place in the history of America's penetration of the Pacific Northwest.\* Samuel Parker remained in Ithaca where he wrote his account of the expedition to Oregon, entitled *An Exploring Tour Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, published in Ithaca in 1838.

Parker was not the only county resident to respond to the call of the west. Dr. Elijah White, of Lansing, and his wife began as missionaries to the Walla Walla Indians. White later accepted a position as sub-agent for the United States government in the Oregon Territory, where he remained for ten years. Then in 1847, White returned to Tompkins County where he too published an account of all he had seen.<sup>21</sup>



\* The Whitmans established a mission to the Cayuse Indians in Oregon Territory. It became an important stop on the Oregon Trail over which many emigrants moved. The Whitmans helped sick and weary travelers and promoted American settlement. In 1847 Cayuse Indians, fearing measles brought west by the settlers, turned on the Whitmans and killed them both. Congress acted swiftly when it heard of the outrage by its renewing its interest in Oregon; it sent out government officials who established in 1848 the first territorial government west of the Rockies.

The Free Masons were yet another active association in the 1820s and 30s—and one of the most important. Masons, members of a secret, fraternal, quasi-religious society, based their rituals of service and initiation upon Protestant religious practices. Many famous Americans were Masons, including George Washington and Andrew Jackson. Joining Masonic groups was one way of showing increased status among people intent on bettering themselves. Yet, in America, where government was supposed to be open and responsive to the people, there was a fear of secrecy. Many people believed that secrecy bred conspiracies and the probability of political and economic manipulation by a few persons in the community. What this meant to villagers in Ulysses and Dryden was that Masons, who had secret rites and secret code words and close bonds with each other, might become an elite within the town. They could control policies by agreeing to vote together, and if they traded only with each other, they could stifle free trade. Therefore, many people feared the Masons.

The issue of the Masons exploded because of the infamous William Morgan affair. Morgan became a Mason at Rochester in 1823. When he moved to Batavia in 1826, the chapter there refused to admit him. In a mood of revenge—or one of exploitation—Morgan wrote down Masonic secrets and arranged with a Batavia printer to bring out *Illustrations of Masonry*, an exposé of secret Masonic Practices.<sup>22</sup> The Masonic chapter in Batavia heard about the proposed book and ransacked Morgan's belongings, and they tried to burn down the print shop where the manuscript was being put into type. They finally arranged to have Morgan arrested and detained by the Batavia jailer (possibly a Mason) who then transferred him to the Canandaigua jail to keep him all the more securely. Morgan, however, was kidnapped from the jail, spirited across the state in a curtained stagecoach, and never seen again.

Some claimed that Morgan had accepted a cash payment and had left for Canada. Others firmly believed that Morgan had been given a boat ride to the midpoint of Lake Ontario and when properly weighted, pitched overboard. The investigation that followed disclosed nothing about Morgan's kidnappers or his fate, but it did reveal that a great many officeholders in the state of New York were Masons. Whatever happened to Morgan, his disappearance and the rumors which flew across the state about the episode, electrified the countryside. In Trumansburg the Masonic Lodge became a target of the community's first newspaper, *The Lake Light*. Feeling against the

Lodge became so stormy that all but 12 out of 142 members dropped away. The faithful dozen, called The Twelve Apostles, met in secret in the Halsey House for the next twenty years and only emerged again publicly in 1847.<sup>23</sup>

By 1828, with the coming of the United States Presidential election between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams, the Masonic issue got tangled with the political. The Anti-Masons generally took a strong stand against Andrew Jackson, a Mason, and the Anti-Masonic movement, which began in New York, expanded to other states and attacked all secret societies. As the first major third party in American history, the Anti-Masonic party met at a national convention in Baltimore to plot its political strategy.

In August 1828 *The Ithaca Journal* announced meetings of a local anti-Masonic party. One advertisement invited Republicans in Danby who were not members of any Masonic Lodge to meet in order to plan their tactics for the November election.<sup>24</sup> A month later the number of Anti-Masonic meetings around the county increased, and by 1829 the pro- and anti-Masonic forces within the county were in full swing. The Anti-Masonic Republicans of Spencer met in September, as did the anti-Masons of Ulysses. In October *The Ithaca Chronicle* announced a pro-Masonic meeting at DeRuyter, while *The Chronicle* claimed that the Masons had agreed upon three principles of action to counter their enemies. The first was to assist a brother when he was in difficulty, whether right or wrong. The second, to vote for a brother in preference to any other person. And the third, to keep secrets of brother Masons except where murder or treason was involved.<sup>25</sup> Nonsense, cried the Masons! These were not their beliefs. But the harm had been done, and the newspapers, unchecked by libel laws or rules of evidence, printed whatever pleased the editor's viewpoint.

On March 3, 1830, *The Chronicle* listed the issues it supported. Republicanism was the creed of the paper, and its editor viewed the Masons as a "most pressing issue," every bit as serious as temperance. A newspaper editor or publisher—often one and the same person—could be a very powerful force in any community, for his viewpoint controlled the news. The best restraint upon a newspaper editor was a rival press, and in larger communities there were often several weekly papers competing for public attention. The editors sniped at each other in a running series of printed battles.

From 1828 onward, local voters responded to the chaotic political situation by voting the Republicans out in 1829, by supporting

the anti-Masonic candidates in 1830, and then returning Republican candidates in 1831. In 1832 the county split roughly in half, electing Andrew Jackson by 3,338 votes to 3,045 against him.<sup>26</sup> Local issues and offices determined political affiliation, rather than national candidates and platforms. The editor of *The Ithaca Journal* commented on influences upon local voting habits:

The genuine anti-masons, as well as those Clay men who pretended to disavow anti-masonry, used every effort to impress it upon the electors, that *national politicks* had nothing to do with the controversy, that it was not a question between Jackson and Clay, but it was "Masonry and *Anti-Masonry!*"<sup>27</sup>

Persons dissatisfied with the national leadership in 1832 gathered to form a new, local political party, an amalgamation of voters opposed to Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, who supported instead Henry Clay. Masons and county anti-Masons attended the meeting, which had been convened by the Ithaca Mechanics Society.

The Mechanics emerged in 1832 as persons disaffected by the so-called spirit of enterprise. They felt left out of the dream of betterment because of labor practices which they considered unfair.<sup>28</sup> Carpenters, joiners, masons, and painters elected Edward Erskine chairman of their own organization. They complained that workers, paid a daily rate, were required to work 12 or 14 hours a day, thereby giving more work than they were actually paid for—they believed a ten-hour day sufficient, and pledged not to work longer, and they agreed to boycott any employer who demanded more than ten hours work.

The Mechanics' complaints went even farther, though, echoing the fears of American craftsmen all across the country. They promised not to keep too many apprentices at one time, that the number of skilled workers would remain small, that they not educate their own competition. They formed a committee to judge any new workman who appeared in the community in order to control the quality of the work performed. Long before a labor union system came into being in the United States, these craftsmen banded together to control production and to better their working conditions. The Mechanics turned to politics to gain power within the community. They, like other groups in the county, associated to better their lives. They, too, looked for ways to prosper in the booming life of Jacksonian America.

## Enterprise Challenged

The outlook for Tompkins County in 1836 was rosy. Increased business had brought about prosperity for some and employment for others. Educational institutions grew: there was the Academy, several private schools, and the district-wide elementary system. Additional mills now crowded the streams; the water power of Six Mile Creek, Fall Creek, and Cascadilla turned wheels which helped to produce flour and chairs, whiskey and paper, lumber and woolen goods. A canal system connecting the county to Lake Ontario gained local support, as did a state-funded railroad through the southern tier.

These were boom times. Land values in Ithaca skyrocketed, and anyone with a small down payment plus enough money to pay interest bought land. Out-of-towners speculated within the county, and some land values rose twenty-five percent. Speculators bought a 400 acre farm in the southern portion of Ithaca for \$160,000—an unheard of sum.<sup>1</sup> Simeon DeWitt's holdings in Ithaca were split up and sold following his death in 1834. One year later a 50 by 200 foot lot carved from his land sold for two dollars. In 1836 a portion of such a lot sold for twenty dollars.<sup>2</sup>

Local newspapers stressed the economic opportunities to be found in the county. More capital, said the editor of *The Jeffersonian and Tompkins Times*, would improve conditions; the prospects of the county were good, and its resources unsurpassed. He also believed that additional mechanics in the area would cause the county to prosper because "they promote growth, and contribute as much as any class to its wealth and respectability."<sup>3</sup> *The Ithaca Journal* believed that endorsement by the New York legislature of the Erie or Southern Tier Railroad assured future prosperity. "Business of every description seems to be unusually prosperous," wrote the editor of *The Journal*.<sup>4</sup>

Even in Albany people heard about the industry and growth in Ithaca. The editor of *The Albany Evening News* wrote that