

A View to Our Past



When the Seneca tribe first roamed these hills and valleys, they walked through dense growth of maple and elm on the valley floor and oak, chestnut, pine, beech, hemlock, ash, hickory, butternut and wild cherry on the hills. Wolves, bears, and cougars were competition for the Native Americans who stalked deer. The smaller wildlife, bobcats, fishers, raccoons, squirrels, and turkeys were also plentiful and came to drink from Mud Creek.

History records that the first white men to visit Bristol were the French explorer, Robert LaSalle, and the Jesuit missionary, Galinee in August of 1669. While waiting for an Iroquois escort to take them to Ohio, the explorers were shown "Burning Springs." Galinee recorded, "In order to pass away the time, I went with M. de LaSalle, under the escort of two Indians, about four leagues (10 miles) to the south of the village (Victor) where we were staying (Ganondagan), to see the very extraordinary spring. Issuing from a moderately high rock, it forms a small brook. The water is very clear, but it has a bad odor, like that of the mineral marches of Paris, when the mud is stirred with the foot. I applied a torch and the water immediately took fire and burned like brandy, and was not extinguished until it rained. The flame is among the Indians a sign of abundance or fertility, according as it exhibits the contrary qualities. There is no appearance of Sulphur, or any other combustible material. The water has not even any taste and I can neither offer nor imagine any better explanation than it acquires this combustible property by passing over some aluminous land."

None realized that it was natural gas coming from underground and bubbling through the water that caused the water to burn. Probably set afire by lightning when the Native Americans found it for the first time, the flame was several feet high and burned until extinguished by heavy rains or high winds. More than a hundred years passed before it was discovered that the gas could be used for heat and light.

When Walter Case owned the "Burning Springs" farm (Case Rd.), he and his wife cooked over the flame which at that time rose to a height of eighteen inches. The drilling of gas wells in the area caused the flame to become smaller.

On September 11, 1779 General Sullivan's troops marched through Bristol on what is now Vincent Hill Rd., crossed Mud Creek and followed the Indian trail to Honeoye. They burned the village near Flatiron Road, just as they had destroyed the Indian village at the top of "Arsenal Hill" in Canandaigua.¹

Written by Sandra Riker and edited by Beth Thomas on 110517

Page 1 comes from "Early History of Bristol" written by Beth

#2 1845 Town Meeting Highway Commissioners establish Path masters duties and those assessed to do the work to maintain the roads

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Research provided by Beth Thomas, Donna Beretta, and Sandra Riker

The Beginning of Bristol and Early Government:

In 1789 the town of Bristol was formed and consisted of Township 8 & 9 from the Phelps & Gorham Purchase. Bristol was one of the first thirteen townships to be formed in Ontario County. In 1825 there was a published proposal to unite the south part of Bristol with part or all of other towns in Ontario, Livingston and Steuben Counties into a new county. This did not happen. However, in March of 1838 the town of South Bristol was formed officially breaking away from the whole parcel of Bristol. The Town of South Bristol comprises the whole of Township No. 8, fourth range and part of No.8, third range.

Town Meetings were held annually in homes, inns and churches. There were 6 centers of activity in the early years and they were known as Muttonville, Bristol Center, Egypt, Baptist Hill as well as Cold Springs and Boswell Corners in the South part of the Town. Baptist Hill was once considered the center of the town and called Bristol.

The early government consisted of a Supervisor, Town Clerk, Assessors, Highway Commissioners, Constables, and Overseers of the Poor, Path Masters, Pound Master, School Commissioners, Collectors, Fence Viewers, and an Inspector of Lumber.

Town meetings were held regularly at the old Methodist Episcopal Church in Bristol Center as well as in taverns and homes of the early leaders of the community. Early on Bristol was a religious center with seven active churches throughout the town. Today there is only one active Church in Bristol and it is the United Church of Christ located on Baptist Hill. The first meetings of the Grange #1080 were held in the Methodist Church, but as membership grew they relocated in 1938 when the Bristol Amusement Club offered their hall (the Empire Knights of Relief Hall) and skating rink on Baptist Hill. In 1956 the Grange relocated to the Bristol Center Improvement Company hall located on County Road 32 and is now the home of the Bristol Town Hall.

Early Agriculture:

Early farming included the raising of sheep as well as the slaughtering, processing and rendering of tallow for the making of candles. In 1797 records show 21 registered earmarks in the town and by 1850 there were 210 flocks of sheep. The Town kept this enterprise in check by mandating fences of 4^{1/2}' in height creating holding pounds that the Pound Masters were responsible for who in turn appointed the fence viewers to watch over them. In 1825 a fine of \$5.00 for any rams running at large from late August to the middle of November was enforced.

With the passing of this industry came the advent of hop farming. This flourished from 1835 until blight and the prohibition era caused the decline of this source of revenue for the town. Between 1880 and 1925 apples and berries took over as the next source of revenue for the farming community until

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modern practices of canning and drying of fruit became outdated and it was more efficient to truck the produce to the public market in Rochester, New York. Some of the other farming operations were lumber, saw mills and grain mills remains of them may be found throughout the town.

Early Roads:

The number of Path Masters and road districts varied each year from six in 1797 to fifty two in 1836. The number dropped to 33 in 1838 when South Bristol became a separate township. The Path Masters were elected for each road district and were provided with a list by the Highway Commissioners who would be required to work on the roads. The work force consisted of every male over the age of 21 in the district, (except for “ministers, priests, paupers, and idiots or lunatics”) every person owning land in the district, whether male or female resident or non-resident, and all corporations owning land in the district.² They were responsible for removal of all noxious weeds, briars and brush on the highway, removing all loose stones on the beaten track of road once a month between April 1st and December 1st. They were expected to remove snow within 24 hours of being notified of their assignment and failing to do so resulted in a fine to be collected by the Path Masters.

Early Schools:

In the early history of Bristol there were as many as 12 school districts. The first one established at Baptist Hill in 1813 and was the last to close in 1953 when it was centralized with the Bloomfield school district. The other schools were centralized with Naples, Canandaigua, and Honeoye prior to the closing of School #1. In the early 1930’s school districts 1 and 11 did not have electric light but did have natural gas wells nearby and that was a source for their heat and lights.

Recent History:

In 1966 the Monroe County Water Authority proposed using the lands of Bristol to create a reservoir for their use under the New York Senate Bill #4405. This would be similar in nature to their use of Hemlock and Canadice Lakes in Livingston County. The Bill had passed the Assembly and the NY Senate Authorities Committee and was on its way to the NY Senate Rules Committee before the Town of Bristol or Ontario County had been notified of its existence. Letters were sent to Governor Rockefeller and Senator VanLare (who represented Monroe County as well as part of Ontario County) asking to have this stopped. On June 2, 1966 the Bristol Town Board called a special meeting of the townspeople to make them aware of what was being proposed without prior notification to the Town of Bristol. The Town Board advised the townspeople the Executive Director of Monroe County Water Authority that the only purpose of this land grab that it would be “less expensive than some other additional facilities planned to pump water from Lake Ontario” for Rochester. He went on to say he felt “the creation of Bristol Lake is a boon for the entire area and it would not diminish the beauty of the valley.” The proposed lake would cover over 1800 acres of the 3500 acres of the Town of Bristol and would run 2.5 miles south of Route 20 stretching southward along the east side of 64 and its full length would be 5 ½ miles in length and one mile in width at its widest part. Route 20A would be rerouted around the west side of “Bristol

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Lake” and then continue on through the Town of Richmond. The residents of Bristol as well as the other Ontario County Supervisors did not agree with this “brazen land grab” and in December of 1966 the town board of Bristol drafted a resolution “expressing its disapproval and unalterable opposition to any plan formulated or approved by any person, corporation, group, association or body and any statute introduced before any legislative body for the purpose of taking lands in the Town of Bristol for any purpose whatever, unless the said plan or statute has first been presented at a public hearing to the citizens and residents of the Town of Bristol and has been approved by the Bristol Town Board which put an end to “Bristol Lake”.

There is more that can be shared about the history of the Town of Bristol and its residents. For instance, you could go to the Bristol Volunteer Fire Department website www.bristolvfd.com to learn about them and its early beginnings. The dedication and comraderies of this organization is amazing and strong. There are other similar groups within the community that provide services and assistance to our townspeople such as “Harmony Circle” and the Bristol Library which should be included in the town's history. To learn about them go to the history page on the Bristol webpage: <http://www.townofbristol.org>.