

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

History is important as a background study as it can provide the reasons behind the settlement of the area as an urban place as well as the reasons for its growth and development and continued existence as a place in which to live and work. Herkimer has a long and proud history as one of the earliest settlements west of the Hudson River, and before this it was a part of the area occupied by the Mohawk Indians, a tribe of the five nations (later six) known as the Iroquois Confederacy.

The first white settlement was started in 1723 on the site of the present Village of Herkimer, then called German Flatts, by a group of Palatine Germans. The government encouraged the settlement of this particular site as it would serve as an outpost directly in the path of an attack in the Albany area, as such an attack would probably proceed through the Mohawk Valley from hostile country to the west. In the event of an attack word could be dispatched to the forces stationed in the Albany area and preparations made to repel the attack before the action was carried to the more populous areas along the Hudson. The settlement was sacrificed to this purpose when it was completely wiped out during the French and Indian Wars of 1754-60. Rebuilding was started immediately following the hostilities.

In 1776 Fort Dayton was built on the north bank of the Mohawk River, evidently on the small rise where the County Court House now stands, to protect the residents in the settlement. A similar fort, Fort Herkimer, was built on the lands of General Herkimer to protect the residents on the

south bank of the river as it was feared that, in the event of an attack, time would not permit fording the river to Fort Dayton. The strategic location of the settlement was to come to the forefront when for the second time it was burned, this time by Brant during his campaign against the American Colonies in 1778. Even though it was still being rebuilt after the first burning, they were about 70 dwellings on both sides of the river, mostly on the north bank, along with numerous mills, barns and other buildings. This action is vividly portrayed by Walter D. Edmonds in Drums Along the Mohawk.

The Town of Herkimer was organized in 1788 and on April 6, 1807 the Village was chartered. According to Nathaniel S. Benton in A History of Herkimer County (J. Munsell, Albany, N. Y., 1856) "this spot was for many years before and after the revolution the most populous of any in this part of the country; the public buildings of the county have always remained at the Village, and for several years it enjoyed a commercial prosperity unrivaled by any locality in the county." Even though the opening of the Erie Canal in the 1820's caused some loss to the general prosperity of the area, by 1830 the Village contained some 120 dwellings together with stores, hotels, printing offices, a blacksmith shop, distilleries, a tannery, a potashery and a cowbell factory.

Industrialization did not really get underway until the Herkimer Manufacturing and Hydraulic Company was incorporated in 1833, with a capital of \$100,000, to make a dam across the West Canada Creek to provide power for cotton, woolen, paper and flour manufacture. Again in the words of Nathaniel Benton, "The extensive water power of the West Canada Creek, which had been long unimproved, was brought into use about the year 1835, by a company of enterprising citizens of the town, and although the results of this experiment may not have fully met the

expectation of some of its most sanguine projectors, there can be no doubt of the very beneficial effects to the village, by the construction and operation of mills and machinery and the use of the water power brought out by the company. "

In 1836 the Utica & Schenectady Railroad, later to become a part of the New York Central System, was extended to Herkimer, providing a rapid means of travel in comparison to the Canal. The Canal, however, continued to be the primary means of moving freight for many years and is still in use today. In 1886, when the manufacture of furniture was begun, industry reached its greatest development in Herkimer.

Since that time, the Village has experienced generally steady growth both in population and industrial development. As was the case in most upstate communities, Herkimer received a considerable boost in population in the early 1900's with the influx of migrants from Europe. Large numbers of Italians, Poles and Russians made Herkimer their home, most settling in the last remaining undeveloped land south of the railroad right-of-way. The influence of this migration can be seen even today south of Route 5.

It is apparent that throughout its history, transportation has been the key to the growth and development of the Herkimer area. This is as true today as it was in 1723, as evidenced by the construction of the Thruway, with the area interchange within the boundary of the Village. While modern methods of transportation make location a somewhat less important consideration in commerce, it is still one of the primary concerns of industry. It would appear, therefore, that the desirable location with respect to transportation, which was the underlying factor in the development of the area as a center of agriculture, dairying, industry and commerce, will continue to be of primary importance in the future. It is, therefore, expected that the Herkimer area will continue to show a slow but sound, steady growth over the coming years.