

Town of Durham History and Background

The history of the town of Durham has been determined largely by its physical geography. The town is situated on the northeast slopes of the Catskill Mountains, and encompasses the central portion of the Durham Valley. Catskill Creek flows down the center-line of the valley. The creek has its source in the Franklinton Vly (a large wetland and pond) just to the north of the Catskills in Schoharie County. From here it flows southeastward through Preston Hollow and Cooksburg in the town of Rensselaerville (Albany County) to Oak Hill and East Durham in the town of Durham. As it flows, the creek has the Catskill mountain slopes to its west and rolling hills to its east. Beyond these foothills begin the outermost Albany suburbs. Below East Durham, the valley broadens considerably, and Catskill Creek flows through the flatter portions of the towns of Cairo and Catskill, emptying into the Hudson River at the Village of Catskill.

From the mountains (over a couple thousand feet in elevation) on the west side of the town of Durham, one achieves fabulous vistas of the valley and foothills, encompassing five states. From the valley floor (approximately 500 feet elevation) one has scenic views of the wall of mountains to the west. The alignment of the valley forms a gateway from the Mid-Hudson Region northwestward to Schoharie County in central New York State. The lower mountain slopes and foothills are fertile land for agriculture. As a result of these elements, the town has a long tradition of farming, it has served as a historic transportation corridor, and throughout the twentieth century it was a resort destination for people escaping New York City. Today it remains a place of farming and tourism. But it is increasingly a residential community of people working in the larger towns and cities of the Hudson Valley, and an area of weekend homes.

Prior to the arrival of the first European settlers, the Durham Valley was a wilderness with few, if any, Native American villages. Mohawk Indians of the Iroquois culture occupied Schoharie County, and tribes of Mahican and Leni Lenape Indians of the Algonquin culture lived in the Hudson Valley. The latter had one of more villages along the lower reaches of Catskill Creek near its confluence with the Hudson. The Durham Valley likely served as a route of transit by native peoples from these two groups, primarily for war, but perhaps also for trade.

The spread of European settlers into the valley was slow initially. Europeans bought and settled Algonquin lands along the banks of the Hudson River, including the area of the present village of Catskill and hamlet of Leeds, but they did not venture far up Catskill Creek. Prior to the Revolution, westward settlement in New York was discouraged by the British Crown, to avoid conflicts with the Indians. Also, the rapids on Catskill Creek made it unsuitable for transportation of farm goods and building supplies, and there were no maintained roads up the valley. It is not until 1767 that Eliab Youmans, a surveyor of patents, and his assistants are believed to have been the first Europeans to overnight in the area.

The first settlers in the town of Durham were Lucas DeWitt, John Plank, and Hendrik Plank who made their homes in the area of Oak Hill as early as 1770 or 1772, but left during the Revolution. After the war they returned, possibly in 1782, and the area eventually became known as DeWittsburgh. At this time there was great pressure for new farmland for young soldiers discharged from service, and for southern New Englanders whose agricultural lands had become over-populated during a couple hundred years of settlement. Many of these people followed DeWitt and his companions into the valley, or moved through the valley to central New York. One of the early settlers was Selah Strong, who migrated from Durham, Connecticut, in 1784 with six others among whom the names Jonathan Baldwin, Abiel Baldwin, Phineas Canfield, and David Merwin are known. These seven pioneers settled an area on Meeting House Hill, near the center of the present town boundaries, and called it New Durham. Many others came from Connecticut, including settlers from Cheshire, Connecticut, who largely settled what is now East Durham (once called Winansville) in about 1784 to 1785. Daniel Cornwall came from New Haven, Connecticut, in 1788 and gave his name to Cornwallville. The settlers lived in log cabins as they cleared the land, and then later built frame houses. They also established churches and built gristmills and sawmills.

The political history of the town of Durham begins around this time. The area that is now the town of Durham was part of Albany County before 1790, and belonged to the district of Coxsackie which later became the town of Coxsackie. In 1790 this town was divided and the western portion became a new town called Freehold which encompassed the present towns of Durham, Windham, Ashland, Prattsville, portions of Greenville and Cairo, and a large part of Conesville (Schoharie County). When Greene County was established in 1800, Freehold was separated from Albany County and made a Greene County town. Subsequently, the Town of Freehold was subdivided in 1803, with the new towns of Cairo and Greenville taking portions from it. On March 28, 1805, the name of the remaining portion of Freehold was changed to Durham, after the original home of many of its settlers. At this point in time, the town of Durham included areas to the north and west of the mountains that were later annexed to Schoharie County in 1836, and became Conesville. The remaining town contains 31,033 acres. Most of the western boundary of the town was set at the top of a ridge of mountains that was surveyed by David Baldwin in 1806. The ridge runs from the top of Mount Pisgah (2,900 feet elevation), over Mounts Nebo and Hayden, then across Barlow Notch to Ginseng Mountain, and across Jennie Notch to Mount Zoar, and from there across State Route 23 and up Windham High Peak (3,500 elevation). Today, this is also the route of the Long Path, a hiking trail from New York City to the Adirondacks. Windham High Peak forms the southwest corner of the town.

Transportation into and through the valley was revolutionized by construction of the Susquehanna Turnpike in the period of 1800 to 1806. Since the New York State government did not have the resources to build and maintain roadways westward, it granted charters to private companies established for that purpose. The companies were allowed to raise money from tolls. In 1806 there were 67 such turnpikes completed, begun, or planned in the state. The Susquehanna Turnpike was particularly important because it provided a route from the Mid-Hudson Valley over the northern tip of the Catskills and down to the Susquehanna River valley, which was then a significant transportation route and a place of new settlement. The road began at The Landing in the village of

Catskill, and roughly followed the alignment of Catskill Creek up through the Durham Valley to what was then New Durham. Today this consists of State Routes 23B and 145. Just past the center of the town of Durham it turned westward, passing through today's hamlet of Durham (along the modern County Route 22), and headed straight up West Durham Mountain (on today's County Route 20). From there, the turnpike continued through the southern portion of Schoharie County, and down through the western Catskill foothills in Delaware County to its terminus at Unadilla, near Oneonta. The route was lined with taverns and inns, at least about one every mile. Travel was slow, by horse-drawn coach or wagon, but it was a good for the time period. It was also used by farmers and herders for driving their flocks. Particularly noteworthy were the stone bridges built over some of the creeks that crossed the route. These remain today as historic sites, such as one about a mile north on Route 145 from East Durham (by Stone Bridge Road). The alignment of the Susquehanna Turnpike was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. Thus, the truckers and commuters on modern-day Route 145 speed by at 55 mph with a historic landmark under their tires. The route up West Durham Mountain retains the name Susquehanna Turnpike. This was the toughest segment for travelers since the horses had to struggle up the steep slope, and strain to keep from going too fast downhill in the other direction. Today it is hard for drivers to resist stopping to take in the incredible view of the valley across the hayfields.

The importance of the Susquehanna Turnpike as a transportation route to the west declined significantly with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. As well-built as the turnpike may have been, water remained a more comfortable and efficient means of transportation in the early part of the nineteenth century. The village of Catskill was particularly hurt by this change because it had served as a hub of commerce, being located at the eastern terminus of the turnpike. For this reason, in 1830, a group of Catskill entrepreneurs banded together and chartered a new transportation system, a rail road, beginning at Catskill and extending up through the Durham Valley and the Schoharie Valley to the village of Canajoharie in central New York. Unlike railroads today, this pioneer line was built as a narrow gauge rail road. It mostly followed close to the banks of Catskill Creek. In East Durham it followed the west side of the creek. Though the tracks are long gone, the alignment remains as a cleared walking trail from County Route 67A southwards about a quarter mile to an old, stone viaduct. Here a small stream flows underneath.

The route crossed Catskill Creek a number of times upstream from East Durham. One of these crossings was at a place called High Rock. An old farm road leads from the Durham Center Museum on Route 145 back to this site where one can see the remains of the railroad embankment and one of the bridge abutments. There is a bend in the creek at this point which causes a whirlpool. At this site, in 1840, this bridge unfortunately collapsed while a train was passing over, causing the loss of one life. This was one of the first railroad disasters in history. The Canajoharie & Catskill Railroad, as it was called, was never completed. Although trains regularly traveled the route for a few years after it began service in 1839, the line was a dead-end. It was only constructed from Catskill as far as Cooksburg. Due to lack of funds, high maintenance costs, and possibly the train disaster, the venture was ended in 1842. The tracks were pulled up.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century the population of the town of Durham declined as farmers and workers sought the fortunes elsewhere, whether in the Mid-West where better farming

opportunities had opened up, or California, or the cities. The population dropped from a peak of approximately 3,000 in 1830, to only 1,200 in 1900. During this period tourism began to make up for losses in agriculture and industry in Greene County. However, in the Victorian era this consisted primarily of upper class tourism to the Mountaintop towns, such as Hunter. Before the days of the automobile, tourists traveled from New York City up the Hudson River by steamboat, and then transferred to small, local railroads that brought them to hotels high up in the mountains. To a lesser extent, tourists stayed at cottages and boarding houses (which were often converted farmhouses, where the local farmers acted as host) in Durham, and the neighboring valley towns of Greenville and Cairo. But this changed as increasing numbers of middle class tourists found such travel within their reach. Many of these were from economically-advancing ethnic, immigrant groups in New York City, and they tended to remain in ethnically-distinct tourist areas. East Durham became the center of Irish Catskills tourism and came to be known as the “Irish Alps”.

With the advent of the automobile, tourism in the area changed dramatically. Whereas the Victorian-era tourism involved quiet enjoyment of the natural surrounding by a particular hotel, the automobile enabled tourists to zip about from place to place looking to “take in the sites”. In response, to influence guests to spend more of their money closer to “home”, an entertainment-based tourism arose. In the 1920’s, Ferncliff House was the first of the larger, resort-type boardinghouses in East Durham with an Irish clientele. The Shamrock House and Erin’s Melody followed in the 1930’s. The Weldon House was one of the larger hotels. The resorts had bars, live music, dancing, tennis and pools.

The peak period of Irish tourism in East Durham was in the 1950’s and 1960’s, before middle class vacation travel by jet became common. While there are fewer Irish hotels and resorts today, East Durham continues to be a center of Irish culture. In 1987, the Michael J. Quill Irish Sports and Cultural Centre opened in the Weldon House. Every Memorial Day Weekend it sponsors a large, famous Irish Cultural Festival at the fair grounds in East Durham with many bands and dancing. It also sponsors the Catskills Irish Arts Week every July, when experts in Irish music, dancing, and other arts travel from Ireland to teach courses. The Centre has plans to construct a historic replica of a nineteenth-century Irish country village in town. This has begun with completion of the Lavery Cottage. East Durham is also home to the Irish American Heritage Museum and the National Shrine of Our Lady of Knock which is an American sister to the pilgrimage site of Our Lady of Knock in the village of Knock, County Mayo, Ireland.

Today, tourists still come to the town of Durham to revel at the Zoom Flume Water Park, or to enjoy a family farm vacation at Hull-O Farms, or to stay at one of the many small resorts, bed and breakfast inns, or motels while enjoying the fresh air and views of the mountains. Though, more recently, the town has become a haven for weekend residents with second homes and a bedroom community for commuters to Albany, Kingston, and New York City.

Sources

Borthwick, J.G. *Durham*. In: *History of Greene County, New York with Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men*. Hope Farm Press, Cornwallville, NY. 1969. First published by J.B. Beers &

Co., New York. 1884.

Helmer, William F. Rip Van Winkle Railroads. Black Dome Press. Hensonville, NY. 1999.

Kubik, Dorothy. *West Through the Catskills: The Story of the Susquehanna Turnpike*. Purple Mountain Press. Fleischmanns, NY. 2001.

Sullivan, James. Editor. *The History of New York State*. Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1927. Transcribed by Holice B. Young at www.usgennet.org/usa/ny/state/his/.

Vedder, J. Van Vechten. *History of Greene County. 1651 – 1800*. Catskill, NY: County Historian. Originally published in 1927 by Authority of the Greene County Board of Supervisors. Transcribed by Arlene Goodwin on www.rootsweb.com.