

A Short History of Austerlitz, Tom Moreland, Town Historian

[Excerpted, without endnotes, from *The Old Houses of Austerlitz* (AHS 2018)]

Part 1: The Early Years – The "Land Of Contention"

The Town of Austerlitz was established by act of the New York legislature on March 28, 1818, so 2018 marks its bicentennial. But this area had been settled some 60 years earlier.

The Indian deed of 1756

On September 27, 1756, two Indian "claimants" deeded a tract of 20,725.5 acres to 75 individuals, who shortly constituted the proprietorship known as Spencers Town. The price was 230 pounds in "New York currency." This tract embraced most of today's Town of Austerlitz, which is larger, embracing 27,792 acres. The deed had been approved a month earlier by the Massachusetts Bay General Court pursuant to a petition presented by Truman Powell and other settlers.

We do not know of any established Indian village or camp on this deeded land. But nearby was Stockbridge, called Indiantown in the 1750s, the home of the Mohican tribe. The Indian deed grantors included Peter Poph-quunnaupeet, the Mohican chief, better known to history as Captain John Konkapot (c. 1690 – 1765), a man much respected by the colonists. Many of the 75 deed grantees came from the Haddam and East Haddam area of Connecticut. Among their number were 12 Spencers, and hence the name Spencers Town (later "Spencertown"). Prominent also was lead petitioner Truman Powell, who was also first named grantee in the deed.

The first settlements

We have only a few glimpses of the challenges presented to the early settlers as they cleared the forest and swamps. The official book of the Spencertown proprietorship (the "proprietors book") documents actions starting in 1757, but does not disclose much about the circumstances of the settlement. A 1774 petition to the state legislature states that settlers had faced "frequent wars and incursions of the Savages" This statement finds an echo in a letter written about 1835-40 by Nehemiah Spencer, a grandson of one of the proprietors, speaking of the early settlers of Spencertown:

The country was then entirely new and they were much harassed by Indians. They built a kind of fort and kept watch in the night, and on one occasion were forced to leave their homes and go to Sheffield in Massachusetts and stayed nearly a year.

Given the peaceful reputation of the Mohicans in Stockbridge, these Indian incursions likely came from Canada.

As for the Green River valley now occupied by Austerlitz hamlet, we are told it was an "almost impenetrable swamp," created by fallen trees damming up the Green River.

The Spencertown proprietorship (1757-72)

The Spencertown settlers organized themselves as a proprietorship, the organizational form long used for new settlements created by Massachusetts and other New England colonies. At the first meeting of the proprietors on May 31, 1757, they elected a committee to survey and lay out "selling lots" to each settler, typically two 100 acre plots.

The earliest settler dwellings appear to have been log houses, which were replaced by sturdier frame structures as soon as feasible. No traces of either the log houses or their early frame replacements appear to have survived. The two oldest surviving houses, on Route 203, date from the 1760s – 1770s and are far more substantial than any likely pioneer dwelling.

Title disputes

Almost from the start of the settlement the proprietors were confronted with challenges to their title. Massachusetts and New York disputed sovereignty over the area, and the Van Rensselaers claimed ownership of the entire area under a patent granted by New York. This was, as one traveler put it in 1759, the "land of contention."

New York and Massachusetts had disputed their border for many years before the 1756 deed. At their most extreme, the Massachusetts claim extended west to the Hudson River, while the New York claim extended east to the Connecticut River.

In 1773 New York and Massachusetts agreed that their border would be a north-south line drawn 20 miles east of the Hudson River, placing the Spencertown area in New York. The 1756 Indian deed had no legal status in New York and thus the settlers had no valid title. Finally in 1793 state legislation granted title "to the respective possessor or possessors" of the land. This state law was passed pursuant to a petition to the legislature led by Spencertown's Col. David Pratt. His house on Route 203, constructed in 1777, still stands, and is being honored this year by an historical marker.

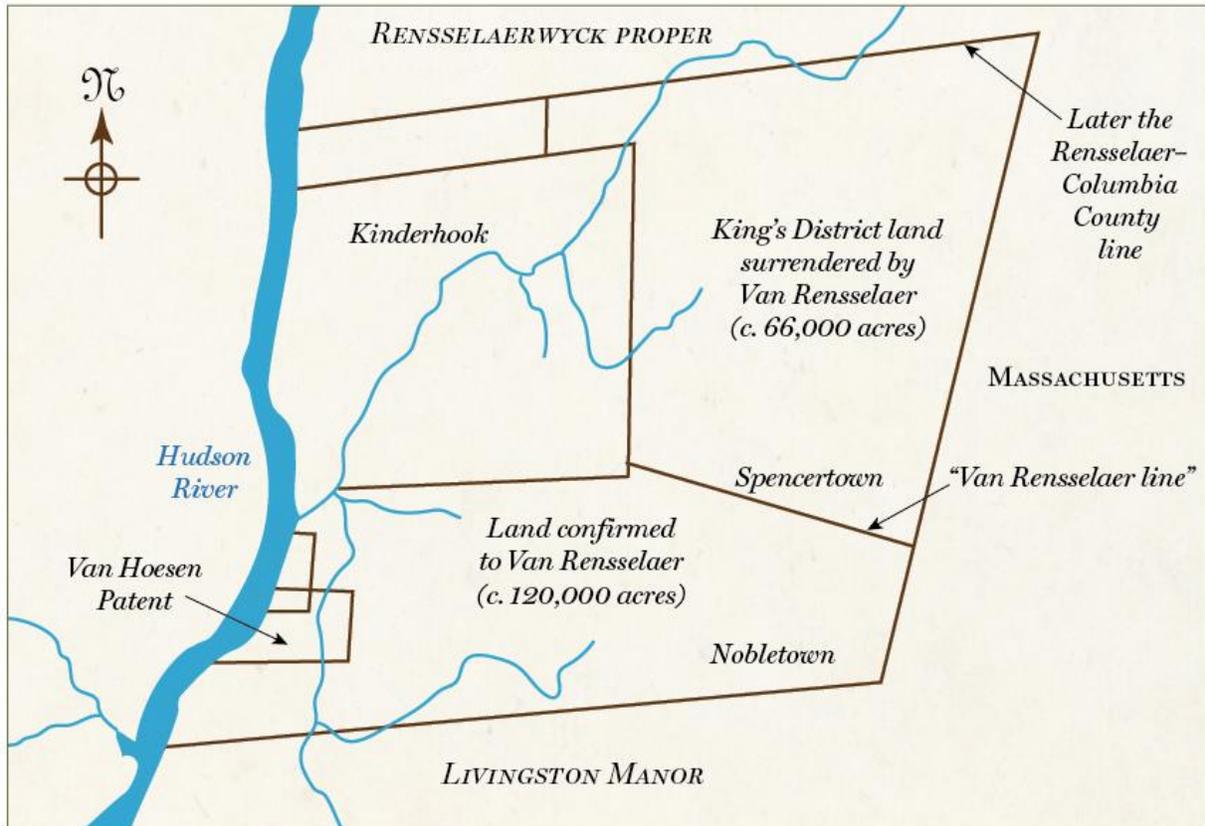
The 1793 legislation did not resolve the title problems of residents living within the area claimed by the Van Rensselaers, which by then included the southwestern third of today's Austerlitz and all of today's Hillsdale. The Van Rensselaer claim had its origin in a Dutch land grant in 1629, which was greatly expanded by a 1685 English patent covering a vast tract of land on both sides of the Hudson, south and north of Albany: "Rensselaerwyck." Claverack was the name given to the "lower manor" in today's Columbia County. Its eastern border was poorly defined in the patent, leading to continuing disputes between the settlers and John Van Rensselaer (1708-82), who succeeded to ownership of the patent in 1740. He viewed the settlers as mere squatters and demanded that they take a leasehold and pay an annual rent under the patent.

These disputes came to a head when, in 1766, there was an uprising by settlers against the land claims of the Van Rensselaers and the Livingstons and other patent holders further south. A series of violent conflicts, known as the Great Rebellion of 1766, included armed attacks on the manors by settlers from Nobletown (today's Hillsdale) and Van Rensselaer-inspired

counterattacks by Crown troops. In July 1766 Nobletown was sacked by an armed militia force and a company of British soldiers. Spencertown was not treated so harshly, but was attacked on August 5, 1766, by a force of 50 soldiers aiming to force the settlers either to recognize the Van Rensselaer title or abandon their farms. The effort failed, with the crown troops withdrawing from the area later in August.

The conflict with Van Rensselaer continued right up to the Revolution, and thereafter. Spencertown often joined with one or more of the neighboring settlements in submitting petitions to the colonial and later state authorities contesting the Van Rensselaer claims. The legislature took no action on any of these petitions, which Van Rensselaer vigorously opposed, attacking the settlers for violence directed against him.

This inconclusive back and forth took a turn in 1773 when New York and John Van Rensselaer reached agreement on a revised patent fixing the borders of Van Rensselaerwyck. In Claverack, Van Rensselaer gave up any claim to an area east of Kinderhook, recently established as the King's District, extending from the northern border of today's Columbia County south to the "Van Rensselaer line," as subsequent deeds termed it. The Van Rensselaer line in today's Austerlitz extended northwesterly roughly from Upper Hollow Road in Green River, passing about one-half mile south of Spencertown, to a point southwest of Morehouse Corners near the Ghent line (Kinderhook in 1773).



The 1773 New York – Van Rensselaer settlement (Map by Ron Toelke, based on Kim, *Landlord and Tenant*, p. 414)

These title disputes were brought before the Board of Trade in London in 1774, with the settlers represented by James Savage and Nathaniel Culver. But before a final decision or settlement could be reached the outbreak of the American Revolution rendered the proceedings moot. In the Revolution the Van Rensselaers and the settlers (Tories excepted) were united in fighting for independence from Great Britain, a cause unanimously supported at a meeting of the King's District on June 24, 1776, two weeks before the Declaration of Independence.

The Revolution

There were no battles fought in this immediate area during the Revolution. But the residents of today's Austerlitz were active participants in the war. There are 33 war veterans buried in the Spencertown cemetery, surrounding St. Peter's church, and about 70 in the town as a whole. The people of this hill country, a few Tories excepted, were ardent patriots, and the local militia regiment, the Ninth of Albany County, saw frequent service on

both sides of the Hudson and in the Mohawk Valley. The surviving lists of these troops show they were over 200 in strength, their number including 17 of the Spencers Town proprietors.

The Van Rensselaer claim found no quick solution after the Revolution. John Van Rensselaer, and after his death in 1783 his heirs, alternated between offering settlement terms to the farmers and taking legal action against them. Most settlers refused all offers, and some filed petitions with the state legislature asking for relief, which was not forthcoming.

The Hamilton settlement

There matters stood until the appearance in the 1790s of founding father Alexander Hamilton, as attorney for the Van Rensselaers. Hamilton's wife Elizabeth Schuyler was the granddaughter of John Van Rensselaer. Hamilton's strategy was to push a few legal actions toward trial in the hope, soon realized, that a few judgments would impel settlement negotiations.

Success was achieved in 1803 with the passage of legislation embodying an agreement negotiated between Hamilton and a lawyer for the settlers: an arbitration commission would adjudicate the title dispute between the Van Rensselaers and each of the 110 settlers who joined in the legislation and if the arbitrators decided the Van Rensselaers had good title - a near certainty given the 1773 revised patent agreement - the Van Rensselaers agreed to sell the land to the settler for a price to be decided by the arbitrators.

After hearings in which Hamilton represented the Van Rensselaers, the arbitrators decided in their favor in March 1804. The result was over 100 transactions in 1804 pursuant to which farmers purchased from the Van Rensselaers the land on which they had settled, as early as the 1750s-60s in some instances. Hamilton's 1803-04 settlement was viewed locally as having "happily ended" the Van Rensselaer dispute, as reported in an 1813 state gazetteer. At long last the title disputes in the "land of contention" had been resolved. This settlement was virtually the last achievement of Hamilton's career. On July 12, 1804, less than three months after the arbitrators' decision, Hamilton was killed in his duel with Aaron Burr.

Part 2. The Era of Prosperity (c. 1790-1840s)

Rapid early settlement

The title problems that beset the area do not appear to have discouraged the migration of New Englanders starting in the 1750s. Oral history tells us that people poured into the Austerlitz area during the 1760 to 1790 period, a veritable "flood of Yankee settlers." By 1793, when Elisha Williams elected to start his legal career in Spencertown, the village had become a "place of importance."

Green River, today's Austerlitz hamlet, "a rather straggling settlement," was never as active as Spencertown, but its valley was famed for its beauty. A traveler from Albany in the 1820s described it as "the most enchanting landscape I ever beheld." Some of this scenic splendor is now hidden from us by the forests which have replaced the neatly plowed fields and grazed hills of earlier times.

One important contributor to the growth of both Austerlitz and Spencertown was their role as stops on the stage coach route between Hartford and Albany. There were two competing lines on this route, and both stopped at hotels in the two hamlets. The local portion of the route, basically today's Routes 22 and 203, later became the Hillsdale and Chatham Turnpike, incorporated in 1805.

Columbia County, subdivided from Albany County in 1786, enjoyed substantial growth, with the population increasing from 27,732 in 1790 to 38,330 in 1820. Its fertile farmlands, and many water-powered mills and other industries, had made it one of the "most opulent counties" in the state, according to Spafford's 1813 gazetteer. As the population increased in the county, new towns were created out of the original seven (Canaan, Claverack, Clermont, Germantown, Hillsdale, Kinderhook and Livingston). Ancram, Chatham, and Taghkanic had already been added when, in 1818, Austerlitz, Ghent and New Lebanon were created.

Austerlitz formed in 1818

Austerlitz was created by the state legislature on March 28, 1818. Most of Austerlitz, about 5/6ths, was taken from Hillsdale. A northern strip, formerly part of the King's District, was taken from Chatham on the west -- the portion extending east to Beale Road and south to Slate Hill Road -- and from Canaan on the east.



1818 plan of Austerlitz overlaid on a contemporary map of Austerlitz; map courtesy of Columbia County Tourism.

The year 1818 was during the "Era of Good Feelings," the period after the turmoil of the War of 1812 and before the rise of the two-party system in the late 1820s, in which Kinderhook's Martin Van Buren played a leading role. It was a peaceful time in the nation's history, James Monroe being reelected President in 1820 without opposition; a propitious time to start a new town.

The town at its creation

In retrospect, we know that Austerlitz had its highest population at the time of its creation, and was at its economic zenith for about the next 20 to 30 years. After that point, about 1850, its fortunes began to decline as farming here came under increasing pressure from areas to the west, and commerce followed the railroads to Chatham and

places beyond. The population declined from a high of 2,355 in 1820 to a low of 626 in 1940, recovering to 1,654 by 2010.

The first Austerlitz town meeting was held on April 7, 1818. Its location, the house of Elisha Murdock in Spencertown, now the Tassinari residence next to town hall, was specified in the enacting statute. Thereafter, the venue of the annual meetings alternated between Spencertown and Austerlitz (Green River).

-- families and farming

The 1820 census enumerates 386 households in Austerlitz. Many of the families were large: of the 386 households, 117 -- 30% -- had eight or more members, with 35 having 10 or more. The family farm was the foundation of Austerlitz

The hilly terrain of Austerlitz, though not as suited for farming as the flatter lands of the towns to the west, was extensively farmed. Save for each farmer's wood lot, the entire town was cleared up to the summits of its hills. Whatever land was not tilled was devoted to grazing. The major crop in the late 1700s had been wheat, but, as the nineteenth century progressed, oats, potatoes, corn and rye became dominant. Farm sizes were typically in the 100 to 200-acre range.

Hill towns such as Austerlitz benefitted from the boom in the sheep industry during this 1820-1850 period. Sheep grazing was a productive use for the hillsides, which were poor for farming but fine for sheep. Domestic wool producers were sheltered from competition from England by protective tariffs, especially the so-called (by opponents) "tariff of abominations" in 1828 and a Whig-supported tariff in 1842. The result was a dramatic increase in the number of sheep grazing in the county and its hill towns. There were 6,758 sheep in Austerlitz at the 1820 census. By 1845, the peak of the sheep boom, Austerlitz was home to 18,283 sheep, the most of any town in the county.

-- commerce

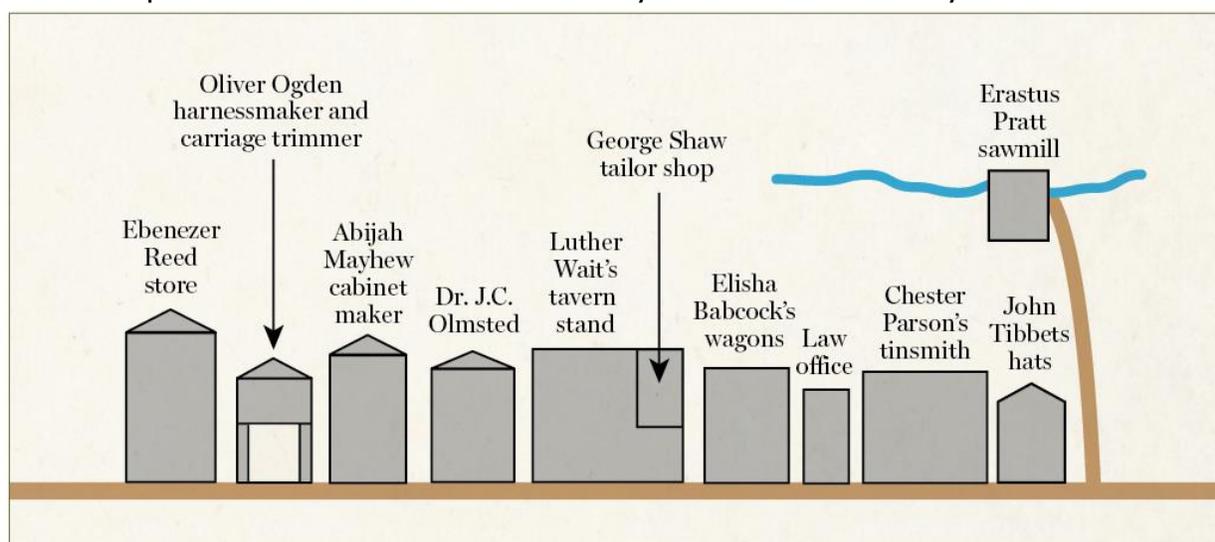
In addition to farming, Austerlitz in its most prosperous years supported a variety of commercial enterprises, as did all towns in the county. The 1820 census shows 93 residents engaged in commercial pursuits, as opposed to 652 engaged in farming.

Some of the commercial activity focused on the mills located on the streams: the Punsit flowing through Spencertown, and the Green River in Austerlitz. Water powered mills dotted the streams. According to the 1829 state atlas, the town had two grist mills, six saw mills, four fulling mills, and three carding machines. Several other towns had more of these mills than did Austerlitz. The only mill category in which Austerlitz occupied first place was distilleries, with four.

Trades were well represented in the hamlets. Typical for a rural town, there were blacksmiths, carpenters, cobblers, coopers, harnessmakers, hatters, masons and

wagonmakers (wheelwrights). As for manufacturing enterprises, from 1823 into the 1840s Messrs. Benedict and Cady operated the "furnace," an iron foundry which mostly made ploughs, on South Street in Spencertown. Spencertown also had two tanneries, one on main street and one on South Street.

The commercial nature of downtown Spencertown was most pronounced on the west side of the main street, which was entirely devoted to shops and professional offices from the Spencertown store northward. Today this stretch is entirely residential.



Spencertown c. 1820s, west side of main street. Graphic by Ron Toelke

There were two woolen mills in the town: John Griswold's mill on South Street in Spencertown, and a mill on Upper Hollow Road in Green River, which was operated in the 1780s-90s by Elijah Hatch, Jr. In 1837 this mill became a tool factory operated by Morris Brainard, who continued in operation until about 1860. It resumed its role as a mill into the late 1800s, until destroyed by the deluge of July 1887. Today this once busy manufacturing site is a vacant lot by the river.

There were also hotels/taverns, serving locals but also drummers -- travelling salesmen -- and passengers on the stage coaches. The earliest known Spencertown hotel/tavern, operating by 1776, was "Scott's Tavern," later known as the Black Hawk, which stood across from the south end of the Spencertown village green. Another storied Spencertown hostelry was known as the "Luther Wait Tavern Stand" in its heyday in the 1820s and 1830s. It was converted to a residence in the 1890s and still stands, the second building north from the Spencertown store. Also surviving is the third hotel, located across from the Spencertown store, which served as the Austerlitz Grange hall from 1909 to 1953. In Austerlitz the tavern/inn later known as the Harvey Hotel and Columbia Inn was in business by the 1820s and survives today as a private residence .

Finally there were the general stores. Before 1800 the record is vague as to the locations of stores we know were operated by James Roosevelt, Truman Spencer and

Abraham Holdridge. There was a store, perhaps Holdridge's, from at least the very early 1800s on the site of today's Spencertown store. Another, owned or operated by Jared P. Clark (1827 to 1881), Palmer and Sawyer (1881 to 1914) and Ed Mesick (1932 to 1950) was at the corner of Elm and Route 203, the building surviving today as the office of Johnnie Walker Insurance.

In Austerlitz, Beriah Phelps presided over a store as early as 1791, as evidenced by a store ledger from that year. For over a century starting around 1830 a store was operated on Route 22 by the Brown family, notably George "Dud" Brown from 1878 until 1944.

-- the professions

The town had resident lawyers and physicians. Among the lawyers of note was Abraham P. Holdridge (1782-1862), who resided next to the Spencertown store and held many public offices. As noted above, Elisha Williams practiced in Spencertown from 1793 to around 1798, but rose to his considerable fame during his later years in Hudson. His law office in Spencertown was in a small building, torn down in 1977, located between the residences owned today by the Fennells and Kadins.

As for physicians, in Spencertown we can identify Peter Powers (1709-1782), Daniel Morris (1756-1809), Zacheriah Standish (1759-1804), Jonathan C. Olmsted (1781-1824), Henry Foote (1799-1842), Ebenezer Reed (1795-1872), and Wright Barnes.

In Austerlitz, early physician Samuel Thorne apparently did not make a favorable impression. According to John M. Varney, writing much later, Thorne "used to ride a donkey and made a very grotesque appearance." In contrast Varney reported that Charles Bull, who lived from 1818 to 1828 in the house now owned by Phil Palladino, was "a very good surgeon for the age in which he practiced."

-- religion

Religion played a central role in both Spencertown and Austerlitz. Among the earliest acts of the Spencertown proprietors, on April 16, 1760, was to reserve a selling lot for a minister. Jesse Clark answered the call, and remained at the pulpit for 20 years, from 1760 to 1780. Early church services were held in private homes until a meeting house was constructed in 1771 on land donated by John Dean. This building, its society incorporated in 1803 as St. Peter's Church, was located on the Spencertown village green. It was moved to its present location across the street, and turned from facing west to facing north, in May 1826. It appears that its steeple and vestibule were added at this time.

David Porter, who served as pastor from 1790 to 1803, was renowned beyond Spencertown as a preacher and scholar. Locally he is credited with ending a widespread indulgence in hard cider, a vice facilitated by an overabundance of unmarketable apples,

leading to a profusion of distilleries. Porter, we are told, was able to put a stop to it through teaching and by his own sterling example.

The society switched denominations from Congregational to Presbyterian in 1827 at the insistence of the new pastor, Joel Osborne. He proved controversial, and may have been one impetus behind the formation of the Methodist Church in 1834.

A high point for St. Peter's was the arrival of Rev. Timothy Woodbridge, who transferred in 1842 from the Green River church, where he had served since 1816. Woodbridge served at St. Peter's until retiring in 1852, and remained active in the community, notably as founder and head of the Spencertown Academy, until his death in 1862.

In Green River, which became known as Austerlitz around 1850, Rev. Samuel Uteley ascended the pulpit around 1847. He proved to be a divisive and unpopular figure. He left by 1857, but not before some disaffected congregants had organized a Christian Church in 1851, greatly weakening the Congregational church. The Christian Church, constructed in 1852, still stands.

-- education

One room schoolhouses provided education to the youth of Austerlitz. At its creation in 1818, Austerlitz had 18 school districts, some shared with an adjacent town, each with its own schoolhouse and governing trustees. The population declined as the 19th century progressed, leading to a consolidation of districts. By the 1890s, Austerlitz had only five districts, with Spencertown by far the largest.

The crown jewel of education in Austerlitz was the Spencertown Academy, organized by Timothy Woodbridge in 1846. The Academy building, today a community cultural center, was constructed in 1847 by local builder Benjamin Ambler. After Woodbridge's death in 1862 the Academy continued under Ebenezer Reed's leadership until he departed from Spencertown in 1870. At that point the Academy ceased operations, and its building became the public school for the Spencertown district.

-- the high point

In retrospect the years 1846-47, highlighted by a grand Fourth of July celebration in 1846 and a fete the next year to mark the opening to the Academy, can be seen as the high point of Spencertown's early history. The village was prosperous, with the one railroad to Chatham not yet undermining its commerce. The sheep boom was at its height. Dr. Woodbridge had brought St. Peter's to renewed prominence. The Methodist Church was also flourishing. And the opening of the Academy further fostered a sense of community pride. Spencertown in 1846-47 was firmly in touch with its past, and confident of its future.

Part 3. The Slow Decline (c. 1850-1900)

The tide begins to turn

-- bypassed by the railroads

While the town was near its peak prosperity around 1846-47, circumstances were about to move in an adverse direction. The railroads were one problem: they went to Chatham and not Spencertown. Before the railroads came to Chatham, but not after, "folks traveled from Chatham to Spencertown for their trading, their amusement and their education."

The first road to reach Chatham, the Hudson & Berkshire, opened in 1838. It was a small "one horse" road, and its Chatham stop had no material impact on local trade. But by the early 1850s, when the Boston & Albany and New York & Harlem lines reached Chatham, a distinct shift in commercial activity began. Over time trades and business migrated to Chatham, while Spencertown and Austerlitz became quieter places. By 1869, the year Chatham village was incorporated, it had become a major railroad center. Four different lines converged on the village, which saw more than 100 trains arrive and depart each day. From 1850 to 1880, the towns of Chatham and Ghent -- Chatham village straddles the town line -- saw a 23% population increase: from 6,132 to 7,527. Over the same 30-year period, the population of Austerlitz declined by 28%: from 1,873 to 1,341.

-- farming challenges

Farming in Austerlitz became an increasingly difficult challenge as the 19th century progressed. It still had some strength after the Civil War. The 1870 census records 194 farms in Austerlitz. Most of these farms still existed by 1900, but their value had severely declined as the profitable options for farming progressively narrowed. For example, one 94-acre farm on the Canaan border sold for \$1,800 in 1851 but brought only \$500 in 1898.

The earliest local crop to lose its viability was wheat. By the 1830s wheat farming had fallen victim to competition from the west, as well as soil depletion, rust blight and insect infestations. The boom in sheep grazing compensated for a while, but not for long. Just as earlier high tariffs against English wool had supported the local sheep industry, so the lowering of tariffs after 1845, coupled with increasing competition from the western states, contributed to its sharp decline. By 1855 the sheep population in Austerlitz, like that of the county as a whole, had fallen to about 50% of its 1845 total.

Since sheep grazing had become the principal use for the Austerlitz hill country, its rapid decline took a heavy toll. By the 1850s, some farms in the eastern hills were

being abandoned. The Macedonia section in the north central part of the town also saw significant population loss, as many farmers moved downhill to the Red Rock area

For a while, a rise in the demand for rye straw may have helped local farmers. The production of wrapping paper from rye straw, more plentiful and cheaper than the fiber needed to produce rag paper, experienced dramatic growth in the 1825 to 1875 period. There were a number of active mills in the Chatham area, including along the Kline Kill on County Route 9. But time moved on here as well: the sulfide process of producing paper from wood greatly reduced the demand for local rye, which also suffered because of the superior quality of the rye grown in the Mohawk Valley.

Hay found a market in New York City, with its huge numbers of horses, though the river towns produced much more hay than Austerlitz. Much of this market disappeared when the city's horsecars were replaced by electrified vehicles in the 1890s. Increasingly farmers turned to dairying, which became a principal focus of agriculture in Austerlitz and the county into the 20th Century.

-- the lure of the west

More generally, the westward expansion of the country took its toll on Austerlitz, and other hill towns. Their terrain made farming difficult, as compared with lowlands to the west. Some movement in that direction was occurring soon after the Revolutionary War, as a modest flow of area residents gravitated to newly opened farm country in western New York. Many Spencers, as an example, moved to Maryland, in Otsego County, after Israel Spencer and others obtained a 4,800 acre land grant from the state legislature in 1793. The opening of the midwest, and the completion of the Erie Canal to Albany in the 1820s, greatly accelerated this movement.

The Civil War

Austerlitz answered the call to arms in the Civil War. About 110 Austerlitz men, ranging in age from 18 to 44, enlisted in the Union forces, generally for three-year terms. All but ten of the Austerlitz volunteers made it home alive. Of the ten who did not, nine died not from battle wounds but rather disease, which was true of their regiments' general experience.

Austerlitz at 1870

Farming, though in decline, remained the mainstay of the Austerlitz economy until well into the 20th century. The 1870 census clearly shows the continued agricultural focus of Austerlitz. The population stood at 1,442, comprised of 337 households. Of these households 194 owned a farm.

While the town continued to lose population, to some extent the exit to the west of Yankee families was offset by the arrival of newcomers from abroad. Irish and German

families moved to Austerlitz in numbers, with the Irish strong by the Civil War and the Germans a little later. Most of the Germans settled in the southwestern part of the town, which became known as New Germany, or Little Germany. The community worshipped at the little German church on county Route 21, just over the Hillsdale line. The ministers preached in German into the 1930s.

One new commercial pursuit around this time was the production of charcoal, needed principally as fuel for the iron foundries located in Richmond, Massachusetts, Copake and Chatham. Much charcoal was burned in the eastern hills and Green River area, denuding many Austerlitz hillsides. A number of the charcoal miners ("colliers") had immigrated from France, where they had been active in the charcoal industry. The Bills family of Green River was especially prominent, operating the "charcoal factory" shown on the 1873 town map near the Hillsdale line. They also operated La Pierre Hotel in Green River, Hillsdale, for several decades. In September 1905 these two business pursuits of the Bills interacted in a most unfortunate manner: a Bills charcoal wagon parked in a shed overnight caused a fire that burned the Bills hotel to the ground.

The Panic of 1873

The nationwide Panic of 1873 had a financial origin, as a number of banks and investment firms failed due to excess speculation and other causes. But it had serious consequences for rural America, as food prices collapsed causing great poverty in farming communities. This was the longest recorded economic slowdown in modern history up to that time. Not until 1878-79 did the economy start to recover.

The Panic may well have been a blow from which Austerlitz agriculture never recovered. The price of local farmland took a distinct downward turn in the mid to late 1870s, and many farm foreclosures occurred. While these misfortunes were bound to happen at some point, given the trends apparent from the 1840s onward, they may have been accelerated by the Panic.

Part 4. Modern Times (1900-)

The decline of farming

By the early 1900s, Austerlitz was experiencing widespread abandonment of its farms. As the value of farms fell, many young men left to make their fortunes on the richer farmlands of the west, or in the cities with their growing industry.

For the county as a whole, resurgent forests had begun to replace abandoned farmland by 1870, and forests exceeded improved farmland by about 1940. Undoubtedly this had happened in Austerlitz much earlier. One beneficiary of farmland abandonment was the white-tailed deer. Deer had begun to disappear from Austerlitz and the county during their agricultural zenith, and were locally extinct. But they returned with the

resurgence of the shrubland and secondary forest. By 1915 the Chatham Courier was observing that the deer "are breeding very rapidly and their devastations increase with their increasing numbers."

-- end of the mill era

As farming faded, so too did the mills that had served the farming community. The three water-powered mills along the Green River in Austerlitz had been destroyed by a violent deluge on July 23, 1887, causing the worst flood in the history of Austerlitz. Two mills in Spencertown did survive into the 20th century. At the north end of Spencertown, Martin Harvey acquired the old Akin grist mill in 1905, installed a gasoline powered engine in 1907 and continued in operation until around 1917. The south end of the village hosted the last miller in town: Frank Oles, who operated a steam-powered grist and saw mill on the east side of South Street, almost to his death in 1934.

-- the hunting preserves

Especially in the 1920s, a number of hunting preserves were created through assemblages of abandoned farm properties. William Brann and George M.L. LaBranche did so in the Dugway and Green River areas. The Austerlitz Club established its preserve in the Dugway-West Hill area in 1926. In 1925 the Yonkers Rod & Gun Club acquired a 1,000 acre tract in the southeastern hills of Austerlitz, extending into Hillsdale. Both of these clubs remain active today.

-- the absence of mass housing
developments

Austerlitz is fortunate that farm abandonment has not been followed by mass, suburban type housing developments, which would have spoiled the rural nature of the town. Many farms have been subdivided to create residential parcels, but only in small numbers. The only large development has been Bryarcliffe, developed in the 1980s by Serge Bervy on parts of the LaBranche preserve off of West Hill Road. It consists of 85 large lots, attractively nestled in a wooded environment. The enactment of zoning in the town in 2009, capping efforts dating from at least 1955, has precluded mass housing developments in the future.

The world grows closer

Austerlitz was never as isolated a place as one might suspect. By the early 1800s, and perhaps even earlier, local merchants were making regular trips to New York City via the Hudson River sloops. But the world grew much closer in the early 1900s. The first automobile to find Spencertown arrived in 1902. The telephone came over on lines from Chatham in 1903. Electric lines reached Morehouse Corners around 1915, and Spencertown, as far as South Street, in 1919. Lines reached Austerlitz in 1927-28. But those living on many of the town's roads did not get electricity until after World War II.

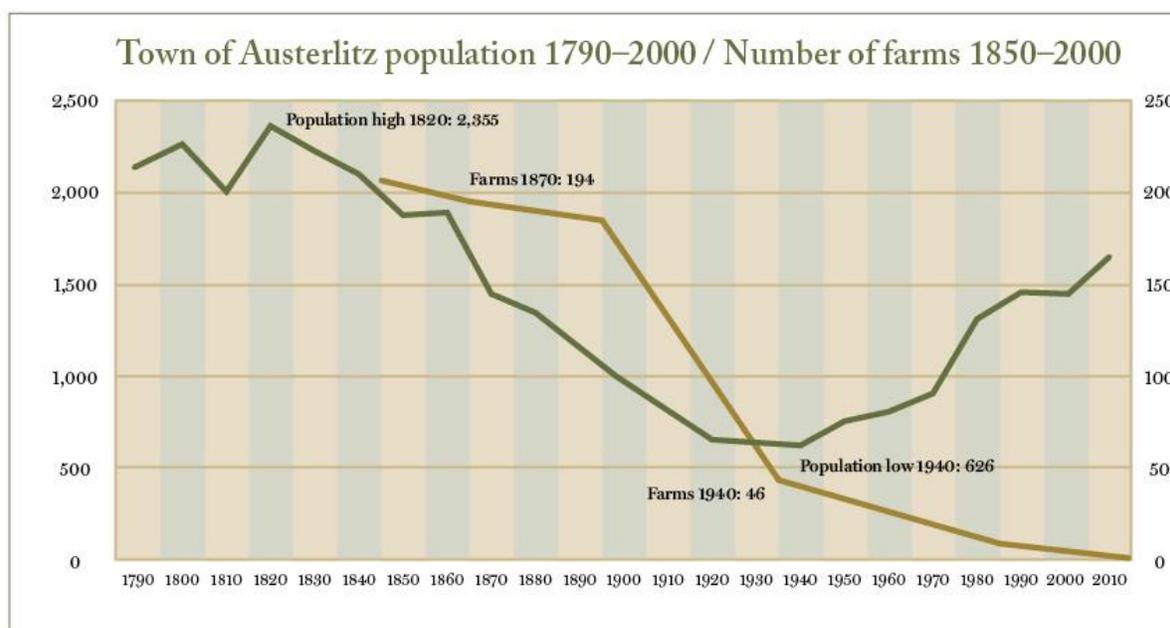
The automobile and improved roads enabled local residents to hold jobs outside of the community. As farm work declined, many found work in the factories and offices of Pittsfield, especially General Electric, as well as Hudson and Albany.

Dairy: farming's last stand

Farming continued in Austerlitz, albeit on an ever-declining scale, as the 20th century progressed. Farms continued to disappear. The 194 farms existing in 1870 had been reduced to only 62 by 1940, as the town's population reached its historic low of 626.

Most of the surviving farms were dairy farms. Many farms sold their raw milk to the Borden processing plant in the Buckleyville section of Chatham. But by 1961, when a fire destroyed the plant, the industry had changed and Borden decided not to rebuild. Many local dairies could not survive a new requirement by other processors that farms install a large cold storage tank to avoid the need for daily pick-ups. Most local farms could not support herds of a size sufficient to justify this investment. Only 20 farms, most dairies, were left in the town by 1966, and that number had dwindled to four by 1977. The last surviving dairy farm was the Doyle farm on Route 9, which ceased operations around 2015.

Vegetable farms had lost their viability even earlier. Their produce had been sold to local stores in Chatham and other villages. This market disappeared when the stores were pushed out by new supermarkets, which did not buy from the local farms.



Population: — Number of farms: — (Population prior to 1818 is extrapolated.)

Civic and social life in the 20th century

-- the stability of the hamlets

Notwithstanding the demise of the farming economy, there remained in the town and its two hamlets a rather vibrant society with considerable social engagement. To understand the town's continued civic vitality it is important to note that its two hamlets experienced only limited change over the years, even as much of the rest of the town was abandoned and depopulated. While commercial activity largely disappeared, the housing stock and the population of the hamlets held up well. Of the 65 houses in both hamlets shown on the 1888 atlas map of the town, 56 (86%) have survived. In contrast, outside of the two hamlets, in the formerly agricultural rest of the town, the survival rate is only 40%: only 101 of the 255 houses shown on the 1888 map are still with us.

The stability of Spencertown is demonstrated by an interview given by Hiram Mather, the village's undertaker, in 1895. Mather, 93 at the time of the interview, had arrived in Spencertown in 1821. He compared the Spencertown of 1821 with its appearance in 1895:

Spencertown has not changed very greatly in appearance since I came here. There are about the same number of buildings now as there were then, but of course, many of those now standing have been built to replace the old ones.

Since we know that nearly all of the houses standing when Mather spoke are still here today, the density of the built environment today is much the same as the village of 1821. To be sure it looks different: the narrow dirt road, with abundant trees on both sides, has been replaced by a wide paved highway, with fewer trees shielding the houses.

-- civic engagement and social life

Civic organizations and activities were many in the pre-television age. A Village Improvement Society functioned in Spencertown from 1904 into the 1930s, attending to such matters as care of the village green and street lighting. The Women's Christian Temperance Union was active, and installed a community well on the main road in 1903. The Austerlitz Grange was an important social center for the farming community. It was organized in 1896 at the house of Henry B. Ambler on Route 9, and by 1905 had a membership of 164.

The two churches in Spencertown and their auxiliaries maintained a steady schedule of social and fundraising events. The Tower Club of St. Peter's, a support group formed in 1929 by a group of younger women, was especially inventive. From 1931 to 1933 it put on a circus, first on the village green and then, in 1933, under a big tent in a field across the Punsit north of Spencertown. It featured its members and a few professional performers.



The Tower Club circus 1933. Left to right: bottom row Jean Beach, Edna Wolfe, Babe Steuerwald, Grace Howes; top row Isabel Robertson, Dot Frank, May Howes, Mary Rundell, Elsie Rundell. Kneeling: Sidney Festeau.

People went out to socialize more in the pre-television age than today. The biggest local events were the weekly square dances. Spencertown's Eddie Sawyer, a much favored dance caller, led a band which played at Czirr's Hall in Harlemville before World War II, always to a packed house. In Spencertown, square dancing started in 1947 at Peterson's barn on Route 203, then switched to the former Methodist church, owned by the Austerlitz Grange, where the dances continued into the 1970s.

The most famous local musician was George R. "Pop" Sweet. He led his bands, the Merry Melody Makers and the Huckleberry Pickers, starting before 1930 and into the 1960s. Pop Sweet's reputation reached far beyond Austerlitz. He played in such venues as Constitution Hall in Washington D.C., Tanglewood and the National Folk Festivals held in several cities.

In Austerlitz during the 1920s and 1930s the Columbia Inn on Route 22, the former Harvey Hotel, hosted weekly dances. Dances into the 1940s were also held at George D. Brown's hall, located on the same block in "downtown" Austerlitz. Pop Sweet played in Austerlitz frequently. After the dance he would walk all the way to his house on Fog Hill Road, a distance of about three miles. Brown's Hall, and its predecessor Woodmen's Hall, and the Columbia Inn all hosted dinners and other social functions for local groups, as well as the tourist trade.

World War II necessarily disrupted life in the town. As noted above, in 1940 the town had reached its historically lowest population level at 626 residents. From these depleted ranks, the War called away the service age men, who numbered 30 in one list published in 1943. Left behind, as a witness to those years recalls, were the minister, the women and the World War I veterans. During the War years the minister and the ladies drove the fire trucks.

After the War the town showed renewed vigor. Some commercial ventures opened, such as the Brookside Rest café in Spencertown on the Punsit and Vernon Stone's café and gas station in Austerlitz at the corner of Route 22 and West Hill Road. You could dine at Strawberry Hill on Dugway, which also had a small ski run on the hill next to it. Another ski area was Mountain 10 on Fog Hill Road. Ed Mesick's weekly auctions, held next to his store building in Spencertown, were major community events from the late 1940s until 1975. As one resident recalled, "Nobody missed them You couldn't even drive through the town."

Informal social gatherings sprung up from time to time. A singing group, informally initiated by a sign at the Spencertown store, evolved into a semi-professional operation called Ho-Di-Hm-La, which put on a number of well received productions in the early 1950s, with performances given in several venues around the county.

The overall impression of Spencertown and the town as a whole is of a community that very much enjoyed its own company. The close-knit nature of the town undoubtedly played a role in this good feeling. Many of the families had been here for many generations, and a few even since the earliest days of the town. Dorrie Kern, who had moved up from the Bronx in the 1940s, was struck by the society she joined: "... it was beautiful because everybody knew everybody, they were all very close together. ... And they were all farmers." Marge Dexheimer Heald, who grew up in Little Germany, recalled her early life this way: "As I look back on it I had a ball. I didn't realize how bad off we were, it never occurred to me."

While some may have lamented the decline in Spencertown's economic importance, as compared with booming Chatham, most probably would have agreed with this 1926 tribute to the hamlet's pastoral quiet, preserved by the absence of the railroad:

Like most other advantages of civilization the railroads

bring with them many undesirable factors. Spencertown, with its dirtless, smokeless, noiseless, well-kept homes and yards and its almost entirely native population is quite a charming village in which to live.

Austerlitz, though smaller in scale, was also rich in long established families, such as Harvey, Herron, Kinne, Varney and Wheeler. Relative newcomers, such as the Ferry family arriving in 1921, and the Badertscher family arriving in the 1940s and raising eight children, added much to the hamlet. It too was off the beaten path, especially before State Route 22 was extended north from Austerlitz in 1938.

Part 5. Austerlitz Today

There are, no doubt, fewer active community social groups and activities today than formerly, which reflects a nationwide trend in this television/home entertainment society. Families spend more time on their own, and less time engaging with the community, causing a loss of "social capital," as one scholar put it.

The town has lost some important institutions from its past. The Spencertown Methodist Church closed in 1950. Although it had flourished in the early 1900s, while the smaller St. Peter's congregation struggled, in the end St. Peter's was the survivor. The Austerlitz church, reactivated by Lutherans in the early 1930s, had its last formal service in 1949. The Austerlitz Grange, which had a membership of over 200 as recently as 1956, ceased operations by 1970. There were not enough local farmers left to sustain it. The local school districts were supplanted by consolidated districts in Chatham and Hillsdale. The last one-room school to close in the Town was that of Austerlitz, in 1955. The commercial enterprises of years ago have disappeared. Brown's store in Austerlitz and the Mesick store in Spencertown are long gone, as are the few hotels and inns of yesteryear in both hamlets.

But there are continuities from the past. The Spencertown store, now operated by Steven and Ann Pinto, continues as a centerpiece of Spencertown. St. Peter's Church, now in its 258th year, stands tall with an active membership and outreach programs. The Friends of Historic St. Peter's Church, formed by Mary Zander in 2002, helps financially support the church building. The Tower Club continues its supportive role, though no circuses are planned.

And new businesses and institutions have emerged to provide a sense of place and purpose. Among the more unique is Dan's Diner, a 1925 lunch wagon relocated from Connecticut to Route 203 and carefully restored by Dan Rundell. The old corner store at Elm Street in Spencertown has been carefully restored as the office of Rich Nesbitt's Johnnie Walker Insurance. Steve Bakunas has just opened his Country Suites inn on Route 203.

The Spencertown Academy ceased service as a public school in 1970. But it has been repurposed as a community cultural center, maintaining since the early 1970s an active schedule of exhibits and programs with an audience drawn from well beyond Austerlitz.

The Austerlitz Historical Society, formed in 1988, has established a strong physical presence in Austerlitz on Route 22 with Old Austerlitz, on land donated by Robert Heron. The Society's two popular annual festivals, the Blueberry Festival and Autumn in Austerlitz, draw attendees from the capital region and beyond, and have brought new renown to this once "quiet and obscure" hamlet. The Academy and the Society are run on an almost completely volunteer basis.

The fire companies of both hamlets, also voluntary organizations, appear stronger than ever. Both recently succeeded in building impressive new firehouses with funds raised locally. The fire companies and the Academy are among the town's institutions which have benefited from the generosity of the Ellsworth Kelly Foundation. Under its current head, Jack Shear, the Foundation has provided the funding to purchase and convert the old Methodist church into the new town hall, dedicated this weekend.

"City seekers"

One element contributing to the continued vitality of Austerlitz is the influx of full-time and weekend residents from downstate and other places. The population of the town has recovered from its 1940 low of 626 to 1,654 in the 2010 census. The flow of newcomers from the city was envisioned as early as 1876 by the newly formed Spencertown Village Improvement Society. Its founding statement, addressing the "hard times" impacting local farmers and merchants after the Panic of 1873, looked to the future of the town:

... nothing will save our isolated country towns from a fatal retrograde, but an active enterprise which will make our villages attractive. This will invite from the city seekers for retired homes, and then if we cannot secure those who are in active business we can have solid men who have withdrawn from their pursuits.

Seekers from the city and other areas -- solid men and women -- indeed began to come to Austerlitz, and other towns in the county. By the 1880s bed and breakfasts and tourist homes had begun to open in earnest in Austerlitz. Purchases of homes by downstaters also increased. The marketing of the area in the early 20th century was especially promoted by realtor Frank Wolfe from Mount Vernon and numerous Mount Vernon residents moved to Austerlitz as a result of Wolfe's efforts.

What has attracted newcomers, as well as secured the loyalty of long-time residents, is the beauty of the man-made and natural environment. True, the tilled fields of yore are gone, and some of the bucolic dirt paths of yesteryear have been replaced by paved

highways conveying speeding cars. But the hamlets retain much the same feel, and many of the same houses, they had 150 or even 200 years ago. As for the rest of the town, the tides of change have washed away the farms, but surviving are many old houses standing on roads dating to the 18th century, and sheltered by a forested landscape not unlike that encountered by the first settlers.

This environment has attracted not only retired and second home owners but also active, full time residents, including some of great fame who could have settled anywhere, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay in the 1920s and Ellsworth Kelly in the 1970s. Newsweek in 1981 included Austerlitz in its list of ten "tempting rural havens" from around the country. The next year U.S. News & World Report highlighted Austerlitz as "a great place to live."

There are, no doubt, even more historic and scenic towns somewhere. But the residents of Austerlitz like this one.