

THE TOWN'S NEW HISTORIC MARKERS

The Town sports five new historic markers this year, each highlighting a person or a building from the town's 200-years of history. These markers were all funded by the William J. Pomeroy Foundation of Syracuse, which granted applications for the markers submitted by the Austerlitz Historical Society as part of the town's bicentennial celebration in 2018.

EARLY TAVERN: In Austerlitz on Route 22, this marker stands in front of the building that was a tavern as early as 1829 and became the Harvey Hotel (1870-1915) and later the Columbia Inn (1921-61), both important meeting places in the hamlet of Austerlitz. The Columbia Inn was a favored venue of "Pop" Sweet and His Huckleberry Pickers, later the Merry Melody Makers, which played for square dances during the 1930s and 1940s. Today the building is the residence of Michael and Elizabeth Walters.

PETER WHEELER: This marker on Dugway Road stands near the site of Peter Wheeler's residence in the 1830s. Wheeler escaped from slavery in 1806 and, after some adventures on the high seas, settled in Spencertown around 1825. He is remembered today because his autobiography was published in 1839 through the efforts of Charles Edwards Lester, then the pastor of St. Peter's Church. The 1830 census shows that Wheeler lived on this section of Dugway, but does not pinpoint his house. A leading candidate is the house today owned by Tobby Cassuto which in 1830 was owned by Harry Jackson, an African American. But there is another old house on this stretch of road, owned by Gregg Lampp and Edouard Daunas, which could have been the Wheeler residence. Thus the marker can only say that Wheeler "settled near here."

OLD CORNER STORE: At the junction of Route 203 and Elm Street in Spencertown stands a building that served as a general store for at least 150 years prior to closing in 1951. Its longest tenured owner/operators were Jared P. Clark, 1827-81, (Ira)Palmer & (Derret) Sawyer, 1886-1914, and Ed Mesick, 1932-51. Mesick continued to conduct weekly auctions at the site, a fondly remembered local tradition, through 1975. The building was carefully restored a few years ago by Richard Nesbitt Jr. and today houses his Johnnie Walker Insurance agency.

PRATT HOUSE: At the north end of Spencertown on Route 203 stands the impressive Georgian style house build in 1777 by David Pratt, today the home of Ron and Rita Van Alstyne. Pratt (1738-1828) rose to the rank of Colonel in the Revolutionary War. His petition to the state legislature led to the important 1793 statute that cleared local land titles. Until that law no one in Spencertown and northern Austerlitz had good title to the property they occupied since New York refused to recognize the 1756 Indian deed, authorized under the laws of Massachusetts Bay colony, pursuant to which the area had been first settled.

CLARK HOUSE: Dr. Mary Clark (1845-1937) was a pioneering female physician and also a strong benefactor of the Spencertown Methodist Church. The marker on Route 9 stands in front of her house, today the home of Ryan Littrell and Penny Tehrani. In the late 1700s the land was owned by Nehemiah Spencer, born in Spencertown in 1767 and a grandson of one of the original settlers.

In addition to the above five markers, two others, also funded by the Pomeroy Foundation, note that the town's two hamlets are now listed as Historic Districts on the National Register of Historic Places. The Austerlitz Historic District marker is on the east side of Route 22, near the 1805 house owned by Dan and Shani Palladino. The Spencertown marker is on Route 203 in front of the old town hall, which is being converted into a local history museum and office of the town historian.

These new markers join older ones in Spencertown, honoring St. Peter's Church and the Spencetown Academy, and in Austerlitz, honoring Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose Steepletop stands on East Hill Road. One other marker, on South Street in Spencertown, is in apparent error: standing in front of a beautiful Greek Revival house, today owned by William and Margaret Stratton, it attributes the house to Elisha Williams, the famed Federalist lawyer and politician. Williams did start his legal practice in Spencertown in the 1790s, before relocating to Hudson, but he died in 1833 before this house was built in the 1840s.

