

Life in Schaghticoke in 1790: Part 1

It was 1790. The Revolutionary War was over, and the border dispute between New York and Vermont was settled. Peace had arrived. The new New York State government established Schaghticoke as a town with virtually the same boundaries as now. It was within the brand new Rensselaer County, broken off from Albany County.

So who lived in Schaghticoke and what was life like? The 1790 Federal Census gives a bit of insight. Unfortunately it lists only the names of the heads of each household, plus the numbers of males in the household over and under 16 years of age, and all females, plus the number of slaves and free blacks. Other information comes from the two printed histories I have used throughout this series, plus a few early town records which ended up in the Lansing Papers in the NYS Archives. Schaghticoke didn't have a town hall until 1990, so early town records are thin, to say the least.

The population of the town was 1,650, living in 254 households, that is about six people per household. Just three of the households had a woman listed as the head of the household, and only one person lived alone. It would have been difficult to manage daily life alone, without help to do the heavy work of farming, cutting wood, etc. Widows and widowers either remarried or moved in with married children. By 1814, when a state census was conducted, the population was 2,847, so the town grew rapidly over the next twenty years.

This population included 143 slaves, 9% of the population. Slavery was quite common in the Dutch families of New Amsterdam, and with families of Dutch heritage in general. About 11% of the households, that is 47, owned slaves. Almost all of the families with slaves had Dutch surnames. Four families, two Knickerbockers, Lewis Viele, and Peter Yates, each owned nine slaves, the most. Peter Yates and John Knickerbocker, Jr. had both been Colonels of the local militia regiment in the Revolutionary War, and were two of the wealthiest men in town. 40% of the slave-owning families owned only one slave. Even the Dutch Reformed Church minister, Lambertus DeRonde, owned slaves. New York State enacted a gradual emancipation law in 1799. Every child born to slaves after July 4 of that year was free, though males had to be servants until age 25 and females to age 28.

The 1790 census gives no information on occupations or wealth, but we know that most people were farmers. The 1795 census records that 155 men possessed freeholds of at least 100 pounds, eight had freeholds worth between 20 and 100 pounds, and 112 rented lands worth at least 30 shillings. This information was important as there was a property qualification for voters, and those were the men who could vote.

The tenants of the Albany Corporation Lands, like the Knickerbockers, were farmers who paid rent to the city of Albany in wheat and fowl. People worked to be as self-sufficient as possible, raising food to store for winter, keeping a couple of cows, pigs, and some chickens for their own use. Even those who had other jobs, like the Dutch Reformed minister, farmed as well. Some of the Albany tenants, like the Knickerbockers, rented more than one parcel. John Knickerbocker Jr. built his grand "mansion" just before 1790. If you haven't visited the Knickerbocker Mansion, I hope you will soon!

In the next column, I will discuss other businesses in town and the first town government.

Life in Schaghticoke in 1790 part two

In the last column, I talked about life for the 254 families who lived in Schaghticoke in the newly peaceful time after the Revolution. The industrial revolution was about to bring great changes to the town, but in 1790, Schaghticoke was a town of farmers, working hard to make a decent living.

There was no village in the town, but there were a few concentrations of homes. In the Albany Corporation Lands, the longest settled part of town, there was a Dutch Reformed Church, the remnants of the fort, and at least a saw and grist mill. There was also a concentration of people, many of them from the Palatinate in Germany, in what is now the Melrose area. There was a Lutheran Church established near the intersection of Northline Drive and Valley Falls Road around 1790. There was also a concentration of people in Cooksboro, on the border with the town of Pittstown, where Michael Cook had a grist mill on the Deepkill.

There were a few businesses in town in 1790. There were four licensed retailers listed in the town records, but no information is given as to what they sold. There were also eight licensed inn keepers. Jacob Lansing was granted a license in 1785 as he was "of good moral character." In the absence of a town building, inns were used for public gatherings and as polling places. The inns were scattered along the roads. Lansing lived in the southern part of town. James Masters had an inn near his home on modern Masters Street, in the north part of town, James Brookins was licensed to have an inn at his home, the current Paradise Nursery on Route 40, and Sybrant Viele had an inn at Schaghticoke Hill, near the modern HV Rescue Squad, just to give a couple of other examples. Actually, for a town of 254 families, four shops and eight inns seem like a lot!

Transportation in town was difficult. There were a few dirt roads, based on Indian trails. The northern road went from Lansingburgh to Cambridge, via what is now Valley Falls Road. There were no bridges across the Hudson, and there were just two ferries, at Stillwater and Pleasantdale. There may have been small settlements in both locations. The Lansings, as in Lansingburgh, ran the ferry to Half Moon, probably as early as the Revolution. The Vandenbergers ran the ferry at Stillwater from an early date. The Svateks' house, with 1732 on its roof, was the ferryman's house.

The first bridge was constructed across the Hoosic River at what is now the village of Schaghticoke about 1790 by a newcomer, Daniel Chase. A few entrepreneurs recognized the great potential water power of the falls in the Hoosic River at that location, but up until the bridge, there were few or no buildings in the area. Once the bridge was built, the industrial revolution came to Schaghticoke, with various textile factories springing up on the Hoosic right after 1800. At first the community was known as Schaghticoke Point.

In the next column, I will talk about the formation of town government and give a bibliography for the three columns.

Life in Schaghticoke in 1790: Part 3

In the last two columns, I have talked about life in Schaghticoke in the peace following the American Revolution and the boundary dispute with Vermont. Virtually everyone in town was a farmer, and virtually no one lived alone. There were two churches, the Lutheran and the Dutch Reformed, a few shops and mills, and eight inns. Transportation was slow, by path or water.

The town of Schaghticoke was organized by the state in 1788, with the first town meeting held in April 1789 at the house of John Carpenter. "House" is a synonym for "inn", so the first and subsequent town meetings were held in bars! There is no record given of how the first town officers were chosen, but there would not have been universal suffrage. Men had to own a certain amount of land to vote. They met together at the local inn to cast their ballots. The first town supervisor was Jacob A. Lansing, also the ferry operator and inn keeper. Town officers were divided between old Dutch families and newcomers, with Silas Wickes as town clerk, and old residents Nicholas Groesbeck, Abraham Viele, as assessors along with newcomers Jacob Yates, Zephaniah Russell, and Martin Weatherwax. There were also three overseers of the poor, three commissioners for roads, three constables, one collector, 14 pathmasters, three fence viewers, and one poundmaster. In general, residents would be responsible for maintaining the section of road- or path- which bordered their property. Fences were important to keep animals from destroying crops.

For many years there was just one town meeting per year, versus at least one formal meeting per month now. At the 1791 meeting, 80 pounds was appropriated for town expenses. In 1793, 30 pounds was voted to support the poor. In 1795, the town erected three pounds around town for confinement of loose animals caught by the poundmaster. In 1804 a resolution called for all farmers to cut the Canada thistles on their farms before they went to seed or be fined \$5. Half the fine would go toward maintenance of the poor and half to the person who informed on the guilty party. Canada thistles were very invasive.

In 1796, school commissioners were appointed for the first time. They were Nicholas Masters, Harman I. Groesbeck, Silas Goodrich, Peter W. Groesbeck, and John Crabb. In 1797, the commissioners certified the amounts of money due to the town for school purposes: 99 pounds from the state and 44 pounds to be raised by taxes in the town. School aid for the next year was cut to 88 pounds. At this point, I know nothing more about the schools than that- but at least this indicates that the town had responsibility for organizing them.

From the start, the town government had some of the same functions as today: road maintenance, control of animals, land assessment, and tax collection, along with responsibility for the poor, which is handled at the county level today, and for schools, which is managed separately.

With peace, many newcomers were coming to town. Many New England soldiers had returned home after the Revolutionary War to what seemed to be few opportunities. They migrated westward, both farmers and those seeking water power for factory sites. Schaghticoke looked good to both groups. In future columns I will examine the changes they brought to the town.

Bibliography: Kloppott, Beth, History of the Town of Schaghticoke, 1980.
Lansing Papers, NYS Archives.
1790 Federal Census for Schaghticoke.
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