

## VILLAGE OF LEICESTER HISTORY

by

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In the early history of New York State the lands west of the Genesee River were wilderness inhabited only by Native American tribes. There were four Seneca villages located in Leicester; Little Beard's Town, Squaukie Hill, Gibsonville, and at the site of the Village of Leicester. The largest Village was Little Beard's Town and with the exception of Seneca fields, the area was forested and home to bear, wolves, and wildcats. One of the earliest settlers delighted in telling how He hunted bear and deer where the Village of Leicester now stands. Early Town records stated that there was a \$5.00 bounty for every wolf killed and \$1.00 for each wildcat.

The 1790 Census of Ontario County stated that the Indian Lands/Leicester contains four families and seventeen people. Within five years after the end of the Revolutionary War settlers began to arrive in the western frontier. The 1797 Treaty of the Big Tree created Indian Reservations and opened the land west of the Genesee for development.

In 1802 the Township was named Lester after the son of Oliver Leicester Phelps and in 1805 the spelling was corrected to Leicester. Leicester was the first Town west of the Genesee River where a permanent settlement was made. The settlement was located at the lower end of Jones Bridge Road and became a thriving Hamlet known as Old Leicester. In August of 1814 Samuel Miles Hopkins was building a large public house in Old Leicester and due to a disagreement He then had surveyed lands which He owned and created the rival Village of Moscow. He named the Village Moscow for reasons unknown. One possibility may be that the biggest world news of 1812 was Napoleon's Grand Army invasion of Russia and the capture of Moscow. I believe it is unlikely that a defeated city would be a choice for a new village name. Another possibility is that it was very common to name villages, cities, and towns after those in the "Old World".

The Village design contained a central square or park that is reminiscent of a typical New England Village commons. The Moscow square was covered with a scattering of pine trees, white oak trees, and an undergrowth of bushes. In 1814 the first building constructed in Moscow was a barn built by Jessie Waddams. He also built the first public house in the Village which still stands today next to the Presbyterian Church and which many people know as the Starr house.

The Village of Moscow rapidly grew. A rough two roomed cabin became an Academy with perhaps twelve or fifteen male and female students. A low brick schoolroom was built at the east end of the Village Park and also used as a meeting house on Sundays. By 1815 a blacksmith, a tavern, a store, a post office, and a printing office made up the rest of the Village. The Village also had a Doctor, a Lawyer, a Justice, a hatter, a tanner and shoemaker, a cabinet maker, a grocer, a stage proprietor, an inn keeper, and a cooper. In 1817 the Moscow Academy built a new three story frame building facing the Village Park. The Academy was almost the first school of academic grade in western New York and the students came from Buffalo, Canadagua and other regions. The first newspaper in Livingston County was the Genesee Farmer published in Moscow. The Moscow Presbyterian Church was organized in June of 1817 with nine members consisting of five men and four women. The church services were held in the lecture room of the Academy.

The signing of an Indian Treaty was held at the Moscow Academy in 1825. A large number of Seneca Chiefs were present and Mary Jemison sold her Gardeau Reservation. In 1821 Livingston County was formed from parts of Genesee and Ontario Counties. There were three proposed plans, one plan had proposed two Counties. This plan would have resulted with the Village of Moscow located at the center, and therefore Moscow would be the County seat. A prominent citizen of Moscow was sent to Albany to lobby to the Legislature but was unsuccessful.

The Methodist Church was the first church built in the Township and was built in 1829 on Main Street in the Village of Moscow. The Presbyterian Church was built in 1832 and is the only church continuously used as a Presbyterian Church. The Baptist Church was built in 1844 and is now Saint Thomas Aquinas – St Luke the Evangelist Parish Catholic Church. The Methodist Church building has had many uses. In the early 1920's it was used as classrooms for the first and second grades from the Moscow School, a station for the first Village fire truck, a movie house, and in 1976 was moved and incorporated into the Leicester Fire Hall building. In 2007 the Celebrate! Family Church purchased the Peter's Party House and relocated from the Village of Mount Morris to the Village of Leicester.

The years prior to the Civil War found the Village growing and prospering. The Village was located on a heavily traveled route for western migration and people came to homestead and raise families here. Moscow became a center of business and trade. There were many public houses to serve the travelers and the farmers coming to ship grains and goods on the canal.

In 1882 the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad laid a railroad bed through the center of the Village. The coming of the Railroad created new business



opportunities for freight and passenger services. A building boom followed, warehouses, grain elevators, a railroad depot, a water tower for the steam trains, and a very large brick railroad building were erected. On Sunday June 17<sup>th</sup> 1900 tragedy struck the Village. A cinder from the steam train landed on the roof of a warehouse occupied by Thompson and Wooster and within two hours the entire business district as well as homes were destroyed. As a result of the fire 40 people were without shelter and the only building remaining was the railroad brick building and the mill and lumberyard owned by B.E. Brophel. Estimates of the loss was placed between \$75,000.00 and \$100,000.00. The Town and Village Hall was destroyed and all the records were lost. Most of the businesses carried little or no insurance and some business owners were financially ruined. By the fall of 1900 the business section was being reborn and several buildings were nearing completion.

On July 16<sup>th</sup> 1907 the Village of Moscow was officially incorporated by public election. The title of President was used until 1927 when the title was changed to Mayor. In September 1911 the Civil War monument was dedicated and located in the Village Park. A monument committee composed of veterans and citizens solicited donations to pay for the monument and to plan the event. Between 3,000 and 4,000 people attended the dedication and the afternoon exercises were held at the Presbyterian Church.

World War I began in Europe in 1914 and lasted until 1918. The United States entered the war in 1917 when the War was at a bloody stalemate. The decision was unpopular and the Army was ill equipped. Everything became geared to the War effort and the citizens and communities had to make sacrifices. New building construction was not allowed, rationing occurred and War Bonds were sold to finance the War. In March of 1917 the Village name was changed. There are not any recorded reasons or public opinions about why this occurred. There seemed to be little controversy about this issue. At the General Election held on March 20<sup>th</sup> 1917 a total of 46 votes were cast; 32 for, 12 against, 2 blank and the Village name became Leicester. One possibility may have been to distance themselves from an unpopular war and the events in Russia at that time. However, a more practical reason was that there was another Moscow located on the rail line and the railroad wished to eliminate confusion. For the first time the Village, Town, Post office and Railroad Depot had the same name.

In the summer of 1918 the Spanish Flu Epidemic began and lasted for a year. The Flu also had a deadly strain of pneumonia and 1 in 3 people in Livingston County died. The Village of Leicester closed all places of amusement, public meeting places, clubs, schools, and other organizations except for meetings of the Red Cross and regular church services until November 1<sup>st</sup> 1919 when the closing order was revoked.

The Village of Leicester had a Military Band and in 1922 the Village Board passed a

motion to erect a Band Stand. The Band Stand was located on Main Street on the lot where the Methodist Church was moved to and currently where the Fire Hall now stands. Unfortunately there is not a known picture of the Band Stand.

In the fall of 1938 a water supply line from the Village of Mt Morris to the Village of Leicester was constructed. The Village finally obtained a reliable public water supply as well as adequate water pressure for fire protection.

Since the founding of the Village the Village boundaries had remained unchanged. The availability of public water resulted in applications for annexation of property into the Village. The first annexation occurred in 1968 and was a small portion of Main Street to include Argenna Park. The 1990 annexation was a parcel of property consisting of 30 lots bounded by South Street, Pleasant Street, and Jones Bridge Road. In 1993 the new street off Pleasant Street was named Eastman Place. In 1995 Upper Mount Morris Road from Pleasant Street to Jones Bridge Road was renamed Mahoney Street.

In the year 2000 a new Veteran's Monument was erected in the Village Park. The monument was designed and paid for by Leicester Veterans.

The Village Park is the heart of the Village. The 1910 Village Ordinance No.16 states "No person shall walk or trespass over or upon any portion of the Village Square of the Village of Moscow other than upon a duly laid out walk or said square, or drive any animal or vehicle thereupon, without the consent of the Board of Trustees of said Village. A violation of this ordinance shall be punished by a fine of not less than \$10.00 nor more than \$50.00." Since that time this regulation was gradually abandoned and the Village Park has served as the focal point for Community events. Over the years there have been band concerts by the Leicester Military Band, the Fireman's Field Days, winter ice skating, and dedication services. The tradition has continued today with Memorial Day Services, Sunrise Church Services, Summer Concert Series, the Winter Wonderland Festival, and weddings held in the Gazebo

The Village of Leicester is among the smallest Villages in New York State but has a rich and extensive history. This document highlights some of the major events that have occurred since the Village was founded. There are many stories and events yet to be told about the Village and its citizens.