

**Middlefield
and the Settling of
the New York Frontier**

*A Case Study of Development
in Central New York, 1790-1865*

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PREFACE

The development of Clarksville, the modern day hamlet of Middlefield, is the story of the growth of a small hamlet in central New York. Hamlets are significantly different from towns and their stories are markedly different. Hamlets develop naturally as people settle in a place and set up the myriad businesses and services that interconnect to form an independent unit. Towns are political devices designed for the easy administration of government. Hamlets came first. It was only after the settlement of these communities that political boundaries—towns—were designated. In some cases, these town boundaries encompassed multiple hamlets, as was the case in the town of Middlefield, in which Clarksville was only one of several hamlets. Hamlet boundaries were fluid, growing and contracting as their component businesses grew and contracted in number and physical space. Town boundaries were firmly fixed and did not fluctuate. The only exception was when a town was divided into several others, as when the town of Middlefield was divided from Cherry Valley.

Hamlets grew throughout central New York as settlers moved into this region after the Revolutionary War. Although it is true there were several such communities in central New York prior to the Revolution, most settlement occurred after that date. Many people who migrated into the area traced their roots from the eastern states of Massachusetts and Connecticut. In some cases, these migrants had moved from the eastern states to the Hudson River valley before moving further west into what became Otsego County. Similarly, many migrants eventually left Otsego County and Clarksville and moved further west to the vast areas opened by the Erie Canal and thence to Ohio.

The examination of the Antebellum development of Clarksville bears remarkable similarity to so many other hamlets strewn across the region. In this way, Clarksville serves as a case study in understanding why and how these communities coalesced. To understand this westward migration, in which Clarksville was a relatively brief stopping point for some and a permanent home for others, one must answer certain questions. First among these is why people came to Clarksville. It is not enough to know that they came. To some it was opportunity that beckoned by way of fresh, rich farmlands. To others, it was to follow family members who had come before. Many saw a chance to prosper as local agriculture prospered. Still others left to make a fresh start, free perhaps of shadows in their past.

Once upon the frontier, where settled New York was far to the east and

wilderness was to the west, little enclaves of people and isolated farmsteads formed interdependent relationships. To refer to these people as self-sufficient is a rather romanticized view, and gives the impression that they made all they needed to survive. That is not entirely true. The earliest settlers had no ability to forge tools and cooking utensils, they could not grind grain, they certainly could not saw trees into lumber to build houses, and feeding themselves in their first year on the frontier could be problematic. Very shortly after arriving in this region to settle, people could certainly have made their own furniture and clothing, and they could have grown crops on which to subsist, however, there was still a need for outside assistance. Most people refused to even settle on land unless there was a blacksmith, grist mill, and saw mill within some reasonable distance. Through much of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, these little communities, which were fast becoming recognizable as hamlets, co-existed in a symbiotic way, with people traveling between them to take advantage of a store here, a blacksmith there, and a mill down the road.

This is not to imply that travel was easy. The opposite was true. A short trip over rough roads, if there was a road at all, could require the better part of a day. Depending on the season, such trips could be grueling. The spring, with its depths of mud, could be very time consuming and agonizingly slow. To travel any distance in the winter must have been nearly unbearable with the bitter cold, even though traveling on frozen ground and, in many cases, along frozen rivers and lakes, made travel faster. However, as difficult and awful as travel may have been at these times of the year, the fact is that it was a necessary part of life on the frontier. To argue that people did not travel simply because it was difficult misses the point of necessity.

It was during the early nineteenth century that any real semblance of self-sufficiency in these central New York communities came into being. Self-sufficiency required the ability to be able to meet all of one's needs. Hamlets developed to do just that for a group of people. Within these hamlets there was every necessary service from blacksmithing to tinsmithing to milling. People became carpenters, doctors, and lawyers to fill necessary occupations, but they also became tailors and shoe makers. People built churches and schools in close proximity to taverns and distilleries. Stores opened in these communities to bring goods from distant parts of the state and country to the hamlet. These same stores allowed local farmers and craftspeople to have an outlet to barter or sell their excess produce and other wares. Serving as a link to the outside was the postal service.

Separating the many hamlets across the region were vast stretches of farmland dotted with individual farmsteads. The economy of these hamlets was built largely on the prosperity of these surrounding farms. Even though the economy had a certain level of internal momentum, they would have withered away had it not been for the farmers. That is to say, the economies in these hamlets developed an internal dynamic in which the component businesses of the hamlet

grew and flourished on the strength of each other. That phenomenon notwithstanding, the surrounding farms with their many needs for products and services drove the hamlet economies forward. The merchants and professionals of these hamlets grew prosperous, and in some cases, wealthy, as the fortunes of the local farm economy ebbed and flowed.

Clarksville exemplifies this progression. Although, as with any hamlet in any part of central New York, there will be a certain degree of uniqueness, the story of Clarksville is not all that dissimilar from other hamlets. There were personal dynamics at work among the residents, and there were individual and community concerns which would not be replicated in other hamlets. This, however, does not change the fact that the businesses and services that were established, indeed in some cases the physical positioning of certain buildings and businesses in Clarksville, was mirrored in innumerable hamlets. Distilleries and tanneries were kept to the outskirts of the hamlet, whereas schools, stores, and taverns tended to the center. Mills were necessarily near a large source of water and cemeteries were kept at a distance.

Perhaps one of the most unique features of the history of Clarksville revolves around its name. Originally named after the great local landowner, George Clarke, the spelling was Clarkesville. Sometime, imperceptibly, during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the “e” which ended George Clarke’s name was dropped from the hamlet’s name, leaving it as Clarksville. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, beyond the scope of this work, the name of the hamlet became synonymous with the name of the town. Middlefield came to mean either the entire town or just this hamlet, depending on the context. This slow transformation in the spelling of Clarksville has been mirrored in the text of the present work. The early chapters include the “e,” but later chapters drop this letter. The attempt has been made to closely follow social usage in Otsego County.

As with much of the central New York region, the second quarter of the nineteenth century was a time of economic and social consolidation in Clarksville. By the time of the Civil War every business and service necessary to area residents was to be found within the confines of the hamlet. The hamlet had become as self-sufficient as was possible; much more self-sufficient than it had been at the dawn of the nineteenth century. By the outbreak of war, it was scarcely necessary for the average person to leave Clarksville during their lifetime. All that they needed was to be found within the bounds of the hamlet. Indeed, many nonessential, luxury goods could be found there as well. Socially, people intermarried within the communities more and deep family ties were formed. This, too, grew out of the lack of need to travel. In an earlier time when travel was necessary, and hence perhaps more common, marriage and family ties could be sustained over longer distances. As the need for travel declined, so too did the tendency to form relationships across longer distances.

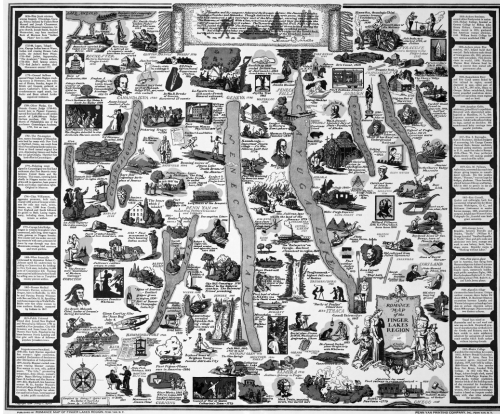
The picture of Clarksville in 1865 was that of an independent organic unit.

It was self-sustaining and stable. Growth in infrastructure had reached its apogee. Indeed, one of the last buildings ever constructed in the hamlet was erected in 1859. People tended to their personal and business relationships at a relative distance from the rest of the world. So complete was this self-sufficiency that a cataclysmic event such as the Civil War, which threatened to rend the nation in two, could be viewed as an abstract event from within Clarksville. To refer to this as a simple time is to miss the point. People wrestled with the big social questions of the day such as slavery and intemperance, business dealings were not always based on a friendly handshake, and religious, political, and familial ties bound people together. Many of these issues were viewed by residents of Clarksville through the microcosm of their world and, hence, their personal experiences. Intemperance was a greater horror to them than slavery, because they had, by 1860, first hand experience with intemperance whereas slavery was just an abstract idea.

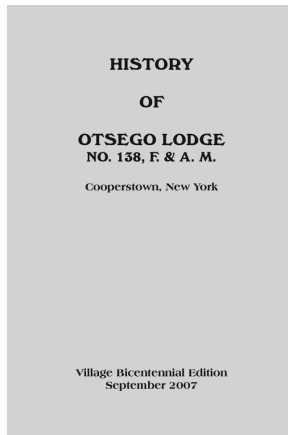
The world was not simpler to the people of Clarksville than it was to people in larger, more urban areas, it was just smaller. The study of this smaller, organic unit serves to highlight human behavior as people band together to build a community. It serves to exemplify how relationships develop through familial and business bonds, and how some people manage to make great successes of themselves on the worldly stage through hard work and perseverance, and perhaps a bit of luck.

I would be remiss if I were not to extend my gratitude to the many people who have helped me with this work. First and foremost among all these people are Rodney and Jeanne Johnson, whose assistance in so many aspects of this work could never be tallied. Their patience through long conversations and their willingness to share their vast stores of knowledge make me greatly indebted to them. Wayne Wright and Jo-Anne Van Vranken at the New York State Historical Association Library were invaluable. Additionally, the staffs at the Otsego County Clerk's Office and the Otsego County Surrogate's Court proved themselves always gracious and helpful. Special thanks need to be tendered to Thomas Savini of the Chancellor Robert R Livingston Masonic Library and the staff at the Cornell University Library. Of special note is the assistance of Les and Dorothy Rathbun who graciously allowed me access to the minute books of the First Baptist Society in Middlefield. Virginia Schoradt, New Lisbon Town Historian, for making the New Lisbon Congregational Church records available to me. My friends who tirelessly read the manuscript and made thoughtful suggestions deserve my gratitude: Sandra Bullard, Rodney Johnson, Les Rathbun and Joseph Sisk. Lastly, I must express my appreciation to my parents, who have always been supportive of all my work with words of encouragement.

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