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**NEW BOOK EXPLORES HISTORY OF MIDDLEFIELD AND
DEVELOPMENT OF CROSSROAD HAMLETS IN CENTRAL NEW YORK**

Typical rural settlement provides case study for entire region

Have you ever driven through a small crossroads hamlet in upstate New York and wondered just how and why the place was settled, and what people did there? Have you been puzzled by the location of small collections of stately houses, seemingly in the middle of nowhere? *Middlefield and the Settling of the New York Frontier: A Case Study of Development in Central New York, 1790-1865*, the most recent book by Dominick J. Reisen, explains one of these typical hamlets, its development, and the lives of its inhabitants in early central New York. The book has just been released by Square Circle Press.

The hamlet of Middlefield, New York is located in Otsego County in the Town of Middlefield, and lies along the eastern shore of Otsego Lake, the enchanting Glimmerglass of James Fenimore Cooper's novels. Today, the Town of Middlefield boasts a population of some 2,500 people, but the hamlet still only numbers a couple dozen houses and less than one hundred people. There has been virtually no new construction in the hamlet since the Civil War, and in the 1980s most of the hamlet was placed on the National Register of Historic Places as a nearly unaltered example of an extant village crossroads.

More than just a mere history of one community, this scholarly exploration of Middlefield presents this rural hamlet as a case study of the development of small towns in central New York State during the early years of the American Republic, through the Civil War. "I was drawn into writing this book because so much of the pre-Civil War crossroads still remains. One can clearly see what the hamlet was like during this earlier period," said Reisen.

The author tracks the emergence and growth of various businesses and social groups within the community, tracing in great detail the lives of various key figures who made their home in Middlefield. He discusses how external agricultural factors and the great social movements of the era, such as temperance and abolition, impacted their lives inside the hamlet, both economically and socially. Viewing these ambitious personalities through the full spectrum of life, Reisen reveals how their interconnected lives and businesses led to a degree of prosperity and self-reliance in this secluded frontier settlement.

This wide-ranging study's crucial value to historians, however, is the way in which the author uses Middlefield to illustrate the development of the entire region of central New York during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He reviews the development of technological achievements such as the Erie Canal and railroads, and explains how these advancements in transportation alternately spurred growth and led to stagnation in various communities. According to Reisen, "These transportation improvements were not universal boons to central New York, but even in communities such as Middlefield, where neither a canal nor railroad was built, they still had a dramatic effect." He also provides significant discussion of the unique landownership patterns of central New York and how these arrangements led to social unrest and radical change, resulting ultimately in the Anti-Rent Wars during the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Middlefield and the Settling of the New York Frontier: A Case Study of Development in Central New York, 1790-1865 relies heavily on primary source material and is documented thoroughly with endnotes and indexed. The work is substantially illustrated with photographs and maps, and several appendices offer additional detailed information.

ADVANCE REVIEWS:

“In the decades before 1920, when the census first showed that more than half of the U.S. population lived in urban areas, generations of Americans were born and reared on farms or in villages, hamlets, and other small communities. In his insightful study of the New York hamlet of Clarkesville (and the surrounding town of Middlefield in Otsego County), Dominick Reisen evokes many of the rich themes associated with this rural way of life. Deftly using a wealth of sources, from manuscript diaries and letters to newspapers, census reports, and many historical and literary works, Reisen traces the development of Clarkesville from the time its land was first claimed by George Clarke, colonial governor of New York, through the end of the Civil War. He tells many individual stories—those of Yale graduate Sumner Ely, an early doctor; of Revolutionary War hero Benjamin Gilbert; of storekeeper Benjamin D. North, Jr., to cite only three—that capture the flavor of life across seventy-five years of Middlefield’s existence. Reisen writes knowingly of a hundred intriguing themes, from plank roads and turnpikes to canals and railways, from agricultural societies and hop farming to the crucial role of local commerce in village life, from the importance of churches and schools to the appeal of such movements as Masonry, Temperance, and Abolition. But what is most moving about his book is the sense of how, even as places like Clarkesville were affected by many external currents and pressures in a period of enormous change, they so often managed to remain sources of virtue and opportunity where individual lives and family stories took their rise and ran their satisfying course. Although for most modern readers this world is literally long-ago, none of us is completely out of touch with its value or allure.”

—Wayne Franklin, University of Connecticut

Author of *A Rural Carpenter’s World: The Craft in a Nineteenth Century New York Township*,
and *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years*

“The book is well researched and written so that the general public can engage in the time period that it covers. It will prove to be a key reference source for the study of Otsego County in particular, and upstate New York in general.”

—Harry Bradshaw Matthews, Hartwick College

President, United States Colored Troops Institute for Local History and Family Research

“Explaining why he left France to travel throughout America in the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, ‘I sought there the image of democracy itself, with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices, and its passions.’ Dominick Reisen’s *Middlefield and the Settling of the New York Frontier* provides a snapshot that Tocqueville would recognize. Following a small community in upstate New York from its colonial roots through the Civil War, Reisen begins the story with early settlers who cultivate not just crops, but virtues as well, their hard work motivated by their desire to be self-reliant. The maturation of the early republic is reflected by the residents of Middlefield as they develop civic, social and religious institutions, forming the attachments and shared interests that drive democratic behavior. In their day-to-day efforts we also distinguish the links between self-improvement and the desire for prosperity. But while education, economics, politics or the relatively distant battles of the Civil War insist that this little hamlet recognize the larger world, Reisen demonstrates that the residents of Middlefield recognized themselves first and foremost by their local associations, suggesting that the democratic character of national identity springs from the daily give-and-take of local identity.

“Professional historians will find in Reisen’s study a useful collection of data supportive of social histories of the early republic. For local historians, *Middlefield* is an admirable model of how to research

and interpret the history of even the smallest communities. Readers with a general interest in history might keep in mind that Tocqueville studied America ‘in order to learn what we have to fear or hope from its progress.’ Reisen’s study of Middlefield usefully documents not only the history of a small New York hamlet, but also the fundamental building blocks at the foundation of America’s progress.”

—Brian Carso, J.D., Misericordia University

Author of *Whom Can We Trust Now?: The Meaning of Treason in the United States, from the Revolution through the Civil War*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dominick J. Reisen is a 1989 graduate of Bard College with a degree in Social Sciences. He is a founding member and the first president of the Otsego County Historical Association, a position he held from 2003 to 2008. He has served as the treasurer of the Town of Middlefield Historical Association since 1999 and has been on its board of directors since 1994. From 2002 until 2004 he served as the Town Historian for the town of Middlefield. His previous books include: *Middlefield: Otsego Lake's Eastern Shore*, *Inscriptions From the Middlefield Baptist Cemetery*, and *The Middlefield Hamlet Historic District: A Guide for a Walking Tour*. He makes his home in the Daniel Cummings house in Middlefield, the hamlet once known as Clarksville.

BOOK LAUNCH EVENT:

What: Lecture and book signing by author Dominick J. Reisen

When: Thursday, August 13, 2009 @ 6:30 pm

Where: Kinney Memorial Library, 3140 County Hwy. 11, Hartwick, NY

Info: Sponsored by Otsego County Historical Association; Open to public; books available for purchase; refreshments served

What: Author presentation and book signing by author Dominick J. Reisen

When: Thursday, September 10, 2009 @ 7:30 pm

Where: Cooperstown Village Library, Main Street, Cooperstown, NY

Info: Author appearance book signing. Open to public; books available for purchase at the event, more details pending.

BOOK INFORMATION:

The book is available in both hardcover and paperback editions, and is available for sale both online and through retail bookstores. For more information about how and where to purchase Middlefield and the Settling of the New York Frontier or other titles, products and services available from Square Circle Press, visit the publisher’s web site at www.squarecirclepress.com.

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Author: Dominick J. Reisen

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