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**AUTHOR
INTERVIEW
Q & A**

BOOK TITLE: Middlefield and the Settling of the New York Frontier:
A Case Study of Development in Central New York, 1790-1865
AUTHOR: Dominick J. Reisen

Q. In terms of “development” today we immediately think of McMansions, strip malls and big box stores. In this book are you talking about the same type of rural development?

A. Those terms would be unrecognizable to people of the early American nation, but the concepts they imply are recognizable. The world of the late 18th and early 19th century viewed nature as man’s domain. He was free to take its resources and use them and that was regarded as improvement. So developing land by building houses and businesses, that is, settling the land, was thought of as inherently good and progressive. Houses in rural communities are certainly humble in size compared to today’s McMansions, but these people were very house-proud. They took great pains to have craftsmen adorn their houses as best they could afford. This quite often was reflected in the beautiful front door surrounds we still see on these early houses because this was the most commonly viewed part of a house by a visitor. Businessmen in this early period, like those of today, sought enticing ways to attract people to their stores. Today we think of the needs of “convenience” which means having everything under one roof. In the ante-bellum period it was a little different. Bartering was such an integral part of the frontier economy that sometimes people chose to shop at a store because a store keeper might offer more for the goods they were bringing in to barter. The one similarity was then as now was the drive to have the latest “item.” Today that might be the latest CD or the newest electronic gadget. In the ante-bellum period it might be having the latest shipment of tea from New York City. The point is, the concepts are the same even if the terminology is different.

Q. So in the early 19th century, development and progress were almost synonymous, and not only good but essential to the young nation?

A. Very true, even earlier than the nineteenth century man looked at nature as his domain to tame and use. The concept dated back to the Garden of Eden, when Christians believed God gave them the earth to populate, tame, and use as they need. We see eighteenth century garden planners in England actively altering nature by constructing ponds, diverting rivers, clearing forests all to “improve” the appearance of the land around an estate. In the wilderness of central New York, development was viewed as building roads, houses, businesses and communities. When William Cooper first viewed the site of Cooperstown from Mount Vision he said he saw a wilderness that was his to tame and improve, his to civilize, and therein lies the premise: Europeans saw it as their duty to civilize the frontier. To them, that meant wiping away everything that was there, in some respects even the native peoples, and replicating European communities. In this way development and progress became synonymous, but more than that it was seen as vital to the young Republic. Only a developed frontier could aid in making this new country the model for the world to follow. These people were fiercely patriotic and they saw their patriotic duty as taming the wilderness, spreading their civilization, and spreading their democracy. This concept was later referred to as Manifest Destiny and was universally viewed as a good thing at the time.

Q. What are some of the major themes of development in Central New York that you explore in the book?

A. One of the key themes of this book is how these isolated communities throughout central New York grew to become nearly self-sufficient. Two economic themes of core importance that ran in tandem are the development of 1) key businesses that sustained a frontier community, such as stores, mills, and taverns, which helped to create an internal economic momentum within hamlets, and 2) the development of the surrounding agricultural base along with the changes in agriculture from sustaining crops to cash crops, which was responsible for bringing large amounts of currency into the community. Neither one of these phenomena could have occurred without the other. Along with these two themes were the advances in transportation: better and more roads, canals, and railroads. Finally, of great importance was social development. Throughout the work I stressed the emergence and growth of religious and fraternal groups. Development of the type seen in central New York during this period relied heavily on the ability of disparate peoples coming together and working together to replicate a familiar society, in this case an European society which had been transformed by the challenges of New England. This was then grafted onto a frontier area. Ultimately, this led to something similar to, but distinct from, New England.

Q. Middlefield is a place in upstate New York that most people have never heard of, and yet if they went there, they would recognize it immediately. Why?

A. One of the best reasons for using Middlefield for this case study is that so little has changed since the Civil War. The last real building to be constructed in the hamlet was the District No. 1 schoolhouse which was built in 1875. Having said that, the twentieth century has seen some major losses due to fire and flood, and there have been some structures moved into the hamlet such as mobile homes which, by their very nature, are temporary. The fact remains, one can walk down the Long Patent road today and still see much

the same view that Dr. Azel Metcalf would have seen. These facts also explain why Middlefield, as an Historic District, is valued as a nearly intact example of an early nineteenth century village crossroads, and one which is very similar to those located all across New York.

Q. Who, or what types of people were essential to the development of Middlefield? Were they people typical in other developing towns across New York?

A. People who became prosperous in the frontier regions of central New York generally were ambitious people who were willing to work hard. Life in Middlefield during the period of this book was brutal for many people. Even though by 1820 the hamlet had reached a point of economic stability and a degree of prosperity, this community still required people driven by a strong work ethic. However, these people, in many ways, held true to principles of charity and good will. These people banded together to start schools and build churches, which at the time these were communal enterprises. One sees in Middlefield, as in so many other communities, key people rising to the top of the social structure. This was a time of unbounded optimism of the human spirit; people were still driven by the egalitarian spirit of the American Revolution. Despite the fact that much of New York State had something resembling a pseudo-aristocracy, people genuinely believed that hard work could raise anyone in the ranks of the social strata. In this way, someone like William Cooper, who came from a very modest Quaker family, could rise to such heights as to have influence that matched, and in some ways exceeded, that of George Clarke who had been born into a genteel English family.

Q. Who are some of the more unusual, or even pioneering, people you encountered in Middlefield's past?

A. Two of the most intriguing people of Middlefield's past for me were Joshua Pinney and George Washington Johnson. Pinney could be the subject of a riveting biography. He came from modest roots in the Albany area. In Middlefield he ran a tavern, then a store, then he became a postmaster, and finally to his business ventures he added distillery owner. Along the way he found time to be instrumental in starting a school and the Baptist church. However, something fascinating happens along the way. He becomes convinced of the "evils of drink" and starts marketing a cure for intemperance even as he is running a tavern and a distillery. Finally, in the 1830s he divests himself of all of his Middlefield businesses and leaves for Owego in the Southern Tier where he becomes a key player in the temperance movement. Pinney represents a person who becomes increasingly driven by a reform impulse. Johnson, on the other hand, represents someone in many ways more crass and base. He came to Middlefield to teach a school and kept a most candid diary in which he records so much of what he dislikes about the people of Middlefield. He notes that he teaches Sunday school to impress those he needs to impress even though it runs against his grain. The way he talks about many of the women of the community have more than hints of sexual overtones. Indeed, he records being lectured by Joshua Pinney's wife, Polly, to stay away from her daughter because she disliked "courtship that looked not to marriage." By this point one can see in his diary, by his own hints and admissions, that he is viewed as something of a dandy at best, and a rake at worst. I find these two polar opposite personalities to be fascinating.

Was Middlefield generally prosperous, or did it suffer economically at times?

A. When viewed from the 21st century, this period will, at first, seem like a steadily prosperous time. However, this is deceptive. The period was hit by many of the same types of economic convulsions we feel today. The collapse of the real estate market of the 1817 period is much like that of today. Many people saw their wealth, locked up in real estate, vanish. This came quickly on the heels of the "year without summer," when frost was recorded in every month. This led to widespread crop failures and the financial ruin of many. There was also the severe economic dislocation caused by the Erie Canal, when so many central New York farmers had to compete with farmers from further west who had virgin soil and resulting higher crop yields. These downturns notwithstanding, the period 1790 to 1865 saw tremendous growth in central New York. In Middlefield one sees strikingly beautiful examples of architecture being built by people who had attained a pronounced degree of prosperity. There is also evidence through important improvements that were made to earlier buildings. Even though there were periods of great economic suffering at the individual level, generally it was a time of economic improvement for vast numbers of people.

Q. Middlefield seems somewhat obscured by its more famous neighbors. What is Middlefield like today?

A. In many ways Middlefield remains a quintessentially rural New York hamlet. The town has nearly the same number of people in the 2000 census that it had in the 1820 census. With the loss of several buildings during the twentieth century due to fire and flood, the hamlet is actually smaller today than it was in 1865. However, it is truly little changed from that early time. The hamlet has been remarkably fortunate in one way. In the 1960's, a young couple came to Middlefield and recognized what a century of desertion and desolation could not hide: the early nineteenth century village crossroads. Over the course of some forty years Rod Johnson and his late wife Jeanne exerted what must have been their every waking moment in bringing the hamlet back to its early beauty. Their efforts and restoration examples bore fruit as they were joined by long time residents and newcomers who also began restoring properties in the hamlet. To them must be credited the rehabilitation and restoration of the hamlet to its mid-nineteenth century appearance. Indeed, the Johnsons were largely responsible for the hamlet being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This above all else makes Middlefield a uniquely wonderful place and even though it is obscured by its more famous neighbors, such as Cooperstown, perhaps that is all for the better. Most people have probably never heard of Middlefield, or of its founder, George Clarke. But many have heard of Hyde Hall, the stately manor home that Clarke built on the northeastern shore of Lake Otsego in the town of Middlefield. So perhaps Middlefield does have some lasting fame after all.

How long did it take to research and write your book?

A. I started working on this project in 2001. When I started this book I knew I wanted to write a local history that was rather more in-depth than many other local histories. I did not want to portray a community that developed as if in a vacuum. I wanted to explain why and how issues in the outside, larger world impacted this community. This necessarily meant exploring not only Middlefield, but gaining a firm understanding of much of the central New York region. Due to its ambitious topical scope, it was a lengthy book to research. Further, since I was also working on other projects –writing a cemetery guide for Middlefield hamlet and a pictorial history of the entire town – I was not able to devote uninterrupted attention to this project.

Q. What was your writing process like? Did you have a routine?

A. The writing process can be very draining. It takes a lot of organization to have your research notes at your fingertips while trying to compose text that is accessible and interesting to the reader. I found that during the early stages of the book I had to develop an outline for the entire project. This could be altered as information came to light, but I found I had to know where I was going. I also found it crucial to have a detailed chapter outline before I started each chapter. Using the first outline, I was able to do all the research relative to a given chapter. Then, while drafting the chapter outlines, I could create a flow for the subject matter within the text of that chapter. As for the actual writing, I find I compose best in the morning when my mind is fresh. Revisions were best done after the text had sat dormant for a day or so. Invariably, the revision process disclosed needs for additional information and supporting data. Only after these steps were completed did I try to go back to revise the text to make the writing smooth and polished. I might also add, when this was all done, it was a very humbling process to have my peers review the work and make suggestions. One has to be able to take sometimes extensive criticism in order to get a book ready to be seen by a publisher.

Q. Where did you conduct your research for this book?

A. Since the book relies so heavily on primary source material, research necessarily centered on those places where collections of early documents are housed. The George Hyde Clarke family papers are held at Cornell University so I spent many hours there. Likewise with the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, which has in their collections letters, diaries, and newspapers on file from the period. I was fortunate in that in Otsego County the County Clerk's Office is readily accessible so land deeds were obtainable. The same held true of the Surrogate's Office for wills. Finally, I let it be widely known that I was working on this project. Many people were kind enough to give me access to their private collections of documents, or documents for which they were custodians. Not to be discounted were the numerous and long conversations with people who had varying degrees of information which exposed numerous leads and tangents that I might otherwise have not found.

Q. You have both illustrations and maps in the book. How did you select what was included?

A. The easiest way to answer this question is to say I made my selections based on what was available. I wanted maps that would illustrate the progressive development of the hamlet. I was lucky to find so many wonderful private maps within the Clarke Family Papers at Cornell, which dealt with the hamlet. When I coupled these with the mass-produced maps of the area from the mid-eighteenth century I was able to show the vital development of the hamlet. Illustrations were a little trickier. With only three exceptions it was impossible to find any contemporary illustrations. Those three exceptions are the pictures of the Metcalfs, which were made available to me by a descendant, and the Harrison North house, which was made available to me by a man who has a copy of the tintype from around 1859. In choosing the other illustrations, I chose those buildings for which early 20th century post cards were available and which I knew were little changed from their early 19th century appearance. Lacking a picture of the Pinney tavern, I took a picture of this building myself, knowing that it had been faithfully restored by the current owner. The point of the illustrations was to show the reader the places mentioned in the book as they would have appeared during the period covered by the book.

Q. Were you confronted with any obstacles in your research? What were they and how did you overcome them?

A. The only real obstacle was time. In order to write a work of this scope that relies on primary source material as it does requires time and patience. I think everyone can figure out how to make time to do the things they enjoy most. To that end I would suggest, if you intend to write a book, any book, make sure the topic is engaging enough for you to keep your attention.

Q. Do you have any advice for people who want to research the history of their hamlet or small crossroads town?

A. The first thing I found to do was to review what has already been written about your community and the surrounding communities. Get a sense of what themes have been covered and what issues have been raised. Also, always ask yourself when reading these other books, if you were writing it how would you improve it. Visit local libraries, historical associations and local historians to learn what primary source material is available. Two crucial bits of advice should be borne in mind. The first is to rely heavily on primary source material: diaries, letters, first-hand accounts, and newspapers. An historical work that rests entirely or even largely on secondary source material is little more than a retelling of someone else's work. One cannot analyze history if one starts by relying on someone else's analysis – go to the primary source. Second, make an argument instead of a narration. Rather than simply recount what happened, try to write a history that argues a point. The easiest way to do this is to ask the question "why?" instead of "when?" and "who?" For example, we all know that Washington crossed the Delaware, but why did he do it? Similarly, we all know that Middlefield developed along the banks of the Cherry Valley Creek, but why did it develop there? Why did it develop at all?

Q. This is definitely a specialized history book. What is the audience that you're trying to reach?

A. Anyone who has seen one of these cross-road hamlets and wondered, "how was this place established, and what happened to them?" would be interested in this book. Obviously, local history and New York State history buffs should appreciate it. Of those, I'd like to first reach the "arm chair" historians who just want to better understand the "how and why" of their area of central New York.

Written as a case study, this book gives much information that is easily transferable to other parts of the region and should help them. The second group would be the scholarly community, the historians who are studying the region and want a greater understanding of how it developed, how the many interlinked parts of our society came together, and why they came together. On the other hand, non-historians should find value in this book as well. I think it will appeal to those people who wish to make their home in one of these quiet picturesque communities and want to know the inherent value of its architecture and landscape. And then there are those who are concerned about the future of these hamlets, and who want to preserve the beauty of these communities from the ever-increasing hand of sprawl masquerading as progress in our 21st century world. The book should give them a better understanding of what was important about the self-sustaining nature of development in these smaller communities.

Q. This is not your first book. What are your other books about?

A. My first book was an architectural guide to the Middlefield historic district which I developed in conjunction with a walking tour of the hamlet I give for the Middlefield Historical Association. Shortly after this point I was intrigued by the development of the hamlet and the personalities that brought the hamlet into existence. That is where this present book had its genesis. The two intervening books grow out of research for this project. The first was a cemetery guide which I developed for my own private use. As that project was progressing I kept being asked by genealogists for copies. So I had it printed and started marketing it. A portion of the proceeds of that book actually go to the Baptist Cemetery Association. Also, during this time I was asked to do a pictorial history of the town of Middlefield for Arcadia for their *Images of America* series. The present book is far and away my most ambitious undertaking.

Q. You took a non-traditional route to publish this book. Why, and how much control did you have over the process?

A. My last book was published in a very traditional way. I do not see myself ever doing that again. The current method, using a small publisher with a print-on-demand format, gave me the ability to be actively involved in every step of the publication process. Traditional publishers do not usually allow the author/historian much input into the design and appearance of the final product. I feel very strongly that since this is my work, I want direct and active input into every facet of the publication process. Using a small publishing house gave me that control with the professional assistance I needed. I have actually already recommended this publishing house to several other historians I know.

Q. What have you learned from the process of writing and publishing this book?

A. Before this book I never appreciated the myriad details which go into publishing a book. Having conversations about font size and style floored me. Looking back, all those highly detailed discussions about technical matters had a value all their own in terms of understanding the process. I have a much greater appreciation for the work editors and publishers do.

Q. What's next? Any plans for another book?

A. My next project is going to deal with early reform movements in Otsego County. In researching this current book I found a lot of information leading me to believe there was a true reform impulse in the area. This reform impulse seemed to manifest itself in three areas: abolition, temperance and feminism. I found repeated reference in newspapers to temperance rallies and within church records to people being censured for excessive drinking. This was a major concern to the people of the area because they perceived excessive drinking as having very real adverse impacts on society. Abolition seems to crop up shortly after slavery was abolished in New York State in 1827. At first it seemed to follow the line of "no expansion for slavery." However, by the 1850s there seems to be a real abhorrence among large segments of the population against slavery. Certainly it was not a universal abhorrence, but it was pervasive through society. Lastly, both of these reform movements were tied closely to the budding feminist movement. However, in researching this book, I was fascinated to find an early divorce and an early pre-nuptial agreement in Middlefield. I feel there must be more such instances through the county. These display a spirit of independence among women that is undoubtedly what led to the feminist movement. There is a lot of work to pulling such a book together, but it should be enjoyable.