

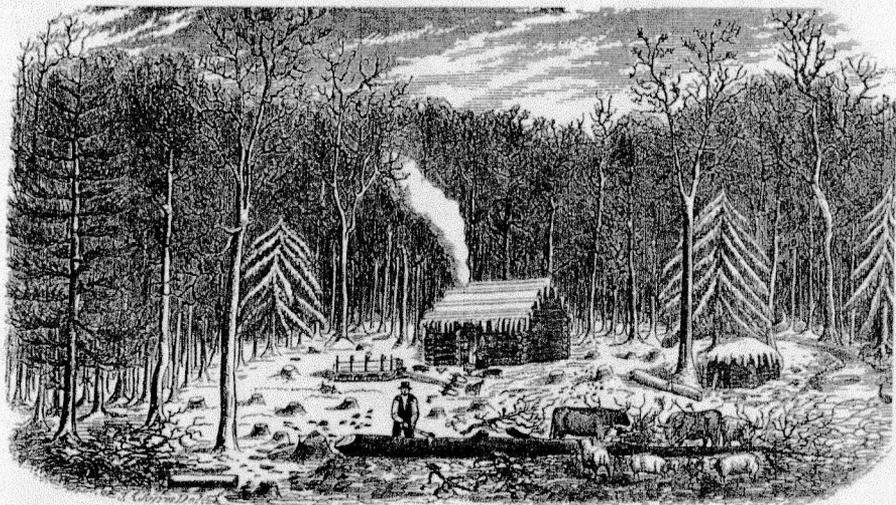


## **A LITTLE HISTORY TO SHARE ABOUT THE BACKBONE RIDGE.**

### ***What is the Backbone Ridge?***

The Backbone Ridge is the name given to the hilltop ridge running between Cayuga and Seneca Lakes. It is about 30 square miles in size and includes former farmsteads and many small communities with businesses that supported and were supported by the family farms. The area lies in portions of Schuyler, Seneca and Tompkins Counties in New York State. The families on over one hundred hilltop farms in this area were removed or relocated by the Resettlement Administration, a program of the New Deal during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Shortly afterward the houses and barns were destroyed and the land reforested or turned into public grazing lands. The area contains the Finger Lakes National Forest including the Hector Grazing Lands and many small communities including Burdett, Bennetsburg, Reynoldsville, Mecklenburg, Perry City, Covert, Searsburg, East Steamburg, Townsendville, Lodi Center, Valois, Logan and Hector.

The Backbone Ridge History Group is focused on the history of this very rural area.



Source: Turner, *The Pioneer History of the Holland Land Purchase*, 1848

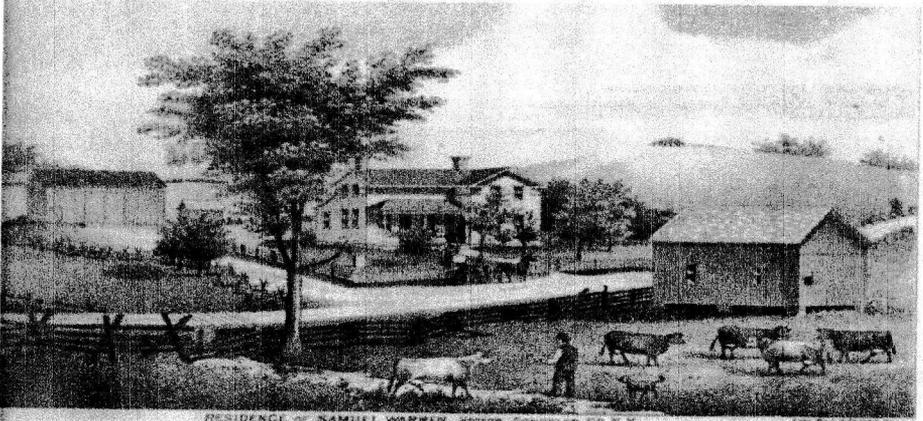
### ***What is the history of the Backbone Ridge?***

This was Native American territory culminating in the Iroquois Confederacy with the Seneca Nation occupying the area up until the Sullivan-Clinton expedition. During the Revolutionary War the Indians were driven off and their buildings and crops destroyed to prevent them from providing the British with supplies and to protect the settlers further east from massacres as had already occurred in the Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania and at Cherry Valley and Springfield in New York.

Ten years after the end of the Revolutionary War, Congress created a lottery system to pay the revolutionary soldiers for their service with grants of land in a newly created Military Tract. (see “The Military Tracts” article on the Historian’s portion of the Seneca County website: [www.co.seneca.ny.us](http://www.co.seneca.ny.us) for more information on the Military Tract) With participation by New York State, Privates were granted 600 acres each and Officers multiples of 600 acres depending on their rank. Since ten years had passed between the end of the war and the award of land grants, most soldiers settled elsewhere and were not interested in

relocating. They sold their land rights to speculators who in turn sold to pioneers who wanted to settle on fertile lands in the wilderness.

Beginning in the early 1800s, settlers began arriving. They made clearings in the forest on lands they had purchased, usually near a stream, where they could plant some wheat, raise the few livestock they brought with them, build a cabin and start a family.



Samuel Warren Farmstead, c. 1875, Town of Hector

An amazing period of growth followed, supported by newly built sawmills, grist mills, tanneries and other businesses. As the population increased, churches, schools and small communities with businesses such as blacksmith shops, and wagon shops appeared. According to census data, the population peaked in 1850. At that time the next generation of pioneers headed west to Ohio, Michigan and other states.

Backbone Ridge life marched on for several more generations with its ups and downs reflecting the ever changing social, economic, religious and political philosophies of the region and the country. Opening of the Erie Canal, steam boats on the lakes, the railroads, invention of labor saving agricultural equipment, "scientific" farming and industrialization created dramatic changes.



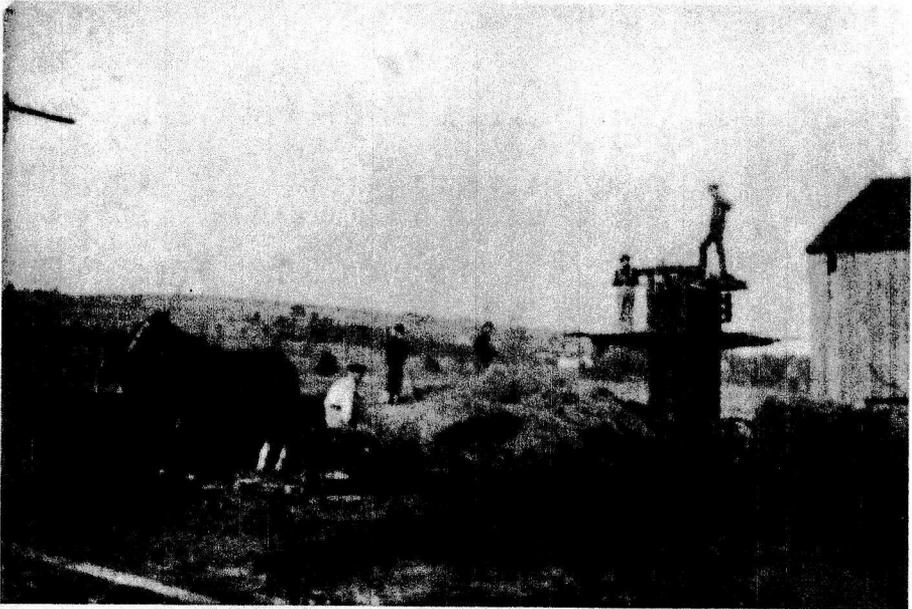
Perry City Wagon Shop, drawing by Anne R. Knight

Events such as smallpox and flu epidemics came and went. An inspection of headstones in the family cemetery plots provides evidence of the heartbreaking mortality rate of children and young women. However, it is also evident that many individuals lived to be very elderly. Still other evidence demonstrates extensive family service during wartime. Through it all, the farm families made adjustments appropriate for their particular set of circumstances.

After moving into the new century, through World War One and the Roaring Twenties, farming the hilltops began to be studied at Cornell University while Franklin Delano

Roosevelt was Governor of New York State. FDR brought many individuals involved in those studies with him to the federal government. As the New Deal evolved under FDR's direction, federal programs and administrations were created to develop and implement federal policy. The Resettlement Administration had a great impact on the Backbone Ridge resulting in the elimination of over 100 family farms and the creation of the Hector Land Use Area.

There is evidence that some of the farms had already been abandoned for a number of reasons by then (Vaughn, LM. 1929 Abandoned Farm Land in New York, Journal of Farm Economics 11), however more recent studies (Hoock, Mark W., "Common Sense" Versus "Good Sense": Marginalization of Agriculture" (2013). Masters Theses. Paper 435. [http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters\\_theses/435](http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/masters_theses/435)) have shown that the farmers remaining were creative in crop, livestock and marketing diversity and had a good chance of continuing to be successful on the Backbone Ridge.



Jump Pressing Hay on Darling Farm, Town of Hector

It is questionable however, how long the Backbone Ridge Farms could have remained competitive without electricity, improved roads and schools, things that the farmers had no control over. Was the decision to remove these farms the result of economic, social or environmental policy? For many families the only occupation they knew in the only homes in which they had lived for generations, ceased to exist. For some, who may have been in dire financial straits, this might have been a welcome way out. For others it was probably very difficult to leave.



Frank Abram Tunison Farm, Town of Covert

In 1946 the Hector Grazing Association was created to manage the grazing program on the Hector Land Use Area, which at that time accommodated cattle, horses and sheep on about 500 acres of land on farms from which the farmers had been removed and the buildings destroyed. Just cattle now, graze in designated pastures, from May through October. In 1983 the Hector Land Use Area became the Finger Lakes National Forest.

## ***What historical archaeological work has been taking place?***

For the past several summers Dr. LouAnn Wurst has overseen archaeological excavations at a sample of farms located at the south end of the Finger Lakes National Forest. A main goal of her project is to understand the everyday life of these farm families from initial settlement in the early 1800s until the farms were finally removed from production. Findings so far indicate that farm families on the Backbone Ridge were making capital improvements to improve their farms, changing their agricultural production strategies to match current markets, and investing in costly consumer goods such as automobiles, telephones, radios, and domestic objects well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These results contradict the commonly held belief that farming in this part of the country declined over a long period of time-indicating that the history of agriculture in this area was much more complex than has typically been assumed.

For further information, contact Dr. LouAnn Wurst, Department of Anthropology, Western Michigan University, 1005 Moore Hall, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5306. (269-387-2753)

## ***What is the mission and vision of the Backbone Ridge History Group?***

### **Mission**

To identify, collect, interpret and in cooperation with surrounding historical societies, to facilitate access to archives and artifacts related to the history of the lands, communities and people on and around the Backbone Ridge and to share this history with others.

### **Vision**

The Backbone Ridge History Group will be recognized as the authoritative source of historical information and objects related to the Backbone Ridge lands, communities and people, bringing this history to life through its educational publications, public programs, website and interpretive sites and exhibits.

## ***What activities do Backbone Ridge History Group volunteers engage in?***

Research  
Cemetery Cleanup, Restoration and Documentation  
Public Education Programs  
Quarterly Newsletter  
Oral History Interviews  
Collecting, Indexing and Preserving Related Documents  
and Photographs  
Website Management  
Development of a Research Center  
Exhibits At Local Events  
Planning for a Living History Interpretive Site

## ***Where to go for more information OR to become a volunteer?***

Website [www.backboneridgehistorygroup.com](http://www.backboneridgehistorygroup.com)

Mailing Address PO Box ~~64~~ 62  
Trumansburg, New York 14886

Phone 607 532 4213 or 607 546 5533

e-mail [orchardland@zoom-dsl.com](mailto:orchardland@zoom-dsl.com) **or**  
[DorisPike@aol.com](mailto:DorisPike@aol.com)

*A living history site is being planned. While visiting the area would you be interested in visiting a site on the Backbone Ridge that interprets life on a hilltop farm? If so, would you please let us know through one of the contacts listed above? Your input will help with planning. Thank you!*

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