

The Backbone

A publication of the Backbone Ridge History Group of Schuyler, Seneca, and Tompkins Counties



Road and Transportation Development in the Military Tract Region (and much of NYS) by Judy Wickham Butterfield

We need groceries. We get in our vehicle and drive on a paved road to the store to get our necessities.

Now imagine, if you will, the 1700's in what was to become the Finger Lakes Region of NYS. There were no roads. At best there were paths and trails worn down by the passing feet of deer, bobcats, cougars and the moccasins of the Haudenosaunee people. The trails would have been narrow, filled with ruts, roots, vines and closely enclosed by the encroaching forests.

These paths, large and small were all the surveyors found and used when they entered the area to lay out the New Military Tract. This large tract of land, approximately 1.8 million acres, was to be laid out in 28 townships comprised of one hundred 640 acre lots. Forty acres of each lot were meant for roads and would not have counted in the land deeded to the soldiers. There is some confusion among scholars and historians about the 40 acres but it stands to reason that the boundaries between these lots could and would become pathways and eventually roads as settlers went about life, visiting from one property to another and getting to town.

In the early days of the settlements the roads and byways were initially dirt and gravel. They would have followed the terrain, avoiding trees and deep ravines. They were rutted by wagon wheels and horse hooves. Snow melt and rain deepened ruts as it ran down the steep pathways of the hilly countryside making travel tedious and slow. (continued on page 3)



Inside this issue

Road and Transportation Development in the Military Tract Region (and much of NYS): 1,3,5-7

President's Update.....2

Military Lot Presentation.....1

Jaime Montour Presentation.....2

Turnpikes in Burdett.....7-10

Military Lot Presentation

The final Military Lot presentation was given October 19, 2025 at the Burdett Fire Hall. June Szabo, Judy Wickham Butterfield, and Keith Jenkins presented their work over several years. A surveyor's chain was brought in and Harold Bush played the harmonica for the crowd. See photo at right.

For more information on military lots, please refer to our website:

www.backboneridgehistorygroup.com.



The President's Update

Welcome to late winter. This season seemed to start in mid fall has been referred to as an old fashioned winter. Snow and ice had me on the ground twice, but luckily no harm done. Shoveling snow was almost a daily activity. It was so hopeful to finally get a few warm days . I couldn't help but think of our ancestors and know that they had the same anticipation for spring that we do. Keep in mind that their methods for keeping warm were more limited than nowadays. For thirty plus years, our household had the experience of wood fired appliances. Fortunately, we had wood lots to draw from. There was a saying that wood heated you twice— once when you cut and split it, and again when you burned it.

Our Backbone History Group is looking forward to the upcoming programs, and events we will sponsor this year. Keep watch for local calendars, and publications for updates.

We have been working on our building : entry steps, railings, ceiling repairs, insulation, stucco repair, and tree removal. If you would like to help sponsor these projects, please send support to - Backbone Ridge History Group, PO Box 62, Trumansburg NY 14886

Thank you,
Harold P. Bush



**Backbone Ridge History
Group
PO BOX 62
Trumansburg, NY 14886**

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Special Event—Cynthia Neale and Jaime Montour

On November 2, we had a special program on Queen Catherine Montour by her descendant Jaime Montour of the Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation No. 40, Ontario. She is a Healer, Paralegal, and Knowledge Keeper who discussed her journey tracing her lineage to Queen Catherine. Author Cynthia Neale, who wrote *Heeding the Call, Digging Deep, and Catherine, Queen of the Tumbling Waters*, was also going to join in but had a mishap and was unable to attend.

Thank you to all that attended!



Road and Transportation Development in the Military Tract Region (and much of NYS) by Judy Wickham Butterfield (continued from page 1)

Roads in and around the newly surveyed and settled townships were under the governance of the local municipalities and were often cleared and mostly maintained by the local folks who settled here. Men between the ages of 21 and 60 were expected to maintain the roads by working without pay for two or more days a year.

In Charles Wickham's diaries of the 1880s, he mentions in June of most years, he and his son Willie would work on what is now Burnt Hill Road for several days. In June of 1885 on Friday the 19th he wrote, "We worked on Road 5½ days. Ed worked on Road" (Ed was his hired help). In 1886 on Wednesday the 2nd he wrote, "Whitley Smith Brought Road Machine home and Paid my wife \$3.75 for use of same". On the 14th "Raked Stone out Road, Ed Simpson got road Machine" and Wickham added more road work entries on the 15th and 19th. Mud season had passed and getting the road back in shape was a necessity for trips being made to Bennettsburg, Burdett, Watkins and further. I was unable to ascertain what the 'road machine' was however, I feel it was most likely an early design 'road-grader' leveling the road and scraping rocks away with its blade.

When a road was built in an area that was continuously damp or wet, logs were often used to give wagons a way to gain purchase and to keep them from sinking in the muck and mud. These roads and portions of roads earned the name corduroy roads. They were horribly uncomfortable and could turn a few miles of travel into hours of bouncing and praying that axles did not break or wagons tip over.

As time passed and there was more call for passable routes, plank roads and turnpikes became plentiful. Both types were sometimes toll roads and a fee was charged to help maintain the roads and to pay investors dividends. Plank roads were much easier to traverse than corduroy roads, being made from boards or logs with a flat side up and laid closely. In the military tract area there were no turnpikes and few, if any, plank roads. Plank roads were typically longer routes where speed and ease were of greater importance.

(continued on page 5)



Photo of corduroy road construction, Puerto Rico mtns 1940-41

We would Love to Hear from YOU!

We would love to hear your story!

Did you grow up or have family or relatives from the Backbone Ridge area?

We are always looking for writers to submit articles for The Newsletter too!

Please email your stories and photographs to us or contact our President, Harold Bush.

Email:
Haroldb
@rochester.rr.com

Phone:
607-227-8994.

Thank You to our New Members and Renewals as of January 30th 2026:

Mission Statement:

To identify and facilitate public access to sources of information documenting the history of the people, communities, and lands in and around the Finger Lakes National Forest and promote the study of this history.

Any person, group or business interested in the objectives of the Backbone Ridge History Group of Schuyler and Seneca Counties shall be eligible.

Funding for the Backbone Ridge History Group comes from membership dues and donations. The group is a not-for-profit, tax-exempt, charitable organization.

As a member you will learn more about the Backbone Ridge's proud and fascinating history and help decide how to preserve and promote it for future generations. Members are welcome to attend and vote at the annual meeting held in October and are invited to attend the other events held throughout the year as listed on the Calendar of Events page. Members will also receive the quarterly newsletter.

Annual Dues:

Individual or Household \$15.00

Patron (Firm, Business, Individual or Household) \$50.00

Contributing and Sustaining \$100.00

Institutional (any related Organization) FREE

The membership year runs from January 1st to December 31st. Dues received after September 1st will be applied to the new year. To become a member, download a form from our website and submit it and your payment (checks payable to Backbone Ridge History Group) to:

Backbone Ridge History Group
Membership Chairperson
P.O. Box 62
Trumansburg, NY 14886

*Thank
you*

Road and Transportation Development in the Military Tract Region (and much of NYS) by Judy Wickham Butterfield continued from page 3

The “road” mentioned several times in survey notes from the New Military Tract development in the townships of Ovid and Hector was Catherine’s Road. It was a well-used path, initially used by the indigenous people and then by Sullivan’s army. Sullivan had been charged by George Washington to clear all the native people, their villages, and crops. This road ran from near the southern end of Seneca Lake at Catherine’s Town (Montour Falls) to Kanandasega (Geneva). The army would have widened it to make way for artillery, wagons, and large units of soldiers. North of the Finger Lakes Region, the Great Genesee Trail, was another native trail used by the soldiers. This main artery ran from the Hudson Valley to the Great Lakes and while it did not pass directly through the military tract it did allow settlers to more easily come to the newly developed area, and to move goods out. By the mid-1800’s the toll roads, turnpikes, and plank roads, began to go out of style as most roads led to ports on the Erie Canal, completed in 1825 and collecting a toll for such short trips was a waste of the toll collector’s time and the return on investments dwindled. The lakes, and the wider roads such as Catherine’s Road and the path along the west side of Cayuga Lake that skirted the Cayuga’s reservation were used to get goods to the boats carrying mainly agricultural products to larger cities to be sold to bigger markets.

As time passed, railroads came into being, eclipsing the roads with speed and capacity. Roads began to be used primarily for short distance travel and folks sometimes used the trains to travel from one location to another - such as the center of Hector township to the village of Burdett. Details in a family diary spoke about various family members taking the train the short distance to visit relatives.

Finally, in 1898 New York State established the State Highway Department, the first in the nation. It was now that paved roads began to appear but certainly not immediately in the Backbone Ridge and the rest of the New Military Tract lands.



In 1909 Catherine’s Road would become State Route 78 and finally 414, but it was still dirt as it passed through the hamlet of Hector.

Photo at left, East Lake Road (current Rte. 414) circa 1900. This does not look like a bad road but it is quite narrow and also dirt. Following a rain storm or as the snow melted it would most likely turn into a mud pit.

(continued on page 6)

Road and Transportation Development in the Military Tract Region (and much of NYS) by Judy Wickham Butterfield continued from page 5

Catherine's Road, now State Route 414 passing through the hamlet of Hector north of the Dandy plaza and the Hector Presbyterian Church. (photo right)

Route 414, one of the major roads in the Finger Lakes, on the western edge of the Backbone Ridge area was developed connecting and upgrading several smaller roads in the early 20th century. It was initially, in part, numbered 44 and I believe in at least one area 78. The numbering changed to 414 in 1935.

NY State Route 79 also began its life as several smaller roads and had sections joined to become known as NYS Rte 79. This road runs through a portion of the Backbone Ridge. It crosses over the ridge between Bennettsburg and Mecklenburg before continuing to Ithaca. In the early 1900s both 414 and 79 were being improved and added to. The use of asphalt was beginning to make the roads more passable for cars as they became more popular.



Rte 414 along the cliffs on the east side of Seneca Lake. Early steam shovel and some horse drawn wagons shown. The picture was circa 1935. (photo left)



While the outer edges of the New Military Tract began to see improved roads, the majority of the Backbone Ridge roads remained dirt and gravel for many more years. It was 1934 when the government resettlement program began buying properties on the highest portion of the Ridge. In these areas there are few homes left, including in what is now the National Forest, and many roads are still dirt and gravel. Some of the earliest, presumably, less busy roads have become seasonal use or are completely abandoned. The roads still

in use are primarily maintained by the towns in which they lie. (cont'd on page 7)

Road and Transportation Development in the Military Tract Region (and much of NYS) by Judy Wickham Butterfield continued from page 5

In more recent times the busier roads such as County Rd. 1 from Rte. 414 to Trumansburg and County Rd. 4 that runs near the top of the Ridge have been paved. This has made travel between the State highways used in the area easier to access.

It is interesting to think that there are still beautiful areas in the Finger Lakes Region that are much like they were in the 1800s. You can travel on the original dirt and gravel roads, slow down, imagine what it was like for our ancestors and balance out the high speed lives most of us live these days.

In doing the research for this article, I relied on NYS DOT historical information, some of my ancestor's diaries (Charles Wickham), my work with the Backbone Ridge's New Military tract project and personal history.

Turnpikes in Burdett by Charlotte Dickens

Several major roads, once called turnpikes, ran through Burdett in the early part of the 1800s, and were a part of a system of roads, very important to the development and settlement of our area. These same roads, with some adjustments and alterations are part of our lives today.

One turnpike, the first scheduled to go through Burdett, the Susquehanna Bath Turnpike, was authorized by an act in the New York State Legislature on March 24, 1804, and was an extension of the Catskill Turnpike going from Jericho to Bath. The original Susquehanna Turnpike was authorized on April 1, 1800 to go from the Connecticut Border to Wattle's Ferry (Jericho, now Unadilla). (Palmer, Richard. "Turnpike Corporations in New York State." <https://cayugagenealogy.org/turnpikes/index.html> .) The route passed through Ithaca, Mecklenburg, and Burdett, by a route that turned to the left from what is now 79 onto what we now know as Skyline Drive and then continues down Church Street and down what is now Main Street to Watkins Glen (Salubria, Jefferson) and through to Hammondsport and then Bath. (DOT documents, maps).

Also a second turnpike was called the Ithaca Hamburg Turnpike, so named before the collection of settlements was yet named Burdett and its incorporation was enacted by the New York State Legislature on April 12, 1816. (Palmer, Richard. "Turnpike Corporations in New York State." <https://cayugagenealogy.org/turnpikes/index.html> .) It began in Ithaca, then to Mecklenburg and then to Burdett through Lake Ave./Carpenter Road, turned left at the end of Carpenter (where Hamburg and Hector Point were located and continued to the inlet at the foot of Seneca Lake through Jefferson (Watkins Glen) to Havana (Montour Falls).

Yet another turnpike , the Hector and Catharine Turnpike, was included in legislation passed on April 15, 1823. (Palmer, Richard. "Turnpike Corporations in New York State." <https://cayugagenealogy.org/turnpikes/index.html> .) This turnpike route was authorized

(continued on page 8)

Turnpikes in Burdett by Charlotte Dickens
continued from page 7

to go from the Newtown Turnpike in the Town of Catharine to Jefferson (now Watkins Glen) to Burdett by way of what is now Route 79 to Main Street to the Tug Hollow Road to the Lake Road (NYS Route 414) and on up to Hector. The wording in the legislative act was "...that John. H. Osborn, Samuel Seeley, Sedra Wood, and such other persons as shall associate for the purpose of making a good and sufficient road to at begin at the easterly line of the Newtown turnpike road, opposite the house of Bradly Thompson, in the town of Catharine, in the county of Tioga, and to run from thence on the most eligible route eastwardly crossing the inlet of the Seneca lake to the foot of the hill, at or near the southeasterly corner of the said lake, thence northerly contiguous to the said lake, on the most direct and practicable route until it intersects the old lake road, leading from Ovid village to Newtown, on lot number sixty-eight in Hector, near the now dwelling home of Robert Dailey, and to build a good and sufficient bridge across the said inlet of Seneca Lake, where this said turnpike road shall cross the said inlet, shall be and are hereby created a body corporate and politic, by the name of the Hector and Catharine turnpike road, and bridge company..." (Laws of New York, 46 the Session, Chapter XLI, p.180--DOT maps and information supplied from FOIL request).

Also in this 1823 legislation authorizing the Hector and Catharine Turnpike, were the directions that there would be only one tollgate on this road located between the bridge and a stone building built by Thomas Horton near the head of the lake, where it would serve as tollgate for the road and the bridge. It further ordered that once the said road and bridge were completed, that "all persons travelling this road would pay the following amounts: for every wagon drawn by two horses, mules or oxen, twelve and a half cents, and three cents for every additional every additional horse, mule or ox; for every pleasure wagon drawn by two horses, twelve and a half cents; for every chariot, coach or phaeton, drawn by two horse, twenty-five cents, and three cents for each additional horse; for every chair, chaise, or sulky drawn by one horse, twelve and a half cents; for every one horse wagon, six cents: for every horse and rider, four cents; for every sleigh or sled drawn by two horses, mules or oxen, six and a quarter cents; every sleigh drawn by one horse, three cents; every score of hogs or sheep, twelve and a half cents for every score of cattle, horses or mules, twenty cents, and..." Persons going to and from mills were exempt. (Laws, 46 the Session, p181)"

The last to become an incorporated turnpike, the Ithaca and Havana Turnpike was authorized March 28, 1829. (Palmer, Richard. "Turnpike Corporations in New York State." <https://cayugagenealogy.org/turnpikes/index.html> .) Some of these routes apparently ran the same routes for sections of other turnpikes authorized before them as laid out in information supplied from FOIL request).

Delving into the history has been somewhat difficult, due to a lack of information found in many of the historical documents regarding roadways. The 1854 History of Schuyler County published in 1879 is full of information about individuals and families who moved here and dates they arrived, anecdotes and biographical data, drawings of properties owned by people who bought something similar to advertisements in order to
(continued on page 9)

be included, and much other historical information, However, there seems to be lack much discussion about roads and transportation systems in our area. Consequently the committee doing the research for the update to the Burdett from the Beginning went to town records, made a FOIL request for maps and information the NYS DOT by Martha Evans, Burdett Historian, and were able to find some online sources. Thus we were able to piece together what occurred in the sphere of transportation in the area during the era of the Turnpikes.

When New York State settlements were mostly confined to lands along the Hudson, the issue of transportation of goods and mail were mostly solved by river travel. However, as pioneers began to settle in more Western areas due to the opening up of lands after the Revolutionary War, the Clinton military campaign and treaties were made with Native Americans, the issue of transport by way of roads became more urgent. In 1790, the entire Military Lot area of which the Town of Hector was a part, was surveyed. This area was set aside and acreages given by military allotments as repayment Revolutionary soldiers for their service. The very earliest roads were made by cutting underbrush, swamps made travelable by "corduroying" them with logs, large trees circumvented, and bridges did not exist. Rivers and creeks were forded. None of this was very conducive to travel by those wishing to settle. The legislators became aware of the pressing need to improve roads if they want to encourage commerce. Finding that taxation, then lotteries were not sufficient to raise enough funds, turnpikes were authorized in which private corporations to raise funds for road maintenance through tollgates to be placed normally even ten miles. (Holmes, Oliver. "The Turnpike Era." History of the State of New York in Ten Volumes, edited by Alexander C. Flick, State Historian Under the Auspices of the New York State Historical Association, by Columbia University Press, 1934, USA. Volume Five. Digitized in 2011 by the Internet Archive with Funding from the Boston Consortium Member Libraries. https://archive.org/stream/historyofstateof05newy/historyofstateof05newy_djvu.txt).

The first major road to become a turnpike was begun in 1797, the Great Genesee Road, and started from Fort Schuyler on the Mohawk on to Geneva and was officially turned into a turnpike in 1800. The most important of the turnpikes were hard-surfaced with macadam, and yet others were earth surfaces, but likely better than other non-turnpike roads that were dirt surfaced. (Holmes). The first incorporated turnpike was the Albany to Schenectady Turnpike, but others soon followed and the Catskill (Susquehanna) Turnpike was one of those authorized early in 1800, and in 1804 authorization for the route was extended to Ithaca and onto to Bath. That route was scheduled from the beginning to go through Burdett to Jefferson to Hammondsport (Holmes). From maps supplied from DOT we can see that the route followed the route through Burdett by way of Church Street and down Main Street and to what is now Route 79. Later in the following decades the other turnpikes going through were also authorized by NYS Legislation.

Not only were the turnpikes in many places in New York used for people heading west to settle in Ohio, they also often accommodated animals being taken to market, usually in an

Turnpikes in Burdett by Charlotte Dickens continued from page 9

easterly direction. (Palmer, Richard F. "The Old Line Mail": Stagecoach Days in Upstate New York. Lakemont, NY.: North Country Books, 1977, pp. 58-62). Parts of the Susquehanna Turnpike (also known as the Catskill Turnpike) were used by drovers taking animals east to New York City and other eastern large cities. From Ithaca the Susquehanna Bath Turnpike extended to the other end of the Catskill turnpike and into the Catskills. The droves of animals often included turkeys and geese besides the usual cattle, pigs or horses that might be more commonly thought to be taken to market by drovers. Farmers along the turnpike routes often catered to the drovers, offering pastures and barns for the animals, while innkeepers sometimes specialized in offered accommodations to the drovers. When the railroads became a major mode of transportation in the 1850s, they largely replaced the turnpikes in the transport of animals to market (Palmer, 62).

Stagecoach travel was important to travelers and to the postal service, although post riders by horseback preceded the stagecoach for mail delivery. Inns along the stagecoach and postal routes on the turnpikes catered to passengers using this mode of travel. Stages continued after canals took much of the freight travel from the turnpikes in the canal heyday. The stages continued to be used for awhile as the railroad era was beginning, eventually being gradually replaced by the railroad travel. Both the canals and the railroads took business from the turnpikes. What had never been especially lucrative for the private turnpike companies, became less so and they became public roads instead. They continued to be utilized for travel by individual horse and carriages, and eventually for automobiles (Holmes). This is the case for many of these same routes today, which do continue to closely follow many of the original routes.

This is true for the roads through Burdett.. A notable exception is route of the Main Street Bridge that is now used only as a footbridge. Tug Hollow Road traffic now must go by way of NYS Route 79 to Lake Street and then turning right onto Tug Hollow, a county road, and then turning right onto Route NYS 414 towards Hector or if turning left, then heading towards Hector Falls on NYS 414 and eventually Watkins Glen.

