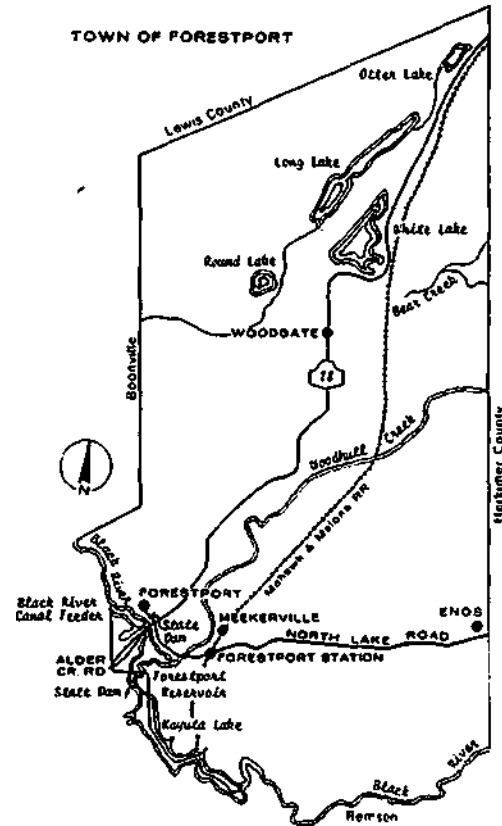


(This article was originally written in 1977 for the US Bicentennial celebration book, "*A History of Oneida County*", by the Town of Forestport Historian at the time, Hilda Avery. It is reproduced here from "*Exploring 200 Years of Oneida County History*", Oct. 1998, with gratitude to the Oneida County Historical Society.)

# Forestport

By

Hilda Avery



Forestport is the youngest town in Oneida County and one of the largest in area. Located in the northeastern corner in the foothills of the Adirondacks, it is also the fastest growing town, according to Livingston Lansing, of the *Boonville Herald*.

It is almost impossible to visualize the wilderness of 200 years ago which greeted the few hardy pioneers who came into the area at the close of the Revolutionary War. Parts of three early land patents are included in Forestport. In 1761 Matthew Adgate, a member of the first Constitutional Convention and the New York State Assembly, purchased by contract 45,000 acres of land for two shillings sixpence an acre. His patent, to what is known as Adgate's Western Tract, was issued January 30, 1778, and was later broken up into the Picquet, Gouverneur, Miller and Swanton, and Devereaux tracts. It embraces White Lake and Otter Lake as well as Forestport

The Remsenburgh Patent of 48,000 acres was granted in 1787 to Henry Remsen, J. G. Klock, George Klock and John Van Sice after they petitioned the legislature that this area had been conveyed to them by deed in 1766. This acreage is in the general area of Enos Road and Kayuta Lake.

Thomas Machin was granted a patent in 1788 of 31,360 acres. He emigrated from England in 1772. He was a skilled engineer and surveyor and assisted in placing the chain across the Hudson River to protect West Point from British ships during the Revolution. The Woodhull Tract of eight miles square, or a full township, was apparently a

later grant. This comprises the land in the village and east of the village.

In its early days the town had several names. The first was Smith's Mill, from a sawmill on the west side of the Black River. Truman Yale started a chair factory nearby and also built the first frame house on the east side of the river. Then Dr. Platt Williams moved in, built an impressive home on the Alder Creek Road, and a sawmill a mile and a half down the river. The settlement became known as Williamsville. It was also known derisively as Punkeyville for the tiny biting insects that staged an annual spring invasion.

The building of the Black River Canal Feeder, which was completed in 1848, brought both work and transportation to the area. Besides the feeder itself, two dams were built to provide storage reservoirs for the canal. One was made across the outlet of North Lake and the second replaced a sawmill dam in what is now Forestport village.

With adequate transportation and shipping assured, more sawmills began to spring up. People who lived in the outlying settlements of Grantville and Meekerville moved to the village. At one time lumber was hauled from the mill at Grantville for shipment on the canal by means of a wooden railroad. There is nothing left of either Grantville or the railroad now. Meekerville, on picturesque Woodhull Creek, is a ghost town except for a few summer homes.

With the increase in population, schools and churches were needed. A two-room schoolhouse was built with a room for smaller children on the ground floor and one for the older pupils upstairs. Long counters circled each room

where the children sat with their backs to the teachers, whose desks were in the center.

Four churches were organized: Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic. The Methodist Church closed nearly 50 years ago and later the Episcopalians bought the building, remodeled it, and tore down their own beautiful church that stood near Beechwood Cemetery.

The first minister in the Presbyterian Church was the Rev. William Cleveland, brother of President Grover Cleveland. The President brought his bride here to visit and for a short time Forestport was much in the limelight as reporters overcrowded the hotels and filed daily news stories by means of Horace Dayton's telegraph. A parade led by the town band was staged in the President's honor.

In the early days while the town was still a part of Remsen, its neighbor to the south, voting became a problem. The residents alternated voting one year in Remsen and the next in Williamsville. However many of the Williamsville men worked in the woods and it took real effort to reach the polls before closing time. This seemed an injustice and the resentment grew until one year a small group of men persuaded Frank Tracy, who always had the fastest horse in town, to drive them to Remsen. Before the astonished Remsenites realized what was happening the men snatched the ballot box and took it to Williamsville where their co-workers would be in time to vote.

That clinched the matter. In 1860 a committee was named to divide Remsen and Williamsville into two separate towns. James Mitchell and Charles Thomas of Remsen with William B. Jackson and Alfred Hough were paid \$1.50 per day to serve on the committee. It was not until November 24, 1869, that the new town was formed and the first town meeting held in March 1870 made it official. Robert Crandall, postmaster, suggested that their name be changed to Forestport and everyone, including the United States Post Office Department, agreed. It is the only post office with that name in the United States. The old records spell it as two words Forest Port, but in a short time it was changed to one word.

In 1870 the population was 1,276. Records listed 25 log dwellings, the largest number in the county. Some years after the division from Remsen, the land on the west side of River Street was annexed from Boonville.

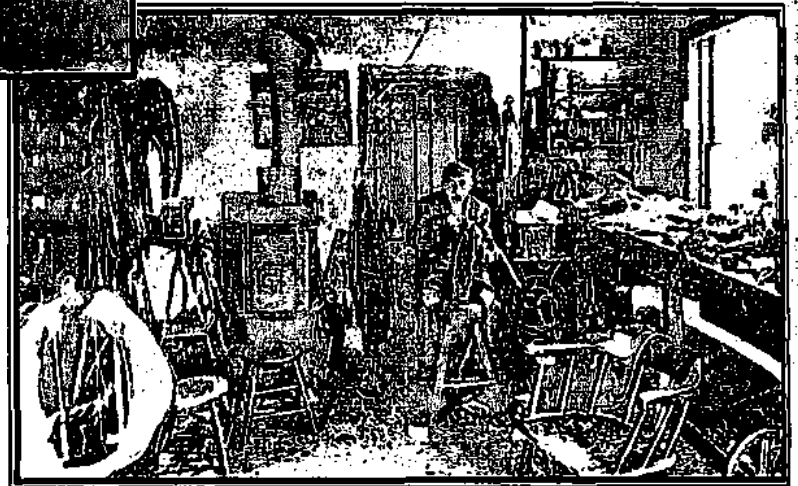
Anson Blake had acquired much of Dr. Platt Williams' holdings by marrying his daughter and he decided to clear the land and grow corn. He brought crews from Canada to help cut the virgin timber, which was eagerly converted, into lumber by the sawmills. Piles of hemlock bark accumulated and a large tannery owned by Proctor and Hill at Woodhull took advantage of this to become the largest in the state, with 480 vats which used 6,000 cords of bark each year to process 25,000 hides. All this aided industry in the area but the farming venture failed. The soil was too



RooR-dec

*An outing on the Black River Canal Feeder at Forestport with the sawmill in the background.*

*Sam Uteley's harness shop, Forestport.*



Hilda Avery

sandy and the growing season too short.

Among the early mill owners were T. R. Stanburgh, Seifert and Harrig, James Gallagher, Hough and Hurlburt, Forestport Lumber Company, Phillip McGuire, Charles Hayes, Francis LaFountain, Denton and Waterbury. All this lumber business generated a thirst and saloons sprang up as fast as the mills. The husky bartenders aided by a baseball bat had no trouble keeping order, for "there was no law north of Remsen."

For the superstitious, Forestport history bears out the old adage that things happen in threes. Three times the village was destroyed by fire and rebuilt. There were three breaks in the canal feeder. After the second fire, which took 14 buildings, the village incorporated with John H. Neejer as its first president. A water system was installed but before it could be turned on a third fire burned seven buildings. For a time the village owned its own electric light plant but this was sold many years ago and in 1937 the village voted to dis-incorporate.

The turn of the century saw the land being stripped of timber and the mills began to close. Jobs were less easy to find. Before this, in 1897, a few men put their heads together and decided that a break in the canal feeder would solve that problem. At one point the canal parallels the Black River and is 70 feet higher. Holes dug surreptitiously during the night became larger in a few hours and morning found a vast opening in the canal bank, with water

pouring into the river. Seventeen hundred men and teams worked around the clock for a month before the damage was repaired. The men were paid \$1.65 a day and the teams 35 cents an hour.

The first break brought such prosperity that another occurred the following May. Again everything boomed but the state began to be a little suspicious. When a third break occurred in September 1889, the state sent Pinkerton detectives to investigate and 13 men were arrested. Five were sent to prison, three fined, and five freed, two for turning state's evidence.

Forestport once had two supervisors at the same time. After the death of John Coughlin the town board could not agree on a successor and by a fluke both Fred S. Liddle and Mrs. Laura LaFountain were appointed. Neither would withdraw, and the matter was finally settled by the courts with Mrs. LaFountain the winner.

Forestport had the first central school in Oneida County built in 1927 after the existing schoolhouse burned. A few years ago the district consolidated with Adirondack Central in Boonville. A new elementary school replaced the old one, which is now used for town offices, meetings and community activities. Otter Lake and Woodgate have discontinued their one-room schools and have joined with the Town of Webb school at Old Forge.

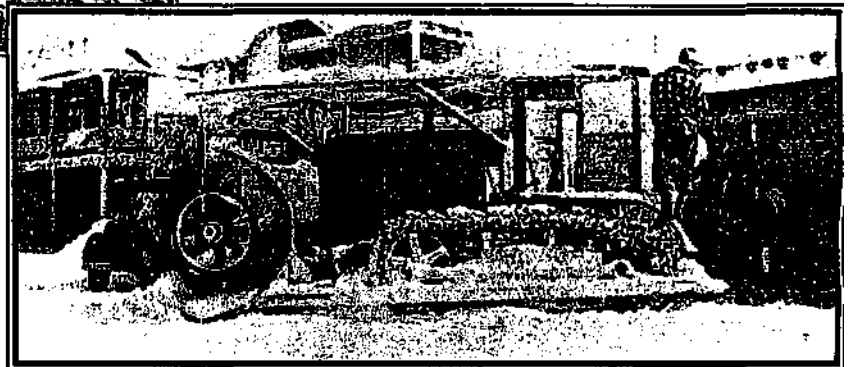
At present the Rome Specialty Company which man-



Hilda Arvey

*Employees at the Denton and Waterbury sawmill about 1885.*

*Forestport's rotary snowplow known as the "White Elephant."*



ufactures fishing tackle is the only industry in Forestport. The Village Boat Shop has an active business through out the summer months and restaurants, such as the Buffalo Head, provide year-round employment. The Mid-York Bookmobile serves the village while local interest in starting a Forestport Library has had limited success.

In the pre-electric refrigeration days Woodgate supplied ice to the City of Utica. Each winter the huge blocks were cut packed in sawdust and stored in a large icehouse for the hot summer days ahead. The icehouse burned one night with flames that could be seen for miles. The Oneida Pink Granite Company operated a quarry at one time about a mile or so from White Lake and shipped carloads of the beautiful stone for building purposes.

Otter Lake never had an industry except logging. It did have one of the early hotels where guests were introduced to Adirondack vacations. Roscoe G. Norton did a great deal to develop Otter Lake into the thriving summer community it is today.

The volunteer fire company, organized after the big fires, was reorganized as the Forestport Fire Fighters. In 1998 the Fire Fighters operate from one station on River Street, Forestport, and serve approximately 245 square miles in 3 districts. It is the largest protection area for a single-station volunteer company in the State of New York. The Fire Fighter's 43 active members, plus an Explorer Scout unit and social members are also an impor-

tant unifying organization in a community that sprawls along more than 70 miles of town roads. The trend of developing the center of the community reversed many years ago in Forestport.

Community donations are the principle source for equipping the Fire Fighters. Today, there are 6 well-equipped trucks, tankers and emergency vehicles that respond to over 170 calls per year.

The forest has reclaimed the land again and the *few* farms have disappeared. White Lake and Otter Lake are ringed with summer camps and pleasure boats ply their waters in summer. Little Long Lake boasts Camp Nazareth, a Catholic summer camp for boys and girls. Round Lake is owned by the Masonic Home in Utica whose residents spend the summer (here. Camps nestle on the shores of Kayuta Lake and sit beside Woodhull and Bear Creeks. Houses now line the North Lake Road and Enos Road and the people socialize in many little communities scattered throughout the area.

In this bicentennial year we look back on a wilderness, a sawmill town, a summer resort. These are the three phases of Forestport.

### **Selected Reference**

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