

A BRIEF VISIT TO RICHFIELD (MONTICELLO)

Submitted by Village of Richfield Springs Historian Harriett Geywits

A one-time native of the hamlet that we know as Monticello left us what was a labor of love, started by his mother and father, Claude and Dorothy Robinson, who instilled in him the necessity of preserving local history. Following the death of his parents, Clyde A. Robinson (1929-2015) sorted and organized the many bits of history that had been collected by them and compiled everything into a scrapbook of the early history of the hamlet, portions of which give us information as to the formation and growth of what was once a thriving community.

King George II of England granted a patent of 43,000 acres to David Schuyler on June 3, 1755. This patent was divided into lots and sold to settlers. What was to become the Town of Richfield in April of 1792, lay within that patent area in the northeast corner and what was later known as Monticello is located approximately in the center of the township. Otsego County was part of Montgomery County until February 1791.

The settlers began to come, among them John and Obadiah Beardsley, Seth Allen, Joseph Coates and John Kimball, later joined by others. Joseph Beardsley, being a staunch Democrat and admirer of Thomas Jefferson, gets credit for the change of the name of the hamlet from Richfield to Monticello, his choice of name being pulled out of a hat containing other suggestions in 1815.

Some of the 'firsts' in the community were:
The first tavern was erected by Jacob

Brewster, built in 1799 to accommodate travelers as well as incoming settlers while they constructed their own homes.

The first church was organized at a meeting at the tavern in 1799 with Rev. Daniel Nash as its pastor with a church building erected in 1803 on the Colwell farm.

The library was begun by Obadiah Beardsley in 1802.

Whitman Randall opened a store in 1806.

With the population growth, Major Rathbun saw the need for a three-story hotel known as the Monticello House in 1815.

Also included as part of the growing community were other stores, churches, hotels, a hatchery, sawmill, gristmill, post office, furniture store, gun shop, brickyard, dressmakers, and resident doctors - everything that would be needed by residents of a growing community.

Jacob Brewster's Tavern served the community well for approximately one hundred years. It was destroyed by fire in 1901. A second hotel, the Monticello House, built in 1815, was said to be the first of its kind this side of Albany. It consisted of three stories and measured about 25 feet wide by 50 feet long. The first floor consisted of a living area plus a public sitting and reading room. The second floor held the sleeping rooms and the third, a fine ballroom. It was a popular stop for businessmen and other

travelers as well as being a gathering place for locals. A fire in December of 1922, destroyed not only the hotel but many other buildings along Main Street as well.

Church history began in 1799 when father Nash was an honored guest at the barn raising on John Beardsley's farm. When the roof was done, he held a service, helping to establish the first church society. It was incorporated in 1801 as a Protestant Episcopal Church. That year, a church was built on the Christopher Colwell farm. The building was torn down in 1832 and some of its timbers were used in building the St. Luke's Episcopal Church near the center of Monticello. This was the last church building in the hamlet, taken down in 1953.

The Congregationalists organized in 1803 and built a house of worship in the western part of the village near the cemetery now known as Twilight Rest. They shared the building with the Baptists until it burned in 1822. The Congregationalists (now Presbyterians) built a new church in the village of Richfield Springs. The Baptists eventually built a new church on the south side of Main Street in Monticello in 1842, but this too, was discontinued in later years.

Schools were of great importance to the early settlers, the first one of record being located on the Colwell farm. It was a small, low, log building with a bark roof sloping to the rear, greased paper for windows, a huge open fireplace, benches of split logs with pegs for legs. For desks, split

logs called puncheons were fastened to the walls. Later a school building was erected near the center of the village. District 11 schoolhouse served the community well until all area one-room schoolhouses were consolidated with the Richfield Springs Central School.

A library was organized in 1795 in the home of a resident and incorporated as the Richfield Columbian Library in 1809. With the growth of the village of Richfield Springs, it was disbanded in 1901 with the books divided between interested citizens.

Each community had at least one store. The first one in Monticello was opened by Whitman Randall in 1806 with other owners to follow. As was the practice, the post office was found as part of the general store. It was first at the home of the Snyder's in 1820 before it was moved to Brace's store in the center of town where it remained until 1933 when the rural letter carriers from Richfield Springs delivered mail to Monticello.

This was a growing, prosperous, farming community that lacked nothing in the way of what was necessary for their self-sufficient lives. Unfortunately, with the changing times, the hustle and bustle of the community of Monticello was to change to a small residential area with the industries, churches and history of the first settlers now only a memory.