

SETTLEMENT

Early Homesteaders

Shortly after General George Washington effected the expulsion of Native Americans from New York State in 1779, nearly two million acres between Seneca and Oneida lakes were claimed by America and established as a "Military Tract." This land was divided into 600-acre lots, and given to the many Revolutionary War soldiers as payment for their services. The new government did not have enough money to go around, and land was plentiful and cheap. Some soldiers, having no need for such a gift, happily traded their allotments for a paltry sum; in one case, the property was sold for "a coat, hat, one drink of rum and one dollar."¹ Others, however, took the gift seriously – and as history has recorded, they outfitted their wives and children, gathered their necessary belongings, and started out on the long trek through the wilderness to the land they would call "home."

That's the version we get from the history books – and so it is true, for the most part. But what about the occasional spunky, husbandless woman settler who outfitted her children and braved the wilderness for her own new home? We don't hear much mentioned about her. But it was just such a woman who became the first settler of Caroline – the Widow Earsley.

Over the Meadow and Through the Woods

When the widow Maria Earsley settled down for a good night's rest in Roxbury, New Jersey in 1794, her mind was troubled. Her husband having recently died, she was trying to raise ten children alone. But she could not keep them from the all-encompassing influence of intemperance and drink, which "greatly prevailed roundabout them."² That night, she had a dream in which she saw a picturesque cabin by a brook distant woods. She woke up determined to find that idyllic spot and raise her babes there, free of King Alcohol.

In the summer of '94, the Widow, accompanied by three men, started her journey to the virgin expanse of northwestern New York. They traveled by horseback and camped in the woods at night, she using "her saddle as her pillow."³

The crew met a surveyor along the way who had made a map of "Township No. 11." He agreed to accompany them to that spot, and let her look over the land. One day, after journeying west through the steep, dark hills between Richford and Caroline, they came upon a spot where the countryside suddenly opened up to the daylight. The Widow was enchanted. After passing a little brook that tumbled through

the hillside, she stopped dead in her tracks and exclaimed, "This is my home! This is the spot I saw in my dreams!"⁴ She immediately bought the surrounding 100-acre plot for \$3.00 per acre. Satisfied, she returned home to pick up her children.

Upon leaving New Jersey, the Earsley family consisted of mother and ten children – five boys and five girls – the youngest of whom were female twins (born two weeks apart). They started back in the spring with oxen and sleigh, as the snow was still several feet deep. All told, Mrs. Earsley traveled well over 500 miles.

The clan arrived safe and sound in March of 1795, but much to the poor Widow's frustration, she had a neighbor – Captain David Rich, who had arrived a mere week before. Normally she would have been pleased at this turn of events. After all, the next closest human being was in Brookshire, ten miles away. And Ithaca was twelve. But unfortunately, *this* neighbor was a *tavern keeper*. Needless to say, the Earsleys and the Riches stayed on distinctly "aloof" terms for many years to come.

Disappointed perhaps, but undaunted, the Widow determined to build a secure life for her family. A cabin was erected. Corn was planted. Life in Caroline had begun.

She wasn't totally without friends, either. Neighborly Iroquois often stopped by the Widow's place to share some bear meat, and they "watched her duties with great interest."⁵ One time, however, one such visitor had quite an unexpected request. He motioned that he wanted her iron





Elizabeth Earsley Yates was a mere nine months old when she was carried by her mother to the wilderness of Caroline, New York, in 1795.

kettle. Not anxious to anger him, she complied; though it must have broken her heart to part with that essential tool. But the next day as she started out the door, there, sitting glimmering in the sun before her was the iron kettle, full of that most precious mineral – salt. Here was a gift for the brave Widow.

Brave indeed.

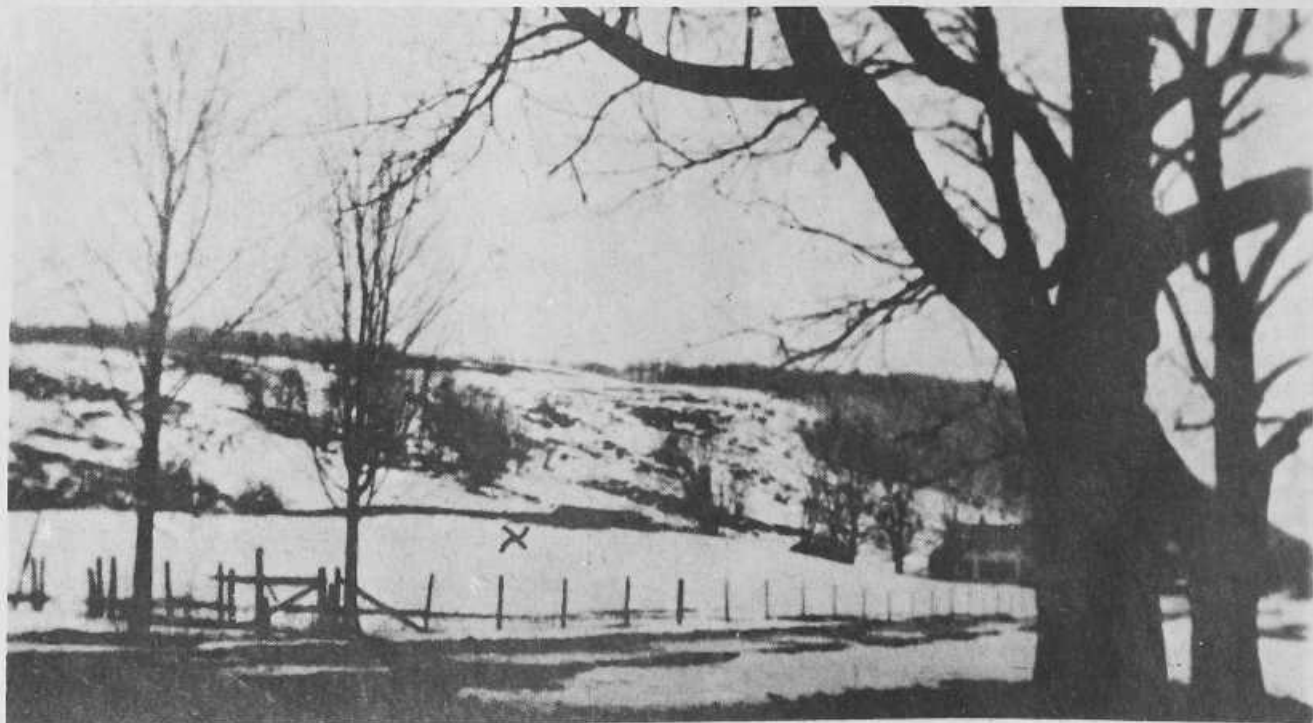
It is said that one night she was roused by a noise among her domestic animals, and upon rushing out she discovered a large bear killing one of the pigs. With true Dutch grit she dispatched the bear with her rifle. She later called her children to assist her in preparing the meat for food.⁶

The Widow Earsley died at the ripe old age of ninety, and was buried on her farm. Her survivors, numerous to start, were the seed of many an Earsley to be found in Caroline today. Her house has long since been leveled, and now Route 79 passes right over the spot where it once stood. The land is marked, however, and can be visited, as can the little brook that captured the Widow's heart 182 years ago.

Other Early Settlers

At the time the Widow Earsley first sighted her new-found home, there were only a few other settlers who qualified as old-timers. The Yapple, Dumond, and Hinepaw families were the first white settlers to make Ithaca their home; they had set up their cabins five years before her arrival. Then the Captain David Rich came to Caroline, and one week later, the Widow and her entire population. After that, additional settlers gradually filtered in. There were other brave widows, but most colonists came as husband and wife.

Once they reached their new home, a family of settlers hastily threw together a lean-to of pine boughs for shelter while the log cabin was being constructed. Then a small amount of land adjacent to the cabin was burned-off so that quick-growing food crops like corn, potatoes, beans, pump-



The cross in the picture indicates the spot where the widow Maria Earsley built her log cabin in 1794. The barn, the roof of which shows behind the hill, once stood beside the cabin.

kins, squash, and turnips could be raised in hopes of warding off starvation during that crucial first year. In the meantime, the surrounding district was explored so that medicine, tools, furniture, and other necessities could be provided.

Pioneer Life

It would be a mistake to glorify the pioneer woman's job over the man's, as the reverse would be equally misleading. Both sexes were kept uncommonly busy, and were equally deserving of any glory that may be handed out.

Man's Lot

The life of a male homesteader was filled with hour upon hour of bone-hard work. Procuring a single bag of wheat was a major accomplishment. Here the story of that venture is traced by way of Mr. Earl, an early Ithaca resident.

Mr. Earl . . . lived up the Inlet nine miles in the town of Newfield. He walked from his home to the residence of Judge Townley in the town of Lansing, a distance of about eighteen miles, worked for Mr. Townley until he earned a bushel and a half of wheat, took it in a bag on his back,

came to the mill on Cascadilla Creek, had it ground, and then carried it home to Newfield.¹

Men, responsible for the welfare of their families, constructed their homes with tools of their own making, and farmed the land for every kernel of corn they could scratch out of it. Considering the hills, cloudy weather, and soil full of clay, rocks, and stumps, it could not have been easy.

Woman's Lot

The life of the pioneer woman was no bed of roses, either. The hours were long, and likewise packed with exhausting, repetitive, and demanding work. Her environment was usually the cabin and the nearby grounds. The cabin itself was built simply — floors were packed earth, window panes were greased paper, and a blanket sufficed as a door. Cabins were rarely larger than 20-by-24 feet, and had neither attic, cellar, nor room dividers. They were almost always damp, what with weak spots in the roof giving way to rain or snow. One pioneer once wetyly remarked that the only dry places in his cabin were under the table or bed.² This made for some muddy floors, and, owing to the high cost of shoes, nearly everyone went barefoot from spring to fall.

Available cabin space became increasingly limited as the coming winter required that more and more foodstuffs be stored inside. One historian describes the scene:

Hung from the rafters of the cabin . . . were beans and peas, dried corn, peaches, berries, clusters of herbs for medicines and seasonings, dried and smoked beef and venison, . . . smoked hams and sausage took their places after the fall butchering season. By the time winter had shut in, the ceiling of the cabin was a veritable food storehouse.³



Pioneers making maple sugar.

Beneath this drapery, the pioneer wife put in 16-hour days. There was the cooking. And the cleaning. Not to mention the butter-making, soap-boiling, carpet-piecing, candle-making, dyeing of barks and nuts, preparing of medicine, preserving, mending, sweeping, nursing, quilting, weaving, and endless spinning that filled all the odd moments.

Let's look more closely at one of these tasks – making clothes. Not only did this involve the sewing of the garment, but also the additional steps of spinning, weaving, and dyeing the cloth. For woolen goods, sheared sheep's wool had to be washed, teased,* and carded** before it could be spun into yarn, dyed, and finally knitted into sweaters, socks, mittens, stockings, scarfs, hoods, or shawls. For linen articles, the flax plant had to be pulled from the ground, its husks rotted, knocked off, and combed before it could be spun into yarn, dyed, and finally woven into shirts, pants, or sheets. The fabric "linsey-woolsey" entailed the weaving together of both wool (for warmth) and linen (for strength), and was used to make clothing or blankets.

When it came to cutting out the pieces for an article of clothing, pioneer women had different rules than those we use today. For one, there was no convenient Simplicity pattern to follow, and so each pattern piece was custom-made. The simplest rudiments – such as buttons – were hard to come by, so substitutes were fashioned from thread. Styles have changed as well; men's pants opened at the sides and their shirts buttoned down the back.

It is important to mention that this age of "homespun" didn't last long in Tompkins County. This area was industrializing, and by 1830 factories for carding wool, manufacturing cotton fabrics, and weaving yarn were running full tilt. It was more efficient to get wool carded, dyed, and woven by a big machine than to do it oneself, so these home-skills were gradually replaced. Home spinning, however, persisted until well after the Civil War. Spinning factories were established long before then, but coexisted for many years with home spinning, which remained a convenient and productive way to pass those long winter evenings.

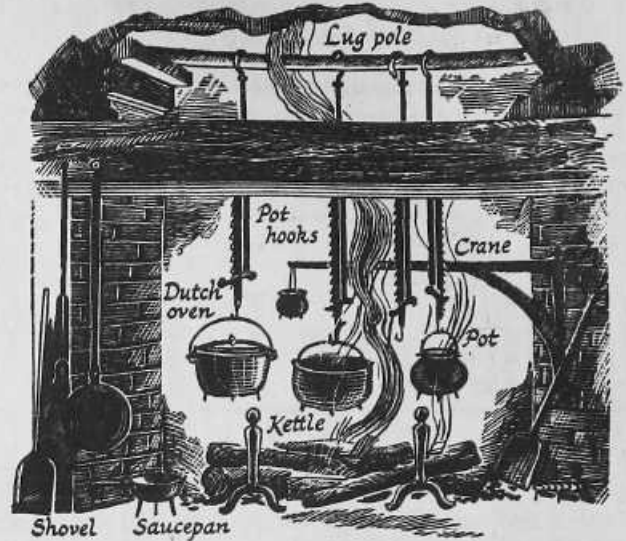
Cooking was another task that occupied much of the farm wife's day. Open fireplaces were often built less than perfectly, and cabins were liable to fill with smoke when a wintertime meal was cooked. The variety of utensils was limited, but women could boil, bake, and roast over flames with the ever-present iron or brass kettle, or simply bake in the ashes of the fireplace. Buckwheat pancakes with fried ham, pork or sausage, and maple syrup was a typical winter feast. When cooked, a meal such as this was placed on the table – a rough-hewn plank. Youngsters gathered 'round, and the food was served on wooden plates or bark. They picked up their portions with sharpened sticks instead of forks, and if their memories are to be trusted – it was delicious.

After supper, the woman hauled water from a brook or well to wash dishes, just as she did for laundry and bathing. Then she would settle in for a long evening of spinning or sewing by the light of the fire.

In sum, the pioneer's life, woman or man, was a musty mixture of tedium and hard work, and the simple pleasures of life.

The Land – a Fair-Weather Friend

Among other terrestrial delights, there were clear, star-filled nights; black, humus soil; and an abundance of wild food and game. But pleasant conditions could, and often did, take a turn for the worst. The soil was buried beneath snow for half the year. And large, stalking animals posed a genuine threat to smaller creatures – like people. One early pioneer woman remembers she "would rock her babies in



the evening with the panthers crying and only a canvas door at the opening."⁴

Those were the days! The Widow Earsley once came home to find a bear which had found its way inside. The woods teemed with wolves, foxes, and rattlesnakes, among others. Amy, a Danby child of the early 1800s, remembered when her brother James was bitten by a rattlesnake. He "never wholly recovered"; his skin was mottled "and rings ran around his body." No wonder Amy stated that she "feared the snakes more than all the others."⁵ After she was grown and had a home of her own, Mrs. Amy Barker found that her snake experiences were not over. The creatures would sometimes crawl under the cabin when she was outside cooking or gardening. And if unobserved, they could easily make their way inside the house.

One day, when in her home in West Danby, Mrs. Barker was startled by a wildly frightened cry from a young schoolboy just outside. On going to the door, she was more startled still at seeing a huge rattler lying directly before the door with his head spread out flat on the ground, the most dangerous posture. Her first impulse was to blow the dinner horn to call to the men folks to come and dispatch the snake. But she feared to leave the creature lest he escape under the house. Looking up to the roof of a little piazza over the door, she saw the handle of a pitchfork that was within reach, and with this instrument she soon dispatched the intruder, and the boy entered the house peaceably on his errand.⁶

Questioned at the age of ninety-five, Amy Barker explained simply, "We had lots of courage."⁷

Anyone who tried to live through the famine of 1816 in this county needed all the courage s/he could muster. One area pioneer, now long dead, vividly described the cruel year:

When there was a killing frost every month of the year and virtually all crops failed, when corn was not to be had, when children were lucky to get enough of last year's potatoes to stay the pangs of hunger until somebody in the neighborhood could shoot a deer and divide the meat, as was

*teased – the fibers of fleece, which may be somewhat matted together, are fluffed and spread apart.

**carded – the seeds and burrs are combed out of the wool while the fibers are straightened.

commonly done that winter, when . . . more than one man made a 20 mile trip over into Lansing or Milton [Genoa] through the snow and lugged home a bag of wheat on his back.⁸

But these hard years passed, and life went on. In the meantime, a new wind was rising which would change the entire fabric of this rural and formerly "respectable" area . . .

City of Sodom

The Ithaca of 1795-1810 was described by one historian as "distinguished by no markedly unusual features."¹ Like a thousand frontier towns, it contained a few hundred people who farmed their land and went about their business as best they could.

It was the War of 1812 that gave this otherwise rural area its first taste of commerce. The War cut off the supply of gypsum — a lime compound used in the manufacture of fertilizing plaster — which had been obtained principally from Canada. This brought into requisition the Ithaca supply near the head of the lake. Every day hundreds of loads of gypsum mined from the outlying hills were brought by boat to the Cayuga Lake Inlet, and then carried by oxen to Owego. "This influx of boatmen and teamsters," explained the Reverend Mr. Parker in 1816, "who were engaged in their work seven days a week, with no intervening day of rest, and very little if any religious influence exerted upon them, soon made the place as proverbial for its wickedness as it was for its rapid growth and the increase of its business facilities."²

Not a Nice Place

Before long, Ithaca became known far and wide as the city of "Sodom." In fact,

In 1815, the Pastor of the little [Presbyterian] Church became discouraged, and at the close of one of his Sabbath discourses pronounced the pulpit vacant and gave up his labors among them.³

And no wonder — church involvement left a lot to be desired.

It had twenty nominal members, of whom five were intemperate [drunks], and some others

were so grossly immoral that six of the male members and two females had to be cut off from the communion of God's people.⁴

In addition to these goings-on "within the pales of the church," there was a "corresponding state of things in the community."⁵

The pillars of society . . . so far as pecuniary means were concerned, were gamblers, horse racers and Sabbath breakers.⁶

This atmosphere of sin was compounded by the scarcity of female society.

In 1809 there were but two or three marriageable young ladies in Ithaca, while there were forty young men. If it was thought proper and desirable to have a ball, or a pleasure party of any description, the county was scoured for miles around, and requisition upon the neighboring settlements, to afford the necessary number of ladies.⁷

This unequal distribution only widened as Ithaca's growing industry attracted a large proportion of young men, few of them beyond reproach. . . .

Not impelled by family cares and duties, not attracted by the charms of domestic happiness, they seek relaxation and pleasure in pastimes which the more staid and sober perhaps too severely condone.⁸

This is the sort of place Ithaca had become after its initial pioneering days. Meanwhile, the surrounding towns and villages continued to be relatively well-behaved, possibly because they were not as economically developed as Ithaca. She had taken the first shaky steps toward industrialization, and was decidedly feeling the consequences.

Sodom Redefined

By the year 1817, when a concerned pulic was busy complaining about the "fearfully common licentiousness" in the area, cartographers and legislators rolled their maps and documents out on their desks, and leaned over to take a better look.

At that time, the village of Ithaca was a mere off-shoot of the town of Ulysses,⁹ in Seneca County. But it certainly seemed that the population was clustering in and around the single village of Ithaca. Local officials decided to redefine the present boundaries and form a new county with Ithaca at its hub. Land was drawn from the present Seneca and Cayuga Counties to comprise the new jurisdiction. The ever-popular Daniel D. Tompkins was governor of New York at the time, and on April 17, 1817, the newly-boundaried area was made official and christened, "Tompkins County."



Tompkins County, for years entrenched in its rural immutability, began to take on the various strata of a more complex society as the area became increasingly industrialized in the nineteenth century. Social class lines were drawn more distinctly, and opportunities for gainful employment became available for some female workers as well as male. Countrywide, a prevailing philosophical attitude emphasized individual freedom, along with a growing awareness of the need for social reform. Such large-scale cultural and economic changes may be ascertained in a single sweeping glance over a one-hundred year period; however on a day-to-day level women in Tompkins County went about their respective chores — everything from working the button factory to baking bread.

