

The Town of Harrisburg Yesterday and Today

The Town of Harrisburg was formed February 22, 1803 and is the oldest Town in what is now, Lewis County. Sections of what are now Lowville, Champion, and Mexico touched the new Town of Harrisburg. Areas that are now Pinckney and Denmark were removed later leaving Harrisburg with its current size of 25,634 acres. Harrisburg is located in the west central part of Lewis County and is on the very top of the Tug Hill Plateau. Blessed with the highest annual snowfall east of the Rocky Mountains (around 300 inches annually), the unique geology and weather that is the Tug Hill is foundational to the metamorphosis of the Town. The Town of Harrisburg was named for Richard Harrison, who owned land in this area and in other northern New York townships.



The Town's rotary snowplow is pressed into service on the Cobb Road

A convention to create a new county was held in The Town of Harrisburg at the Freedom Wright Inn on November 18, 1944. This was the convention creating Lewis and Jefferson Counties out of territory belonging to Oneida County.

Agriculture, including dairy farming, butter and cheese making has long been a part of our history. In the early days, oxen did much of the work on farms. Beef cows, sheep, and chickens were very important and there was even a fish farm. Crops harvested included winter wheat, oats, Indian corn, potatoes, hops, and apples. Dairy farming remains a staple of Harrisburg's economy. Early industry in the Town of Harrisburg included sawmills, gristmills, ice harvesting, a glass factory, a cheese factory and a brick factory. Small business included butcher shops, taverns, blacksmiths and a greenhouse. Natural resources included maple sap, timber, potash, peppermint oil, spruce gum and natural gas. Many residents still tell tales of experiences with pockets of natural gas that lie within the Town to this day. Today, tourism is the fastest growing industry in the area with hunting and snowmobiling now being challenged by ATV's for dominance of the

local recreational industry.

Currently, the largest economic project ever proposed is under development. The project is the Flat Rock Wind Park and, along with the Towns of Martinsburg and Lowville, Harrisburg will host almost one-half of the largest wind farm ever constructed in the northeastern United States. The wind farm will have 188, 400 foot tall wind towers generating as much as 300 megawatts of electricity. Nearly \$300,000,000 will be spent in its development.

The earliest settlers were Puritans, but they never had a formal church. The earliest Church was the Free Communion Baptist Church formed in the Town of Harrisburg on July 16, 1822 by a council appointed from people living in Lowville, Martinsburg and Turin. Saint Patrick's Catholic Church organized and erected circa 1850 was located on the Thesier Road, near the junction with Woodbottle Road. This was one of the first Catholic edifices in all of Lewis County. The church was destroyed by fire on May 22, 1889 under unusual circumstances, but a church cemetery, maintained by the Town, remains on the site. Many churches were built in the Town of Harrisburg. There are currently no churches within the town. The former Third Baptist church located on Route 12 now serves as the home for our current town clerk.

The schools in Harrisburg were established starting in 1814. At one time there were 12 school districts in the Town of Harrisburg. The twelve rural districts were declining and on October 25, 1935, school districts No. 1,3,7 and 11 were centralized with the Copenhagen Central School. Districts No. 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10 were incorporated into the Lowville Academy and Central School System when centralization was completed on June 25, 1952. District No. 4 at Windecker continued with grades I through 6 with an average of 25 students until 1958. All Harrisburg's schools are now closed with the Copenhagen and Lowville Academy districts still serving the Town's students.

The current residents enjoy many activities such as hunting, fishing, ATV, snowmobiling, biking, bird watching and family get-togethers. The Town of Harrisburg's latest census shows our population remaining steady at about 423 people. The only storefront business currently located within the Town is the "Maples" restaurant (formerly "Deer Hill"). We have many townspeople who run businesses from their homes, including: woodworking, construction, logging, butchering, computer sales and service, and a welding and fabrication shop. A new cabin rental and RV park is planned for development on the north side NYS Route 177 near the intersection of the VanDressen Road. The Town plans to develop new land use and planning tools starting with a comprehensive plan for development. These tools will ensure that landowners and residents will have a voice in the Town's future development.

New municipal facilities were built in 2001 replacing the aging highway department garage and single room Town Hall. The new facility houses: the municipal offices for the Town Clerk, Highway Superintendent, Justice Court and the Town Supervisor. Additionally there is a public meeting room, kitchenette and a records retention room. The rear of the facility houses the highway department's garage and maintenance facility. The meeting room and kitchenette are available for use by Town residents and landowners.



Harrisburg Town Hall and Highway Dept. garage on the Cobb Road

The future is as important as our past! With the undertaking of a Comprehensive Plan we will develop a vision and a plan that will set a course to the future. The Town government has forged new relationships with the County, State and Federal Government agencies to identify and develop economic opportunities. From the past to the future, the Town of Harrisburg that recently celebrated its bicentennial will be participating in the bicentennial celebration of Lewis County in 2005. We celebrate our yesterdays; endeavor with enthusiasm today to ensure a brighter tomorrow.

To contact us:

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Some of the information used in this website was gathered from a book "Town of Harrisburg, A History" written by Madelene Mosher Bernat, past Town historian. This book contains many more fascinating facts about the History of Harrisburg and the northern Tug Hill region. It can be purchased from the Town Clerk at the Town Hall.