

Town of Montague History

The Town of Montague is well-known today for its recreational opportunities. Mile after mile of beautiful ATV and snowmobile trails wind through desolate, seemingly endless forests. Fishermen and hunters know they'd better come prepared with a GPS or compass to be secure in the wilderness that is Tug Hill. However, Montague wasn't always the wilderness it seems to be today. Montague has gone through many changes since its inception. Ironically, today's Montague would be more recognizable to its earliest settlers than it would be to its residents of 100 years ago!

Montague was created from the larger town of West Turin on November 14, 1850. The town was named for Mary Montague Pierpont, daughter of the former owner of the land. No information has yet come to light regarding how Miss Pierpont felt about this honor. Early settlers included Samuel Holden, who arrived in 1846; Samuel P. Sears, who built a sawmill at the corner of what is now Sears Pond Road and Salmon River Road in 1848; Joseph M. Gardner, who settled on the corner of present-day Sears Pond and Gardner Road in 1848; Alvin Stafford, who built a cabin in the woods on Liberty Road near the town line with Pinckney in 1848, George Moffatt, who started a farm on the Sears Pond Road between Pitcher and Salmon River Roads in 1850; and Norman Howe, who came to what is now the Olin Road to start a farm in 1851.

During its first thirty years, the town grew rapidly. By 1880, there were 975 residents! Some settlers saw the cheap land in Montague as a chance to finally have a homestead all their own. Others saw gold in the virgin stands of spruce and hardwood trees just waiting to be harvested. Montague's peak came in the years between 1880 and 1900. In these two decades, Montague was a bustling, self-sufficient boomtown that would be almost completely unfamiliar to today's inhabitants.

In 1896, there were six sawmills in Montague. Aside from the aforementioned mill at Sears' Pond, there were two sawmills in Hooker, a now-vanished hamlet far down on today's Salmon River Road. Near the corner of what is now Sears Pond Road and Rector Road stood a sawmill that also manufactured cheese boxes. The Marcellus Saw Mill stood on the western side of Liberty Road, about one-half mile north of Sears Pond Road. The biggest of them all was the Parker Saw Mill, at the intersection of what is now Parker Road and Flat Rock Road. According to the Lewis County Directory of 1895-96, this mill, owned by Lester B. Parker, produced between 1 and 2 million board feet of spruce and hardwood a year and supplied employment for 30-50 people. (On a side note- Lester B. Parker also had the first phone in Montague, in 1890.)

The sawmill industry had two great natural enemies. The first was the gradual depletion of mature timber that occurred in and around Montague as a result of the sawmills' constant activity. By 1910, the majority of Montague's land was treeless farm fields. The need to range farther and farther away for worthwhile timber slowly decreased the cost-effectiveness of mill operations. The second great natural enemy was fire. One of the mills at Hooker burnt to the ground on Feb 24, 1891. In July 1898, all of Lester Parker's mills and equipment burned in a devastating fire. He rebuilt, and a year later, his operation was running again. However, in 1906, fire once again destroyed Parker's mills. He rebuilt once more, but the mills never regained complete financial stability, and he ceased operations in 1915. The other mills gradually declined until the 1940's, when the last of them closed its doors.

The second most important industry in Montague during its boom years was the manufacture and sale of cheese. Farmers realized that selling their milk to a cheese factory was

the most cost effective way of handling their surplus. Daniel Denning built the first cheese factory on today's Olin Road in 1882. John E. Murphy erected the Forks Cheese Factory on the Factory Road in the mid-1880's. The Gardner's Corners Cheese Factory and the Rector Cheese Factory were both operating by 1887. These four factories took milk from over 1,000 cows and turned it into cheese.

Aside from sawmills and cheese factories, Montague had 153 farms ranging from 20 to 500 acres during its most prosperous time. It also had nine schools, three blacksmiths, two grocers, six post offices, a Grange Hall, four hotels, and two churches- a Methodist Episcopal Church at the corner of Liberty and Gardner Road, and a Methodist Protestant Church at the corner of Rector and Sears Pond Road.

After 1900, Montague began a long, steady period of decline. There were many reasons for this. The winters in Montague are longer, colder, and snowier than anywhere else in the region. The late spring and early autumn frosts on Tug Hill made many crops impractical for farmers. Sometimes the ground yielded a bigger crop of slate, sandstone, and limestone than anything else. The many random piles of stones that can be found in the woods all over Montague attest to farmers' efforts to keep their fields stone-free. Farmers' children grew up and decided they could have an easier life elsewhere. People were "burned out" of their houses and decided to rebuild in a less remote location. In 1945, the last cheese factory shut down. By 1950, the population had decreased from its high of 975 in 1880 to 139. In 1952, the four Montague schoolhouses still open were closed due to school centralization, and the remaining students began taking the long bus ride to Lowville Academy and Central School each day. Buildings were torn down, burned down, or simply left to rot. The forest gradually reclaimed what had been taken from it.

In the 1970's, a rebirth of sorts began in Montague. People discovered that the deserted roads in Montague, combined with the extreme snowfall the area receives, were perfect for riding their snowmobiles each winter. Gradually, word spread about this "sledder's paradise." The cheap land available in Montague encouraged snowmobile enthusiasts to buy land and erect camps to pursue their sport. New businesses opened to cater to these consumers. The Montague Inn, located at the corner of Sears Pond Road and Rector Road, opened its doors on October 19, 1972. The Tug Hill Inn on Salmon River Road opened in 1980, and the Spruces Bed and Breakfast on the Sears Pond Road opened in 1991. All-terrain-vehicles ("four wheelers") soon realized that what was good in the winter was good in the summer, and they began frequenting the area as well. Currently the wilds of Montague are a premier destination year-round for off-road vehicles. Montague is the centerpiece of a vast trail system that encompasses 5 counties. In 1996, the National Weather Service installed a Doppler Radar System in Montague to get a better handle on the heavy lake-effect snows. Now anyone can check the weather in Montague via the internet. Montague's population will probably never rebound to previous levels. According to the US Census of 2000, Montague is the second smallest town in the state, population-wise. However, Montague's fame as an outdoor destination continues to spread. Montague's future is looking bright!

-David Andalora