

Brief History of Schodack

The first settlement in what is now the Town of Schodack was in 1630 by tenants of the Patroon System, but before these Dutch settlers located here, this had been the land of the Mohican Indians (part of the Algonquian Nation), and from them Schodack got its name. In their language “escudah” is the word for “fire” while the suffix “ki” means “place of”. From “escudahki” it is possible to understand the derivation of the words Schodack and Esquatak. The first recorded contact between Mohicans and Europeans occurred with the arrival of Henry Hudson in 1609 aboard the Half Moon, exploring the river that bears his name. He was invited ashore by a friendly Indian chief, and noted in his journal that “the land is the finest for cultivation that I ever in my life set foot upon, and it also abounds in trees of every description”. It was the Indians’ gifts of furs, however, which ensured Europeans returning. The name “Esquatak” is indicated on early colonial maps at the present location of the Village of Castleton, and early histories noted that the chief village or council seat of the Mohicans was in Schodack.

The town occupies a beautiful site on the Hudson River, which forms its entire western boundary, and is located in the southwest corner of Rensselaer County. It was officially formed on March 17, 1795, when the state legislature made the final division of the Towns of Rensselaerwyck. Freeholders and inhabitants were empowered to hold town meetings and elect town officials. Today Schodack is governed by a Supervisor and four Councilpersons, comprises 63 square miles, and is home to 13,000+ residents.

First settlements were along the Hudson River, but the many streams that flowed from the high valley plateau to the river promoted the construction of mills along the waterfalls and the opportunity to farm encouraged migration to the interior. Schodack Landing, a hamlet on the Hudson River, became a major port center, encouraging agricultural development and expansion. Also, the village of Castleton-on-Hudson grew as a trading and shipping port, and was incorporated in 1827, governed by a mayor and board of trustees. Water power from the principal creeks, Moordener Kill, Vlockie Kill, Muitzes Kill and Valatie Kill provided for the growth of paper factories, lumber, grist and fulling mills, brick making and iron work. In addition to river trade, major improvement to roads occurred in the early 1800s with the Farmers Turnpike built on 9J, and the Rensselaer-Columbia Turnpike built from Rensselaer City to the state line near Canaan, N. Y., passing through Schodack. Two railroads built in 1840 and one in 1880 hastened economic growth with the delivery of freight, mail and passenger service.

Other hamlets in Schodack are: Muitzeskill, South Schodack, Schodack Center, Brookview and East Schodack. Even though farming was the predominant occupation in the 19th century, residents were employed at numerous mills and self-employed as merchants, shopkeepers, tavern owners, blacksmiths, harness makers, shoemakers, stone masons, carpenters, tailors and carriage makers. From 1870 to 1920 ice harvesting on the Hudson employed many workers in the winter, and small crews were employed in the summer to ship ice stored in ice houses by barge for sale in New York City and southern cities. With a supply of wood for pulp and water power for grinding, Castleton Paper Mill was established in 1856, and Fort Orange Paper Co. in 1881. Two piano action factories were successful from 1874 until 1928, when the advent of the radio replaced the piano in the family living room.

During periods of war, local residents witnessed many movements of troops and armaments, starting with the French and Indian Wars. During the Revolution, for three weeks in January, 1776, they saw the passage of Colonel Henry Knox's historic artillery caravan on its way to Boston from Fort Ticonderoga to deliver arms to General Washington at Bunker Hill. Knox's forces constituted such a threat to the British army that they withdrew in their ships, leaving the patriots in full possession. Colonel Knox was appointed to Washington's cabinet as the nation's first Secretary of War. In 1927 the New York Knox Trail Commission erected a historical marker at the intersection of Routes 9 and 20. In the fall of 1777, another "parade" passed through when thousands of British prisoners, captured at Saratoga, were marched to New England prisons. By war's end, taverns, inns and blacksmith shops dotted the roadsides, forerunners of today's motel and service stations on this road.

Historical research has documented that many houses still standing in the town were built in the 18th century. Through the years, these houses have served as taverns, forts, barns, post offices, schools, Masonic Halls and mills. One house (Staats), built about 1696, has been occupied by the same family for twelve consecutive generations and is the oldest known stone house in Rensselaer County. This site was listed on the State and National Historic Register in 1978. Two other National and State Historic Districts are Schodack Landing and Muitzeskill. These are two of the best preserved areas of Schodack, which contain houses that reveal a sense of the 19th century style. Many of the early surnames are also preserved by the present Schodack residents who are of Dutch descent.

Written in March 2001 by Irene Saganich and Mildred Adriance, former Town Historians, from the *Town of Schodack Historical Record*.