

A History of Springwater

Rev. William Hunter - Dansville Express

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Editor's Note: In 1878, the Rev. William Hunter presented this "History of Springwater" at the third annual Pioneers Association of Livingston County. He spoke of some of the early settlers, their simple way of life and some anecdotes of their neighborly interactions.

The year 1807 is memorable as the year in which Fulton succeeded with steam navigation. It was in that year that the settlement of the town of Springwater was commenced. The first settler was led to that land of valleys and hills as Moses was led to the Promised Land by "A Pillar of Cloud".

Mr. Seth Knowles left his home in Massachusetts in the year 1805, came to Livonia and settled on what is now called the "Gibbs" farm. That season and the next the crops in Livonia and the towns north of it suffered from drought. Mr. Knowles observed that clouds often rested on the hills south of him; and that showers were frequent there while no rain fell where he lived. He therefore resolved to make a prospecting trip in that direction after harvest.

Accordingly, in the fall of 1806 he and his son Jared, and Peter Welch, took their guns, axes and necessary provisions on their shoulders, and followed the old Indian trail over Bald Hill, in the town of Canadice.

They came into Springwater valley about a mile from the head of Hemlock Lake, and there made a small clearing and built a log cabin on lot No. 4, now part of the farm owned by Mr. John Jennings. They then returned to Livonia and remained there through the winter.

On the last day of March 1807, Mr. Knowles and his family came up to Hemlock Lake on the ice and took possession of his log cabin, thus establishing himself as the first settler in the town of Springwater.

Other settlers soon followed, but it was not until ten years after Mr. Knowles moved in, that the town was organized.

Its organization took place on the first day of April, 1817. It was suggested that the new town be called Knowlesville, in honor of the first settler. But this did not meet the minds of the people. John Roberts then proposed that it be called Springwater, remarking at the same time, that he had never seen a place where springs were so numerous. The vote was unanimous to call the new town Springwater. The name was well chosen; for, in the language of scripture, the town is "a land of brooks of water, and of fountains that spring out of valleys and hills."

In the early history of Springwater there is but little that is noteworthy. It does not appear that the early settlers had any reason to fear the scalping knife of the Indian. None of them had any sanguine encounters with wild beasts. But they suffered what we would now call great privations. Many of them were happy if they could procure a little grain in exchange for a few bunches of shingles, the only commodity they had to dispose of. It is not known that they suffered actual want but they were often "hard up" for the necessaries of life. It was a time of rejoicing in many a family when the father came home from Bloomfield, or Richmond, or the James settlement, with but a scanty supply of bread- stuff.

If one had been passing over the Canadice hills in those days, he might have met a tall stout man with a bag of grain on his shoulder. This man was Elder John Cole. He was the first minister who resided in Springwater. It is said that he often carried grain from Richmond, a distance of twelve miles over a hilly road. He labored through the week and preached the gospel on the Sabbath; usually holding two services, and regaling himself during intermission on a piece of Johnny-cake, which he carried from home. Mr. Cole was a strong man physically, preached strong doctrine, and according to the custom of the times, did not eschew, what was then called a reasonable use of strong drink.

When more grain was raised in town than was necessary for home consumption it was almost impossible to dispose of it at any price. A farmer on Springwater East Hill raised excellent wheat and drew it to Rochester and sold it for thirty-one cents a bushel.

The early settlers enjoyed but little intercourse with the outside world. There was general rejoicing when a mail route was established between Springwater and Geneseo. The mail carrier travelled on foot and carried the mail in a valise. His weekly arrival was a time of great interest; nearly every man in the settlement might then have been found at the house of the postmaster. They did not have to wait long for the mail to be distributed, as it consisted generally of about three or four letters, and perhaps twice that number of newspapers.

The history of Springwater furnishes some instances of long continuance in office, professions and occupations which are worthy of notice. Alva Southworth was chosen the second supervisor of the town and was re-elected to that office fourteen years. He was the first postmaster and held that office thirty years, appointed thereto by eight Presidents.

Dr. Arnold Gray has ridden over the hills and through the valleys of the town, ministering to the sick for fifty-six years, and is still engaged in the duties of his profession.

Mr. N. R. Hopkins has toiled at his anvil the same length of time, fifty-six years, and is still able to do good work and tell a good story.

Joel Hudson, Esq., served the town as justice of the peace for forty-two consecutive years. It is believed that no town in the state can show an instance of longer continuance in office than this.

But few anecdotes of the early settlers have been preserved. One however is told which is worth mentioning. The ladies of those times made use of two articles with which the ladies of our day are not much acquainted viz: the spinning wheel and the side saddle. Mrs. Zadock Grover sent to her neighbor, Mrs. Gaston to borrow a spinning wheel. Mrs. Gaston answered that she did not like to have the wheel go out of the house, but that Mrs. Grover was welcome to come and use it as much as she pleased. This did not suit Mrs. Grover's convenience, and she regarded the refusal to lend the spinning wheel as an unneighborly act. Not long after Mrs. Gaston sent to borrow Mrs. Grover's side saddle. This furnished a good opportunity to pay her back in her own coin, so Mrs. Grover returned answer that she did not like to have the saddle go out of the house but that Mrs. Gaston was quite welcome to come and ride on it as long as she pleased.

Nearly all the old settlers have passed away. A few still remain who are feeling the infirmities of age. Soon the mournful inquiry will be made in regard to them all - "The fathers, where are they?" We respect the memory of those hardy sons of toil. Their labors converted the primitive forest into fruitful fields. We honor also the memory of those noble women who endured, cheerfully, the many privations of pioneer life. They had few of the comforts and refinements that their children now enjoy. But they knew how to be content with little, and how to make their log cabins happy homes.

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