

A Brief History of Early Springwater NY

2016

Compiled by Judy Tripp-Neu

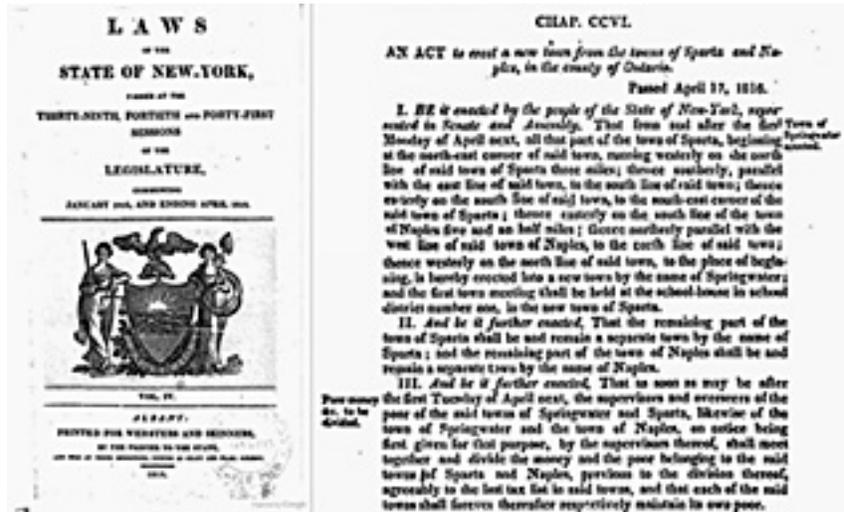


Photo of the law that created Springwater NY in 1816

The founding of the Town of Springwater, New York, evolved by an act of the New York State Legislature, and a new township was erected on April 17, 1816, “to be taken from the townships of Naples and Sparta in the county of Ontario.” Thus, the Township of Springwater was formed by land from the townships of Naples to establish the eastern boundary and Sparta to mark the western boundary. It is approximately eight miles in an easterly and westerly direction and about six miles in a northerly and southerly direction; its northern boundary is slightly longer than its southern

one. It should be noted that Livingston County was erected February 23, 1821, from lands of Ontario and Genesee counties. This would make the Township of Springwater nearly five years older than Livingston County.

The early surveys of this area were made during the summer and fall of 1789, by Col. Hugh Maxwell. The region had already been divided into lots and ranges, in fact were given numbers. The township is in the fifth and sixth ranges. Soldiers engaged in the Revolutionary War were the first to see the pristine land with its virgin forests and rolling hills. The only known inhabitants were Indians from the Seneca tribe, part of the Iroquois Confederacy and a few trappers who periodically wandered in this direction. They were the keepers and custodians of the western gate of the Iroquois Indians. Artifacts found in this area, judged by carbon dating testing, indicate that earlier Indian or aboriginal cultures also visited here, perhaps centuries before the Senecas appeared.

In 1806 after the harvest, the first known white resident, Seth Knowles, having observed from his drought-ridden farm in Livonia that clouds formed and rested on the hills regularly to the south and frequently rain fell from these clouds, accompanied by his son, Jared and another man, Peter Welch, carrying axes, guns, and necessary provisions on their shoulders, followed an Indian trail over Bald Hill in the Town of Canadice to Springwater Valley. About a mile from the head of Hemlock Lake, they made a small clearing and built a small log cabin on Lot No. 4 on what would later be part of the Jennings farm.

They returned to winter in Livonia and on the 31st day of March 1807, Mr. Knowles and his family came up Hemlock Lake on the ice and took possession of that cabin, becoming the first of many settlers that would follow them in the ten years prior to an official town being organized. These first settlers formed settlements or hamlets that came to be known as East Springwater in the northeast part of the town; Liberty Pole northwest of the village of Springwater and south of Webster Crossing; the hamlet of Springwater where today is located the junction of NY-15 and NY-15A; Tabors Corners located in the northeast part of the town and Webster Crossing which is located in the northwest corner of the north of town.

The town was called Middletown by many and the valley referred to as Springwater Valley. When the first organizational meeting was held in April 1817, it was suggested that the town be called Knowlesville to honor the first settler family, but that met with opposition; Mr. John Roberts, also an early settler, who had a farm where Rte. 15 and Rte. 15A meet at the four corners (southwest corner of Main Street) then suggested "Springwater" remarking that he had "never before seen a place where the springs were so numerous," and thus that is how the hamlets united and the town became known as Springwater.

More Brief History of Early Springwater NY

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The history books about Livingston County and the Town of Springwater say very little about what prompted the residents of this area to petition the elected members of the New York State Legislature to form a separate community. It is recorded that people had begun settling in the area in the early 1800s and many books say Seth Knowles was the first white man to build a cabin and actually bring his family members into the area. They arrived with their possessions on a sled down Hemlock Lake on March 31, 1807. What we do know is that this heavily forested, lush valley was inhabited by members of the Seneca tribe centuries before the first white settler arrived, and most of the early settlers happily settled on the east side of the valley near Hemlock Lake.

We can hypothesize that perhaps people were tired of traveling to Canandaigua for their official needs; perhaps they felt sufficiently established and wanted to be in charge of their own destiny, or maybe it was simply growing pains and a desire to have a voice in what was happening around them. Whatever the reason, on a cold Wednesday, the 17th of April 1816, the legislature did vote and it was agreed that this area we now call Springwater would become a town of its own.

We must remember these early settlers were directly affected by the cold summers in the period 1811 to 1817, the year 1816 has gone down in the annals of New England history as "The Year There Was No Summer," the "Poverty Year" and "Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death." The year began with a moderate but dry winter. Spring was tardy and continued very dry. The growing season from late spring to early fall, however, was punctuated by a series of devastating cold waves that did major damage to the crops and greatly reduced the food supply. In areas of central and northern New England, the summer had only two extended periods without frost or near freezing temperatures. A widespread snow fell in June. As a result, corn did not ripen and hay, fruits, and vegetables were greatly reduced in quantity and quality.

It is recorded that 1816 saw farmers only producing 10% of their annual crops and many farmers went to great extremes to feed their families. Potato farmers were forced to dig up the seed potatoes they had planted to put food in the mouths of their loved ones, and ice storms and abundant snow destroyed nearly everything in the spring and summer storms, including the recently sheared lambs. People living in this area fared better than most in the cities because of the huge populations of game and wild fowl, and numerous edible plants that grew wild.

Referred to as Hemlock Valley and Middletown in the early days, Springwater got its name from John Roberts, son of Peter and Rebecca Roberts who were early settlers in Sparta. Springwater was formed from parts of Sparta and Naples because these two communities lacked the funds to expand their own communities and maintain the valley. After drought conditions had severely affected Western New York in previous years, Knowles found that this area had its own favorable micro-climate and the area was ideal for farming.

Settling his family on that cold March day in a cabin that he, his son and brother-in-law had built the previous fall, the Knowles family were the first of many families that escaped from the larger communities in Vermont, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania to find land of their own. Men traveling with General Hugh Maxwell during the Revolutionary War first saw this land and went back to tell others of the fine land that waited to be settled on the "western frontier."

After the American Revolution. George Washington sent General Sullivan and his army into western New York to forcibly remove the Native Americans. Villages, cropland and orchards were destroyed. The

Seneca fled to the west. This land was now the frontier of the new nation, and its settlement became a priority for the government.

In 1816, the center of government activity was concentrated where people lived. There were no buildings in the valley as we know it today; it was simply used as a means to cross over to the west side of the county. Before submitting the petition to become a town, the residents gathered to give the town a name. Many suggested Knowlesville in honor of Seth Knowles, but he declined and John Roberts, who later owned a farm on the southwest corner of Mill Street opposite where the Post Office is located, suggested "Springwater" saying he had "never lived in a place where so many natural springs flourished."

The first meeting of the government took place on April 9, 1817 in School No. 1 in Sparta. The remaining Seneca people were allowed to use the valley for hunting from September 1 to December 31 every year until 1828 and hunting lodges were erected in the area of what is known today as Depot Road. The Indians would hunt the area along Hemlock Lake, bring their kills back to the lodges where they were skinned and prepared for transport back to the Indian villages. Many Indians also traded with the white settlers bringing in baskets and woven items for food and baked goods.

Government meetings continued to be held in public places on the east hill until the railroad made a proposal to come through Springwater. Once the railroad decided to lay track in Webster Crossing, government meetings were moved to what we now know as the hamlet.

The first 100 years were filled with growth. Many young men left the area to fight in the wars and returned to farm and raise their families. If there was a centennial celebration, it is not recorded. Quite possibly because World War I was ongoing in Europe and very shortly American men would be called to defend the treaties signed with the European governments.

The second 100 years has seen change and growth, stagnation and decay in our town, but as we begin the Bicentennial year we are optimistic for her future. We are an agrarian town with rural roots that lie buried deep in the rich fertile soil. We are currently in the process of reinventing ourselves, of discovering new avenues of growth while staying committed to preserving our natural resources. The natural beauty of this place, the abundance of seasonal changes, and the diversity of land use attracts people from all over who still have pioneer spirits.

Judy Tripp-Neu

Author's note: Founders Day is April 17th 2016. It is the first of many events this year that celebrates the history of our town and showcases the beauty of this region. People of all faiths and traditions are invited to attend the church service at the Springwater Fire Hall, 8145 S. Main Street at 10:00 a.m. A Chicken BBQ will follow at 11:30 a.m. and a formal reception and proclamation will commence at 1:00 p.m. Depending on the weather, parking may be limited at the Fire Hall, but off-street parking is available at the Quik Stop store and as directed by the Livingston County Sheriff's Office.

Assemblyman Bill Nojay and representatives from Senator Catharine Young's office will present proclamations; elected officials from the county, state and federal governments have been invited as well as all residents and anyone who is interested in participating in this special day. Music for the reception will be provided by the Wayland Aires. A hike sponsored by the Springwater Trails group will commence after the reception through town as part of their monthly Third Sunday hikes that will highlight areas of historical interest and significance in the area throughout the rest of 2016.

Of special note, the fifth great grandson of John Roberts, Randy Yeomans and his wife, Brenda, will join us for the reception dressed as their ancestors were 200 years ago. We invite you to join us in welcoming them back to town and celebrating our 200th birthday!

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