HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF KINGSTON

WELCOME TO THE TOWN OF KINGSTON

The Town of Kingston is among the smallest in the State. It is bordered by the towns of Hurley, Ulster and Woodstock. It was, however, at one time one of the largest in the State until its division in 1879. The town is divided with about one mile of Route 28 being in the Town of Kingston and the rest in the Sawkill area. The Route 28 area is the business district where there are a number of small stores and businesses. This portion of the town was known as Stony Hollow. The northern portion of the town was known as Aasta Clove by the Dutch. These names are no longer used. There are 4504 acres in the town, one small village and the rest are hamlets. It was also one of the most prosperous bluestone areas. The last stone quarry in the town closed in 1952. There were twelve hamlets in the town. Dutch Hill and Orange Row are no more. Dutch Settlement is now called Ruby and is located in the Town of Ulster.

Dutch Hill

There were many Germans living in this section of town. The Irish called the Germans “Dutch Men”, so the hamlet of Dutch Hill was formed. This area had small charcoal huts on the hill. The “Dutch Men” sold charcoal locally throughout Ulster County. This area is no longer referred to as Dutch Hill. It was on the Morey Hill side of Route 28.

German Hill

In 1955 Fred Roberts, Sr. built a few bungalows for folks who wanted a cheap place to live during the summer months. They were mostly German folks so the name given to this section was German Hill. It is also referred to as Sawkill Park more recently.

Graystone Ledge

Graystone is a very hard stone used as grinding stone for the grist and flour mills. This ledge runs east of Morey Hill Road to Jockey Hill Road. It is south of Sweet Meadows. In 1965 Arnold Rymkevitch bought this land and built Rym Rock Trailer Park.

Hallihan Hill

Hallihan Hill was named after Mr. Hallihan who was a large land owner. There were many bluestone quarries open on his land worked by other quarrymen. It still retains the name of Hallihan Hill. One end of the road, on the Town of Kingston side, is called Hallihan Hill Road and the other side of the road, on the Town of Ulster side, is called Hallihan’s Hill Road. The reason for this is not known.

Jockey Hill

The name appears on the early map of 1700. It is not clear where the name originated. Its quarries were among the largest and most profitable of bluestone quarries in the Town of Kingston.
Morey Hill

Also called Moray Hill. Mr. M. Morey was a large land owner with many bluestone quarries on his land. The land leading from Sawkill Road through Morey Hill to Route 28 is also called Morey Hill.

Orange Row

This was a small section on the main Jockey Hill Road called Orange Row. It was largely inhabited by Irish Protestants, “Orange Men”, as they called themselves as opposed to the Catholic, “Green Irishmen”. This section is no longer inhabited by Irish Protestants and the name is no longer used.

Powder Mill

On the Ulster County map of 1854 is shown the ruins of Howe’s Powder Mill. The place was well known for its frequent blow ups of gun powder. Because of its explosions many of the trees around the area were filled with lead, and therefore, unusable. Not far from the mill site is a bridge crossing the Sawkill Creek. This bridge is called the Powder Mill Bridge.

Sawkill

Its name is derived from the Sawkill Creek that passes through the hamlet. In the early years there were two or more general stores, a few taverns, some boarding houses, a school and a church (St. Ann’s Church). A post office operated in Sawkill from 1885 to 1915. Now Sawkill has a fire company, town hall, highway department and church only.

Stony Hollow

Stony Hollow gets its name from the terrain in and about the Hollow. Stony Hollow, much like Jockey Hill, had one of the largest and most profitable bluestone quarries in the area. Stony Hollow was on a road first called the Plank Road. Because the iron wagon wheels were very destructive to the wooden roads, the planks were replaced with bluestone. It was then called the Stone Tram Road. Heavy wagons of stone and barrel heads wore deep groves into the stone. When the groves became too deep the stone was broken and replaced with new stone. Finally, a new more modern road replaced the stone road. The name then changed to Route 28. It is now called Route 28A. Route 28 does not go through Stony Hollow but passes by it.

Wintergreen Hill

Wintergreen Hill gets its name from all the wintergreen growing in the clove. Around 1780 – 1800 a small mill was built on the brook to press the oil from the wintergreen leaves and berries to make wintergreen oil.
**Dutch Settlement (Ruby)**

The Dutch Settlement was located on Hallihan Hill. It was located in the Town of Kingston but with the division of the town in 1879 it became part of the Town of Ulster. This area is now referred to as Ruby.

**A Little History**

During the 1600’s Holland discovered the Hudson and claimed land on both sides of the river. They established trading posts to trade goods with the Native Americans. In 1614 a trading post was built at the mouth of the Rondout Creek.

In 1652 a group of settlers were given permission to buy land from the Native Americans on the lands of the Esopus – also known as Sepe or Sopus. Thus, the “Whiteman” came to live on the rich farm lands along the banks of the Esopus near the present City of Kingston. In 1661 the land became known as Wiltwyck and charter bestowed on the settlement. In 1664 the Dutch surrendered to the British and the name was changed to Kingston. In 1673 Kingston was retaken by the Dutch and the name was changed to Swannenburg. Finally, in 1674 the land was retaken by the British once again and the name permanently changed to Kingston.

**Founding of the Town of Kingston**

Governor Dongan granted to the people in common, then residing about Kingston, a piece of land “extending from the Hudson River near Little Esopus Creek, to and along the bounds of Hurley to the mountains, thence along the mountains to the County of Albany, now Green County, along the county line of the Hudson and south along the Hudson to the place of the beginning”. The grant was approved May 17, 1688. This is the date the Town of Kingston was founded. Twelve trustees were elected and given the power to sell land or plots to the Freeholders or Commoners.

**The Establishment of the Town of Kingston**

The Town of Kingston was largely a farming community that engaged in some commercial trade along the Hudson River. One of the first purchases in the present Town of Kingston was made on January 1, 1695. William Legg bought 100 acres of land lying on both sides of the Sawkill Creek from the trustees for 50 “schipples” of wheat. The deed permitted the building of a sawmill and required the payment of “a half bushel of good winter wheat yearly to ye trustees and their successors forever”. This mill was located near the Powder Mill Bridge. The house and mill were destroyed by fire in the 1880’s. The Legg family lived there for 88 years. Their mill was reported to have ground wheat for the Continental Army.

Kingston became the first capital of New York in 1777. In October of that same year Kingston was burned by the British. In 1788 the State legislature passed a law establishing more than 100 towns and villages. Earlier, the legislature decided towns, not counties would be polling places. The Town of Kingston was one of those towns established that March 7, 1788.
Annexations

In 1804 began the first of a series of annexations from parts of the Town of Kingston. “Uptown” Kingston was incorporated. This was the first land lost by the Town. Then, in 1811 part of the Town of Saugerties was formed from the Town of Kingston. That same year the Town of Esopus was formed by taking part of the Town of Kingston. In 1818 part of the area taken by Esopus was given back to the Town. In 1849 the village of Rondout was formed. In 1872 the villages of Rondout, the Kingston communities of Ponckokie and Twaelfskill became part of the City of Kingston. In 1879 the Town of Ulster was formed from the Town of Kingston by the County Board of Supervisors. Finally, in 1883 Zena was added to Woodstock. This was the final land lost to the town.

The Discovery of Bluestone

With the discovery of bluestone and the opening of the Delaware and Hudson Canal in 1828, the beginning of a new industry began. Bluestone from the quarries in Ulster County became a big business. With the Irish potato famine of 1845 came the influx of Irish to Kingston and surrounding areas. Most were poor, illiterate and unskilled. The quarries provided them a means to support their families. Stonecutters and others came to work the quarries. Large bluestone businesses built company houses or “shantys” to house the quarryman and his family. These houses were 16 x 30 feet with hemlock siding, a wood shingled roof, a narrow stairway and four rooms upstairs with small windows. A woodstove heated the house. A typical family of six to ten children plus parents and maybe some elderly folk lived there. Quarrying was carried on eight or nine months of the year. In many quarries no work was done during the winter due to the freezing of reeds in the stone. During months of no work the quarrymen survived the best they could. Many times, they would rely on the “Overseer of the Poor” to see them through the worst of times.

For the quarryman, a good quarry was worth its weight in gold and times were very good. He could provide for his family and have a bit left over. This was a time when a quarryman could be rich in a couple of years. There was great demand for stone and men could command almost any price. This was a time of prosperity and bluestone was sought. Intense competition and cut-throat operations became the norm.

In the Town of Kingston some of the best bluestone came from the Stony Hollow and Jockey Hill areas. St. Patrick’s Cathedral, the Brooklyn Bridge, the base of the Statue of Liberty, the Washington Monument, the Pentagon, “Shrine of Our Lady of the Hudson” in Port Ewen, the spillway of the Kingston Reservoir in Zena, to mention a few, are said to have come from these quarries. Throughout the northeast, bluestone was used for sidewalks, curbing, window sills, doorways, benches, fountains and much more. All mining and finishing were done by hand with picks, hammers, wedges, hand drills and stone axes. It took teams of six to ten horses to
haul the bluestone from deep within the forest to the stone docks on the Rondout. Sometimes the stone slabs were so large, it took two to three days just to haul them out of the woods. Deadly accidents were a common occurrence. Explosions, lung disease, falling rocks, fatalities involving horses and drivers, to name a few, were just a small part of the dangerous conditions quarrymen faced each day.
The Decline of the Bluestone Industry

The decline of bluestone began in 1866 with the development of Portland cement. Many of the quarries were now exhausted of bluestone, prices dropped and quarrymen could no longer provide for their families. Quarrymen who once gained a good payment for their hard work were now barely surviving. Delivering stone to the docks was not profitable. After cartage, tolls and rent were deducted there was very little left over. Families struggled to survive. Thus, began the unrest, strikes and violence that followed.

There are many stories about the corruption and violence in the Town of Kingston that led to its division in 1879, however, we must remember there are two sides to every story. Strikes and fights were common in many of the surrounding areas where bluestone was prevalent as well. This was a time when the Irish immigrants came in large numbers to work the quarries, therefore, prejudices ran high.

Many stores had signs that read “Irish need not apply”. Anti-Irish stories and biased comments were printed. The Town of Kingston became the focus of an effort to discredit and distort the actual events taking place in the town. Newspapers continued to add to the volatility of the times by distorting or exaggerating the facts. While the *Kingston Argus* attempted to give a more objective view, it failed to investigate or challenge any of these accusations. While it is true that the quarrymen were certainly a rough and uneducated breed of men and that many times heated arguments lead to violence, it was not just in the Town of Kingston. We must also remember during this time in our nation’s history there were no social services to help those in need and the well-to-do were immune to their condition. This is not to say there was no corruption, but it was rampant in surrounding areas as well. Misleading reports and eye witness accounts varied according to the person’s allegiance.

To the quarrymen, there were just to parties, the “rich man’s party” and the “poor man’s party”. Samuel Tilden, a Democrat, represented the “poor man’s party” and Rutherford B. Hayes, a Republican, represented the “rich man’s party” it was felt.

The Final Outcome

Finally, the State commenced a long and thorough investigation into the corrupt activities of the Town of Kingston. This led to the demise of the Democratic Party and the merciless division of the town.

Though the town certainly had its share of political upheaval, violence and yes, probably some corruption, questions remain as to why the Town of Kingston was ostracized in such a public way. *Chronicles of Ulster* by Robert P. Donaldson gives the reader another view into this perplexing time. We leave the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

With the division of the town and decline of the bluestone industry those remaining were left to survive as best they could. It is interesting to note that in “1875 there were 4,507 men, women and children in the Town of Kingston. By 1880, after the town had been divided, there were 1,093 men, women and children in the town”. *Chronicles of Ulster by Robert P. Donaldson, page 859.*
With the dissolution of the old town in 1879, the Town of Kingston was now “little more than a cluster of hamlets bound together by only a legislative act.” (Burgher manuscript; Town of Ulster History) Now, the town, meager in population, with a territory small in acreage with rocky, thin and sterile soil was left to devise a means of survival. Local residents farmed and did “piecework” as a means of support.

**Summer Boarders and Businesses**

By the early part of the century “taking” summer boarders became a popular pastime with the town’s people as well as a boost to the economy. Local industry turned from mills and quarries to services. Summer retreats, camps, stores and small businesses were established. Some of the small businesses that once operated in the town were: Camp Woodcliff, the Village Store, the Sawkill Snack Bar, Armscraft Gun Shop, Avalon Nightclub, the Dasie Bus Line (circa 1920), Smith’s Truck Equipment, Central Cabinet Shop, the Dress Factory, Reiff’s Inn, Sawkill Stables, Urell’s Auto Parts, Wopowog Kennels, and Thendara Lodge.

There is a story former Historian, Harry Siemsen, told of the “Face in the Falls”. Mr. Siemsen explained that a Mrs. Meyer of Brooklyn was recovering from an illness at Thendara Lodge in the winter of 1926 when she discovered the appearance of a face in the falls that strongly resembled her dead father. They had no photo of her father so they had the section of the face retaken and enlarged. Family and friends all agreed it was a very good likeness of the man.
Schools in the Town of Kingston

The Jockey Hill School District 2 was formed in 1865. It was said that a teacher by the name of Ford was so cruel to the children that they and their parents tried unsuccessfully to have him fired. The children wrote a poem and egged Myron Gaddis to recite it to the school trustee. It went:

“Lord of love, look down
Upon us poor scholars.
They hired a fool,
To teach the Jockey Hill School
And paid him fifty dollars.”

When this had no effect on the trustee, Mr. Brophy, the parents held a secret meeting. Mr. Brophy was voted out and a new trustee elected. The new trustee discharged Mr. Ford and hired a new teacher. The salary for a teacher in Sawkill in 1897 was $143.26 a year.

In 1879 the town lines changed and Jockey Hill became District 1. Between 1921 and 1922 a new school was built because the Jockey Hill School was destroyed by fire. The school stood behind the present town hall. It was used as a one room school house until January 1960 when the classes were merged into the Kingston Consolidated School System. The Dutch Hill School was formed on January 30, 1872. It was located on the Rt. 28 area side of Morey Hill Road. The Stony Hollow School was located near the railroad tracks on Rt. 28A. It closed in 1954. The Lower Sawkill School known as Brabant was located somewhere near the Anthony Cruise Bridge and Heritage Energy. All were closed by 1960.

The Sawkill School was given to the town to be used as a town hall by the school district. Modifications were made in 1963 to accommodate office staff. It served in this capacity until August 2010 when it was finally demolished due to structural problems. A new town hall was built close to where the old schoolhouse once stood.
Legends and Folktales

There are many legends and folktales which have been recorded by former historian, Harry Siemsen. One of Sawkill’s favorites is “Hallihan’s Hill Headless Barber”. It seems there was a headless body of a man, fully clothed, walking about with a bloody stump protruding from the collar of his coat. Held securely upright underneath his left arm was his head. In that hand he carried a lantern. In his right hand he held a large open-bladed razor. Some said the lantern was burning and the razor was bloody. Most said they never got close enough to find out. There were, of course, individuals who doubted this. One of the McGuire boys said that if he ever met this headless fellow, “He’d have all the answers or else!” His chance came a short time later and true to his word he stood his ground til the apparition was but a few feet away from him. As Mr. McGuire later stated, “I could stand the glare of his eyes, but when I’d see’d his lip move and heard the head say, “McGuire, ye be needing a shave”, I got out of there!!”

The Sawkill Fire Company

In the late 1940’s a serious consideration was given to the creation of a fire department for the town. After two failed attempts, the fire district was formed in 1950, due to the donation of a Maxim 1919 cableless pumper by the Holy Name Society of St. Ann’s Church. Unfortunately, during a test of its capabilities, the crankshaft broke. Undaunted by this
misfortune, the fire company incorporated on January 8, 1951. They borrowed $6,000 and began construction of a firehouse. It took more than a year and was built entirely by the volunteer labor of its members. The new firehouse was dedicated July 4, 1952. It was expanded in 1972 and again in 1986. The fire auxiliary was formed around 1960. Its purpose was to support the work of the firemen and promote entertainment and social activities for its members and the community.

**Sweet Meadows**

By the 1950’s the Town of Kingston saw the growth of suburban life. IBM became the driving force behind employment in the area. With this growth came a need for housing. The Sawkill Creek which had always been a problem became a bigger issue with the development of Sweet Meadows. In 1981, the residents of Sweet Meadows, friends and neighbors from other parts of the town banded together to have a “rock picking party”. This action drew some county-wide attention to the flooding problem and led to a clean out of the creek. However, this did not solve the problem and some flooding still persists during heavy rains. In 2015 the County began a Flood Prevention Project whereby a box culvert was installed to help direct water from the back creek into the Sawkill. This has led to much better conditions during times of heavy rain.

![Sweet Meadows Before Houses 1956](image)

![Sweet Meadows First Houses 1958](image)

![Rock Picking Brigade - 1981](image)

![Even the Children Helped](image)

**Times Change**

As the past merges with the present changes must be made. The quarries of a by-gone era are silent. The once thriving population of Irish immigrants are no more, though some of their descendants visit periodically to reminisce. There are a few quarry houses remaining in the
Stony Hollow area. The one room schoolhouse is no more, however, the old school bell and pictures of the many children who once roamed the hills of Sawkill and Stony Hollow remain. St. Ann’s Church is still a historic reminder of the resilience of an impoverished people. Businesses such as taverns, boarding houses, general stores, and small farms that once flourished are gone and others have taken its place.

The Town of Kingston has survived these changes, however, and looks to a bright future. The Sawkill Fire Company provides help in fires, floods and other emergencies. It sponsors pancake breakfasts and Santa’s ride through town. The fire auxiliary hosts the children’s Easter Egg Hunt and Halloween Party. It supports the work of the fire company and promotes entertainment and social activities for its members and the community. It meets every third Monday of the month. The annual Christmas Tree Lighting and summer recreation program sponsored by the town board provide social gatherings throughout the year. The historian’s office provides information about the town’s history, hosts presentations and the annual Memorial Day Ceremony. The Sawkill Seniors provide guest speakers, luncheons, trips and information about various activities for seniors throughout the county. They meet every second Wednesday of the month. St. Ann’s Church, founded in 1869 by Irish quarrymen, continues to be cared for by the “Friends of St. Ann’s”. Its volunteers clean and maintain the church, its grounds and cemetery. The Boy Scouts meet every Tuesday in the firehouse. They are an asset to our community and provide help through their Eagle Scout projects. Our highway department maintains roads and is there in wintry storms to keep our streets cleared.

The Town of Kingston, though small in size, is a proud community of friends and neighbors. It still retains its rural character and close-knit community spirit.
HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT

The Town of Kingston Highway Department maintains approximately 9½ miles of road. This includes the Sawkill area as well as the Route 28A section of old Stony Hollow. Hills and curves are prominent in the town. This makes for some challenging conditions during the winter.

Edward Moore is the Highway Superintendent. Alfie Sylvester is the Deputy Superintendent and Road Foreman. Tom Cole is the Heavy Equipment Operator. Together, they make up a diligent and hardworking team that keep the town roads clear in wintry weather. They repair and pave the town roads as well as checking for any problems that may arise. They are always there to lend a hand in emergencies.

The first record of “path masters” is dated 1877. This was a system of highway work with Commissioners of Highways for the town, and overseers for various roads or districts. The property owners were assessed a certain number of days to work on the roads.

The Highway Commissioners divided the town roads into districts and numbered them. They also entered into records where each road started and ended. A list of property owners in each district was compiled in proportion to the value of the property. Each owner was assessed a number of days that work was to be done on the highway. The work was done by the owners or someone they hired within the district the property was located. To see that the work was done, the Commissioners appointed an “overseer” or “path master” for each district. A “road warrant” containing the names of property owners and number of days assessed was given. Many residents who were assessed owned no property, however, if they had a horse, they were assessed as well.

In 1909 the system of road work was changed from assessed labor and contracts to the present system of highway money being raised by taxes. The Superintendent of Highways was, and still is today, in charge of the maintenance of the highways.
FRIENDS OF ST. ANN’S

The “Friends of St. Ann’s” was formed out of necessity after the church closed in 1961. St. Ann’s had served the Sawkill community since 1869. It closed when it became the mission church of St. Catherine Laboure in Lake Katrine. From 1969 to 1975 it fell into disrepair. It was then that a small group of residents headed by Jack Duffy, a longtime Sawkill resident, his son, William and some friends decided that St. Ann’s could not be left to ruin. An attempt was made to paint and repair some of the damage done by the abandonment. After a tragic automobile accident resulting in the death of three of the workers, work was halted for a number of years.

In 1978 an organized effort was undertaken to repair the church. This effort became known as “The Committee to Save St. Ann’s”. Local residents painted, plastered and replaced windows. The name was also changed to the “Sawkill Church Repair Fund’. It had a board of five trustees headed by Joseph Goldpaugh Jr. The first fund-raising effort was a bazaar. This netted the group a total of $8,579 to use to cover the cost of repairs. On Memorial Day, 1979, mass was celebrated for the first time. Over the years many volunteers both Catholic and non-Catholic have donated their time and skills to keep St. Ann’s from falling into disrepair again. This group is now known as “The Friends of St. Ann’s”.

In 2015 a small group of volunteers undertook the mammoth job of cleaning some of the weathered gravestones. Volunteers meet four times a year to clean those most in need. Many of the stones which were once unreadable are now legible. Information on those stones provides a glimpse into the life of the hardworking people who once lived in the town.

St. Ann’s continues to hold services five times a year and a Novena to St. Ann is offered in July for nine days. Meetings are held the third Wednesday of the month at 7:00 pm during the months of April, June, August, October and November. “Friends of St. Ann’s” continues in its efforts to maintain the beautiful little church we see today and continue her legacy. All are welcome to join us.

History of St. Ann’s Church

The story of St. Ann’s begins with the people who worked the bluestone quarries in the Sawkill area during the 1800’s. These people were largely Irish and settled in the area. Since there was no church of worship, services were held in their homes. As the population grew so did the Catholic faith and a church was needed.

In 1869 property was acquired and a church erected on Jockey Hill. This church served the community dutifully until 1878. It was built along the lines of a quarryman’s house with a one story frame, hip roof, wood shingles and clapboard siding. It measured sixteen by fifty feet. It was later converted into a two family house and called the “long shanty”. There was one duty, however, that the Jockey Hill Church could not fulfill and that was the need for a cemetery. That meant that all burials had to be done at St. Mary’s in Kingston. Because the
automobile had not yet been invented, the only mode of transportation was by walking or, for those fortune enough, by horse and wagon. This meant that worshippers, in some cases, would have to travel a distance of ten miles to attend service.

In 1868 property was acquired for the present cemetery. In 1878 a second St. Ann’s Church was constructed on this property. The present site of St. Ann’s was purchased specifically to fill the need for a closer place to inter the dead of the outlying area. The rectory for St. Ann’s was built in 1905 and in later years was enlarged to include a chapel. In 1908 St. Ann’s hall was built and became a cultural center where local talent performed, dances and dinners were held. It also served as a place for town meetings as well as a polling place for elections. These structures stood for many years until they were demolished for safety reasons in 1962. In 1913 St. Ann’s was destroyed by fire and rebuilt that same year on its old foundation. The building we see today is a result of that effort.

There is a cave located in the bank beneath St. Ann’s and legend has it that this is the home of the “Lady in Black”, seen many a night wandering around St. Ann’s Cemetery.

The outdoor shrine was built in 1944 when the parish was 75 years old. St. Ann’s became famous throughout New York, New England and Canada. Many people made pilgrimages to the shrine during the Feast of St. Ann particularly during the novena held every year in August. Mass was celebrated outside on the stone altar and chairs set up on the grounds for the many people who attended. It is said that a disabled girl was cured at the shrine during one of the services when she stood up from her wheelchair and walked to the altar. The church closed in 1961 and became the mission church of St. Catherine Laboure in Lake Katrine. This was not popular among Sawkill’s citizens and when the church closed altogether, local residents formed a group to preserve the church and its traditions. This small but active group of volunteers is known as the “Friends of Ann’s”.

![1907](image1.jpg)  
![Rebuilt 1913](image2.jpg)