

Introduction

Carol Kammen

Tompkins County Historian

The Town of Lansing historian received a call one day from an eager reporter. In her town, he noted, there were both Collins and Armstrong roads. Were they named, he asked, to commemorate the United States space team that put a man on the moon?

Well, no.

Though those roads do commemorate people by the name of Collins and Armstrong, they were not astronauts, but families who had early on settled in the town and whose names were later added to the roads.

Names are inherently fascinating. We all spend a good deal of time naming our children and we have given the same attention to places where we live. Some people name their houses. Most of us come to areas that are already named, or so we think, yet naming goes on, even today. The stories of the place names in Tompkins County are interesting for several reasons. They tell us something about the times when they were named. They link us to another era and help us understand something about the way the area developed.

We can discern a general phasing of naming, yet not every name will fit this pattern. The earliest distinction seems to be between places that were mapped with streets and those that were not. In 1807 Simeon DeWitt created the earliest map of what became Ithaca showing a crosshatch of streets. He was involved, about the same time, with mapping the area beyond Wall Street in the upper reaches of Manhattan.

On that map he and the other commissioners did the same thing. They made a design of regular streets meeting at right angles. DeWitt put names on those streets so that as the lots were advertised for sale, they would be more easily identified and perhaps even more pleasing to buyers. He started with the names of places to which particular streets would have run had continuous roads been built, such as Owego Street, Aurora Street.

Where there was no concentration of streets, as in the farming areas of the county, the roads were called by landmarks, by the names of the farm families who lived along them, or by their destination. Many of these names were not made official and did not appear on our maps until many years later. Road names helped people get about, for the most part.

Now and again we historians are asked, who was Tompkins? Or, was Trumansburg named for Harry? Or, do the roads in the Town of Dryden really commemorate the originators of the Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention in 1848? Well, there is Cady Street, and there is Mott Street, and, even McClintock Road. Ah, no. As much as we might today want to lay claim to honoring Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Mary Ann McClintock, who charted such a radical and important course in 1848, we cannot. Nor, most likely, would people in the past have wanted it thought that they supported that convention and the reforms it launched, for that meeting in 1848 in Seneca Falls was controversial. Not everyone approved of the ideas so passionately urged in the Declaration of Sentiments. Those roads in the Town of Dryden carry the names of early families who lived along them.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Cornell University began its expansion across the gorge to the north, and the area called Cornell Heights took its character. Its streets were mostly short but the earlier grid pattern was not maintained, and the names on the streets reflected some of the eminent people who had been, or who were at the time, associated with the university, such as Roberts and Thurston.

Bryant Park to the east of the university also grew up, its names var-

ious, but Oxford links it to the academic world, Irving to the literary. Other names, such as Cornell Street, lead in to the university.

The development of the Village of Cayuga Heights in the second quarter of the twentieth century represents a shift from these more utilitarian names of location. The word “heights” itself implies views—it was a place to view from. Those roads were not straight with regular turnings, either, but undulated across the land to create an aspect of ease. The names given also reflect this: Sunset Park, Highland Road, White Park Road, and The Parkway. There is Iroquois Road too, recalling the earliest residents in this area, removed so long ago it could appear on a roadway without irony or guilt. These are names to attract the affluent, and the large lots and landscape reflect a comfortable suburban environment.

Greater concentrations of streets and roads appeared in the later half of the twentieth century as the population increased, as people were able to live farther away from their place of work, and as houses were created in what we call developments. In many cases, these names of the 1960s and 1970s are different from those of earlier days. The “cigarette” streets, such as Winston and Salem, appeared then, and names that reflected a bucolic view of the landscape; this was not the stage for labor, such as farming, but a place of “rustic” hunters and others who viewed the woods and fields as places full of natural beauty and the home of interesting animals. So we have Birchwood, Maplewood, and Sycamore drives, plus Pinewood Place, all developed by Rocco Lucente who probably put more names on the land than anyone else in the county’s history.

From the last quarter of the twentieth century, we also inherited a number of names that can be traced to those in a particular developer’s family: Lisa, Christopher, Laura, Leif’s Way, and so on. This leads to the question of how our streets get their names today? It varies slightly with each town, but usually a developer of land submits his plans to a town or to the city planning board and the board approves the number of lots, the configuration of the streets, the provision for the roads

and for utilities. The names are reviewed and despite some board members' dislike of one name or another, the developer usually has his say. So in Lansing there is Smugglers Path, which dates from the 1980s when we assume there were no smugglers in the area.

Some notable people are honored with street names. In Ithaca, Jay and Clinton and Adams recall politicians of the first half of the nineteenth century. Some of the people who owned land on which their names have come down to us are also worthy of recall. For instance, we have both Esty Road and Esty Street. During the latter half of the nineteenth century there were two brothers Esty in Ithaca, both of whom contributed to the area's development. Elston Place recalls Judge Elston. Not so long ago, the City of Ithaca created James L. Gibbs Drive, Alice Miller Way, and Rachel Carson Way. These are significant people, but it is too easy to let the name slide over the tongue without recalling why those names are on the land. This book should help us remember.