

Rock City Falls

This article is based on presentations made by Jim Richmond and Karen Staulters at the Simpson Methodist Church in Rock City Falls on September 20, 2018

The Great Falls of the Kayaderosseras

The hamlet of Rock City Falls is spread out along the Kayaderosseras Creek as it descends southeastward through the town of Milton in Saratoga County. Long an area visited seasonally by Mohawk Indian hunting and fishing parties, pioneers began arriving in the 1770's after the lands of the Kayaderosseras Patent were first opening to settlement. The area of Rock City was assigned to the estate of John Tatham, one of the original 13 proprietors of the Patent. Among the owners of this tract in 1770— Lot 6 of the 16th allotment— was Dirck Lefferts one of the Trustees of the patent who immediately saw the value of this 2300-acre great lot. His desire to attract settlers to the area was interrupted by the American Revolution, but peace brought a renewed opportunity to take advantage of the swift moving stream that crisscrossed this land.

Before 1790, Jonathan Hatch built a sawmill on the west side of the creek where Route 29 crosses the Kayaderosseras as it continues up the hill to East Galway. He sold the sawmill in 1806 to Jacob Glen, and two years later adjacent property was sold to Peter Kilmer and Isaac Vannostrand, millwrights and mechanics who became early developers of the hamlet.

In 1791, Daniel Rathbun arrived from Berkshire County, Massachusetts and purchased 137 acres near the Great Falls of the Kayaderosseras, one mile south of Hatch's sawmill. His brother Valentine arrived soon after. Their father Daniel had been a clothier in Stonington, Connecticut and later in Massachusetts before joining his sons in Rock City in 1803. Together they utilized the water from the Great Falls to power sawmills and various small fulling and carding mills designed to process wool into cloth. This location soon became known as Rathbun's Mills and then Rathbun's Village as their enterprise attracted others interested in setting up shop at the base of the waterfalls.

The Rathbun family prospered, but not without setbacks. In November 1808 Daniel broke his leg in an accident at the sawmill, a painful injury which took his life a few weeks later. Earlier that year Daniel's daughter Anna had married Aaron Whitlock only to die in childbirth in 1809. Whitlock took over the business at the death of his father-in-law and continued to run the woolen mills with the help of Frank, a slave purchased by Daniel in 1804 for \$325. Frank, described as a "well-built negro who understands the clothing business" ran away in 1810 and Whitlock offered \$30 for his return. No record exists of the outcome of this flight to freedom.

After Daniel's death, Valentine continued to operate the mills, apparently in partnership with Kilmer and Vannostrand. These three can be considered the founding families of Rock City Falls. Peter and Isaac, developed several woolen mill locations along the creek, leasing out their facilities to various tenants during the early 1800's.

The woolen industry was subject to boom and bust cycles on a regular basis. Explosive growth in the early years due to the embargo of British imports and eventual war with England, was followed by a crash in demand and prices following the war as English goods flooded back into the country. In 1815 these three men sold the land at the base of the falls, where Daniel Rathbun had built a fulling mill, to Ezra Starr for the purpose of building a Gristmill at that location.

This same site became one of several owned by a partnership from the next generation. Chauncey Kilmer, son of Peter, and Isaac Rowland, Jr son of the founder of Rowlands Mills five miles to the east purchased and developed several parcels along the Kayaderosseras. Together as Rowland and Kilmer, by 1840 they built a rag paper mill at the site of the current abandoned Empire Mill and remodeled the old gristmill at the Great Falls. Rowland soon moved to western New York and Kilmer took on a new partner, Coe Buchanan.

The teamwork of Buchanan as the creative inventor and Kilmer as the businessman and developer perfected the process of making paper from rye straw at the Stone Mill built for that purpose after the Gristmill had burned. The pair received a contract as the sole-source supplier of paper to the New York Sun, a deal which enriched both men. They expanded their business with the purchase of the Pioneer Mill downstream near West Milton in 1853. The partnership dissolved in the mid 1850's but Chauncey Kilmer's legacy as the successful local industrialist who parlayed skills learned from his father into a large and successful business was assured. After the Civil war he moved to an elegant home in New York City but returned annually to Rock City Falls to oversee his business empire. Chauncey died in 1901, a millionaire.

The Simpson Methodist Church

The early beginnings of the Simpson United Methodist Church can be traced to an 1810 gathering in Mr. Blinn's barn on Tubb's Hill just over the Milton- Galway town line. It seems that several meetings were held here before the fledgling society decided to build a church. Joel Keeler, who lived on what is now Grenelle Road, donated the land for the church on the southwest corner of Armer and Grenelle Roads which was known then as Swan's Corners. The church was 30 feet by 40 feet in size and was used for worship for the next 33 years. Methodist Circuit Rider preachers would visit monthly to perform baptisms and marriages and review the accounts of the church. Miss Eliza K. Grenelle was the first person baptized in this church.

In 1844 the society decided to build a new church on Rock City Road where the population was centered, working in the mills along Kayaderosseras Creek. A new church was built on the present site in that year. This new church became known as the "First Methodist Episcopal Church of Rock City Falls." In 1860, a parsonage was built for the pastors who were no longer riding the circuit but assigned to specific churches for periods of one to three years at a time. Since times were very tough after the Civil War, from 1860-1874, each member was assessed one percent of the valuation of their real property to help prevent foreclosure.

Chauncey Kilmer, and George West were not only leading industrialists and businessmen in the Rock City Falls area in the post-Civil War years. Although not members of the society, they displayed their sense of community by being very generous to the church over the years. Kilmer paid for pulpit furniture and a fine pulpit Bible, donated the 1000 pound Meneeley bell in the bell tower in the 1890's, and bequeathed the church \$2500 as an endowment when he died. Other leading contributors to the church included the

Van Ostrand, Sherwood, Broughton, Swan, Mawley and Dubois families

In 1897, New York State law required churches to become a Religious Corporation and they took a new name as a result. They were now known as the "Simpson Methodist Episcopal Church." The

congregation had named the church after the internationally renowned Methodist Bishop Matthew Simpson who was confidant to President Abraham Lincoln. Bishop Simpson was very close to the president and gave the Eulogy at his burial in Springfield, Illinois. He was known as a very wise man who wrote several religious books.

On January 25, 1920, just before the Sunday service, the church burned to the ground. The congregation decided to rebuild right away and held their church services across the street at the Old Stone School #5 until the church was rebuilt. The new church was dedicated Feb. 5, 1922 and four memorial windows installed, with a cherry altar and altar rail. One of the windows was dedicated to Carl Phillips who was studying to become a minister, who had drowned in Saratoga Lake the week before the laying of the cornerstone. He was only nineteen years old. The children of the community raised the money and dedicated the window in Carl's memory as he was loved by all who knew him.

In 1939, the Simpson Methodist Episcopal Church had another name change due to the denomination merging with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Methodist Protestant Church to become the "Simpson Methodist Church."

In 1960, the congregation decided to add an addition on to the building that would be for education and fellowship and they also added a kitchen. They had to pipe water from the parsonage well across the street and under the road to the church to accomplish this.

In 1968, the denomination again changed the name due to the merging of the Methodist Church with the Evangelical United Brethren to become "United Methodists". The Simpson church was now the "Simpson United Methodist Church". In 2010, the church celebrated it's 200th Anniversary as a Methodist society and soon will mark a century of worshiping and serving the Rock City Falls community in their "new" church.

On October 24, 2018, the Town of Milton's Historic Structures and Places Committee and Town Board presented the Annual Heritage Award to the Simpson United Methodist Church in honor of its longevity and presence in the community.