

This Week in Saratoga County History

Bacon Hill – Not Forgotten

Submitted by James Richmond March 15, 2023

Jim Richmond is a founding member of the Saratoga County History Roundtable, author of two books on local history and a trustee of the Saratoga County History Center at Brookside Museum. He is the director of the just-released documentary film “Bacon Hill-A Forgotten Crossroads” produced by the History Center.



Bacon Hill video team in action – Nov 2022

“Why not Bacon Hill?” Within days of the Saratoga County History Center’s release of our first video in a new series, entitled *“Forgotten Crossroads – Rock City Falls”* in April 2022 two board members approached me with a suggestion for our next video. We had envisioned this multi-film project as a way for the History Center at Brookside Museum to bring attention to the many small hamlets within Saratoga County with a long history, but now largely by-passed by the economic and transportation revolution of the last 100 years. In a county dissected by the Adirondack Northway 60 years ago, and today mostly known for the shining resort of Saratoga Springs, and the sprouting housing developments of Clifton Park, Wilton and other growing towns, this series was meant to highlight those small communities long since forgotten.

Our first indication that these assumptions did not tell the whole story was during the filming of *Rock City Falls*. Yes, it had a long history, yes it no longer was the home of many large paper mills powered by the Kayaderosseras Creek gurgling through its center. No longer was there an electric railway to transport workers and the goods they produced to Ballston Spa and its connection to the larger outside world. But we soon realized that the hamlet was still a living, breathing crossroads. Residents still took pride in their community, its two churches and its volunteer firehouse. Local men and women still worked in the remaining mill, Cottrell Paper Company. The Manson Inn still attracted visitors for social events. Surprised by this vitality, we closed the film with a segment entitled “The Community Still Lives.”

But Bacon Hill? What was there about Bacon Hill that could possibly result in a similar uplifting ending? How could we produce a 20 minute video about these fields dotted with a few farms, one church and a blueberry patch? Well, my first impression was correct in one regard. It was indeed impossible to create a 20-minute video on Bacon Hill.

I should have suspected as much at our first meeting with a few residents in July 2022. Pat Peck, not even a resident of Bacon Hill but heir to the Peck family legacy, sent me a list of Bacon Hill folks who might be interested in working on the project. She provided me with background on each one and who was related to whom. That was my first clue that this film would be different. We assembled in the King Brothers Dairy, the only retail establishment in Bacon Hill, a convenience store well known for its milk and ice cream. I walked several people, all of an age, but seemingly excited to be part of this project. They brought scrapbooks, photo albums, pamphlets and brochures. That was my second clue.

The stories were my third clue. They had lots of stories. Unprompted by myself they excitedly related their stories to me, a total stranger. As one of our interviewees later stated about another Bacon Hill icon since passed, "They knew everything about everybody." And the stories, for the most part, were not gossipy tales of their neighbors. They were positive snapshots of the people and families of Bacon Hill, drawing from their memories to recall events in their own lives and those of their relatives and friends, sometimes going back generations.

I was elated by that first visit, but something told me not to get "over my skis." Oral narratives by people long enjoying the retirement life are great, but was there more to the community? Would the next generation, many in their 50's immersed in their work, want to share their own stories with this amateur film director and our videographer, Dave Waite? Would they be willing to carve out some time from their busy schedule to contribute to this small locally produced video? After all, time is money you know.

When we discovered that the answer to these questions was a resounding yes, we knew we had something. They were gracious and outgoing, eager to talk of their success and challenges, but also proud of their heritage and their families. As one might imagine if you know anything about Bacon Hill, we interviewed several Pecks and Kings. The Peck family first arrived in Bacon Hill in 1836 and two of the largest farms – Welcome Stock and Clear Echo - are owned by 6th generation descendants of the original settler. One of the co-owners of Welcome Stock is Willard "Billy" Peck the current Northumberland Town Supervisor.

The Kings are relative newcomers, having only been in Bacon Hill for 120 years or so. They are well known for their commercial dairy operation and the aforesaid Kings Dairy store. Edgar King, recently deceased, was also a town supervisor and led the community farms first movement in the 1990s. His sons Jeff and Jan currently own both the dairy and Kings-Ransom farm.

Of course, there are people in Bacon Hill not named Peck or King. Jen Thomas of Thomas Poultry and Brian Carmer of StoneBridge Iron and Steel each had a story to tell. All of our interviews were unique but common themes emerged. Proud of their accomplishments, all were quick to give

credit to the hard work and innovation of past generations. And all were genuinely excited about the future.

We also interviewed Byron Winney, owner of the Winney Blueberry Farm who sadly passed away soon after we had the good fortune to talk with him. The Bacon Hill Reformed Church is the center of the community, both literally and figurately. Pastor Jan Vincent and church member Nancy Purinton related their 200 yearlong history and spoke of their vision for the future.

One final surprise awaited us. Impressed by the response of leaders of the middle generation, what could we expect from their sons and daughters? One hint came from one of our earliest interviews with Jeff King and his son Johnathan. A young man just graduated from Cornell, the college of choice for generations of Bacon Hill farmers, he was “all in” to embark on the career path of his parents and grandparents. In our last session we talked with Jan King, joined by his wife Pandora Davis, and teenagers Hannah and Nate. You may surmise the results but the best way to confirm your suspicions would be to attend one of the films premiere events.

Thursday, March 30 7 pm at Brookside Museum in Ballston Spa (sold out), Thursday April 20th 7 pm at the Bacon Hill Reformed Church, or Saturday April 29 2pm at the Museum. Registration is required at <https://brooksidemuseum.org/>