

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE OF PITTSFORD

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Introduction

Pittsford is a historic Erie Canal village, located seven miles southeast of Rochester in western New York. Pittsford Village has a population of 1,500 persons and an area of approximately eight-tenths of a square mile. Despite its location in a suburban area, the Village of Pittsford has retained its distinctive small-town character and quality of life.



Aerial view of Erie Canal curving around the center of Pittsford Village

Unlike most of its Upstate New York counterparts, Pittsford Village has lost very little of its historic fabric, retaining examples of all of its historic functional components, including residential, industrial, agricultural, religious, commercial, transportation, and educational resources, the physical interconnectedness of which remains legible. Most of the buildings in the village either continue to serve

their original functions or have been converted to compatible new uses; as a result the village continues to function as a vibrant commercial, residential, and social center for the surrounding area. The village retains a notable collection of high-style and modest interpretations of the range of styles that were popular from the early nineteenth century through the post-World War II era, including some of the region's most distinguished examples of Federal-style architecture.¹

Settlement, early growth, and the Erie Canal: 1789 - 1840

The location of the present village of Pittsford was the site of a natural spring which was known and used by native-American Seneca people. Israel Stone, the village's first European-American settler, built the village's first structure, a log house, in 1789 adjacent to the spring-fed pond. Early Pittsford served as the governmental seat for the town of Northfield, comprising most of what is now eastern Monroe County. The settlement contained the county's first school (1794), the first library (1803), the first permanent church (1807), the first post office (1811), and the first newspaper (1815). In 1813, after the surrounding towns were organized, reducing Northfield's territory, the name Pittsford was adopted to honor the Vermont birthplace of Colonel Caleb Hopkins, a farmer, community leader and hero from the War of 1812.



The ca. 1826 Federal-style Phoenix Hotel is one of Pittsford's fine surviving early nineteenth-century buildings

In the years immediately following the end of the Revolutionary War, the fertile land of western New York drew settlers, despite the difficulties of transportation that limited this frontier area's economic and population prospects. Pittsford's first cluster of building developed around the Milepost intersection located south of the present village. The construction of State Road (present New York State Route 31)

¹ Katie Comeau, Pittsford Village Historic District Boundary Increase National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form. (Albany, NY: NYS Division for Historic Preservation, November 2016).

in 1805 and the surveying of the route of the proposed Erie Canal caused the center of the settlement to quickly migrate north to its present location. Pittsford prospered as a local trading center due to its location at the intersection of the primary road between the mills at the Genesee Falls in Rochesterville and Canandaigua and State Road, the region's main east/west highway. In 1816, Samuel Hildreth established the area's first stage coach line, eventually putting Pittsford at the center of a large stage network covering much of western New York. The town of Pittsford took shape in a series of reorganizations, as the original town of Northfield (essentially eastern Monroe County), was divided several times from the 1790s to the 1810s. The last division occurred in 1814, when the town of Pittsford's boundaries were set and the town was named for Pittsford, Vermont, the hometown of Colonel Caleb Hopkins, a prominent settler.

The opening of the Erie Canal occurred in stages in the 1820s. Although the original measuring 40 feet wide and four feet deep, the canal had an immediate effect on upstate New York, which included the fledgling village of Pittsford. The combination of rich soil and reliable access to national markets attracted farmers, entrepreneurs, and land speculators, who either lobbied for the route to pass through their area or bought lands along the proposed route. In 1822, the section of the canal that included Pittsford opened, while construction continued from the Genesee River westward; this meant that the journey from Pittsford to the populous eastern and southern portions of the state could be made in a matter of days, rather than several weeks, at a fraction of the former cost of shipping. In 1825, statewide celebrations marked the completion of the entire canal from Lake Erie to the Hudson River.²



Pittsford on the Erie Canal, a Sultry Calm:
an oil painting by George Harvey (1837)

Incorporated in 1827, Pittsford is the oldest of Monroe County's ten incorporated villages.³ The village grew rapidly after the opening of the Erie Canal in 1822 and was incorporated on July 4, 1827. During

² Ibid.

³ The City of Rochester was incorporated as the village of Rochesterville in 1817, but was reincorporated as a city in 1834.

the 1820s, local entrepreneurs made fortunes from both canal construction and other businesses which benefited from the canal trade. Early residents arrived primarily from New England and eastern New York State. As a result the Village's early homes were set close to the street on long narrow lots similar to the pattern found in New England. Log houses were replaced with larger homes. Elihou Doud's brickyard located south of the village provided material for commercial buildings, churches and a handful of grand homes. By 1826, Pittsford's first religious community, the Second Congregational Church, had become the First Presbyterian Church and replaced a simple meeting house south of the village with a fine limestone house of worship on Church Street. Pittsford's fine collection of Federal period buildings are remaining evidence of the prosperity the community enjoyed during this period.

Because of its waterpower, Rochester soon eclipsed Pittsford as Monroe County's dominant economic and population center. Pittsford grew slowly through the rest of the nineteenth-century. Boosted by the arrival of the Rochester & Auburn Railroad in 1834, Pittsford remained an important shipping center for local grains and produce until the late twentieth-century. Village industries included flour mills, lumberyards, produce warehouses, a malt house, and several fruit dry houses.

Retail businesses provided for the needs of the surrounding prosperous farming community while taverns and inns accommodated railroad travelers and canal workers. By the 1840s, Methodist, Baptist, and Episcopal churches had been built in the center of the village. For many years the Pittsford was known as was known as the Village with "six taverns and six churches." The Pittsford Cemetery, replacing the earlier Milepost cemetery as the community's primary burial ground, was established in 1842 at the north edge of the village.

Railroads and Agriculture: 1840-1900

Beginning in the 1830s, a wave of Irish immigrants arrived in Pittsford. Many worked on the construction and widening of the Erie Canal⁴ and on the railroad. In 1856, Irish families held the first Roman Catholic mass and over the next few decades organized the parish of Saint Louis Church. In the village, working class Irish families lived in the Boughton Avenue neighborhood which for many years was known as "Little Dublin." In 1867, German immigrants established Saint Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church. Services at Saint Paul's were held in both German and English until well into the twentieth century.

At midcentury, the Abolition movement was locally strong and several homes in the village served as "stations" on the Underground Railroad." Owners of these homes provided hiding places for escaped African American slaves on their way to freedom in Canada.

As was typical in canal villages, most early waterfront development in Pittsford was located on the side opposite the towpath (in this case, the south side of the canal), so as not to conflict with the constant

⁴ New York State proposed widening the canal in 1836. The original prism measuring 40 feet wide and 4 feet deep was enlarged to 70 feet wide and 7 feet deep. The project was completed in 1862.

traffic of mules. An 1858 map of the village shows a cluster of development on the south side of the canal at State Street, including a forwarding house, canal stable, and a couple of stores; the canal banks between North Main and State Streets appear to have been undeveloped at that time. By 1872, a number of businesses were located around the intersection of North Main Street and the canal, including a malt house, lumber yard, and grocery; undoubtedly the growing importance of the railroad made this portion of the village, convenient to both the canal and the railroad depot, especially desirable.⁵



Ca.1842 cobblestone Village School replaced the earlier District Number 6 School on State Street which had burned.

From its beginnings, Pittsford's economy was based on agriculture. Early commercial farming focused on wheat and oats. Later in the nineteenth century as the nearby city of Rochester grew, milk, horses breeding, hay, hops, and apples became important Pittsford crops.

The village's commercial district served the needs of farmers who occupied the surrounding area, and travelers who frequented the village's three hotels. Warehouses, mills, apple dry houses, and other agricultural processing facilities lining the canal converted farmers' produce into more valuable and transportable commodities. Much of the land in the village was in agricultural use until the early twentieth century, and most of the surrounding town was made up of farmland until the second half of the twentieth century.

Prominent agriculture-oriented businesses in the village in the nineteenth century included the Agate malt plant on the south side of the Erie Canal, west of North Main Street, founded in 1863; a lumberyard owned by H.H. Cronk on the north side of the canal, east of North Main Street, formed around the same time. Schoen Brothers Builders and Farmers' Supplies took over the Cronk property in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and developed a sizable complex of agricultural processing buildings including apple drying houses and fruit packing warehouses. Other related businesses were Wadhams & Whitlock Lumber Dealers, south of the canal on the south side of State Street; Hutchinson & Phillips Coal and Farm Supplies, which featured a row of one-story warehouses lining the south bank of the canal just east

⁵ Comeau, Pittsford Village National Register Inventory Nomination Form

of North Main Street; and a flour mill built by J. Vought in 1882. Vought's flour mill survives as the Pittsford Flour Mill; it has been expanded several times and was recently rehabilitated as office space.⁶

In the second-half of the nineteenth-century wealthy Rochesterians began to establish country estates in and around the village. These estates were the first step in Pittsford's evolution from a farming community into a suburb of Rochester. Four of these grand homes remain within the village.

Pittsford Farms, the oldest of the four village estates, was established in the 1860's by Jarvis Lord, a canal contractor. The property has retained its historic appearance and remains today a 200-acre working farm. The farm's dairy, Pittsford's oldest surviving business, continues to process, bottle, and sell milk in returnable glass containers. The Town of Pittsford has purchased the development rights to this farm and seven others to ensure their open space remains for generations to come.



[Pittsford Farms Dairy, established in 1888 as part of a farm estate, is Pittsford's oldest operating business.](#)

Due to its proximity to the booming city of Rochester, the village began a second period of growth in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Many fine Italianate and Queen Anne style homes were built during this period. In 1886, a second passenger and freight depot serving the village opened with the arrival of the West Shore Railroad. Entertainment was provided by traveling shows, community musical groups, churches, and community organizations such as the Grange.

⁶ Ibid.



Until construction of Town Hall, Village and Town meetings were held in the meeting room on the second floor of the Bacon-Armstrong Block

After the village's dry good store/opera house burned down in 1886, a fine new brick Queen Anne style town hall was erected in 1890 which remains the seat of town government today. In 1896, a large new Romanesque brick "Union School" building was constructed to replace the small old cobblestone school. The Village's renewed growth and a series of disastrous fires led to the construction of a village water system in 1897 and the founding of the Pittsford Volunteer Fire Department in 1898. By the opening of the twentieth century, the Village had a municipal water system, telephone service, and an acetylene gas street lighting system.



Pittsford Village Four Corners about 1900

Early Twentieth-Century Suburban Growth:1900-1950

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, the construction of the Rochester & Eastern Electric Railway, an interurban electric railway system, and growing automobile ownership placed Pittsford within easy commuting distance of Rochester. The ease of commuting fueled continued village growth. Sutherland Street, Rand Place, Austin Park, Maple Street, Line Street and Elm Street were all constructed during this period. The twentieth century brought a wave of Italian immigrants to Pittsford, many of whom worked at village mills, warehouses, and the railroads. Many German immigrants worked at the newly rebuilt Forman's Pickle Factory. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the Grove Street neighborhood remained home to a concentrated small Italian American community.

In 1911 and 1912, New York State expanded the Erie Canal through the village from sixty feet to one hundred twenty feet in width to facilitate larger commercial barges and the use of coal powered tugboats. A number of buildings and homes located on the south side of the canal were demolished or relocated to other sites. The Hutchison produce business and the Wadhams and Whitlock Lumberyard were relocated to what is now "Schoen's Alley" on the north canal bank creating the waterfront area that remains today. The State built a concrete wharf as a "port" area in each incorporated municipality. In the village, this area was later used as a tugboat coaling station. Today the canal port is now the Port of Pittsford Park.

In 1916, the Village's main streets were paved with brick and a new school was built to replace the old one which had burned. A decade later, an incandescent electric street lighting system, including distinctive electric "harp" streetlights, was installed. In the 1920s, Village streets were paved with asphalt. State highways running through the village were improved. The "improvements eliminated the a small park located at the Four Corners intersection. In the early 1930s East Jefferson Road was extended from Rand Place to South Street creating the town of Pittsford's second east/west State. During the 1930s, a Village sanitary sewer system and sewer plant were constructed as a Works and Progress Administration project.



South Main Street about 1920

In 1921, Una Hutchison and other village residents found a permanent home for the Village Library in the "Little House" on Monroe Avenue. In 1937, Mary Emilie Wiltsie Field donated a larger new library/community center at 21 North Main Street as a memorial to her father who had grown up in the

building. Today, the Wiltsie Memorial Building serves as Village Hall. After the town of Pittsford's one-room schoolhouses were combined with the Village School to create the Pittsford Central School District in 1942, a new high school was needed. The original section of Pittsford Sutherland High School was erected on the former Lomb estate in 1953.

Late Twentieth-Century Suburban Expansion: 1955 – present

Pittsford, like the rest of the country, saw real estate development plummet during the Great Depression and World War II, only to rebound during the housing boom that began in the late 1940s. During the post-war period, a combination of factors, including strong demand from returning service members eager to settle down in their own homes, increased automobile ownership, the availability of low-cost mortgages, and the use of mass production methods in housing construction, fueled rapid residential development in American suburbs.⁷

By the mid-1950s, the Post World War II wave of suburban growth in the town of Pittsford began to affect the Village. By the end of the decade, seven gasoline stations were operating within the village. Passenger rail service was discontinued in 1956. The village's Baptist and Methodist congregations abandoned small village churches for a new church located immediately south of the village. Saint Louis Church replaced the existing parish church with a large new brick church and parochial school on South Main Street in 1957. In 1954, a gas station was constructed across the front façade of the historic Phoenix Hotel and a few years later a serious fire threatened the building. To save this important village landmark from demolition, community newspaper publisher Andrew Wolfe purchased it and rehabilitated it for use as his company's offices.



In the 1950s, a gas station was constructed against the face of the historic Phoenix Hotel. Changes such as this spurred the founding of the community's preservation movement.

⁷ Ibid.

In the 1960s the pace of suburban growth accelerated and farmland south of the village was rapidly developed into new residential subdivisions. In 1963, a large suburban commercial shopping plaza was built a mile northwest of the village. As the surrounding area grew, residents became increasingly concerned about the effects of this growth on the village. Increasing traffic, demolition of historic buildings, commercial encroachment into historic neighborhoods, and the loss of open space led to the beginning of grass roots preservation efforts.

In the early 1960s the Little House, a historic ca. 1819 attorney's office, was threatened with demolition to make way for a parking lot driveway. A group of citizens and community leaders responded by organizing a preservation advocacy group named Historic Pittsford. The first action of the group was to save the Little House by moving it across the street to a site donated by landscape architect Fletcher Steele. Historic Pittsford has remained an effective voice for historic preservation until the present day.



When threatened with demolition, Pittsford citizens banded together to relocate and restore the ca. 1819 Little House

In 1971, the Hotel Stephany, an old railroad hotel, was demolished to make way for much larger, three-story, modern motel. Dissatisfaction with the appearance of the new building as well as concern over the increasing number of historic building demolitions convinced the Village Board it was time to enact a preservation ordinance regulating architectural alterations to building exteriors. At the same time the entire village was designated a local historic district. The Village of Pittsford was one of the first Upstate New York communities to take such action which is largely responsible for the Village retaining the historic appearance and charm it retains until the present day.

By the early 1970s, the Pittsford Central School District had overbuilt its facilities leading to the closure of the village elementary school. The building was sold to the Town of Pittsford for a dollar for use as the Town Recreation Center, a use that continues until the present day. By this time, the Pittsford Community Library had outgrown its building. The Library was relocated to a converted Star Market grocery store on State Street in 1973 and the former library, owned by the Village, became Village Hall. The transformation of Schoen Place into a retail area began during this period when the Pittsford Lumberyard and Schoen Brothers complex were converted into shops and restaurants.



Late 1970s view of South Main Street business district

After a lull during the 1970s, development in both the town and village resumed in the 1980s. In the village, two office parks, a residential subdivision, and individual homes filled almost all of the remaining vacant parcels of land. Village operated sewage treatment and water supply were consolidated with county systems. Early in the decade the New York Department of Transportation announced plans to widen the four streets leading to the village's Four Corners intersection. The plan was resisted by the Village Board of Trustees which succeeded in reducing the number of added traffic lanes and preserving on-street parking. A significant event in the 1980s occurred when a developer illegally moved railcars into the Grove Street neighborhood in hopes of developing a retail shopping plaza. Successful litigation by the Village forced the developer to cut up and remove the rail cars. The Village's action represented an increasing awareness by Village leadership that more needed to be done to protect the Village's unique qualities and its residential neighborhoods. In 1984 Historic Pittsford succeeded in listing 134 properties in the village in the State and National Registers of Historic Places.⁸

By the 1990s, suburban retail competition and the emergence of retail big box stores resulted in the replacement of traditional village retail services with specialty boutiques, offices, and real estate offices. To restore the village's business district as a destination, the Village Board implemented "storefront zoning" and allowed food serving uses by special permit. The closure of the T.J. Zornow bean mill in 1996 represented the end of warehouse/wholesale business on Schoen Place. The Village began a multi-year phased capital improvement program targeting Schoen Place and the Erie Canal waterfront including public amenities, docks and walkability enhancements. The municipal improvements were followed by private rehabilitation projects that included rehabilitation of the vacant flour mill and grain silo. The transformation of the canal waterfront resulted in the village becoming one of the region's most popular destinations.

⁸ The Pittsford Village National Register District was expanded in 2016 to include 511 properties.



Before and after views showing rehabilitation of the Pittsford Flour mill

In the first decade of the twentieth century, plans were proposed to close the village locations of the community library and high school. Recognizing the importance of these facilities as anchors essential to both the village's economic climate and the greater community's quality of life, citizens and Village leaders lead successful efforts to keep these facilities in the village, in central walkable locations. In 2004, the Village adopted a new comprehensive plan emphasizing walkability, traffic calming, traditional neighborhood planning, and historic preservation as tools essential to retaining the community's economic vitality and quality of life.



In 2006, the Town of Pittsford constructed a new, larger library on the site of the existing facility, thus keeping an important institutional anchor in the heart of the village.

Conclusion

Over the last sixty years, residents, business people, and government officials have worked cooperatively to preserve, enhance and revitalize Pittsford Village. Among the community's accomplishments are the restoration/rehabilitation of numerous village buildings, rejuvenation of historic village neighborhoods, the establishment of a historic preservation district, the redevelopment of the village's Erie Canal waterfront for commercial and recreational use, development of Village parks, and the preservation of farmland through the Town's purchase of development rights.

The village of Pittsford is notable for its exceptionally high degree of historic integrity. Most village buildings are highly intact, with hardly any historic buildings so extensively altered as to be considered noncontributing. Even more noteworthy than the individual buildings is the integrity of the entire village as a whole and its effectiveness as a tangible expression of two centuries of community growth. The interconnectedness of historic transportation networks, agriculture, industry, commerce, education, religion, and residential neighborhoods is clear in the buildings and in the streetscapes. All of these functional components are well represented in the surviving building stock and their spatial relationships are readily apparent. A particularly notable example is the Schoen Place area, where former warehouses are aligned with the Erie Canal and the former railroad tracks and also relate to the adjacent Pittsford Farm property, still in agricultural use. The survival of a substantial number of industrial buildings and of a working farm within the district offers a striking connection to the region's industrial and agricultural history.⁹



View of the village's Erie Canal waterfront

⁹ Comeau, Pittsford Village National Register Inventory Nomination Form

Pittsford has a strong tradition of engaged citizens. Vocal village residents have helped Pittsford avoid the fate of several neighboring communities which have been compromised by roadway volume enhancement projects, excessive parking lot construction, and demolition of historic buildings.

The presence of five houses of worship, three schools, the library, community recreation center, parks, town and village offices, and vibrant retail business district have kept the village functioning as the "downtown" for the surrounding town. The canal, walkable tree-shaded streets and restored historic structures provide an ambiance very different from the typical commercial strip. Despite its small size, the village contains over 250 individual services and businesses. Pittsford Village contains a variety of housing types and a mix of age groups. Over eighty percent of the village's housing stock is over fifty years old. Despite its age, real estate in the village is sought after because of the architectural appeal of the houses, the presence of sidewalks and street trees and the appeal of village living.

Today Pittsford is widely recognized for the success of its preservation efforts. The Village is fortunate to have an active citizenry committed to the preservation of a vital village center for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

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