

BUSHNELL'S BASIN: THE CANAL CREATES A COMMUNITY

Ketchum Road (Pittsford-Victor Road) was opened in 1812, providing a link between Canandaigua, Victor, and Rochester. It became a major stage route, and commercial activity centered around the need to provide taverns and shops for travelers. While Bushnell's Basin was a significant community on that stage route, it owes its major development to the Erie Canal.

By 1820, canal construction was approaching southwest Perinton and the hamlet of Bushnell's Basin. Because the topography was right, a "basin" or widewaters had been constructed which allowed canal traffic to turn around. John Hartwell and his son Oliver purchased a large section of land in the area which abutted the widewaters and constructed a store, warehouse and boatyard.

In addition, John contracted to build the embankment over which the canal would pass. Needless to say, both prospered and the area became known as Hartwell's Basin. As headquarters for the construction of the Great Embankment that would extend the canal over Irondequoit Creek to Pittsford and the terminus of the Erie Canal between 1821 and 1823, the Basin became a boom town. The Embankment itself raised the canal as much as 70 feet above the surrounding area in order to cross the Irondequoit Creek and valley. This extraordinary engineering feat was built by laborers who carried dirt, debris, and logs in wheelbarrows from nearby hills and fields to construct the culvert for Irondequoit Creek and the mile-long embankment.

During the building of the Erie Canal, engineers, laborers and canallers lived, worked, and played in the Basin. Taverns and businesses thrived. William Bushnell, an entrepreneur, bought out Oliver Hartwell, built a complex of boatyards, warehouses, stores and stables along the canal widewaters, and ultimately gave his name to the growing hamlet. Commercial enterprises took advantage of the safe and efficient transportation offered by the canal. The Rand Powder Company established itself in the area of today's Powder Mills Park. Area farmers also made use of the canal to ship their goods east and west. The community prospered.

Richardson's Tavern, perhaps having the largest bar in the East, was certainly among the most well-known of the canal taverns in the area. Horses and mules were quartered under the porches and regular travelers could find a spot in the straw on the third floor. The more well-to-do might stay with the tavern keeper. By the 1960's, however, the tavern was in such a state of disrepair that it was scheduled for demolition. Happily for Bushnell's Basin and Perinton, however, it was saved and is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It stands as a centerpiece for the Bushnell's Basin Historic District along with several other restored 19th century buildings.

Charles Dickinson and Cyrus Leonard, however, were fearful that the wild "canawlers" were endangering their children's morals, and gathered neighbors together to sing hymns and read scripture. In 1831 they built a small white clapboard church in the center of town. It served as a Congregational Church, a Methodist Church, an Episcopal mission, and a community church. Susan B. Anthony is said to have lectured there. It was rebuilt in 1873 and has had several additions since. More recently, it has been used for commercial purposes.

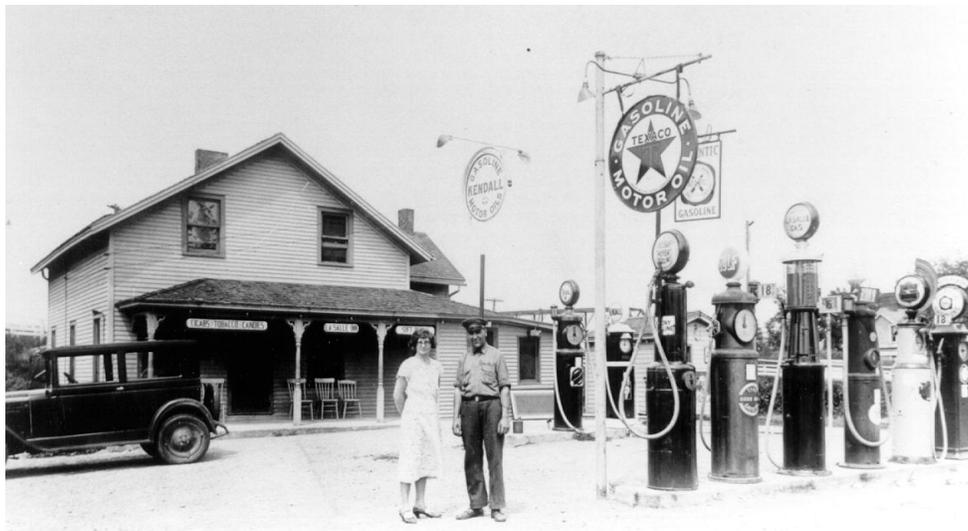
Along Ketchum Road (Pittsford-Victor Road/Route 96) and Kreag Road, small Greek revival houses and workmen's cottages fill the spaces between commercial buildings and farms. Bushnell's Basin Cemetery, founded in 1827, is located at the east end of the hamlet as was the Bushnell's Basin District School. Four or five smaller buildings make up what is known as the Canal Walk at the west end of the hamlet and complete the make-up of this 19th and 20th century canal town.

As other methods of transportation began to overtake the canal, Bushnell's Basin became

more and more a suburban community. In the early 20th century, the Rochester and Eastern Rapid Railway came through the hamlet, connecting Rochester with Geneva and also making possible easy access to and from the city for workers. The station was on Pittsford-Victor Road just to the west of today's Exxon-Mobil Station and the line passed over the canal just to the east of Richardson's Inn (the abutments are still visible). After World War II, Bushnell's Basin, like many other rural areas, attracted suburban development. By the 1960's, the decline of the canal as a commercial entity, the building of Route 490, and the growth of the strip mall and suburban subdivisions threatened what had been a quiet canal-side hamlet. Many of the small early 20th century homes had been demolished, were in a state of disrepair, or were in danger of being replaced by malls or office buildings, and farmland was fast disappearing. Some decisions had to be made.

In 1983, a Bushnell's Basin Community Plan was jointly drawn up by the Perinton Town Board, the Bushnell's Basin Merchants' Association, and the Bushnell's Basin Planning Committee. The plan encouraged rehabilitation of buildings and an organized approach to future development while recognizing the unique nature of this canal hamlet and farming community.

In 1986, an organization calling itself "Historic Bushnell's Basin" was formed, "dedicated to the promotion and preservation of the cultural and architectural heritage of Bushnell's Basin..." This group was strongly supportive of Perinton's Historic Preservation Ordinance and was instrumental in getting Bushnell's Basin's 1989 designation as an historic district in order to maintain its historical integrity as a canal hamlet and early agricultural community and to prevent further deterioration. The Town works closely with property owners in the district to maintain that small scale personality and charm that makes Bushnell's Basin attractive. The Historic Architecture Commission continues to work with property owners to guarantee that future changes to the area will be in keeping with the unique charm and vitality of this historic hamlet.



Casaretti's gas station in Bushnell's Basin circa 1920