

## BUSHNELL'S BASIN: The Canal Creates a Community

### *First of two parts*

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 the Bushnell's Basin area 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 area that would eventually be known as 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, the area prospered and 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 as 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.

In 1823, William Bushnell, an entrepreneur from Massachusetts who had subsequently settled in Victor, bought out the Hartwells' land claim in the Basin. Bushnell's company, Bushnell, Lyman, Wilmarth, & Co., soon made him the wealthiest and largest landowner in the Basin and the hamlet's name was changed from Hartwell's to Bushnell's Basin. The company widened the basin itself, added a fleet of canal boats, built more warehouses, a general store that supplied the canal packet boats, and a distillery. (It was cheaper to ship grain in its liquid form, alcohol, than in its solid form). According to an oft-told Bushnell family story, during the 1830's period of religious revival in the northeast, when the consumption of alcohol was seen to be a significant evil if consumed for other than "medicinal purposes," William "got religion," rushed to his Bushnell's Basin distillery, smashed the kegs and threw them into the canal, swearing never to touch another drop. Apparently he kept his promise.

With the opening of the canal, taverns and businesses thrived. 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 probably stayed with the tavern keeper. Area farmers made use of the canal to ship their goods east and west. Commercial enterprises also took advantage of the safe and efficient transportation offered by the canal. Along Ketchum Road (Pittsford-Victor Road/Route 96) and Kreag Road, extending out from the hamlet center, small Greek revival houses and workmen's cottages gradually filled 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. This canal community prospered.



*William Bushnell*