

EGYPT HISTORIC DISTRICT



Cyrus Packard's Tavern

The Early Years

The hamlet of Egypt has been a part of Perinton since the 1790's, which qualifies it as one of the town's oldest settlements. In a certain sense, Egypt mirrors the history of the area as it developed from a pioneer agricultural settlement, to a village, to a suburban part of a 20th and 21st century community. Recognizing that, the Town of Perinton designated the hamlet of Egypt as an historic district in 2001.

The Ramsdells and the Packards were among the earliest white families to settle in the area. Thomas Ramsdell purchased 320 acres of land in 1802 in the part of Perinton that would become known as Egypt and built a house at what would become #7516 Pittsford-Palmyra Road. In 1807 he sold 197 acres of that land to his son Gideon who was both a surveyor and a teacher in Macedon and who built his house on Mason Road (#173). The Cyrus Packard family also purchased land in Egypt and Cyrus opened a tavern there in 1806. Settlers were drawn by the fertile soil and the abundant water supply, and the area became not only a significant agricultural settlement, but also an important stagecoach village.

The Egypt of the early 1800's had Roswell Everett's tannery, Daniel Whitman's blacksmith shop, a school, a Methodist church that served as both a social and religious gathering place, a cemetery, three popular taverns, and a grist mill, in addition to its homes and farmsteads. Egypt was about half way between Rochester and Canandaigua on the main stage route, making the "honorable business" of running a tavern lucrative and popular. Cyrus Packard's tavern was the site of Perinton's first town meeting on April 6, 1813, when Packard himself was named Perinton's first Supervisor. According to various accounts, the tavern was later moved to the Ranney property and partly incorporated into

the barn which burned in 1918. In 1950, Leander Conover of Mason Road recalled a large hollow filled with stones which was uncovered every time it was plowed. This, he felt, was the cellar hole of the old tavern. Packard also ran a store and the grist mill.

Oliver Loud, who moved to Egypt in 1806, owned and operated a tavern in the area of today's Town Centre Plaza. . Apparently, lumber was so scarce at the time that he had to use boards from his wagon for the cabin. He built a second, larger tavern in 1825. The two-story structure with its ample porches served not only as a tavern and inn, but also as a store, a mail drop, a salesroom for traveling salesmen, a place for transient shows, and a courtroom where Loud's father-in-law, a justice of the peace, attempted to settle arguments among hot-headed canal workers. During the Civil War, after training at the Methodist Church, troops naturally went next door to the tavern to relax. Loud's Tavern was used by various owners as a tavern and hotel up to the turn of the twentieth century. In 1985, the building was moved to Bushnell's Basin where for a time it became a 21st century version of a tavern and inn, before being converted into a private residence.

Olney Staples ran the third and largest tavern in the hamlet, which was located in the vicinity of the Quailbush subdivision. Its size, location, and facilities, particularly its stable and change of horses, made it particularly attractive to the stage line, splitting the 25 mile six-hour trip between Palmyra and Rochester in half. The building itself was a frame structure with a deep rubblestone foundation. An 8'square ash bin in the basement held up 15" square hand-hewn beams. Each room had 8'x8' or 8'x4' square posts in the corners, and the floorboards were 20" wide. The rafters were secured with 12" wooden pegs to the 9" square ridgepole. Six fireplaces heated the rooms. As with most taverns, the first floor included a tap room, as well as a ladies' parlor, a dining room, and a kitchen. The second floor had a 12'x20' ballroom and guest bedrooms. A ghost was said to haunt the northwest guest room, until it was discovered that the "ghost" was the wind across the top of a bottle lodged in a window frame in the room.

Because the taverns were not only places to eat, drink, and sleep, but they were also places where the local people could meet and discuss politics, business, and the other issues of the day, it is not surprising that the three tavern owners themselves were active in the community. Cyrus Packard not only served as Perinton's first supervisor, but was also at various times assessor and Commissioner of Highways. Oliver Loud was Overseer of Highways and School Inspector. Staples served as Commissioner of Highways and School Commissioner.

Unfortunately, most of the commercial buildings that marked those early days of Egypt are gone. However, the farmhouse at 7516 Pittsford-Palmyra Road that belonged to the Thomas Ramsdell family and that was built around 1815 is still standing and qualifies as being Perinton's oldest residence. It is one of only several Federal style buildings in the town. Gideon Ramsdell's house also still stands, as does another early 1800's farmhouse. Both are on Mason Road, at 173 and 353, respectively. Two other houses, 7339 and 7215 Pittsford-Palmyra Road, were probably built in the 1820's.

Located as it was on a main travel route and in a fertile area, Egypt was known for its excellent agriculture, even in the years of "no summers" in the early decades of the 1800's. It was in those years that Egypt probably got its name, since the crops there were plentiful while those in other places were not. According to some stories, the name derives from the Bible story of the Israelite migration into Egypt, a land of abundance, to escape famine in their own land. In addition to being a fertile farming area, Egypt was also the center of politics and commerce for the growing community. However, the hamlet was not destined to remain at the center of growth. Revolutionary changes would come to Western New York in the 1820's.

The Middle Years

In the years between 1800 and 1825, Egypt was a center of politics and commerce for the town of Perinton. The coming of the Erie Canal in 1825 changed that. No longer was the center of activity along a stage route, for commerce and travel now centered around the canal, several miles to the north of the hamlet of Egypt in the village of Fairport. The hamlet did not lose its identity as a community, but its growth was slowed, and it ceased being the center of business and politics.

However, the subsequent years of the 19th century saw Egypt continue to thrive as an agricultural community anchored by the Ramsdell farms on Mason and Pittsford-Palmyra Roads, small businesses and stores, the church and school, and a growing number of residences along Loud, Mason, and Pittsford-Palmyra Roads. Gideon Ramsdell's home on Mason Road was purportedly a station on the Underground Railroad and also a place where Tonawanda and Buffalo Indians encamped during the summer months. Philemon Austin built his house at 7420 Pittsford-Palmyra Road and apparently manufactured pumps. The house at 353 Mason Road, which was built in 1820, had an iron foundry where the Lapham family manufactured "Egypt Plows." The next family to live there, the Conovers, added to the house in 1860 and ran a farm and a creamery there. Several other houses, including 30 Loud Road, built in 1840 by a member of the Loud family, and 7596, 7383, 7489, 7725 and 7752 Pittsford-Palmyra Road, built between the 1830's and the 1870's, add to the area's mid 19th century architectural legacy. The building that formerly stood on the corner of Loud and Pittsford-Palmyra Roads known as Nelson's Store was constructed during this period and served both as a store and a post office. It continued as a store and a gas station through much of the 20th century and was recently razed as part of the Route 31 expansion project.

Other structures in the hamlet date from the early decades of the 20th century. District #4 School (also known as the Fairport Grange), at 7700 Pittsford-Palmyra Road, was built in 1908 of molded concrete, a popular, inexpensive, and durable product that was popular at the time. Now serving as an office, it is a wonderful example of how an older building can be adapted for today's use. 7245 Pittsford-Palmyra Road, an American four-square, was built in 1920 of the same molded concrete as the school. At the west end of the hamlet at 7200 Pittsford-Palmyra Road is Robinson's Garage. Built in 1924, it is a reminder of those days when family-operated gas stations and repair shops were common and an important part of the community. In addition, several homes on the north side of Pittsford-Palmyra Road reflect the Colonial Revival style popular in the 1930's and 40's.

Egypt was linked to the rest of Perinton by the Rochester, Syracuse, and Eastern Interurban trolley, which began operating in 1906. Coming into Perinton from East Rochester, the trolley line was carried across Baird Road on a bridge, went through what is today BOCES I into the village of Fairport where it ran along the north side of the canal. Crossing at Turk Hill Road, it ran south behind today's Town Hall and Community Center and then east to Egypt, where it crossed Pittsford-Palmyra Road and continued on to Syracuse. The Egypt Fire Hall is located on the site of the former Egypt trolley stop. The ten trolley stops within Perinton served to connect outlying areas like Egypt with the center of activity in the village.

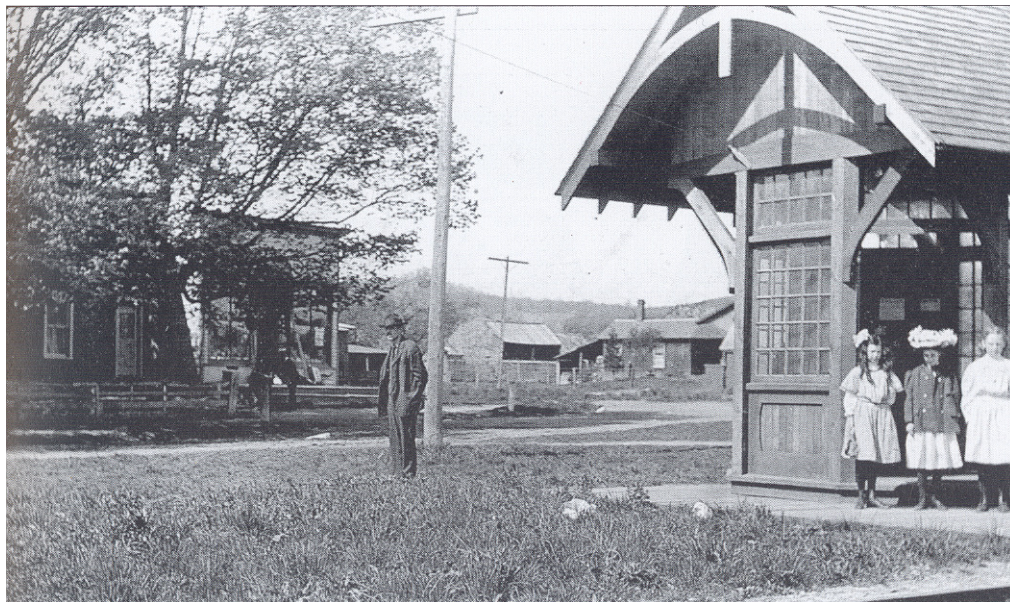
Around the turn of the century, Egypt became one of several food processing centers in Perinton. At the corner of Loud and Pittsford-Palmyra Roads, Frank Monihan and John Martindale opened a small evaporating plant or dry house, which dried and sold local produce. By 1904, they had developed a working system of canning those products, and the Egypt Canning Company was born. In the early years, much of the preparation was done by local farm women who picked up the whole vegetables and fruits during the day

and returned them in the morning ready for the canning process. By 1908, the company had added automatic machinery and had enlarged the facility. The business was incorporated in 1916 and became known as Comstock Canning Company. Growing through the 20's, 30's, and 40's, by 1957 the company joined several other canners to form Comstock Foods. The company provided regular employment for many Egypt area residents as well as for seasonal migrant workers and by the 1950's was pumping \$300,000 into the local economy, canning, among other things, applesauce, sliced apples and beans.

During the first half of the 20th century, while not the center of activity like the village of Fairport, the hamlet of Egypt was a viable community with a definite identity within the town of Perinton.



Egypt Canning Co. on Route 31



R.S. and E. Trolley Stop on Route 31 in Egypt.. Loud Road is in the background

The Later Years & the Future

The latter part of the 20th century into the beginning of the 21st brought further change to the hamlet of Egypt, not all of it positive. Although Comstock Foods (the former Egypt Canning Company), a division of the Borden Company in the 1960's, and a division of Curtice-Burns in the 1970's, was processing up to 200 tons of beans per day and employing about 255 seasonal workers during that period, its future was uncertain. Eventually, as a result of consolidation and reorganization, the Egypt plant was closed for good in 1982. Today, portions of the plant have been demolished and the remainder has had little care. The water tower, however, a recognizable visual sight, remains. Towers of that type were common fixtures in most towns and villages and Egypt's tower is the only one that remains in Perinton.

The old Staples tavern, in the vicinity of today's Quailbush subdivision, was torn down, and Oliver Loud's tavern was moved from the current site of the Town Centre Plaza to Bushnell's Basin. Traffic increased on Route 31, but there were few reasons to stop in the old hamlet that was increasingly surrounded by suburban subdivisions. On the other hand, several new buildings were constructed to house a variety of businesses. Perinton's hike/bike trail, using the old Rochester-Syracuse and Eastern trolley bed, became part of the hamlet. In the late 1980's, with a growing interest in historic preservation, and after Perinton had enacted an Historic Preservation Ordinance, the Ranney house and barns at 7516 Pittsford-Palmyra Road were designated historic landmarks, as was the old schoolhouse/grange further east at 7700 Pittsford-Palmyra Road. A number of other houses in the hamlet were surveyed for possible future historic designation. Egypt was certainly not about to give up its identity.

During the 1990's, an effort began to designate the entire hamlet as an historic district. The criteria for designation require that the area contains properties that would qualify for individual designation and that the area constitutes a distinct section of the town. Egypt clearly qualified on both points. There are four individual landmarks in the district: the former schoolhouse/grange hall; the Ranney homestead, probably the oldest frame house in Perinton; and farmhouses at 7725 and 7752 Pittsford-Palmyra Road. Egypt has been a distinct area of the town since 1813 when Perinton held its first town meeting in Packard's Tavern, one of the local stagecoach inns. It continued to be a center of agriculture and the canning business well into the 20th century, and it still maintains a vibrant identity today. Designation as an historic district came in March 2000.

Since then, the hamlet has seen some new building and there are more plans for the future. The historic architecture commission has worked and will continue to work with businesses to insure that new structures are appropriate to the historic nature of the area. In addition, the town's Egypt Subarea Plan, formulated in 2003, provides development guidelines. While there are some plans for commercial and residential development in the area, to date there are only two residential projects under construction (the Trolley Brook Estates and Carmel Estates subdivisions). The old Nelson's Store, unfortunately beyond repair, was razed in order to align Loud and Mason Roads in conjunction with the Route 31 expansion project. The Ramsdell-Ranney property has become part of adjacent Northern Nurseries, thereby saving Perinton's oldest frame house and preserving a segment of the area's agricultural heritage. Egypt Park, Lollypop Farm, the hike/bike trail and sections of the Crescent Trail offer recreational opportunities in the area. The challenge for the future will be to allow development while insuring that the small scale rural ambiance of the hamlet is preserved. In any case, the hamlet of Egypt, Perinton's first area of settlement, is very much alive and well in the 21st century and will likely continue to reinvent itself as it has so many times in the past.

