

## The Phelps and Gorham Purchase and the Northfield Area

Before the coming of the white man, members of the Iroquois nation lived on the lands of Western New York. While the Iroquois nation had been allies of the British during the Revolution, the Treaty of 1783 ending the war made no provision for them vis-à-vis their land. Further confusing the land issue was the fact that both Massachusetts and New York claimed the lands of Western New York. Eventually New York gained governmental control of the land, and Massachusetts reserved preemption rights (title rights and the right to sell) .

In early 1788 Massachusetts granted Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham and their partners the right to purchase 6 million acres of Indian land in Western New York. In the summer of that year, a council took place at Buffalo Creek, the Indian town at the present city of Buffalo. Among those present were the Rev. Mr. Kirkland, appointed by Massachusetts to oversee any treaty; a number of interpreters; chiefs of the Onondagas, Cayugas, and Mohawks; Joseph Brant; John Butler; members of the Seneca Nation; and of course Oliver Phelps and others who were interested in purchasing the land. The resulting deal, which cost £2100 (about \$5,000) in New York money, about one-half cent per acre, essentially cleared any Indian title to 2.6 million acres of land and opened the door to white settlement. The boundaries of the tract reached from the Pennsylvania border in the south to Lake Ontario in the north, and from the Genesee River on the west to Seneca Lake on the east.

Surveyors quickly created 102 approximately thirty-six square mile “townships,” which were then sold to settlers and speculators. In 1796 the name “Northfield” was given to a 220 square mile area that would become Webster, Penfield, Perinton, Irondequoit, Brighton, Pittsford, Henrietta, and the eastern portion of the city of Rochester. In 1808, for some reason, the name was changed to “Boyle.”

Both sales and settlement of the Northfield area were rapid. While the 1800 census showed a population of only 398, the subsequent (1810) census showed a population of 2,360. The area called Boyle was bought up by a number of different investors and settlers. One of the individual purchasers was William Walker, who bought Township 12 (Perinton) for £1,056 in August of 1789. Walker, his brother Caleb, and his cousin Glover Perrin, surveyed the land into 54 lots of approximately 320 acres each and another dozen of somewhat larger size in the western part of the town near Irondequoit Creek. Perrin remained as the first settler in town and gave his name to the community, which was established in 1812. Although he and other family members wanted the town to be called Perrin’s Town, the State legislature had different ideas and enacted the following on May 26, 1812:

*“Be it enacted by people of the State of New York, represented in the Senate and Assembly, that from and after the first Monday of April next, all that part of the Town of Boyle, in the County of Ontario, foresaid known, and distinguished by the township number 12, in the fourth range of townships in said county, is hereby erected into a separate town by the name of PERRINTON; and that the first town meeting shall be held at the house of Cyrus Packard, in said town.”*

Townspople from Lenox, Massachusetts, bought the tract that became Brighton in 1814. The town of Pittsford was purchased by the Association of Stone and Dodge, a family group from Washington County, and was incorporated as a town in 1814, taking its name from the Vermont hometown of local war hero Caleb Hopkins. The part of Boyle that would become Henrietta, Irondequoit, and Webster was deeded in 1790 to Robert Morris, financier, for a cost of about six cents an acre. A number of subsequent transactions occurred, and in 1818 the town of Henrietta was incorporated, named after the daughter of Sir William Pulteney. Township 14 became the town of Irondequoit in 1839. Caleb Lyon was the first one to purchase land in what would become in 1840 the town of Webster, named after Daniel Webster.

Thus, by 1840, the original Northfield/Boyle area had been settled and organized into the towns that are recognizable today. The remainder of the Phelps and Gorham purchase was developed in much the same way. Within two years of the purchase, by 1790, all 102 townships had been sold, 50 to individual buyers and the rest to Robert Morris. The nation was on its way west.

