

GLEANINGS FROM THE CORN FLATS

Exactly where is Old Niskayuna?

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article marks the beginning of a monthly series undertaken by the town's Historical Committee to help research, teach and preserve Niskayuna's past. We hope you will find these articles, which usually will appear on the first week of the month in *Your Niskayuna*, enjoyable, enlightening and entertaining. Furthermore, we encourage any past or present town residents with information, resources or stories to share about Niskayuna's distinctive history to contact the town historian at dbrennan@niskayuna.org.*

BY DENIS BRENNAN

Niskayuna Town Historian

Since becoming Niskayuna town historian, several people have asked me to identify the precise location of Old Niskayuna.

Recently I came across a "Talk of the Town" essay published in February 1990 by former town Supervisor Ed Reilly, which touched upon this question. It inspired me to attempt a response.

Laura Robertson, Niskayuna's town planner, defines the town boundaries for Old Niskayuna as follows: West of Balltown Road, north of Route 7 and south of Providence Avenue. Many town residents would certainly agree, although some could fairly observe that the town's official internal sectional boundaries are subject to modification.

In that light, however, I believe there is a broader historical consideration. Given that few things are more constant than change, present-day Old Niskayuna might more properly be recognized as "new" Old Niskayuna and, in a similar fashion, what might be then termed old Old Niskayuna post-dated an even older Old Niskayuna. Where indeed is Old Niskayuna?

Niskayuna's first town historian, Lloyd Brinkman, identified three historic districts in Niskayuna based on the 1866 Beers' map of the town: The Niskayuna Hamlet in the vicinity of the railroad station; the Settlement of Rosendale near Lock 7 Road; and the Aqueduct Historic District, where the Erie Canal once crossed the Mohawk.

Interestingly, these three districts reasonably identify Niskayuna both in 1866 and today. Niskayuna Hamlet recalls the Native Americans who cultivated the agricultural flats that provided our town's name; Rosen-



IMAGE PROVIDED

The Beers' 1866 map of Niskayuna

dale, perhaps originating from the Dutch word "rosendaal" (valley of roses), recalls our earliest European settlers; and finally, Aqueduct Historic District recalls not only early 19th-century technology, but the modern technology that remains important in our town in the 21st century.

Indeed, the past is prologue.

Thus, before our new Old Niskayuna, as currently defined, there was a hamlet that could reasonably then be called old Old Niskayuna. However, neither was the Niskayuna Hamlet truly Old Niskayuna.

Another and larger Niskayuna — an older Old Niskayuna — existed before Europeans commandeered native land, agriculture and language. Our town's name, as is widely known, emerged from a Mohawk term for "great cornfields." According to other resources, these fields included sections of Watervliet, Halfmoon and the first ward of Schenectady, as well as land on both sides of the Mohawk River.

Niskayuna may be the smallest town in Schenectady County today, but it was once a much larger, sprawling agricultural food basket. So, does this speculation provide a definitive answer? Obviously not! "Old" may be easily defined by Webster, but fully understanding the term is cloud-

Gleanings

Continued from page 8

ed by perspective. My historian's perspective measures "old" less in number of years than in substantive change.

In that regard, it seems to me that an argument could be made that Niskayuna has changed less today than Beers' 1866 map.

Finally, one cannot help also asking, how much has it changed since a time before interlopers arrived from Europe? Annually, Native Americans planted, cultivated and produced a harvest that sought to generate prosperity, peace and security.

Do we seek anything less today? Perhaps then the true answer to the title question is simpler than we realize: New or old, there is only Niskayuna!