A Brief History of Gallatin

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The Town of Gallatin has had a multi-faceted past, reflecting its heritage of Dutch, English, and New England traditions. To begin with, the town we know as "Gallatin" today did not always have this name or even the geographical boundaries of the present town. It was not until 1830 that modern Gallatin was formed from what was then called Ancram. Columbia County itself had been created out of a part of Albany County in 1786. Soon afterwards, in 1788, eight townships were established in the county. [Today there are 18.] One of these was named Livingston, comprising what are now Ancram, Copake, Gallatin and Taghkanic.

In 1803 this town of Livingston was again divided, creating Granger (renamed Taghkanic in 1814) and Gallatin. But this "Gallatin" consisted of what are now both Ancram and Gallatin. The name "Gallatin" was given the area to honor Albert Gallatin, who was then Secretary of the Treasury and one of the most popular political heroes of the time. In fact, the name "Gallatin" was given to several American counties, towns and even a river – places the man himself never saw. In 1814 the name was changed to Ancram, after the Livingston family home in Scotland. Between 1814 and 1830, therefore, there was no town called "Gallatin." It was in 1830 that this large tract named "Ancram" was divided down the middle from north to south with the eastern half keeping the name Ancram and the western half taking the revived name of "Gallatin."

Gallatin is one of the southernmost towns in Columbia County, once part of Livingston Manor, the 160,000 acre manor of the Livingston family. Robert Livingston [1654-1728], the founder and First Lord of the Manor, was born in Scotland but grew up in Rotterdam, Holland, where his family had fled for religious and political reasons. In Rotterdam, then a leading European financial and business center, Robert received the education in business and practical politics that he later put to such successful use. Robert immigrated to Albany in 1674, working as a fur trader and clerk, capitalizing on his fluency in both Dutch and English. All within a few years, he became Albany Town Clerk, Clerk of the Board of Indian Commissioners, and Secretary to Nicholas van Rensselaer, patroon of Rensselaerwyck. By the time he was 32, Robert Livingston was one of the richest and most powerful men in the state. His marriage to van Rensselaer's widow in 1679 assured even greater social standing and political influence. He went into politics, becoming a member of the governor's council and the Provincial Assembly.

Livingston, who held the position of Clerk of the Board of Indian Commissioners, soon was buying large tracts of land from the local Indians. In 1686 he received an official patent from the Governor, making it all legal. He was now Lord of a 250 square mile Manor – the Livingston Land Grant of more than 160,000 acres. Settlers were not quick to arrive, however. In 1702 there were only four or five cottages in this huge wilderness of Livingston Manor, "men that live in vassalage...too poor to be farmers." More came, however, in response to what seemed at first to be inviting terms, especially after the dispersal of the Palatine settlers from Germantown. The new colonists were compelled

to sign contracts, however, that made them virtual serfs. Settlers could lease the land "for lives or for years" but could not buy it. As part of the contract, each year tenants were obliged to give the Lord part of their wheat crop, "four fatt hens" and a designated amount of free labor. [As historian S.E. Morison, asked, "What did the Livingstons do with all those chickens?"] Harsh lease restrictions caused tenant dissatisfaction from the beginning, culminating in the next century in the explosive Anti-Rent Wars of the 1840s.

Geographically, Gallatin is hilly, "a poor upland," and never was good farming country, a factor which has shaped its history. The highest point in the Town is Mattashuck Hill, also known as Signal Rock, (elevation 1104 feet) south of Lake Taghkanic. The area is now known as Green Hill, because of the many evergreen trees in the area. Many years ago the United States Geological Survey erected a flagpole to mark the site, but it was blown down by a storm in 1918, according to local legend. Signal Rock is the name given this high point, because it was used by the Indians for fires and smoke signals that could be seen for many miles.

Mahican Indians originally lived in the Gallatin area. When white men first arrived, the land was sparsely settled, after many years of warfare between Mahican and Mohawk tribes. The Mahicans welcomed the newcomers, selling them land and creating treaties. It was a Mahican clan, the Winnebagos, that sold Robert Livingston some of the land that became Livingston Manor. The actual date of the first white settlement in what is now Gallatin cannot be verified, but conservative historians cannot place it much before 1740. The standard history of Columbia County (1878) names Hans Dings, "a Hollander," as the first settler.

Surprisingly comprehensive records documenting the Palatine emigration provide more reliable information. Dings was German, not Dutch. These contemporary records show that Hans Jacob Dinges, his wife and four children were in the sixth party of Palatines that came to New York in 1710. (Church books show that the ancestral home of the Hudson Valley Dings family was the German village of Hochstenbach.) The Dings family settled first in the hamlet called Annsberg, one of the four Palatine settlements that comprised Germantown. "Jacob Dings of Annsberg" was listed as one of the Palatine volunteers who took part in the abortive British expedition against the French in Canada in 1711. Hans Jacob Denkes (then so spelled) appeared on the tax rolls in the North Ward in 1717/18 and continued to be listed there until 1737/38. He was surveyor of fences in the North Ward in 1722. In 1723 the names of Hans Dings and Adam Dings (his son) appear in the Dutchess County Supervisor's Records as witnesses to a will.

These German colonists, called Palatines from the part of Germany where many of them came from, were brought to New York by the British to manufacture naval stores – in an impractical scheme that soon failed. Contemporary records describe the miserable conditions that prevailed in the Palatine camps within a couple of years of their settlement. The winter of 1712-1713 was especially severe. Promised food supplies never arrived and famine resulted. "They boil grass and the children eat the leaves of the trees, "an eyewitness reported. Starvation and deprivation were so horrendous that the colonists tried to escape to other parts of the Hudson Valley. Some got to the Schoharie

Valley, others to New Jersey, and some sought another home, in the wilderness to the east.

There is no documentation for what actually occurred. Tradition has it that Hans Dings was following the course of Roeliff Jansen Kill when he came across an Indian's wigwam "in a lovely glade." The friendly Indian invited Dings to settle there. Dings returned to the Manor and told the Lord of the Manor (presumably Philip Livingston at this time) about the offer. Livingston sent for the Indian and had a lease drawn up. This would have been in the area now called Silvernails. The Dings family lived there for several generations, until the Livingston Manor proprietor of the time realized that the Ding farm boundaries included more land that the lease called for. He had the land re-surveyed, cutting off a very desirable piece of land with a mill privilege. This made the Dings occupant so angry that he sold his lease back to Livingston and moved to Pennsylvania. The Dings Family cemetery, located off the Silvernails Road, is the oldest cemetery in Gallatin, dating from before 1748.

In 1825 Livingston descendants (now beginning to sell off pieces of the estate) sold the Dings farm to John Silvernail. Silvernail's son Egbert continued farming there until the late 1800s, when he sold it to Jacob Duntz. At one time there was a railroad station at Silvernails, a post office and a grist mill. The railroad station sign was salvaged and hangs on a barn near the Roe-Jan Farm on Silvernails Road The original house built by the Dings family has been described as having been constructed of heavy timbers, some 20 inches square. When the building was torn down at the beginning of the 19th century, several documents were found hidden in the rafters – some in Dutch, some in English – including a servant girl's indenture papers. Another story tells how, when excavation work for a new foundation was going on near the site, a number of human skeletons were found, as well as arrowheads and flint spear tips, in what may have been an Indian burial ground.

The only church now standing in the town is the Gallatin Reformed Church, on County Route Seven. It was established in 1748 as the Dutch Reformed Protestant Church, with a simple Dutch style wooden building. In 1823 the old church building was condemned and a new one constructed just north of it. In 1872 an addition was added to house the pipe organ, and there was further renovation in 1874. The church has been known by a number of names through the years, and some residents still refer to it as "the Vedder Church," honoring Herman Vedder (1777-1873), who was pastor of the church for some 61 years. A monument in the churchyard commemorates his long service. A historic marker on the county road indicates the location of the Vedder family farm, given to Vedder in 1804 by John Livingston with a "life lease," not expecting that Vedder would live another 69 years. Some of the tombstones in the cemetery adjoining the church date from before the Revolution. The church's remarkably fine pipe organ, dating from 1872, was completely rebuilt in 1969, thanks to Ruth Swanton, the organist at the time, and her husband. Mrs. Swanton's organ recital at the church was a major feature of the Town's celebration of its 150th anniversary in 1980. A plaque in the church honors the Swantons.

Another of the early settlements was Snyderville. This hamlet through the years has borne the names of various families that lived there – not only Snyder, but also Mink ("Mink Hollow") and Weaver ("Weaver Hollow"). Also called West Gallatin at one time, it is located in the northwest corner of the town, on Doove (also spelled Dove) Creek, at the junction of County Route Eight, Snyderville Road and Taghkanic road. The early settlement contained a store, hotel, gristmill, plaster mill, cider distillery, blacksmith shop and half a dozen houses. One of these, called "Whitehall," was the largest, most imposing, and only painted house in the area. It was a landmark, and references to property being located "on the road to Whitehall" will be found in old deeds. When the Snyders bought the mill in the 19th century, the area became known as Snyderville.

There was once a church about a mile east of Snyderville. In 1858 a Methodist congregation, with the financial backing of Henry Younghance of a prominent Gallatin family, constructed a simple frame church building, painted brown. The church was abandoned about 1900, when church membership declined. The small cemetery nearby, with no early graves, has been neglected over the years, but is now maintained by the Highway Department. Traces of the foundation of the old church building have been found, but the building itself is gone. The schoolhouse nearby (on County Route Eight) was in use from 1861 until 1950. It is on the National Register of Historic Places.

In the same area, about half a mile east of Snyderville, off of County Route Eight, is Karwacki Road (named for the farm family there). South of here was once located an unusual settlement known as Stovepipe Alley, because of the stove pipe chimneys protruding from the peculiar sod houses of the two dozen or so families that lived there. They are thought to have been descendants of Indians and the Palatine Germans. They made their living by making and selling baskets, similar to the now highly-collectable "Taghkanic baskets." The people themselves have vanished, but the name "Stovepipe Alley" still appears on maps. Farther to the east along County Route Eight, past the Parkway, is Pond Lily Pond. At one time, ice blocks were cut there and stored in the still-standing ice house.

In the northeast corner of the town is Suydam, on Route 82, near the junction of County Routes Eight and Eleven. This was once a thriving hamlet, located on the Salisbury Turnpike, the principal route from Connecticut, through Ancram, to the Hudson River. The stagecoach inn, dating from 1798, was a popular resting stop for drovers bringing livestock to the river for shipment to market. The name comes from a Dr. Jacob Suydam, who had his office there from 1798 until 1822. Around 1800, Dr. Suydam donated land for a schoolhouse, which burned down in 1918, but was replaced by another building which was used as a school until 1955, the last one-room schoolhouse in Gallatin.

Because of its location on Roeliff Jansen Kill, Gallatinville was the largest settlement in the early town, with a railroad station, a hotel, stores, a grist mill, a plaster mill, two blacksmith shops, a post office and about a dozen houses in the 19th century. The log schoolhouse that existed there is said to have been the first school in the area. (The one-room schoolhouse that replaced this building is now the Town Hall.) The flour and gristmill built there by Robert Livingston in 1742 and later improved became an

important industry. During the Revolutionary War the mill produced flour to feed Washington's troops. Later, in 1830, when Gallatin became a town, it was in Gallatinville that the first Town Meeting was held, with 55 positions created to tend to Town needs. The sign for the railroad station now hangs on a local barn.

An important part of Gallatin's early economic history is now only a name. About a mile and a half southwest of Gallatinville (on the old Nobletown Turnpike and what is now County Route Seven) was located Spaulding Furnace. This plow furnace and foundry was established by Moses Spaulding around 1840, on what came to be called Spaulding Creek. The furnace produced around 125 plows a year. The shop went through several owners, but was abandoned in 1910. A historic marker is on the site.

The breakup of Livingston Manor around the middle of the 19th century, after more than a century and a half, was a decisive point in the history of the State, of Columbia County, and of Gallatin. The long-festering discontent resulting from the harsh terms of land tenure lead to the violence of the Anti-Rent Wars of the 1840s, with rebellious farmers disguising themselves as Indians to prevent identification. There were no major clashes in Gallatin itself, though some of the worst of the violent confrontations regarding tenant rights occurred in neighboring Taghkanic.

In 1849 the State Attorney General filed several lawsuits for the recovery of land, to test the validity of leases in various counties. The test case for Columbia County ["The People of the State of New York v. Herman Livingston"] was over a tract of land in Gallatin. At first the court gave a decision favorable to the State, but this was reversed on appeal. Although the judge agreed that the leaseholding system was against the welfare of the people and "antagonistical to free institutions," he conceded that the state constitution and legal precedent protected the Livingston land titles. He ruled, reluctantly, in favor of Herman Livingston. Although the Livingston deeds repeatedly were tested and were held to be inviolate, in the course of time the land was sold off voluntarily, as old deeds will show. On the face of it, the Anti-Rent movement seemed to be a failure, but it strongly influenced state and even national politics, helping to destroy the manorial system, giving farmers at long last the right to own their own farms.

The roads through Gallatin were important major thoroughfares even in the earliest days, meeting the needs of moving livestock, agricultural products and even bar iron and cast iron goods by oxcart from eastern New York, Connecticut and Massachusetts to the Hudson River. The Salisbury Turnpike (which went through Suydam) was a vital road link. Another important road was the Nobletown Turnpike, which led to Hillsdale and Great Barrington to the east and north. Rail service came after the Civil War, in 1874, with the Rhinebeck and Connecticut Railroad. The line ran from Rhinecliff on the Hudson to Boston Corners, with stops at Copake, Ancram, Gallatinville, Silvernails, Jackson Corners, and Elizaville. Financial problems developed, however, and in 1882 the railroad line (of about 35 miles) was transferred to the Hartford and Connecticut Western. In 1907 this line was taken over by the Central New England Railway. Business continued successfully until after the First World War, when highway improvements led to the predominance of trucks and passenger cars. Business fell off so

much that the Central New England Railway went out of business in 1938.

The largest body of water in the Town is Lake Taghkanic. Mahican Indians, the first settlers along its shores, gave it this name, meaning "water enough." Later it was called Cobies Pond, from the Palatine Jacobi family that settled there. Still later, it was named Lake Charlotte, supposedly after the housekeeper of the Livingston home there. By the end of the 19th century, it was a major resort. Dr. McRae Livingston donated the lake and some surrounding land (150 acres in all) to New York State in 1929, with the provision that the name be changed to Lake Taghkanic.

The State subsequently acquired through purchase and the power of eminent domain additional land to create the present Lake Taghkanic State Park of 1569 acres, mostly in Gallatin, but partly in Taghkanic. In 1933, men of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the New Deal public works project, cleaned up the 500 acre eastern section, constructing a beach, a bathhouse, cabins and camping ground. The legal power of the State to take over private land for the public good was exercised in the early 1950s when about 20% of the property owners along the lakefront refused to sell their land for the Park. By 1954 the Taconic State Parkway had been extended as far north as Taghkanic and Route 82, giving easy access to the Park, making it a prime tourist attraction.

Extension of the Taconic State Parkway in the last half-century has been a major factor in the Town's growth. The Parkway, designed as a scenic highway for pleasure driving, was built in several stages beginning in 1926. At first it went only as far north as Peekskill in Westchester County. The highway came as far north as Gallatin only in 1954. With access to the area thus dramatically improved, the population of Gallatin grew 267% between 1960 and 1990. In 1963 the northern portion of the Taconic extended to the Berkshire Spur of the New York State Thruway near Chatham. The Taconic is now a busy commuter highway, carrying more than 10,000 cars a day in the northern portion (and 65,000 a day through Westchester County). In 2001 the State began closing off many grade crossings to improve safety.

The population of Gallatin was actually greater in 1845 than it was at the time of the 2000 Census. The figure in 1845 was 1675, in 2000 only 1499. When the Western Frontier opened after the Civil War, many farmers moved westward, in search of better soil and better farming conditions. The low point in population occurred during the Depression, when the 1930 Census recorded only 511 residents. As recently as 1960, the population was only 621. With the decline of farming in the 20th century, especially dairy farming, and the breakup of large farms, land use has gone through immense changes in the area. Some old farms have been sold to developers for the construction of homes. There are still some farms in Gallatin, including thoroughbred horse farms, and farms producing both cow and goat dairy products. Now as in its recent history, Gallatin remains a rural community.