

HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF FENNER

The Town of Fenner was set off from Smothfield and Cazenovia on April 22, 1823. Most of the town was in the New Petersburg Tract, leased by Peter Smith from the Oneida Indians in 1794. The town was named in honor of Gov. James Fenner of Rhode Island. It lies a little northwest of the center of Madison County and is bounded on the north by Lincoln and Sullivan, on the east by Smithfield, on the south by Nelson, and on the west by Cazenovia. It covers 31.12 sq. miles, just over 19,000 acres. The 1892 census showed a population of 999. The 1990 census showed 1694. The town is rolling upland and is part of the ridge that separates the northerly and southerly flowing waters of the county. A branch of Chittenango Creek rises in the eastern part, and after a long detour to the south, it flows northerly and forms part of the western boundary of the town. The headwaters of the Canaseraga Creek and a small branch of the Cowasselon Creek rise in the northern part. The Canasaraga Creek flows over beautiful Perryville Falls, just north of the town line in Perryville.

The fertile soil allowed extensive production of hops, and for dairying and sheep raising. At one time there were five cheese factories, but by 1900 none of them were in operation. In 1844 a farmer by the name of Davi Hess noticed a different plant in one of his fields than what he had planted. Three heads of grain were growing from one root. He watched it carefully, and saved all the seeds at harvest time, $\frac{1}{2}$ pint. He planted and harvested these seeds each year, and by 1848 he had 96 bu. The grain became known as "Hess Barley" and weighed 50 lbs. to the bushel and produces 35 to 40 bushels to the acre, the largest crop being 67 bu. It was a two row variety and it was estimated that 10,000 bu. was produced in 1851. (This information from the N.Y. State Ag. Society statistics.)

There is no village entirely within the town. Perryville is in the towns of Fenner, Lincoln, and Sullivan. A branch of the Lehigh Valley RR ran through the western part of town and passed through Perryville. Fenner Corners, being situated near the center of the town, and many of the prominent pioneers having located there, it was considered a foregone conclusion that a village would eventually grow up here. This never did come about as the mills grew along the Canasaraga Creek and the northern part of town, due to the RR. Several businesses centered here early on. There was a store, opened by people from Cazenovia, and run for several years, then a post office was established in 1820, on the southeast corner. The building still stands and has been occupied as a home for many years. Across the corner, the Baptist Church was built in 1820. The early settlers were industrious, God-fearing people, and in their desire for spiritual and religious guidance, they organized the church society on Aug. 3, 1801. It consisted of seven men and their families at the start. In the early church minutes it was recorded that the first pastor, Elder Baker, was to receive \$1.60 for six Sundays, then his salary would advance to \$1.50 a Sunday. Meetings were held in the schoolhouses and dwellings until the church was built

a lot purchased from Ebenezer Dunton, and the minutes state that he was to paid one farthing a year, on demand. The 40 by 50 foot building, which was include a steeple, was built at a cost of \$2601.42. Over the years they experienced various degrees of prosperity, and in 1877 they had a great revival which added about 80 members to the church. The 50th anniversary, Centennial, and Bi-Centennial have all been appropriately observed. In the '30's the church was part of the Nelson-Erieville charge of the Methodist Church, then in the '40's it became the Fenner Community Church and a center for the town elections, dinners, and town meetings. Since an addition was built onto the town highway building in recent years, only the dinners are held at the church, and occasionally, services are held in the summer time. Just south of the church the Fenner Grange Hall was built and chartered on Jan. 9, 1913, with 40 active members. It flourished through the '20's, then was used for town meetings and elections. A second church in the town was organized in Perryville in 1816 and flourished until 1879. It was St. Stephen's Episcopal Church and was discontinued. In 1839 the Methodists organized and built a church in Perryville. The church still stands and is their church today. In 1844, the Methodists organized and built a church in Chittenango Falls, which was thriving, still, in the late 1800's under the pastorate of Rev. T.F. Harris, who also was the pastor at Perryville. The church still stands, such as it is, at the corner of Hoff Rd. and Cary's Hill Rd.

The first town meeting was held May 6, 1823 in a schoolhouse. Officers elected were a supervisor, clerk, assessors, collector, overseers of the poor, commissioners of highways, 2 constables, 3 commissioners of common schools, inspectors of schools, and a poundmaster. The first physician settled in the town in 1814, on a farm a mile and a half from the corners. He practiced there for many years and was a highly respected citizen. The only other resident physician of the Corners practiced there for only two years, then he moved to Perryville. Jonathan Munger settled in 1795 about a mile north of the Corners where he built the first framed barn. Another family came from Connecticut at about the same time, and settled about a mile south of the Corners, where he kept a tavern. His wife was the first person to die in the town. The next settler came from Mass. and settled a mile west of the Corners on a farm. A surveyor and his two sons came and settled next to this farm. One by one they came from Vermont, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Mass. Then a group came from Scotland in the early 1800's and built a grist mill.

The town was divided into eleven school districts, and there was very little change for many years. In 1897, the Union School of Perryville was incorporated, uniting the adjoining districts of Fenner, Lincoln, and Sullivan, known as District #1. The Episcopal Society gave the authorities their church building and site, which they had abandoned. The school continued into the '30's, when it was taken into the centralized district of Cazenovia, along with all of the other rural schools. The school was sold and is now housing several apartments.

Nichols Pond, in the Town of Fenner was the scene of one of the most decisive battles of the world. Historians believe it is equal to Plymouth Rock and Jamestown in importance to Americans. Both England and France were scrambling to include the new territory in their empire. In Oct. 1615, French Gen. Samuel Champlain, together with over 500 Huron and Algonquin Indians, marched south from Canada and attacked the Oneida Iriquois fort at Nichols Pond, in the town northeast corner. Champlain built a tower outside the stockaded Indian village, and fired many rounds inside. They had expected this to be an easy victory, but the Iriquois repulsed their attack and Champlain was forced to retreat back into Canada. The battle was a double defeat, for the unprovoked assault resulted in the Indians total hatred of the French. Within 20 years, the Iriquois became powerful enough to wreak

destruction on their enemies, Indian and French alike, so English domination of the New World was virtually assured.

When the white European adventurers came into the territory of New York, they found it in the possession of Five Nations of Indians. The French called the, the Iriquois, the English called the nations the Iriquois Confederacy. They were located all across the State, the Mohawks in the east, the Oneida's, the Onondaga's, the center, where their meetings were held, the Cayugas, and the Seneca's to the west. Of the five nations, the Oneida's were the least barbarous, revengeful, and blood-thirsty. This was demonstrated in the early wars when they remained neutral or were loyal to the colonists. In the late 1700's the Tuscaroras became the sixth nation of the Confederacy. At the close of the war, the Senecas gave them land in Niagara.

Another part of the town in the northeast was called the Milestrip. In 1794 it was granted to N.Y. State from the Oneida Indians and in 1797 was purchased by a Dr. Enoch Leonard. Because it was a mile wide, he called it the Milestrip. It is 12 miles long, with the road running through the center. The western end is in the Town of Fenner and the eastern end in Smithfield. In 1810 a factory was opened to make the first steel hay forks ever made. As time went on, there were four schools, a post office, a store, and a cheese factory on the road. It is now called East Milestrip and West Milestrip, and there are only residences along the road.

Near the northwest corner of the town is Chittenango Falls, a hamlet. In the early years there was considerable manufacturing here. There was a paper mill where wrapping paper was made from straw, but, with the introduction of wood pulp, it became unprofitable and was abandoned. There was also a cheese factory, a saw mill, and a carding mill. The Chittenango Falls Park Assn. was formed before 1900, and was organized to improve a beautiful park, all in the town. It was all laid out with drives and shade trees, and afforded a fine view of the falls.

Mutton Hill, the highest point in Madison County at an elevation of 1859', was so named because of the many sheep that were raised there. From a small rock tower there, information was transmitted to barges on the canals regarding shipments to be sent or received. Mirrors were used by day and lanterns by night. Sand for the glass factory was shipped down from Boonville and was transported by team and wagon to Peterboro. Livestock, produce, and wool were sent to market by barge. Presently, the Madison County Fire Control Tower is situated there.

In the late 1800's, Fenner Corners consisted of five houses, the Grange Hall, the church and the schoolhouse. The corner house, built in 1798, was a store in 1810, then the post office in 1820. Just to the south a tavern/store was built in 1835. When the Marlett family moved into this building in 1913, the history of the building was fastened to the wall in the stairway, but when loaned, was never returned. As one entered the building, their living quarters were to the right, the store was to the left, and the stairway straight ahead. The store had a showcase, a stove, a cracker barrel, and sold items such as tobacco, cigars, pipes, cigarette makings, wooden matches, candy, popcorn, and hot dogs. On the second floor was a dance floor, 4 election booths, and a table and benches used by the board for their town meetings. When the store closed, the house was slowly renovated, showing the beams and studdings of hand hewn logs. Other early houses still occupied are the Marks home on Fenner Rd. built in 1802 by a surveyor, the Lynn house on Davis Rd. built in 1810, where the bricks were made on the farm, the Beaugardis home of Federalist style which has five fireplaces, a Dutch oven, and 12 over 12 pane windows, and the present home of Steve Weisbrod, just west of Perryville, built in 1815, where the hand hewn beams are still visible.

As there was a lot of hop farming done in the town, there were many hop barns erected. The hop barn on the Cody farm was built in 1884 and most of the interior is as it was when it was built, over 100 years ago.

There are several cemeteries in the town, one of which is used, occasionally. Six of them are still mowed and cared for by nearby residents. Many people were buried on their own property, and as the years went by and more land was cultivated, graves and their stones were moved into the hedges, where many can be found today.

As the industries left the town, so did some of its people, but in recent years, people have cars and enjoy living in the country again. There are still several farms in the town, but most of the people work elsewhere.

(Most of the information for this history came from a Descriptive and Biographical Record of Madison County, edited by John E. Smith and published in 1899. It was given to my Dad, E.F. Bachman in 1925 by Mrs. Ed Smith of Nelson and then to Archie McEvers in 1957. (August 1991)



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America250

3 messages

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Mon, Apr 13, 2026 at 12:20 PM

Thanks again for doing this! Here's the info:

Eagle Newspapers is planning on printing two publications celebrating the U.S.'s 250th. The first publication will focus on the early days of communities in Central New York. The second one will feature a look back at life in 1976.

I'm hoping you will be a part of the team of historians helping to create these publications celebrating this historic time in our nation's history.

What we would like from you are two articles:

The first would answer the question: "How did Fenner first become established and what were the early days there like?"

The second would focus on what life was like in Fenner in 1976 and what celebrations were held to celebrate America's bicentennial.

Word count is subjective, and we would only edit for length depending upon what space there is to fill. Obviously, you would receive byline credit for the articles.

We would also welcome any and all photos you are willing to provide to illustrate each article.

I would like to receive submissions as soon as possible, but the firm deadline for submissions is Monday, June 1.

Please reach out to me with any questions, either via email or at 315-575-3528.

Thanks!
Jen Wing
Managing Editor
Eagle Newspapers

Dave Jones <dave.jones4879@gmail.com>
To: Jen Wing <jwing@eaglenewsonline.com>

Mon, Apr 13, 2026 at 12:29 PM

Got it Thank you for reaching out, and we will definitely get it to you by June 1st
Dave

[Quoted text hidden]

Jen Wing <jwing@eaglenewsonline.com>
To: Dave Jones <dave.jones4879@gmail.com>

Mon, Apr 13, 2026 at 12:30 PM

Thanks!
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