

The Town History Corner

by Harry L.D. Weldon, Town Historian

The Village of Dryden (and Town) here in the Finger Lakes Region has a very valuable piece of property—value not in the sense of financial asset, but rather value in a rich heritage handed to it from an earlier generation. There it sits, saying to all: “come visit me, play on my grass, and enjoy the solitude of an oasis;” in the very middle of in sundry aspects of the daily life of a multitude of residents.

Every community has such a major place. The pioneers that settled here in the late 1700’s had a square of land laid out for education and recreation. Invariably every little town had a small plot at the center of it devoted to a common square or park in addition to a plot dedicated to a school.

I had the opportunity to walk over to Montgomery Park one day and sit at the picnic table under the pavilion with no one else about. The park was void that day of any other person. Then, I walked over to the History House and did some studying of its history. Here is what recorded history has to say about “our park!”

“The Montgomery Park complex historically includes the bounds of the park and the Montgomery house (38 West Main St.) and the lot on which sits the History House (36 West Main St.) moved from its former location (at 34 West Main St.) some 50 feet to the east.

On this site was once located one of Dryden's early distilleries. At about the time the brick store (now the DCC Café) was built in about 1840, two other dwellings were built. Both were raised on the same day, one provided liquor for the workmen, and the other providing supper. One of these buildings was the Montgomery family house and the other residence across the street at 43 West Main St. Originally the house had only two stories, a third was added in circa 1870-80.

Dr. John W, Montgomery was a local physician as early as 1828 in the village. He was a man known of being of social and literary standing. He twice represented Dryden in the legislature in Albany; an active member of the local reading and debating society. He was a charter member of the Methodist Episcopal Society, organized in 1832.

Dr. John's son John J. succeeded to his father's practice and sometime between 1857 and 1866 had a small office added to the east of the Montgomery home, which was later moved to Lewis St.

Dr. Mary Montgomery, granddaughter of John W. (a third generation physician) donated what was to become Montgomery Park to the village after her father's (John J.) death.

For a period of time, during the latter years of John J.'s life, the park area was used for a Summer Youth Playground program. Improvements made during this time included the construction of a utility building and the layout of sandlot ball diamond. The local Boy Scout Troop 24 held meetings there during the 1970's and early 1980's. For a period of time the Dryden Jaycees used the building for its bi-weekly meetings and club room.

After the village became the legal owner of the park area, a tennis court was added and landscaping was done to include a small parking lot. This court was flooded during the winter to provide an ice skating rink until around 1990. At about this time a basketball net was added in one side of the court.

Reconstruction of the former bandstand occurred in about 1975, by volunteers. Around 1995 the utility building was obtained by a private buyer and moved to Weber St. and was succeeded by a picnic pavilion, a new ball diamond and limited playground swings and slides.

For a number of years after the last update the ball field was used for Kiwanis Little League games. For the last 25 years the Annual Dairy Day festivities have been held in the park. During school days you can find parents with their young enjoying the playground equipment. Some folks just like to go there and “soak in” the solitude of its quiet location.

Occasionally, after school there might be a “pick-up game” of tag football or softball and now and then can be found people in a challenging game of frizz bee. Over the years the park has experienced games of capture-the-flag or hide-and-seek (many times to the chagrin of the neighbors) where the adjoining trees and bushes were used for hide-a-ways. People of all ages have fun on the premises. Such, such value is beyond measure.

Oh, and least we not forget the summer revitalizations of Montgomery Park with its weekly band concerts—certainly not like the old days when uniformed band members played stirring marches with lots of coronets, drums, clarinets and such. Today grass roots banjos and guitars or even an occasional “light rock evening” are good too.”

No real record journal has been found to indicate the actual dates and uses or by whom the park has been used since its inclusion into the community as a place of social and recreational activity.