

A TIME AND A PLACE

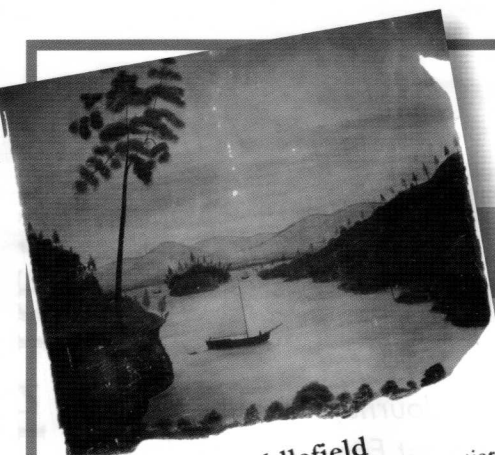
Middlefield and the Settling of the New York Frontier: A Case Study of Development in Central New York, 1790-1865

by Dominick J. Reisen

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reviewed by John Rowen



Middlefield and the Settling of the New York Frontier

A Case Study of Development
in Central New York, 1790-1865

Dominick J. Reisen

In *Middlefield and the Settling of the New York Frontier*, Dominick J. Reisen chronicles the rise of the Otsego County hamlet of Middlefield and its inhabitants.

Reisen comes to this book, his fourth, well-prepared. He has been an officer in the Town of Middlefield and Otsego County Historical Societies. He was Town Historian, and he lives in Middlefield in the Daniel Cummings house, one of the first houses built in the hamlet.

To describe the history of Middlefield, from its beginning after the Revolutionary War — as Clarkesville — through the Civil War, Reisen uses a chronological format. Within each chapter are unmarked, topical subchapters. Throughout the book, he considers a core group of topics in each era of the hamlet: farming and the local economy, architecture, local businesses, transportation, religious groups and the Masons, and locally prominent families.

At book's end are an extensive series of appendices with detailed information about the hamlet and a good index. In the middle of the book, with no cross-references in the text, are a dozen good quality black and white photographs of the hamlet and some of its residents.

In *Middlefield*, the author wants to share his fascination of the hamlet. He also uses life in Middlefield as an example of trends and conditions generally faced by 18th- and 19th-century American settlements as they developed from provisional frontier places to full-blown communities.

So, for example, Reisen's description of the first settlement and development by George Clarke and Benjamin Gilbert does more than enumerate the achievements of these hard-working men. It shows how people arriving on the frontier had to make the right real estate choice to attract settlers and persuade them to stay.

The chapter on the role of transportation in Middlefield and Otsego County specifically and in the United States in general is one of the book's strongest, comparing well to

book-length accounts about 19th-century stagecoach lines, roads, canals and railroads. In this chapter, Reisen explains how high transportation costs held back communities because they could not move goods to market at reasonable prices. He shows how Middlefield missed the hyper-prosperity that communities to the north and south of it experienced from, respectively, the Erie Canal and the Albany and Susquehanna Railroad, which became part of the Delaware and Hudson.

This kind of information has appeared in other histories. What is noteworthy in this book is how Reisen uses local examples to explain big concepts. For example, to illustrate the shortcomings of poor roads and lack of canals, he states that Joshua Pinney's decision in the 1820s to start a distillery was motivated, in part, by his desire to guarantee a steady supply of beverages for his tavern during spring and winter when roads were impassible.

Whereas Reisen seeks the big conclusions and generally does a good job of explaining them, I sometimes liked the local details more than the big picture. *Middlefield* does a particularly good job in explaining how bartering was used in the absence of hard cash, and the reasons why people were eager to operate a post office.

Middlefield had hardworking and community-minded residents. Some achieved statewide prominence but most were important at the hamlet or county level.

I was frustrated by lack of a map showing Middlefield's location. I think it is on the east side of Otsego Lake from looking at a modern map but I am not sure. There is some repetition in this book, where the author re-explains once or twice more than needed a particular hamlet resident's biography. The book's design, with no subheads within chapters and text in rather small typeface on pages with little white space, takes away from Reisen's good work.

Nevertheless, Reisen's research is praiseworthy and *Middlefield* is an important book for readers interested in Otsego County history or American rural history. 🐾