

History of the City of Schenectady

Arendt Van Curler came to this country at the age of eighteen from the small village of Nijkerk in the Netherlands. He was employed by his great uncle Patroon Kilian Van Rensselaer as supervisor of the Rensselaerwijck Patent, and ambassador to the Native Americans. It was in his role of ambassador that, in 1643, Van Curler came upon the Great Flats along the Mohawk River. He described the area as "the most beautiful land ever seen by the eye of man".



"Schenectady Town" by Len Tantillo

Van Curler petitioned and was finally awarded permission to purchase the land in 1661. The deed was executed on July 27th of that year and signed by Iroquois sachems Cantuquo, the Bear; Sonareetsie, the Tortoise; and Aidane, the Wolf. Fourteen families joined him in the new settlement, which was surrounded by a Stockade wall. Each dwelling had a kitchen garden and the Great Flats were shared by all for field crops. The village was called "Schenectady", an Iroquois word believed to mean "beyond the pine barrens."

The little village grew and prospered. Residents established friendly relations with the neighboring Iroquois, an association which included trading and occasionally marriage. Tragedy befell the settlement in the year 1690 when, on the night of February 8th, a group of Frenchmen and "praying" Indians (a 17th century term referring to Native Americans who converted to Christianity) from Canada descended on the sleeping populace. They destroyed the village, massacred sixty of its residents, and took twenty-seven men and boys back to Canada as prisoners. Many others lost limbs in the snow and bone-chilling cold while trying to flee to the safety of outlying houses.

This sad event produced three heroes:

- **Symon Schermerhorn**, who, in his nightshirt mounted his horse and rode to Albany in the bitter cold to give warning.
- **Adam Vrooman**, who fought with such ferocity that the marauders begged him to stop. Adam, having lost his wife and daughter in the raid, re-married and returned to Schenectady to father eight more children
- **Lawrence the Indian**, who followed the war party and managed to retrieve three prisoners. It was Lawrence who was instrumental in the re-birth of Schenectady, offering assistance and much-needed encouragement.



The statue of Lawrence the Indian that stands in Schenectady's Historic Stockade District

Schenectady existed relatively quietly for the next eighty years. Two more stockade walls were built, gradually expanding the village to the east. The last followed along what is now College Street. The town was known for the Schenectady bateau, a sturdy flat bottomed boat that was particularly useful in transporting goods over the rivers and streams that crossed the wilderness. Schenectady had become an important port supplying boats and goods to people traveling west.

During the Revolutionary War Schenectady, primarily an agricultural community joined the military effort by providing food and boats to the troops. George Washington visited Schenectady three times enjoying the hospitality of Clench's Tavern, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the John Glen House on Washington Avenue. George Washington's field hospital was located in Schenectady, just outside the Stockade on the southwest corner of Union and Lafayette Streets. On the grounds was a small cemetery which held the remains of fifty-seven soldiers until they were later re-interred in Vale Park.

In 1795 a remarkable event occurred - the founding of Union College. It was the first non-denominational college in the United States. The first classes were held in a building owned by the Dutch Reformed Church on the northwest corner of Union and North Ferry Streets.

Three years later, the City of Schenectady was officially incorporated. The first board meeting was held in the same building that Union College held its classes. Mayor Joseph C. Yates presided over the meeting was held May 7th, 1798. At the meeting three noteworthy resolutions were passed:

1. Absence from a meeting without a reasonable excuse is subject to a fine of twenty-five cents.
2. Members shall enter the room without their hats and may speak on any subject until the Mayor is seated.
3. When a member of the board wishes to speak, he must address the Chair and all others must remain silent until he finishes.



Joseph C. Yates, first Mayor of Schenectady and 7th Governor of New York State

Mayor Yates went on to become the 7th Governor of New York State.



*Homes in the Stockade Neighborhood
Photo by Dick Mendelson*

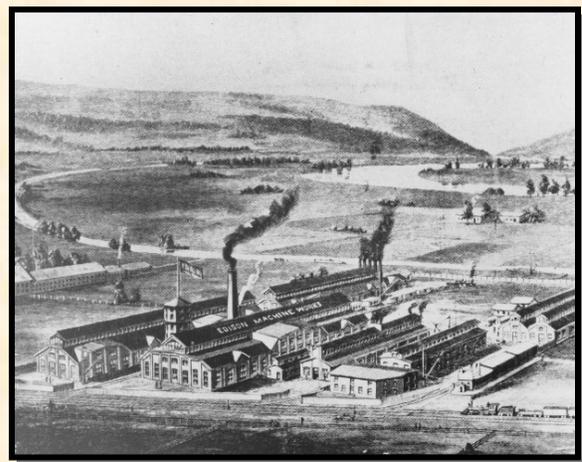
About 1800, the third and final Stockade wall began to be gradually dismantled. The character of the town started to evolve as it expanded eastward. The original village remained the commercial center of Schenectady until 1819 when a disastrous fire consumed 160 structures, only seven of which were insured. Businesses rebuilt outside of the Stockade area and in 1825 the Erie Canal opened, effectively isolating the now residential Stockade area from the commercial district.

The Erie Canal impacted the economy of Schenectady by providing trouble-free and safe transportation across the state. As a result, Schenectady was no longer the point of departure for westward travelers; the essential goods and

services it provided in the past were no longer in demand. Schenectady entered a quiet period until the Industrial Age came upon it.

By the mid-1800's the United States had entered into the manufacturing of heavy goods. Schenectady was no exception, and in 1847 the Schenectady Locomotive Works was established. A few decades later Thomas Edison established the Edison Works in Schenectady, which would later become the General Electric Company. In the early 20th century, Schenectady Locomotive Works merged with seven other locomotive manufacturing plants to become the American Locomotive Company.

The City at this time was home to 14,000 people. As these major companies expanded, the need for workers grew as well. The solution was to recruit overseas. This international recruiting plan contributed to the ethnically diverse population that made up Schenectady. Entire families would relocate here, bringing with them their religious leaders, builders, merchants and all the goods and



*Edison Machine Works in Schenectady
A line drawing completed in 1888, two years after Thomas Edison relocated his factory to Schenectady.*

services necessary to maintain their cultural identity. A dozen different languages could be heard on the streets of Schenectady. The population swelled to 100,000 in a relatively short period of time.

With the influx of people, housing was in high demand. That need was the impetus for the design of a new style house, the Schenectady two-family. Two-family homes were practical and efficient, allowing extended families live close to one another while maintaining separate living quarters. In addition to the working-class homes, Schenectady possessed some of the most luxurious homes imaginable, built especially for General Electric upper management; those homes were constructed in what is now known as the GE Realty Plot.



The Last M7

Female employees from the American Locomotive Company (ALCO) pose with the last M-7 produced by ALCO.

Nearly every neighborhood had a theater. Schenectady Civic Players, the Schenectady Light Opera Company, and the Schenectady Symphony Orchestra were established. The best theatrical productions from New York City could be seen on the stages of Schenectady.

The War years came and Schenectadians were diligently assisting the war effort. The American Locomotive Plant churned out tanks twenty-four hours a day. General Electric's turbochargers allowed warplanes to fly at altitudes reaching 25,000 feet.

After the war, Schenectady again slipped into a quiet period. ALCO closed its doors and General Electric began outsourcing its contracts. The population dwindled to 60,000. But stalwart Schenectadians rose to the occasion and by the year 2000 things were again on the upswing. New businesses are relocating to the area and new ethnic groups are calling Schenectady home.



Schenectady's City Hall

Schenectady's City Hall was built in 1933 by the renowned architecture firm of McKim, Mead and White, the same firm which designed Penn Station in New York City and the East and West Wings of the White House. The clock and chimes were restored to working condition in 1977 after many years of disrepair. The columns were restored in Spring 2006. This building is in the National Register of Historic Places.