

History of Rotterdam

The story of Arent Van Curler and 14 other landholders settling along the Mohawk in 1661 on a piece of land that eventually became the city of Schenectady links to the history of the town of Rotterdam. When the small Dutch settlement was organized, the "Great Flats" on the outskirts of the village became farmlands and the source of timber for Schenectady settlers. An exceptional settler was Elias Van Guysling who chose to build his house outside the village, a house that stood until sometime in the 1940s. In 1680 Daniel Janse Van Antwerp obtained a



Autumn at Plotter Kill Preserve in Rotterdam
Photo by Shawna Thompson

patent for some 165 acres of land in the area of present-day Rotterdam Junction. Van Antwerp's stone house and its adjoining land became known as the Mabee Farm after 1705 when it was sold to his business partner, Jan Pieterse Mabee. Another early Rotterdam settler was Arent Bradt, a grandson of one of the original proprietors of Schenectady. He built the Bradt House on land he inherited in 1713 sometime around 1736. The Bradt House still stands today on Schermerhorn Road, along with other historic homes. This area continued to be thinly settled well into the 18th century, even though other families continued to move out to the flats. Their names, including Crawford, Gregg, Pangburn, Putnam, Rynex, Veeder and Wemple can be

found today, if not among the names of Rotterdam residents, then surely in the names given to a the town's streets and roads.

Rotterdam did not become a township separate from the city of Schenectady until the early 19th century. It was the Third Ward of the city at the time of Schenectady's 1798 incorporation; Glenville was the Fourth Ward. While both wards elected representatives to help govern the city of Schenectady, their populations remained sparsely settled farming communities while the other urban city wards expanded rapidly during the period of westward expansion that started soon after the War of Independence was won. As Schenectady's location on the river encouraged its development as a trading and boatbuilding center, its First and Second Wards increasingly did not see eye-to-eye with its neighbors. Rifts occurred between their elected representatives to the common council and those chosen by the farmers from the Third and Fourth Wards. Inevitably, at the very end of 1819 the city council recommended that the rural wards be made into townships, petitioning the state legislature to do so. On the final day of the legislative session of 1820 the towns came into being. The town of Rotterdam's first supervisor, Peter Becker, elected in 1821, served for three terms.

As the Erie Canal ran eight miles through Rotterdam, its residents benefited from the canal's construction and the other types of employment that the waterway generated. Town residents performed maintenance and repairs, ran shops, hotels and other businesses canal side, and worked on the docks and towpaths, in the boats, and at the three canal locks built within the town. Farmers were able to use the canal for sale and transport of their goods. By 1825, the year the Erie Canal opened up for business, Rotterdam had grown enough to have two churches, and a number of school houses, four gristmills, as many sawmills, three textile

mills, a paper mill, and several other businesses. Rotterdam also grew in response to the railroads that ran through its lands. The roads included the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad, which later evolved into the great New York Central Railroad, and the Schenectady to Duanesburg Railroad which connected to the Delaware and Hudson at Quaker Street. Along these railroads and the canal sprang up a number of small hamlets to provide lodging and other services to railroad and canal workers, the most notable being Pattersonville, South Schenectady, Mohawkville, Carman, Rotterdam Junction and Coldbrook. Several of these communities are still in existence on today's maps.



Plotter Kill Falls in Rotterdam
Photo by Howard Ohlhous

Schenectady County became known in the 19th century as the “Broomcorn Center of the World”, and broomcorn grew especially well on the ten mile-long strip of rich fertile flatland running between Pattersonville and Schenectady along the Mohawk River. The broom corn industry dominated Rotterdam from around 1835 to the 1880s when cheaper western corn drove the business elsewhere. By then Rotterdam farmers had switched to dairy farming or to working in the factories that were expanding in Schenectady.

During the 20th century, Rotterdam took on two new names: “The Town of Tomorrow” and “A Good Place to Live.” As transportation developed to include an electric trolley system, and busses, trucks and automobiles, more and more of Rotterdam’s residents clustered in its hamlets, and worked at the General Electric Company, the American Locomotive Company, Weber Electric, Schenectady Chemical, or a number of other Schenectady businesses. During World War I the Army Depot was located in South Schenectady as a supply point which was enlarged after the war, especially during the years of the Great Depression when a corps of fifty men of the Civilian Conservation Corps was assigned to work at the Depot. The Army Depot and its employees played a vital role during World War II during which the number of new buildings and employees grew significantly. The Depot was phased out during the 1960’s but was converted to an Industrial Park in an excellent location on the rail lines. Added in that vicinity mid-century was a huge warehouse and offices for the Golub Corporation whose Price Chopper supermarkets have expanded their locations throughout New York and into several surrounding states.

After World War II Rotterdam developed into a suburb in every sense of the word. Many large farms and estates, especially those closest to Schenectady, were subdivided, and housing communities sprang up. Transformation was not overnight, but gradually even the more rural parts of the township became more densely populated with the homes of persons who did not mind working in the city so long as they had a home with a country flair about it for their leisure time. Other housing, such as the Coldbrook Estates, was of a more low cost and mass produced type. Rotterdam residents were able to shop at the Shoporama, an early shopping center, where they had their own Carl Company department store, or at one of the other businesses in the Altamont Avenue-Curry Road area. The townspeople even had their own grocery, drug and liquor stores, and other amenities that increasingly shifted business away from downtown Schenectady. Population growth necessitated the consolidation of schools.

In the 1950's the Mohonasen and Schalmont Central Districts were created out of a number of small school districts. Today the Mohonasen District also includes the area formerly served by the Draper School District which formed closer to the city of Schenectady near Bellevue, and has added the Draper name to it, and has given the Draper name to its middle school.

In the 1970's the Wilmorite Corporation proposed to further transform Rotterdam by bringing to it its own shopping mall. The Rotterdam Square Mall was built on the eastern side of Campbell Road, but not after several years of controversy concerning the impact of the commercialization of this area upon the valuable water supply found in the aquifer underneath the Great Flats area. This aquifer provides the water to most of the county and to other locations. Eventually the shopping mall was built in Rotterdam just to the west of General Electric Company property, upon lands that once comprised the Campbell Estate. The Campbell Mansion on the hillside was torn down. However, an ancient family cemetery on the property remains, literally within the shadows of the mall itself.

While the hamlet of Rotterdam Junction suffered when the railroads moved their hub to Watervliet before World War II, it today can take pride in several respects. The Schenectady Varnish Company, which grew into the Schenectady Chemical Company, and is now known as Schenectady International, has located a small but significant plant next to the remaining railroad tracks that employs many of its residents. Being within the vicinity of the current canal and lock system, this section of Rotterdam also welcomed the bike path along the Mohawk that runs through it. Additionally, history minded people have worked to preserve the locks and other remnants of the old Erie Canal that remain in the vicinity.



Mabee Farm Historic Site in Rotterdam Junction
Photo courtesy Schenectady County Historical Society

And, just down Route 5S, the Mabee Farm still stands. Considered to be the oldest house in the Mohawk Valley, it is certainly the oldest remaining building of the first European inhabitants in this area. The Mabee Farm is now a State Historic Site and continues to grow under the auspices of the Schenectady County Historical Society. With the addition of Dutch and English barns and other structures, the Mabee Farm endures, helping to tell the history of Rotterdam, and Schenectady County and how its people have contributed to the history of our country.