

### **3.0 HISTORICAL and ARCHITECTURAL OVERVIEW**

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#### **3.1 Introduction**

This section provides a brief narrative history of the Town of Clarence with specific emphasis on its hamlets. The overview addresses significant trends and themes, and buildings associated with the Town of Clarence. The area's period of significance is identified and examined in this chapter.

#### **3.2 Early History of the Region**

European-American settlement of the Niagara Frontier began at the end of the American Revolution in 1783, though the legal sale of these lands was impeded by the fact that both New York and Massachusetts claimed the new territory. New York State won the dispute in 1786 under an agreement signed in Hartford, Connecticut, which gave New York all of the land once occupied by the Iroquois. However, Massachusetts retained the right to sell the territory west of Seneca Lake and, during the next decade, sold large tracts in Western New York to private investors to open it for settlement. The initial purchasers of the western lands, a syndicate of land speculators under the leadership of Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham, did not follow through, so Massachusetts next sold the land rights to Robert Morris in 1791. Morris sold the majority of this land to a consortium of Dutch investors, called the Holland Land Company, in 1792-93. The sale included all of the present Erie County. (Turner 1974; Ellis et al. 1967).

#### **3.3 Initial Settlement of the Territory**

Settlement of Clarence began several years before the area was formally organized. In 1797, the Holland Land Company's agent, Theophilus Cazenove, contracted Joseph Ellicott to survey the land in western New York into townships in preparation for settlement of the area (Turner 1974; Ellis et al. 1967). To accomplish this effectively, Ellicott laid out two major north-south transit lines, then divided the purchase into six-mile wide ranges that extended from the Pennsylvania border to the Lake Ontario shore. These ranges were then cross-hatched by supposed township lines measured off from east to west in similar six-mile intervals (Douglas Kohler 2006). The area of present-day Clarence was orientated to the far west in this grid layout. Ellicott's original West Transit Line survives today as Transit Road (Douglas Kohler 2005). The major portage road in the region, linking the outlying areas in the province with Lake Erie and the young trading-port community there, ran roughly perpendicular to the Transit Line. Replacing earlier trails established by Native peoples, old Buffalo Road as the portage road came to be known as ran loosely along the course of present-day Main Street.

In 1799, Cazenove was replaced as General Agent by Paul Busti. Following the completion of the "Great Survey," this same year, Busti named Ellicott chief land agent in the region, authorizing him to encourage development (Douglas Kohler 2005). Seeing such establishments as a necessary precursor to further habitation, Ellicott offered lots on old Buffalo Road to "reputable individuals" who would build and operate taverns and inns upon them. The lots which varied in size between 50 and 150 acres as logically arranged by Ellicott, were spaced approximately ten miles apart along the portage thoroughfare and were sold at the company's lowest price of \$2 dollars per acre on a long-term, no interest basis (White 1898). Taking advantage of this offer, Asa Ransom, a young silversmith from Geneva, New York, took possession of 150 acres in the fall of 1799 and thus established the earliest settlement in

Clarence territory at what is now Clarence Hollow (Baker 1983). Though it was likely only the Ransom family there at this time, this is noted as the first permanent settlement in the area.



Figure 5. Asa Ransom Tavern (Historical Society of the Town of Clarence)

In 1801, Joseph Ellicott arrived in the territory, probably boarding at Ransom's tavern, and opened a land office (White 1898). The first land purchases from the Holland Land Company in the Clarence area were transacted later that year. Between the then and 1808, the initial settlement in Clarence territory gradually grew in both size and population. Asa Ransom established a saw mill late in 1801 on the banks of the stream that flows through the Hollow and now bears his name (Ransom Creek). He later expanded his operation, building a grist mill in 1803 (Baker 1983). The constructions of both outfits were important events in the improvement and progression of the nascent settlement and of great benefit to the early pioneers.

A handful of settlers arrived each year with their families, securing land from the Holland Land Company and situating modest, self-sufficient farmsteads. Settling on the close surrounding area of the small establishment, they for the most part built plain folk houses just large enough to accommodate their families. The dwellings may at first have been constructed of logs and rough materials provided by the terrain. However, the operation of Ransom's sawmill likely changed that, allowing for the use of milled lumber and the associated building techniques. The simple houses were most times accompanied by barns and outbuildings necessary for the tending of plots of farm land. These pioneers found an attractive region for their new homes. The forests were naturally broken by small prairies or oak openings, ready from the settlers' plow. Moreover, the land proved very fertile and productive, bringing the settlers excellent returns. As a result, the young rural community slowly but steadily flourished.

Most people settled within the vicinity of the main established Village of Clarence Hollow. However, some spread out measurably. In 1807, Asa Harris, a Revolutionary War colonel,

constructed a tavern along Buffalo Road some miles to the west on a small ridge there (White 1898). A few parcels of nearby land were soon thereafter purchased and simple homesteads built on them. This served as the formative establishment of a secondary area of settlement within Clarence territory, the hamlet that came to be known as Harris Hill.



Figure 6. Asa Harris Tavern (Historical Society of the Town of Clarence) – Buffalo Road, now Main Street

### 3.4 Establishment of the Township and Its Beginning Years

The Town of Clarence, named from the English House of Clarence, was formally established in 1808. As such, it is the oldest township in Erie County, which was formed from Niagara County in 1821. The township at the time of its formation originally comprised all of present-day, northern Erie County, including areas that are presently encompassed by the City of Buffalo and the Towns of Amherst, Alden, Lancaster, and Newstead (Town of Clarence, Master Plan). The first town meeting in Clarence was held in April, 1808, at Elias Ransom's, relative of first settler Asa Ransom, tavern which was in what is now Amherst (White 1898).

Following its official declaration, the young municipality continued to grow and prosper for several years. The first fully independent commercial business, a general store, was opened in 1811. At this early time there was a single physician of prominence in the village. A post office was established in the territory between the years of 1808 and 1811 (White 1898). Farms and homesteads continued to be built on the parcels of land surrounding the village as they were sold off in turn. The development of the village center, however, allowed for some residences to be built there. Though most were of similar folk styling and construction as that of their rural counterparts, these dwelling were built on smaller lots without productive fields, and were as

such dependent on the growing commercial businesses of the Town. Additionally, both the Town and themselves being somewhat more established now, some early settlers found the means to improve and in some instances rebuild their more primitive folk dwellings. If affordable and the needed materials available, the preferred style of the period was a high, Adamesque Colonial. A limited number were built at this time. By 1813, increased growth and population allowed for the building of a second tavern (White 1898).

The Town's development was then briefly interrupted by the War of 1812. The military action between the British and Americans throughout the region disrupted and brought to an abrupt halt the settlement of the area. Additionally, the able-bodied men and boys of Clarence, like those of all local communities, marched off to join the American militia assembling on the Niagara Frontier. During this time, the small hamlet of Harris Hill experienced much forced growth, as it served as a refuge to many Buffalo residents who were driven out of the city by the British in 1813 (White 1898). Upon the resolution of hostilities, though, the Buffalonians left to rebuild, the menfolk of Clarence returned home, and the regular settlement and development of the territory resumed. However, growth remained slow until the neighboring City of Buffalo, now fully re-established, became the western terminus of the Erie Canal in 1825. The opening of the canal greatly stimulated the improvement of the region, affording, among others, an outlet for Western New York products and bringing with it a renewed wave of westward migration.

### **3.5 Development of the Town: 1825-1860**

The Town of Clarence experienced a small burst of growth and expansion at this time which continued until the mid-century. The main village of Clarence Hollow saw substantial growth and reinvestment. Initially founded in the area of the present-day Town of Newstead, the territory post office had been moved to Clarence Hollow in 1816; at this time it was expanded. An additional physician, necessary to tend the budding population, settled in the Hollow in 1830. The Methodist church at Clarence Hollow was organized in 1833, with a stone worship building built the following year. The Presbyterian Church, after meeting, organizing, and securing land rights in 1821-1822, built its first house of worship in 1836. With regard to commercial ventures, Ransom's original mills were rebuilt in 1842 by new owners. In 1850, the second tavern, built in 1813, changed ownership and underwent moderate refurbishment (Baker 1983).

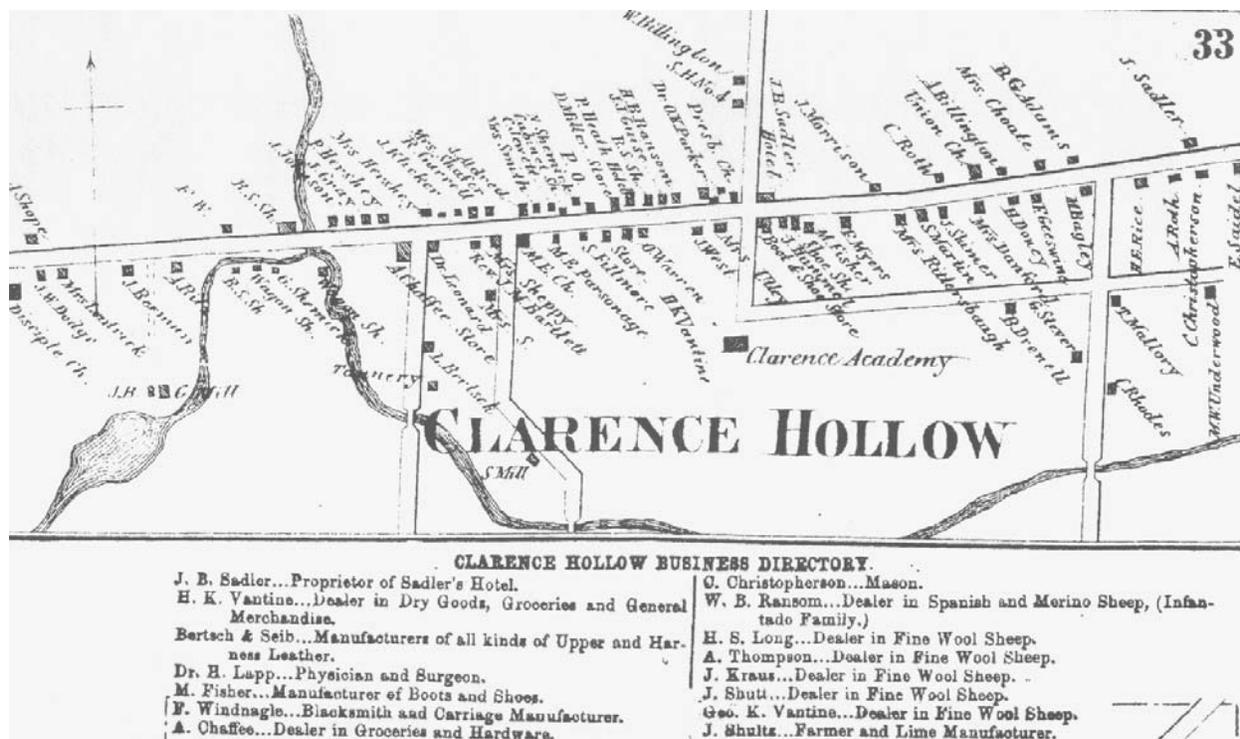


Figure 7. Clarence Hollow Historic Map 1888 (Historical Society of the Town of Clarence)

Similarly, the hamlet of Harris Hill, having returned to its former state following the rebuilding of Buffalo after the War of 1812, began to expand again; this time of its own accord. The early center of this hamlet was the intersection of present-day Main Street and Transit Road, known then as Snearly's Corners (Douglas Kohler 2006). In the 1830s a large general store was opened here. A post office was established there in 1843. A courthouse of sorts was established shortly afterward. The United Brethren Church at Harris Hill was formed in 1858.

Additionally another centralized hamlet of activity grew in prominence within the larger township: Clarence Center. Though the land in this area was previously owned, the site, situated centrally in the Town, gained recognition around 1829, when David Van Tine settled there and opened a store.



Figure 8 – Clarence Center Historic Plaque (Historical Society of the Town of Clarence)

Thus established, this crossroads, known for a short time as Van Tine's Corners, became a small commercial center. A post office was established in 1847, naming the locale Clarence Center. Several more stores opened about this time, including, most notably, John Eshelman's store in 1851. The first hotel was opened in 1853.



Figure 9. Emmanuel Eshelman Store (Historical Society of the Town of Clarence)

Separately, the First Baptist Church at Hunt's Corners was organized in 1837, with a wooden chapel erected in 1844 (White 1898).

As more settlers flocked to the prosperous and productive region, the territory surrounding the hamlets of Clarence was taken up with increasing swiftness. A good portion of the land was soon settled with a mix of family homesteads and larger farms. In these more rural areas, vernacular folk structures remained the most practical and, therefore, dominant style of construction. However, the Greek Revival style was a popular style of the period, and it is seen frequently where affordable and the needed materials were available. To a more moderate degree, some residences were also added within the established hamlets' centers, as was allowed by and necessary to the growing commercial businesses of the Town. Such residences were normally of a more styled nature with more refined materials, both exterior and interior. As before, this period of growth and prosperity also allowed for the repair and improvement of both rural and "town" houses built during the earlier phase of settlement.

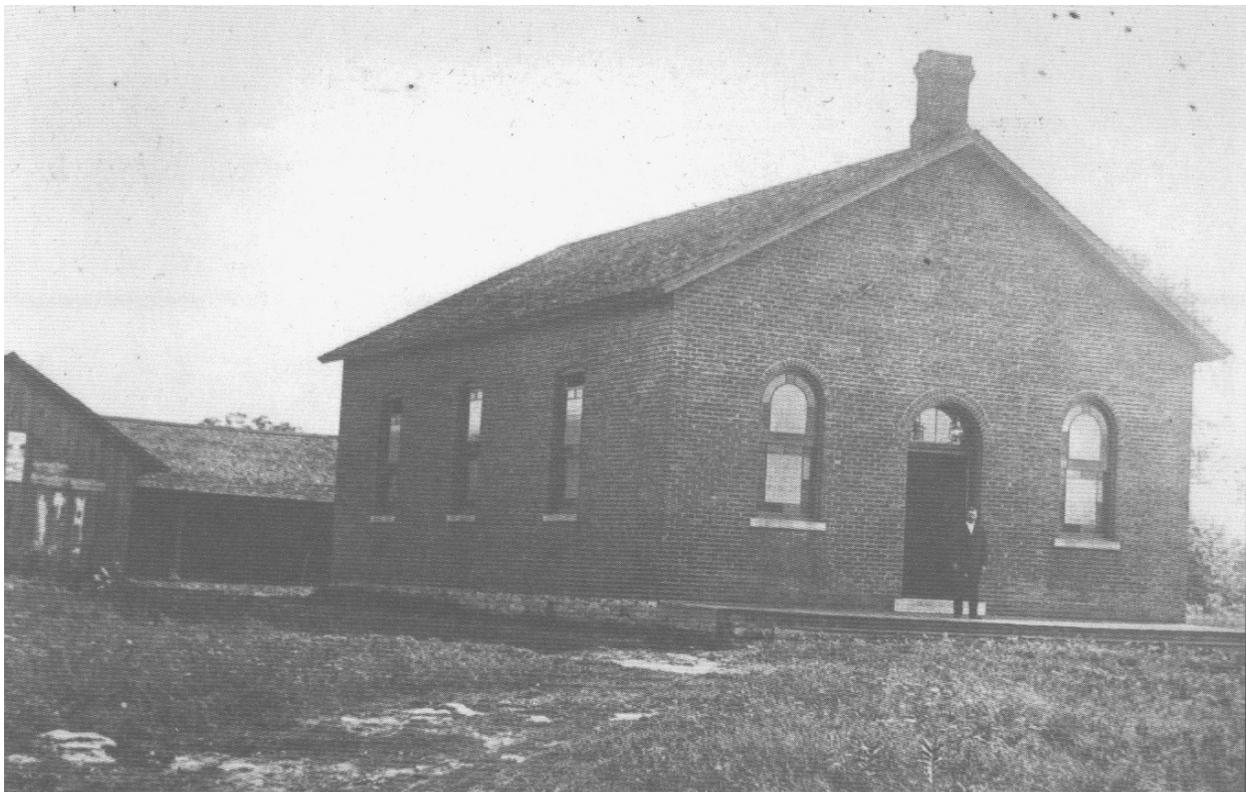


Figure 10. – United Brethren Church of Harris Hill  
1858 (Historical Society of the Town of Clarence)

German immigrants played a substantial role in this and later periods of settlement. Beginning to arrive in Erie County as early as 1840, they settled in large clusters within the Western New York area; Clarence was one of the often frequented locales. As such, a German faction of notable size made visible contributions in certain areas of the Town. For example, a German Lutheran Church was organized at Clarence Center in 1857, a house of worship having been

erected a few years earlier. Also, a German Reformed church was organized in Clarence Hollow in 1859, utilizing a structure built earlier for the Seventh Day Baptists (White 1898).

### 3.6 Continued Development: 1861-1899

The War Between the States slowed the Town of Clarence's development, bringing a pause to its steady progression just past mid-century. Following the War, however, its growth and expansion progressed once more, increasing with an intensity that continued to rise continuously as the century drew to a close. The less prominent hamlets of Swormville and Wolcottsburg, now Wolcottsville, experienced emergent development, while the other three established hamlets continued their path of improvement.

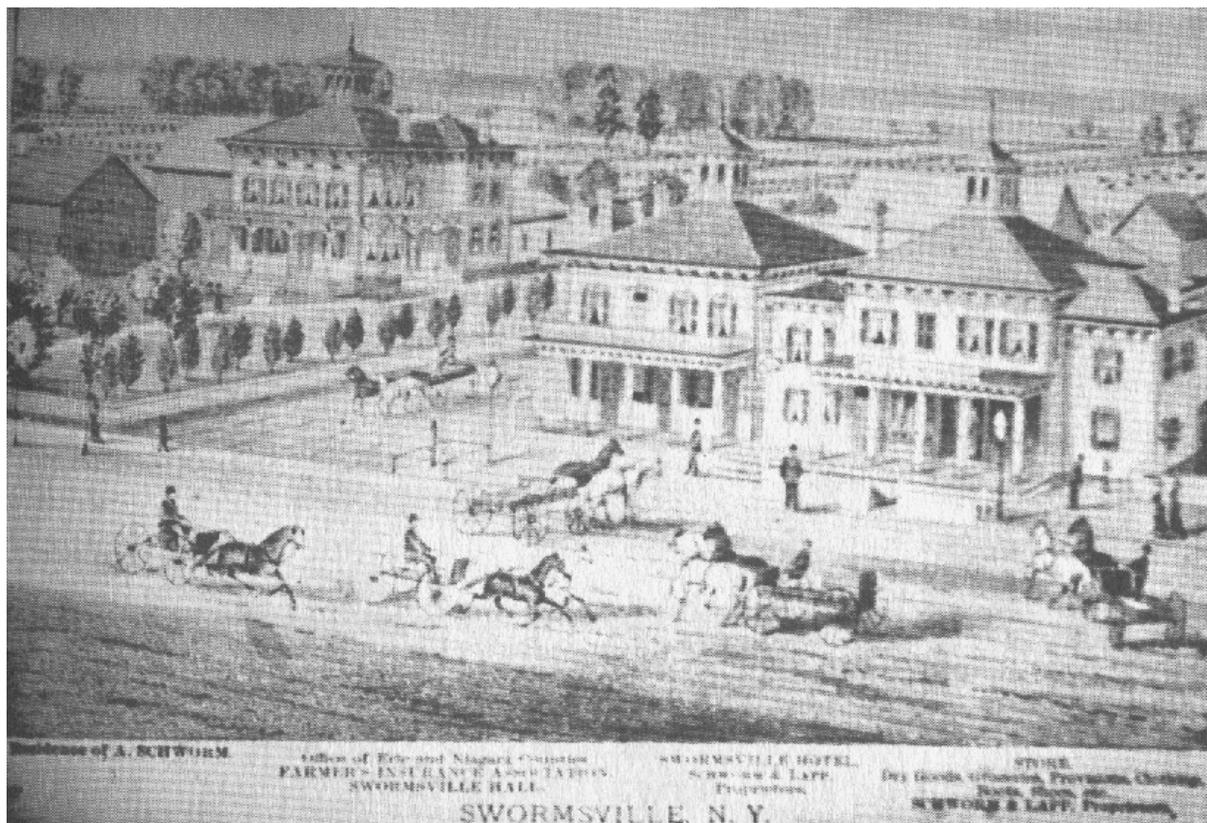


Figure 11. – Swormville NY – showing Adam Schworm Residence, Farmers Insurance and the Swormville Hotel

A small building boom and population rise in the later 1870s brought several new professionals and businesses to the area, along with the rebuilding of existing resources, and the expansion of religious organizations and facilities. An additional physician set up practice in Clarence Hollow in 1864. Later several other businesses were added as a succession of merchants and tradesman, including a cabinet-maker and a shoe-maker, settled there. A second store was opened in Harris Hill around this time. A lime kiln was established there in 1875. The German Reformed church in Clarence Hollow was rebuilt around 1887. Similarly, the grist and saw mills

set up by founding settler Asa Ransom and rebuilt in 1842, were again rebuilt in 1895-97 by the current owner at the time. A German Reformed society was organized in Clarence Center in 1865; a building was built to house it in 1877. Also in 1877, the First Baptist's chapel at Hunt's Corners was replaced with a noted brick church that still stands today. A German Methodist society was organized and built a house of worship in Clarence Hollow in 1879 (White 1898). Churches built during this period commonly utilized the Gothic Revival style.

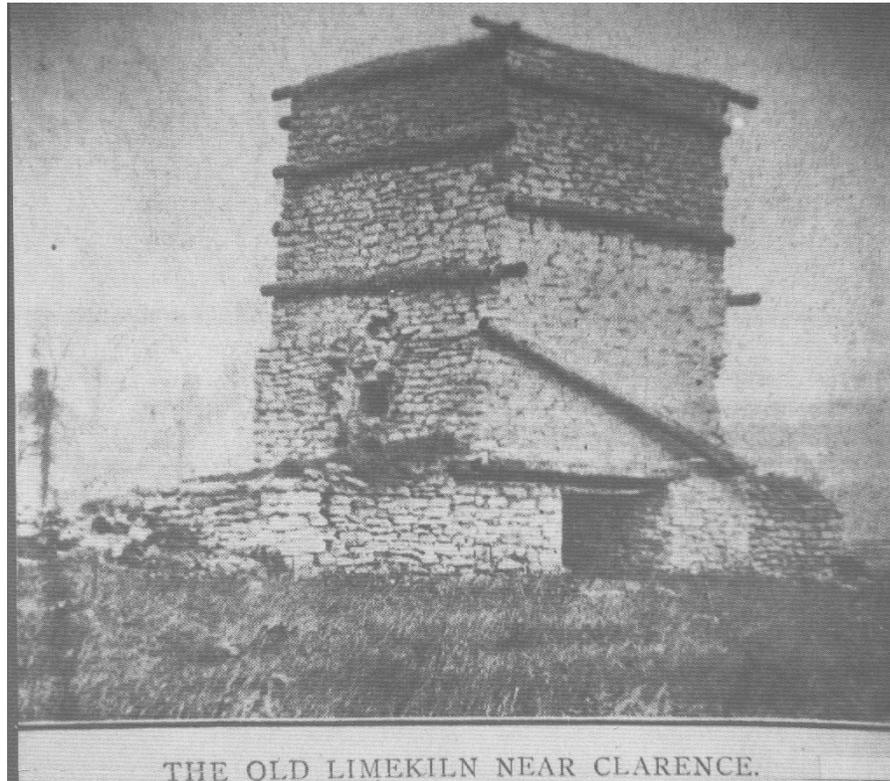


Figure 12. – Shimer's Limekiln 1800s

The abundance of residential development that occurred during this phase was split between two fronts: the continuing advanced development of the village center which allowed, and in some instances called for additional residences to be built there; and the desire and growing need to settle the remaining open land in the area outlying the hamlets. Those residences built "in town" were well-ornamented, designed in the popular high style of the period – either Italianate or, later, Queen Anne. Colonial Revival styles were also popular. On the other hand, farmstead dwellings continued to be built in a more modest vernacular folk fashion. Large barns and a succession of out-buildings accompanied these simpler structures. In certain cases, more styled residences were erected as a focal point of prestige on the larger more successful farms. Often, though, the dwelling would incorporate detailing elements copied from the popular high styles of the period. Additionally many rural dwellings built on established farmsteads from earlier periods, having been built simply and most economically at the time of settlement in a vernacular folk structure, sought now to update and improve their appearance. Victorian detailing was frequently added, as were a variety of additions.

### 3.7 Turn of the Century Progressions

By the end of the nineteenth century, the hamlet of Clarence Hollow had two general stores, one hardware store, one grist mill; one saw mill, two hotels, a basket factory, a Union school, and five churches. Clarence Center had two general stores, one drug and grocery, two hotels, one creamery, one feed and cider mill, one blacksmith, and two notable churches. Harris Hill continued much as it was with the notable addition of a luxurious hotel. The hamlet of Swormville had a post office, general store, and small grocery. Similarly, Wolcottsville had two stores and a hotel. Additionally, East Clarence was a station on a branch of the New York Central Railroad; Gunville was a station on the West Shore Railroad; and Millersport, a small hamlet in the far northeast portion of the Town and partially in present-day Amherst, had a long-kept mercantile business, an additional store and a large German Lutheran church (White 1898).

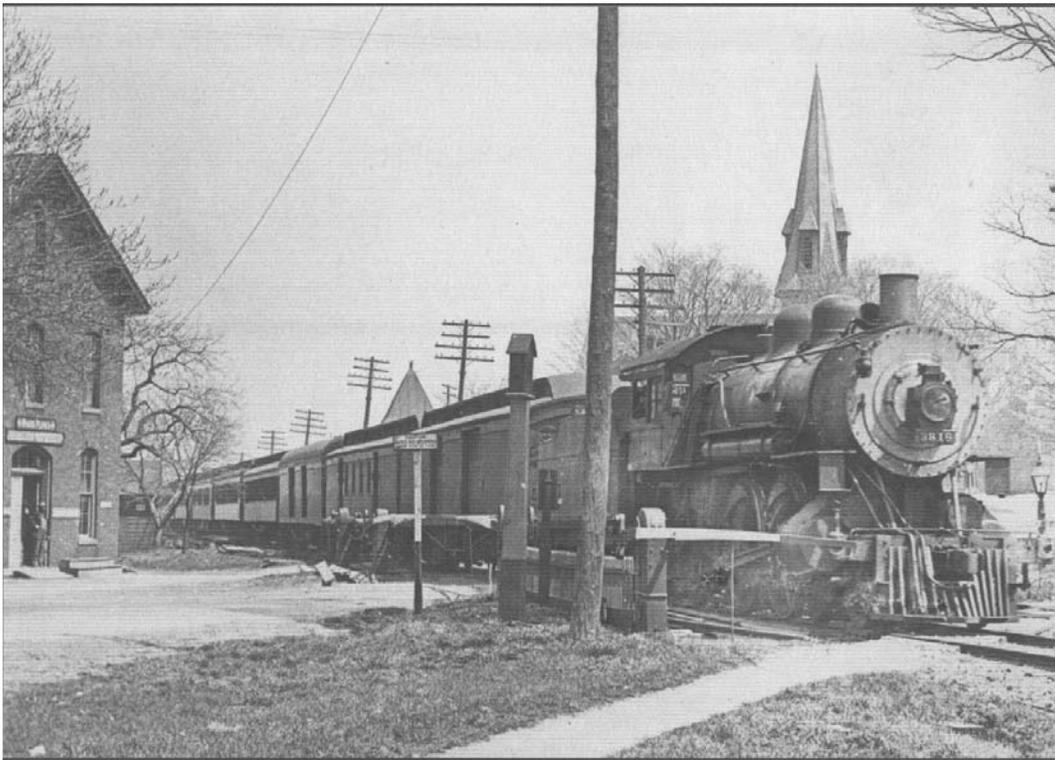


Figure 13. – The West Shore Line, Clarence Hollow  
(Historical Society of the Town of Clarence)

All the hamlets had a considerable residential component to the main streets, as well as sizable residential districts located just off the larger thoroughfares; both of which continued to grow during this period. These dwellings within or close to the center of the hamlets were for the most part large, two-and-one-half story, Queen Anne or Craftsman, and later Prairie influenced, mixed period American Foursquare styled residences with moderate detail and modest accompanying out-buildings fitted to the smaller lots. Growth continued to a smaller extent in the more rural expanses remaining between hamlets as each continued to spread in a residential capacity from its center farther into the outlying areas.



Figure 14. – Goodrich Road Residence (Historical Society of the Town of Clarence)

The Town continued to progress and develop with similar improvements, incorporating advancing technologies and accommodating increasing populations. For example, in the early years following the turn of the century, the trolley from Buffalo to Williamsville was extended to the prominent corner of Main Street and Transit Road in Harris Hill (Douglas Kohler 2006). In 1908, the Clarence Center Fire Company was created, with the completion of its hall occurring two years later in 1910. These trends continued through the first decades of the twentieth century until the outbreak of World War I.

### **3.8 Twentieth Century: Changes and Later Development**

Following the First World War, the growth of the Town of Clarence and the nature of it shifted markedly. To begin with, the vast majority of the township's area had been initially settled upon, developed, and improved. As such, the build-out that occurred from this time forward was in the vein of changes to and additions within the already established layout and workings of the centralized hamlets and the outlying rural areas, rather than expansion and embellishment as it had been in earlier years. Many new structures were added between older buildings, as once large lots were pared down and sold off in smaller parcels. In some instances, older buildings were removed to make way.



Figure 15. – National Gypsum Office Building and Plant, Roll Road, Harris Hill

This new phase of growth was closely linked with economic changes of the times. Much of it was motivated solely by industrial and commercial ventures, and the ensuing residential demands. With the discovery of a large deposit of gypsum on Roll Road, National Gypsum Company built a plant and began operations in June of 1926 (Town of Clarence, Heritage & History). This was followed by Universal Atlas Cement Company, also on Roll Road, and in later years the Certainteed plant on Kraus Road. Such local industrial development precipitated a corresponding intensification in settlement and building. There is a moderate number of modest, later 1920s and early 1930s, single-family, early suburban homes testifying to this brief segment of interrupted growth. Commonly seen styles included Tudor Revival variants and modest Cape Cod Colonial Revivals. There was also a surge in popularity of mail-order, “kit” houses at this time



Figure 16. – Tudor Revival style – Goodrich Road



Figure 17. – Atlas Cement

After the lull of the Depression in the 1930s, there was a much larger land boom coinciding with a broader national movement of migration to the suburbs. The Town experienced its greatest phase of growth and development after World War II, with population doubling between the years of 1950 and 1960 (Town of Clarence, Heritage & History). During this period a great deal of subdivisions filled with tract-housing were created and added to the street pattern within select pockets surrounding the main hamlet communities of Clarence. The building stock of such developments was typified by the early Modern styles of Minimal Traditional and Ranch.

Slowing to a more moderate pace in the 1970s, the Town again experienced a surge of growth in the 1980s, as the pioneering work in the development of the heart pacemaker and other medical electronics by Wilson Greatbatch brought new industry and employment to the region (Town of Clarence, Heritage & History). Most recently, the area has capitalized on the industries of home and commercial construction. The Town of Clarence continues to grow today, entering a new phase of building and development with many new residential homes being built.

### **3. 9 Historic Trends and Themes**

The Town of Clarence was founded as and historically has been a farming community. All of the territory of Clarence was taken up and settled relatively early. Acreage was given generously and many modest family farmsteads expanded over time to large-scale farming operations; those that did not maintained a comfortable subsistence lifestyle. Grain raising was pursued to

some extent, though in later years dairying was a principle business. Agriculture was the chief source of income, supplemented and interspersed by the modest commercial ventures necessary to the everyday needs of a community. Large expanses of rich agricultural land studded with vernacular family dwellings and barn complexes were linked by rural lanes and modest roadways, and spaced by the centralized, commercial and period residential build-up at prominent crossroads within the hamlets. The residual architecture and layout patterns of this formative period and the similarly enduring rural function and character of the Town are still quite discernable.

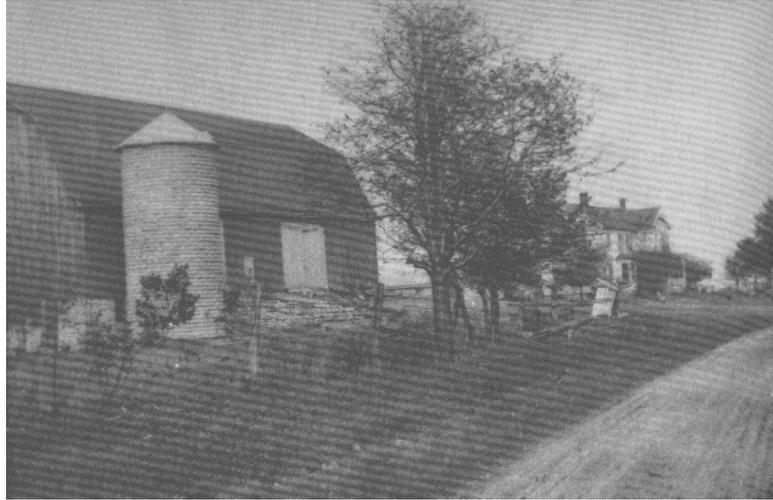


Figure 18. – Forest View Dairy Farm on Griener Road  
(Historical Society of the Town of Clarence)

However, the Town has also had a modest industrial history which was similarly reflected in and affected upon by the varied building patterns of the area. Early industry began with the manufacture of potash, followed by brick factories which used clay from the banks of Ransom Creek. This development was followed by rock quarrying operations which provided sand and gravel for number of additional industries. Later in the twentieth century, significant advances in industry and modern businesses of great economic impact hugely affected both type of build out as well as its relative location. Many of the settlement patterns originating from these periods centered around the respective dominant industries.



Figure 19. Abram Martin Farm, Martin Road

Changing trends of development have been discernable, though, beginning with the post-World War I period, and continuing patterns have been established from the mid-nineteenth century forward. Agricultural lands, both vacant and active, have been persistently converted from rural pastures to some form of residential development since 1960, totaling some 10,000 acres. To date, the total acreage of agricultural lands makes up over 52% of the Town's total area. Though the Town of Clarence continues to serve as a farming community in some regards to the larger Buffalo metro area, it is rapidly continuing on the trend begun post WWII and reemphasized by modern urban sprawl, functioning rather as a satellite suburban residential community to the neighboring metro urban areas.