

On June 14, 1992, Jean Argetsinger of Burdett gave a speech at Lafayette Park about the park's history. The occasion was the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Village of Watkins Glen. The communities of Savoy and Salubria were incorporated as the Village of Jefferson in 1842. The village was renamed Watkins in 1848, and renamed Watkins Glen in 1926.

Lafayette Park History

By Jean Argetsinger

If Samuel Watkins were projected into time to be here today, Lafayette Park would be the spot he would chose to land. Unchanged in size, location and character, it is a gateway from 1842 to 1992. He would find it to be what he planned it to be – the focal point of the community.

He would be pleased with a celebration on Flag Day because from all the evidence, we know he was a red, white and blue Yankee-Doodle Dandy. The names he left behind on village streets of statesmen Monroe, Madison, Jackson, Washington and Franklin and the naval heroes Decatur, Porter and Perry smack of his patriotic sentiments.

He would be pleased to be recognized as the man who established Lafayette Park. Fame is fleeting. If Samuel's beloved wife, Cynthia Anne, had not persisted in 1852 in having the village bear his name, his deeds would be attributed to others and his name a footnote lumped with his older brothers, John and Charles, who came and went 20 years earlier, overwhelmed with the prospect of converting the wilderness they owned into a civilized community.

Samuel Watkins' chosen name for the village was Jefferson, named, of course, for Thomas Jefferson. As Jefferson, the village was formally incorporated on April 11, 1842.

When he had arrived here 14 years earlier in 1828 to have a look at his 25,000 acres of land, the settlement where we are was called Salubria. He was 57 years old, a successful and sophisticated New York City native. He should have been thinking of retirement. Instead, he was fired with the challenge of developing a metropolis on the shores of Seneca Lake.

He built himself a red brick residence, which still stands down the street across from the park. And he developed a master plan.

He sized up his main competition, Savoy-on-the-Lake, a settlement located directly north of Division Street, with access to the lake. It was controlled by Isaac Leake, who swore publicly he would never sell to Watkins.

A dreamer and planner Watkins may have been, but, also, he was a shrewd businessman. Folklore has it that Watkins had Savoy quietly bought piece-by-piece. Neighborhoods within Salubria were identified as Culver's town next to Glen Creek and houses on Madison were referred to as Catlin because of the town of Catlin post office location.

He tied them into one package in 1834 when he hired Col. Everts of Burdett to lay out the streets as we know them today – probably south to Ninth Street, named Cicero Street. Polk and Montour, 10th, 11th and 12th streets, heavily wooded, came a decade later.

Autocrat he was. Watkins named the streets before he gave them to the community as he did the rectangle of green, which he named Lafayette Square. It was the centerpiece of his plan. If there were strings attached to the gift pertaining to the square's use, they were destroyed with village records in an 1850s fire.

It is not too far a stretch of the imagination to say he was influenced by the famous Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C., founded by George Washington, originally as "President's Park."

President Thomas Jefferson re-named President's Park to Lafayette Square in 1803 in honor of Marquis de Lafayette, the French military leader whose involvement was crucial in securing victory in the American Revolutionary War.

In addition to their names, there are remarkable coincidences. Both are rectangular in shape. The White House, home of the President and the First Lady, flanks Lafayette Square, which in the 1820s was the center of Washington social and cultural activity.

Watkins intended the same. His magnificent white mansion on the northwest corner of Decatur and Fourth streets also flanks the park. His Jefferson Hotel was one block away. He planned to have a women's college, the first in the USA, to extend from the square to the lake.

By 1879 when a county history described the park, Watkins and his wife, Cynthia, were dead and forgotten, as were the plans for the college. It was the Civil War, not the Revolutionary War, that people remembered.

The Magee Family was the first family of the village. The Presbyterian Church, built by John Magee, now flanked the park on the south side. Across the street, Duncan Magee lived in Watkins' mansion. In the article, Lafayette's name is not mentioned.

The square is described as the village park and as a "beautiful shady sanctuary where the traveler and village resident is invited to rest and hear the song of the birds." The names of the streets that border the park to the north and south, Washington and Epaminondas, were now Fourth and Fifth streets. The history mentioned the bandstand and a neat, substantial fence adorning the grounds. There is no record of when the fence was eliminated. The bandstand lasted through World War I and almost made it to World War II.

The bandstand was located in the northeast section of the park. A peaked green tower roof topped a tall building, placing the performers high above the crowds. It was the day of the area's many handsome, uniformed bands.

Near the turn of the century, a generous and wealthy newcomer, Frank R. Hoyt, had given an imposing cast-iron fountain for the beautification of the park. It stood where we stand today. When installed, it was a plumbing and artistic success, with gushing water an elegant sight. But time and water were not kind to the metal.

Civic-minded Frank Hoyt, who gave the fountain to the park, fell in love with the village of Watkins Glen when he was a guest at the Glen Springs Sanitarium. He built Idlewilde as a gift to his bride, whom he met there. Idlewilde was home of the W.W. Clute family for decades. It is now a bed-and-breakfast inn.

Mayor of Watkins Glen in the 1930s, Charles N. Cole, left the village \$2,500 in 1947 to build a new bandstand in Lafayette Park. A stone-faced, open platform was constructed in the middle of the park on the site of where the fountain had been. It is the foundation of today's bandstand.

After the war, the community seemed to migrate to the lake and the Glen. The village trustees installed playground equipment on the west side of the park for the growing number of small children. The bandstand was used less and less for performances.

In the late 1970s, there was new appreciation of the park. Environmentalists and urban and rural planners were preaching the benefits of creating parks with emphasis on green spots in residential areas. Lafayette Park was rediscovered as a valuable asset.

In 1986, village Trustee Rose Ciccone contacted the Chemung Arts Council to organize, in conjunction with the village, a series of concerts in the park. It was what people were waiting for. The concerts were an immediate success, with a growing audience happily bringing chairs and blankets to enjoy music in the open. In six years, the number of concerts grew from five to 14.

The overhead tent was going up and down all summer long. The need for a covered bandstand was apparent. Dr. Thomas J. Love of the village Planning Board suggested the formation of a Friends of Lafayette Park to raise the roof. Rose Ciccone was the natural for chairman. She knew first-hand the need. She headed the committee that reached out to the public, near and far, young and old, for contributions large and small. They came in.

The park has meant many things to many people. This was apparent in May of this year when hundreds of village residents signed a petition to keep the park intact. Trustee Jo Pat Wright carried the banner. The park's greatest moment came at the May village meeting when Jo Pat presented a resolution for the preservation of the park in perpetuity. It was passed unanimously.

The park is a tribute to the good sense and good taste of all of the people of the village who have for generations kept the park as the place it was intended to be – a place for outdoor gatherings and a pleasant focal point in the community.