

The following “thumbnail history” was a talk given at the Cuba Chamber of Commerce Annual Awards dinner on March 5, 2022 by the Town Historian. It is hoped that the general readership will find it interesting.

This Year we are proud to be celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Town of Cuba. As a matter of fact it was 200 years ago this very day, March 5th, at 9 o’clock in the morning, a group of pioneers met in Griffin’s Tavern on what is now West Main Street and conducted the first Cuba Town Board meeting.

Leafing through the pages of local history, we find the names of visionaries and community leaders from the early 1820s; Calvin T. Chamberlain, Ruben Moses, Ira Tracy, and Judge John Griffin. Some of them came as early as 1819-20 to this forested area occupied only by members of the Iroquois Confederacy. It is difficult for us to imagine how rugged this territory really was. Historian John Minard in his 1910 Civic History of Cuba wrote, “When you read a resolution passed at a town meeting, offering a bounty for the killing of wolves and wildcats, you will of course infer that wolves and wildcats were so prevalent as to warrant such legislation, and that the town was in such a primitive condition as to make it a desirable abode for such animals.” What was once an Indian path through the forest became The Bath – Olean pike, along present day Main St. It was the beginning of the westward migration.

The list of names continues – Salmon Abbott, Samuel Morgan, Stephen Smith, and Isaac Sheldon. Their intelligence and industry transformed this place from a thickly forested hemlock swamp to a developing community due mostly to the energy and capability of these first businessmen. There were very few buildings, modest log and frame structures with only a few streets and roads laid out. But it was a start.

Then came the 1840s 50s and 60s. The canal was built – followed closely by the railroads and things continued to look good for the future of Cuba as larger more permanent homes and commercial stores were built. Rural school districts were formed with small one-room school houses, from which some students went on to the Union School in the village, for high school studies. Then eventually, in the 20th century, came the centralized school districts.

The litany goes on – more families moved here. Names like Arnold, Ackerly, Champlain, Loveridge, Lanning, Osborne, Sibley, Merritt. All of them were public spirited citizens, businessmen and merchants.

During the 1870s and 80s churches were erected, along with almost majestic, new brick buildings in the business section. The facades of the fine new structures in the burgeoning business district proudly announced the names of Keller, Palmer, Robie, Story, and Bartlett, to name but a few. God fearing men of hope and courage continued to show their vision for the future. There was no complacency in these families who were the life-breath of the community—the molders of our heritage. Leadership provided by people with names like Paull, Gillette, Wheeler, Whipple, Armstrong, Hendryx, Renwick, Reynolds, and Kinney continued the course

of our beautiful southern tier village. Then came names like Arzberger, Mabey, Dye, Congdon, Moses, vanZwanenberg, Hopkins, Miller, and Williams, women and men still stepping up to lead their community with vision and hope.

Over the past 200 years we have put away into dark, dusty attics, memories of hard times. The war of 1812, a civil war, two world wars, international confrontations, a great depression, and currently, a deadly world-wide pandemic with a threatening socio-economic atmosphere, and now, even again, a growing war in Eastern Europe brings grave concern. But through all this Cuba continues to move forward.

Where does this bring us for the future? I like to think that here in Cuba there still pervades a sense of optimism, a community pride that must be instilled into younger generations. Businesses are being upgraded and new enterprises are being started. In spite of our tough economic and social times there remains the spark of a spirit – that spirit will continue to thrive, keeping Cuba the biggest and best little town in all of New York.

There is leadership in the names of the people who, today, help us forge through daily life. Reading through the minutes of local governing bodies, organizations and clubs, you will find many more names of people of vision, people with hope – people who work well together to secure a future for Cuba for generations to come. Among these are the people who are being recognized here tonight.

During this Bicentennial year several community events are being planned. A community wide picnic, ice cream socials, musical presentations, street dances, contests, etc. All paying tribute to those who have brought us up to the 21st century. Hope to see you all out there joining in the celebration.

HAPPY 200TH ANNIVERSARY CUBA !