



This Village's Story Told through residents of Fredonia





Photo courtesy of Doug Kerr

I never realized how wide the state of New York was until I first arrived in Fredonia. Before I was accepted into college, I had been to New York City a couple times, but I had never been west of Albany. I knew Fredonia wouldn't be anything like the city, yet for some reason, I always felt like a hot shot when I told people I was going to school in New York.

Located about an hour from Erie, Pa., and five minutes from Lake Erie, the village of Fredonia is home to just shy of 11,000 residents. Prior to my first time here, the only village I had heard

of was Santa's Village, a Christmas-themed park in northern New Hampshire — a place you never want to go to.

Throughout college, there were many days where I wished I went to Florida instead of a snow-cursed no-man's-land. Nonetheless, the place still grew on me.

Here and there I would overhear stories and rumors of Fredonia's past. I heard that the college in town was designed by I.M. Pei and Henry Cobb, who are famously known for designing the John Hancock building in Boston, Mass., and The Louvre in Paris, France. I

heard an inn was haunted, and I was told one of the bars downtown is almost 100 years old. I gradually became hooked to the area's history.

This publication consists of a collection of stories told by the people of Fredonia. You won't get the full experience unless you actually see the place yourself, but I hope that through these articles you'll get a sense of this village's story.

Dan Orzechowski

On the cover: the front of Fredonia's village hall.

On the back: Johnson Vineyard, photo courtesy of Kim Carpenter.

From 15 students to thousands

How a small village ended up with a college



“All was well until the turn of the century. On December 14, 1900, the Fredonia State Normal School burned to the ground. Six young girls and a custodian were killed in the fire.”

SUNY Fredonia’s Science Center, a \$60 million dollar project, has been functioning since 2014.

A lot happened in the year 1867. Alaska was purchased from Russia, Nebraska became a state, “Das Kapital” was published by Karl Marx and dynamite was patented by Alfred Nobel.

Oh yeah, and that’s when Fredonia established its state college.

But that’s not when this story starts.

In downtown Fredonia, directly next to the village library, lies the Darwin R. Barker Museum. Here, you’ll find records, artifacts and stories from Fredonians of all sorts. But also archived is the history of Fredonia’s higher education system.

Once upon a time, the Village of Fredonia was the only place in all of western New York where you could find higher education. Located where

the village hall currently resides, the Fredonia Academy was known as a hub for teacher training.

When the Academy began to function in 1826, it hosted only 15 students and, apparently, there were no age restrictions. Barker Museum records show that students’ ages ranged from five years old to 32 years old during that first year.

Eventually, enrollment increased. By 1843, 261 students’ names were listed in the Academy’s catalog. Unfortunately, this was only temporary. Because of the Civil War, many young people

were forced to leave the classroom and step onto the battlefield.

Sam Drayo Jr., who served as the village attorney for 48 years, wrote an article on the college’s past. According to Drayo, the Academy had to ultimately close due to financial struggles and a lack of faculty.

Despite the discontinuation, citizens and officials “would not be defeated by the eventual closing of the Fredonia Academy,” wrote Drayo. Then, a light began to flicker at the end of the tunnel.



In 1866, the state legislature authorized four teacher training schools to be established in New York State. Any

Sound like a good deal to you?

Well, according to Drayo, village residents thought it was worth it.

selected by the state.

Luckily for Fredonia, the village knew someone on the inside. Governor Reuben Fenton (whom Fenton Hall is named after) happened to attend the Fredonia Academy. As Drayo writes, “although there is no direct evidence,” Fenton, a Chautauqua County native, “must have had influence in the selection of Fredonia.”

Anyone who drives down Temple Street can't miss One Temple Square. The orange-hinted structure easily sticks out compared to the neighboring buildings. Perhaps this was purposeful to recreate its importance. This was where the college once stood.

Commonly known as “Old Main,” the



The Darwin R. Barker Museum, which has been functioning since 1887, shares space with the village library.

municipality could apply for a state-controlled school to be built in their area. This was Fredonia's chance to get back in the game.

But there's always a catch, right?

According to Drayo, in order for Fredonia to get its new school, the village would have to pay a hefty price. Every candidate in the race would have to give up the land required for the school. They would also have to provide furnishing. Every dime would come straight out of the selected municipalities' pockets. Then, after the schools were built, the state would run them.

The decision was approved by 90 percent of Fredonia's taxpayers, so a delegation embarked on a trip to Albany to state

their case.

Fredonia was so determined to snag one of these four schools that the village authorized \$100,000 to be borrowed. Considering today's inflation, that would equate to over \$1.5 billion.

Nonetheless, Fredonia had won its golden ticket. The village was

“According to the Centennial History of Chautauqua County, the opening ceremony attracted between 10,000 and 15,000 people.”

Fredonia State Normal School on Temple Street quickly became the new center of attention in the village. According to the Centennial History of Chautauqua County, the opening ceremony attracted between 10,000 and 15,000 people. In comparison, Fredonia barely exceeded 11,000 residents according to

the 2010 federal census.

Drayo explained that “these new teacher training schools were uniform or ‘normal schools’ under the jurisdiction of the state.” By 1888, the village had paid off its \$100,000 loan.

All was well until the turn of the century. On December 14, 1900, the Fredonia State Normal School burned to the ground. Six young girls and a custodian were killed in the fire. A monument stands at Forest Hill Cemetery to remember those who were lost. The cause of the fire is unknown.

According to a New York Times article written in 1900, “heavy wire screens were firmly nailed across the windows leading to the fire escapes.” Those who survived the blaze crawled through adjacent windows and continued onto the roof.

Despite concern that the building wouldn’t be replaced, the state eventually came through and constructed what is now One Temple Square with insurance money and other resources.

Classes would continue on Temple Street until the 1940s while the music department moved down the road to a site

of 256 acres. A campus complex was later constructed on the same site. Much of Fredonia’s campus was designed by Henry Cobb in collaboration with I.M. Pei,

Sedlmayer, a volunteer genealogist. Sedlmayer attended Fredonia from 1962 to 1967 after he served in the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. While in college as a history



Because of its limited funding, the Barker Museum is only open on Tuesday and Saturday afternoons.

who later designed The Louvre Pyramid in Paris, France.

When 1948 rolled around, the school officially became a four-year college in the brand-new State University of New York (SUNY) system.

If you step inside the Barker museum, be prepared to be hit by a tidal wave of history. You may be greeted by the museum’s attendant, Dorothy Derby, who’s been with the museum for “oh, at least 15 years!”

You may even see Walt

major, he met his soon-to-be wife, Elizabeth, who can also be found at the museum.

“I was always interested in listening to what my relatives had to say. I’ve been [with the museum] for years, and I still manage to find something new,” chuckled Sedlmayer.

The Barker museum hosts a genealogy library with a collection of state and federal census records, along with rotating exhibits. Stop by. Admission is free.

The history of a “community staple”

Led by just a staff of three, the Fredonia Opera House is one of the most significant landmarks in Fredonia’s history. Rick Davis, the Opera House’s executive director, told me why.

Prior to my interview with Rick, I had never been to the Opera House. I knew of its existence, but I never took the time to walk inside. According to Rick, I wasn’t alone.

“I can’t tell you how many times a month I hear people say ‘wow, I never knew there was a theatre here,’ but I know it’s a lot,” said the director.

Rick believes the way the building is set up has a lot to do with community outreach. In a unique arrangement, the opera house, village hall and police station are all found in the same building. For Rick, having a marquee somewhere would create some awareness, but because of a lack of funding, the opera house is stuck with what it’s got.

When I first stepped inside, I wasn’t sure where to go. I passed a room with Mayor Athanasia Landis talking on the phone on my left and some sort of board meeting on my right. I thought I was going to be

late meeting Rick, until I finally saw a sign directing me to the theatre office.

As I made my way upstairs, I noticed detailed craftsmanship all throughout the hall — an impressive feat for a building over 125 years old.

When I reached the office I was greeted with

amounts to quite a lot. He’s responsible for marketing and promotions, negotiating artist contracts and formulating a (stretched) budget.

With the help of Dan Allen, the Opera House’s technical director, and Marsha Finley, the business manager (who are both Fredonia alumni), Rick has been running



The Fredonia Opera House was a vaudeville hub in the 1920s. Today, independent and Oscar-nominated films are shown regularly

a southern “Hey, how are ya?” from Rick. He sat behind a desk littered in paperwork. Also on the desk was a old, yellow pin that read “Save Village Hall, we’re the Village Hall.”

Rick started off telling me his duties as executive director, and it

this show for 12 years.

Before he landed this gig, Rick was working as a journalist in North Carolina. After moving back home to Fredonia to be closer to his family, Rick heard of the opera house’s job opening and jumped on the opportunity.

“When student loans started knocking on the door, I had to find something that would help pay bills. I have always had an interest in theatre and the arts, and this job has been great to me,” said Rick.

If it weren’t for the village hall restoration about 20 years ago, Rick may never have had this job.

From 1981 to 1994, the Opera House was closed to the public. The condition of the building had seen better days. The balcony wasn’t safe enough to stand on, and maintenance was required frequently.

Village leaders were going to tear the building down, but the community refused to see the landmark go. That’s when the “Save Village Hall” campaign began. Behind the movement was Elizabeth Beal, wife of former SUNY Fredonia president Dallas Beal.

A referendum to borrow money to restore the village hall was overwhelmingly passed, but plans were never made for the theatre. After the village hall was restored, the Fredonia Preservation Society formed.

According to Rick, this committee’s sole purpose was to raise money and oversee the

theatre portion of the restoration.

“Thousands and thousands of volunteers cleaned out the theatre,” he said. “They raised \$1.2 million, which

performed at the opera house, he smiled and said that “depends on who’s asking.”

Older audiences may recognize names like Gypsy Rose Lee, the



Fredonia’s police station and village hall share space in the middle of the village

isn’t enough to restore an entire theatre, but they were able to do it because [Preservation Society] had so many people willing to help.”

To receive a state grant, volunteers had to log at least 32,000 hours of service. Since that was the magic number, the society stopped counting when they reached their goal, but it’s estimated by Rick that over 52,000 hours were actually spent on fixing up the theatre.

In the fall of 1994, the opera house held its grand re-opening, and began new revenue strategies such as renting out space for weddings and corporate workshops.

When I asked Rick if anyone well-known has

famous burlesque entertainer, or the folk rock duo, Chad and Jeremy. Harry Kellar, Harry Houdini’s predecessor, also once performed at the opera house.

Today, the Opera House is the only licensed facility in Chautauqua County that can stream live performances from The Metropolitan Opera. For a significantly reduced price, art lovers can experience world-class entertainment without having to travel far.

“We try our best to arrange a variety of events so that there’s something for everybody,” said Rick. “The opera house is a community staple. Everyone is welcome.”

Battling to preserve a campus

Recently, Fredonia's campus has seen some drastic changes to its building layout. More changes are expected to be seen in upcoming years.

In Fall of 2014, the brand new Science Center was erected. The \$60 million project allowed the Biology Department to migrate from Jewett Hall and the Chemistry Department to move out of Houghton Hall. Now, under a temporary phase, the Departments of Physics, Geology and Environmental Sciences will be housed in Jewett Hall until Houghton Hall is done renovation.

Director of Facilities Planning Markus Kessler explained that, together, a renovated Houghton Hall and the Science Center will establish the Science Complex. However, due to a lack of funding, remodeling Houghton Hall was put on hold.

"We were actually ready to go out to bid for Houghton Hall, and then there was a budget issue," said Kessler. "The budget and the money that was allocated was changed by the governor."

According to Kessler,

Gov. Cuomo's budget prioritized the construction of New York roads and bridges, rather than student campuses.

"We've had a nice 15-year run, so I can understand that a little bit," said Kessler.

Despite the pause from the budget, Kessler explained that remodeling will occur in phases. Phase One, which entails exterior and interior demolitions, was completed last year. If you're from the area, you may have noticed some buzz around Houghton Hall. Now in its second phase, the academic building is seeing its brick walls restored.

Kessler came to work with Fredonia 17 years ago. Wielding bachelor's and master's degrees in architecture from the University at Buffalo, he worked for several architecture firms, including Wendel and Clinton Brown Company, before his Fredonia arrival. Since then, Kessler has been a part of many campus accomplishments, one of them being the Science



Photo of Markus Kessler courtesy of Campus Report

Center.

In 2014, the New York State Fire Prevention and Building Code Council voted to adopt an updated version of the Energy Conservation Construction Code. This code requires all buildings to meet certain energy efficiency standards. The Science Center received a gold rating, an impressive feat for a science building.

"We actually had to go back to school to be taught the new energy code so we have an understanding of what is required," said Kessler.

"Science buildings are very difficult [to reach gold ratings] with fume hoods and all sorts of equipment. So to get gold, I think is a big

Much of SUNY Fredonia's campus was built with concrete. Since he's started working at Fredonia Kessler has spent a lot of his time trying to preserve crumbling concrete.



accomplishment”

But the Science Complex isn't the only item on the university's agenda. The campus, a hub for concrete structures, has been in a constant battle to maintain itself.

In 1968, Henry Cobb, in collaboration with I.M. Pei, designed Fredonia's campus layout. Notable works of theirs include the John Hancock Tower in Boston

University at Buffalo.

Of Kessler's 17 years at Fredonia, 15 of them have been largely spent on concrete restoration. Since concrete wicks and absorbs water, there's easy potential for it to wear. This led to the recent removal of the Spine Bridge that once connected the Williams Center to McEwen Hall.

“We actually replaced a concrete column because the concrete plates were so deteriorated that there was

According to Kessler, many students didn't know that the bridge was “rotting from the inside out.”

Kessler offered that perhaps 20 years from now, with more state funding, SUNY Fredonia could see a Spine Bridge replacement.

Fredonia's original master plan had significant differences compared to today's layout. Since the school was initially intended for 7,000 to 8,000 students, additional dorm buildings were included in the plan. Along with these dorms, an observatory was to be placed near the wooded area near Ring Road.

Again, budget issues prevented the continuance of construction and these ideas were left behind.

With student enrollment on the rise, Kessler hopes to more revenue will come to get more projects completed.

According to Kessler, many students didn't know that the bridge was “rotting from the inside out.”

and the Louvre Pyramid in Paris, France.

Back in the late '60s, Governor Nelson Rockefeller had a vision to redesign SUNY campuses. According to Kessler, Pei's office received and continued to work with Fredonia's master plan. Similar structures and complexes can be found at other public New York schools such as the

no concrete around it to hold up the bridge,” Kessler said.

Particularly on rainy days, students are quick to acknowledge the bridge's removal. Matt Courtney, a senior political science major, said the bridge “blocked the rain on the way to classes, which was nice. But it was crumbling and leaking water.”

Fredonia and Dunkirk: a tale of two cities

Driving around downtown Fredonia is a whole different ballgame compared to driving around in next-door Dunkirk. Although Central Street acts as a bridge between the two municipalities, two different atmospheres lie on each end. This divide is a key factor for why many students at Fredonia never set foot in Dunkirk.

It wasn't until Spring of my freshman year that I finally visited Dunkirk's pier. As a student hailing from beyond New York borders, I had waited long enough to see Lake Erie. Aside from seeing the lake, I had no reason to cross into Dunkirk.

Fastforward to my senior year: I drove to the Fredonia Technology Incubator (located in Dunkirk) almost every day for my internship. Still, despite the amount of time I've spent in the city, I haven't walked around Dunkirk like I have in Fredonia.

Last year at a community forum, SUNY Fredonia President Virginia Horvath spoke about how Dunkirk can offer opportunities for

students. As an example, she mentioned the Technology Incubator.

"There's a psychological isolation that people need to get over," said Horvath to both students and community residents.

While the Technology Incubator does indeed offer a great amount of resources and services, the surrounding area could use some help.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2015, Dunkirk's median household income sat at \$38,937, while the national average was \$50,711. Fredonia was also below the national average, however the village's average of \$47,910 was a significant jump compared to Dunkirk.

This partly explains the rather high poverty rate. About 15 percent of the country lives in poverty, and for Dunkirk, it's a sad 25 percent.

It's clear that the university has boosted Fredonia's economy. Without college students, I can't imagine Sunny's or Old Main (two bars downtown) would last very long.

Luckily, there may be

a light at the end of the tunnel.

A non-profit organization called Revitalize Dunkirk is dedicated to making the city a better place. According to the organization's mission statement, it's vowed to "preserve the historic heritage, enhance the physical infrastructure, reinvigorate commerce and boost community pride."

This is the help Dunkirk desperately needs.

Starting in 2015, Revitalize Dunkirk has been making a positive impact. Thanks to the organization, regular clean-ups are scheduled throughout the city, community events have been organized and flower baskets have been hung on street lights.

Revitalize Dunkirk is also responsible for the installment of "complete streets," which are designed to equally share the roads between automobiles, bicyclists and pedestrians.

Revitalize Dunkirk may not solve all of the city's problems, but it's taking steps in reconnecting Dunkirk and Fredonia.



In 1811, Squire White (the first medical doctor to practice in Chautauqua County) built the White Inn. After the building was destroyed in a fire, White's son, Devillo, rebuilt the structure you see today. Although the Inn is currently on the market, it's been a village gathering spot since the 1930s.

SUNY Fredonia's McEwen Hall lies in the middle of campus. The university's original master plan included a bridge that would connect McEwen to Maytum Hall. Instead, a courtyard with sculptures separates the two buildings.



