

Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary

1823-2013

No. 1—In the Beginning

On Tuesday January 22, 2013 the town of Vestal will celebrate its 190th anniversary.

Because meteorological records were not yet being kept, we can only imagine that Vestal's first day was a typical cold, snowy January day in 1823. There were no parades or celebrations and nothing in the newspaper to commemorate the occasion. Vestal quietly took its place as one of Broome County's earliest towns, forever changing the lives of former Union residents living on the south side of the Susquehanna River.

The law establishing the town of Vestal was published in the February 4, 1823 issue of the Republican Herald. It read:

An Act to divide the town of Union, in the county of Broome. Passed January 22, 1823.

Be it enacted by the people of the state of New York represented in Senate and Assembly, That from and after the passing of this act, all that part of the town of Union, lying south of the Susquehanna River, together with all the islands belonging to the inhabitants residing on the south side of said river, shall be known and distinguished as a separate town, by the name of Vestal; and the first town meeting shall be held at the house of Jacob Rounds, on the second Tuesday of February next; and all future town meetings shall be holden on the first Tuesday of March, in each year.

And be it further enacted, That all the remaining part of the town of Union, shall be and remain a separate town, by the name of Union; and the first town meeting shall be held at the usual place of holding town meetings in the aforesaid town of Union, on the first Tuesday of March next.

And be it further enacted, That as soon as may be after the first Tuesday of March next, the supervisors and overseers of the poor of the town of Union, and of the town of Vestal, upon notice be previously given by the supervisors for that purpose, shall meet and divide the poor and money belonging to the said town of Union; previous to the said division thereof, agreeable to the last tax list; and that each of the said towns shall forever thereafter support their own poor.



Town Seal. The circular motif signifies enduring public initiative. The sun, which actively depicts life and hope, symbolizes a continuing undercurrent of concern for a better community. The sprig in the center of the seal symbolizes both orderly new growth and adaptation to the environment of a changing world.

But what was behind the decision to create the town and how did it come about? Former Vestal historian, Laurence Leamer, proposed the idea that Union was divided to create two separate "loyal" election districts. Leamer also points out residents on the south side of the river were not elected to the influential positions of supervisor or town clerk and that may have caused a rift.

Could a clue be found in the early town of Union minutes? Each meeting followed a similar pattern; the election of a supervisor, a town clerk, collector, constables, assessors, poor masters, commissioners of highways, election supervisors, pathmasters, fence viewers, pound masters, and school commissioners. Pathmaster districts were defined and school money apportioned among the town's one-room school districts. The meeting ended with the assignment of a date and place for the next annual meeting.

These minutes provide a snapshot of the people and activities that preceded our establishment. For example, this brief statement was found in the 1798 town of Union minutes: "Put to vote whether the town shall be divided but did not carry." Based on the date, this entry most likely was referring to the town of Lisle which was taken from Union in 1801. Surprisingly, the town of Union minutes from 1820 through 1822 gave no hint that a major portion of Union south of the river was about to be split off as a separate town.

So who petitioned the Legislature to take this action? We'll probably never have that answer because the petitions to the Legislature for the formation of towns were destroyed in the Capital fire of 1911. All that remain are the brief entries of Senate and Assembly sessions published in the newspapers and the text of the final law enacted.

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The answer may have been in the minutes from Vestal's first and subsequent town meetings but the ledger went missing after the death of Susie Rounds Harris in 1931.

The published proceedings of the Legislature sessions provide only a glimpse of what transpired in the weeks before that fateful date. We find in *The Albany Advertiser* of January 17, 1823: "Bill reported – By Mr. Warner, from the committee on towns, an act to divide the town of Union in the county of Broome." The following day on January 18, 1823, the paper reported: "Bills passed ...And also the act to divide the town of Union in the county of Broome – Mr. Smith in the chair."

It would seem logical that the March 1823 town of Union minutes would mention the loss of more than 52 square miles of land south of the river...but they don't. Instead elected positions were filled, pathmaster districts redefined, and school funds appropriated as though nothing had happened. Of the two local weekly newspapers printed in 1823, only one survives and nothing other than the state law establishing the town was published to commemorate the event. The meeting required by the law to divide the poor and money was not recorded.

Samuel Murdock. Vestal's first Town Supervisor, born in Connecticut in 1787, was an early pioneer who became a prosperous farmer. After building a cabin high on the ridge of Ross Hill Road in 1812, he returned to Connecticut to marry Charlotte Cleaveland. Their 200 mile trip to Ross Corners was made in an ox cart containing their possessions, a table, chair and chest.



"Where did the name Vestal come from?" is a frequently asked question. Towns were commonly named for one of their prominent residents; however, census records do not list anyone with the surname Vestal.

The most likely source of Vestal's name is attributed by Broome County Historian, Gerald Smith, to Robert Harpur who, as Deputy Secretary of State and Secretary of the State Land Board, named many places based on Roman and Greek history and mythology.

During the first quarter of the 20th century, a locally written history stated that the town of Vestal had been called Crane's Ferry and Vestal Mills. Although repeated frequently in newspapers articles and by historians over the years, the statement cannot be substantiated. Before 1823, legal documents such as deeds for property in what is now Vestal, listed town of Union south side Susquehanna River (abbreviated as SSSR). Crane's Ferry was a location, a place in the town of Union where the ferry crossed the river, and it seems reasonable to deduce that residents might have said, "I'm going down to Crane's Ferry", the place. A large number of mills was cited as the reason for the name "Vestal Mills" yet in 1825 Vestal had 7 mills compared to Union's 13 and, although the number had increased to 20 by 1835, it was still far fewer than Union's 38 mills. As unglamorous as it sounds, we were simply Union until January 22, 1823 when the law declared the new town's name to be Vestal.

Early settler Jacob Rounds purchased a piece of land from John Dunbar in 1821 along what is now Pumphouse Road. It was in Jacob's house that the first town of Vestal meeting took place on February 10, 1823. There are few records to fill in the missing pieces of our early history but the New York State census of 1825 provides statistics that reveal demographics in Vestal shortly after its establishment. The total population of 794 consisted of 397 males and 397 females.

The town had 2821 improved acres, 715 neat (domesticated) cattle, 104 horses, 1077 sheep, and 331 hogs. There were 2 grist mills and 5 saw mills. A recap of 1824 statistics documented 2 marriages, 39 births, and 8 deaths. Households had made 1008 yards of fulled cloth, 1819 yards of flannel and wool cloth, 3551 yards of linen, cotton, and other cloth.

From these humble beginnings a rich history has evolved that we'll explore throughout the year as we celebrate Vestal's 190th anniversary.

Sources and additional information on the topics in this article are found at the Historian's office.