

The Lost City of Tryon

The term “lost city” has a romantic, almost folkloric connotation. It conjures up images of derelict buildings, overgrown foliage, and long-ago people. Brighton’s “lost city” is Tryon, a commercial village on Gerundegut (Irondequoit) Creek in what became the town of Brighton in 1814. Traces remain in the northeast part of town but one has to look hard to see them.

If you visit the site today, you’ll see a replica log building on the bluff overlooking the creek. The building, erected in 1938, commemorates the visit by Captain Peter Schuyler and a contingent of men sent by the colonial governor of New York to investigate the fur trade between the native people and the French who were camped at a site near present-day Seabreeze. Schuyler’s party arrived at the Irondequoit Landing in September of 1721 and built a log cabin as shelter. After about a year they abandoned the structure and returned to Albany to report that the French were no longer a problem.

When John Tryon arrived at the Landing in 1797, he found a clearing of several acres and the remains of Schuyler’s cabin. With the abundant waterpower, timber, a natural harbor, and a strategic location on land and water routes, John Tryon saw prosperity ahead, building a village that included a five-story log warehouse, a school, a store, a distillery, an ashery, and a shipping dock. Forty lots were surveyed for houses.

John Tryon found another asset nearby on Irondequoit Creek. A charcoal maker in Plainfield, Massachusetts, Asa Dunbar brought his family to the Landing in the mid-1790s, supporting them by hunting, making salt, and harvesting fruit from trees planted years earlier by native people. Asa, a free Black man, went to work for the Tryon Company, assisting with construction of the village and occasionally traveling to Tryon’s Lima store on company business.

The Tryon store business method was barter, there being very little cash on the frontier at that time. Trading goods came from Canandaigua and points east and included bolts of fabric, ribbons, bonnets, blank books and goose quills, tea, spices, loaf sugar, tobacco, cups and saucers, wineglasses, bedcord, knitting needles, and spectacles. Also available were scythes, cowbells, nails, hammers, and corks. Settlers traded their farm produce, cider, grain, fresh meat, and ashes.

In the early 1800s, this once-thriving metropolis declined rapidly for three main reasons. The first was the death of John Tryon in 1807 and the difficulty of settling his complex estate. The second was the War of 1812 during which the demands for Tryon-built ships increased dramatically but the war also discouraged new settlers from coming to what was essentially a war zone. The third factor was the knowledge that the Erie Canal would be built several miles south of Tryon and would bypass the village in favor of commercial trade at the port of Rochester. By 1822, the canal was a reality with Brighton and Pittsford booming and the Tryon settlement fading away.

During the nineteenth century, the village gradually disappeared, its buildings demolished and its acreage given over to farming. Two houses remain on Landing Road, both built before 1800. Another, less obvious, relic is the road to Irondequoit creek that slopes away from the bluff on which the 1938 cabin sits.

Monroe County's Ellison Park now occupies most of the village so there are no derelict buildings, no overgrown foliage, and no ghosts in Brighton's "lost city" of Tryon.

Mary Jo Lanphear
Town of Brighton Historian
6 September 2023