

Kirkwood Center a/k/a/ Five Mile Point – The Early Years

By: Karen Ferguson, Town of Kirkwood Historian

As I have stated in previous articles, the Town of Kirkwood consists of 5 different hamlets. Starting at the southern part of the Town at the PA border and heading north/northeast, the hamlets are as follows: Riverside, Kirkwood village, Langdon, Kirkwood Center (a/k/a/ 5-mile point) and Brookvale.

Many people have posed the question, “Why is Five Mile Point called Five Mile Point?” The answer is simple. It is said to be the exact distance from the Broome County Courthouse in the City of Binghamton (built in 1897) to the intersection of what was then called River Road (Route 11) and Windsor Road (Old Route 17). The location of this intersection changed when the highways were reconstructed so the present-day landmark would be the corner of Crescent Drive and Frances Street. However, while we know it as Five Mile Point, the hamlet was officially known as Kirkwood Centre.

The first family to arrive in our area was Jonathon Fitch and his wife Esther and they settled in Kirkwood Centre in 1789. He is credited for building the first grist mill in Broome County (known then as Tioga). It was powered by water and located at or near the mouth of the Susquehanna River along the creek we call Park Creek. However, that creek was originally named Fitch’s Creek. This mill was significant because folks would travel as far as 40 miles to purchase their flour from him.

Within 10 years of Fitch’s arrival, hundreds migrated to this area and settled along the banks of the Susquehanna and Chenango River because of the flat riverbed and the rich soil it provided for farming. Thus, Kirkwood Centre was known for its beautiful farms.

A post office for this area was established on September 11, 1861. Eli W. Watrous was the first post master and it was located on his property. According to post office records, the spelling of Kirkwood Centre changed to Kirkwood Center in December of 1893. The post office remained operational until August 14, 1910.

School # 11 was already in use when Kirkwood was founded and was located on Route 11 (River Road) on the Smith B. Watrous property. It was deeded to the school officially on May 2, 1892. It became part of the Windsor Central School District in 1949.

In 1874, the first Grange in Broome County was established in Kirkwood Centre as Kirkwood Grange No. 96. It was located on the property of Franklin P. Hays, at the north corner of Ostrum Road. It was moved to the south side of Ostrum Road around 1900. It still stands and is being used for apartments.

St. Mary’s was established in Kirkwood Center in 1888. Two acres of land was purchased from Eli Watrous. Work was started in September. Volunteers dug the foundation and Thomas and

William Murphy supervised the building of the church. It was completed quickly and the first mass was held on December 25, 1888.

Construction of the New York State Inebriate Asylum was started in 1857 and had its first patients in 1864. The asylum struggled financially and by 1879, it had converted to what is known as the Binghamton State Hospital. After a few years, the Board of Trustees purchased 150 acres of land and established a farm. Over 99% of that farm land was located in Kirkwood. It was Mr. Ebenezer Y. Park who sold his property which abutted Park Creek to the State of New York.

When the State no longer used this property for farming, it deeded 6 acres back to the Town of Kirkwood in 1960 for recreation use and the site of Valley Park. The rest of the farm property was developed for industrial and residential use.

Five Mile Point saw significant changes from farming to commercial and business uses in the late 30s and early 40s. Articles detailing that development were written by Dick O'Dea and published by Historian Elwood Derr in recent years. The purpose of this article was to lay the foundation of those early years.