

The Headwaters History Trail:  
A Proposed Driving and Tourism Tour



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Abstract

This report proposes a scenic byway and tourism trail based on the unique history of the Hinterlands region. Utilizing a theme of “American Revolutions,” the Headwaters History Trail traces significant places and attractions that highlight a sequence of events that began with the earliest European settlement of the Mohawk Valley, lead to a significant strategic role in the American Revolution, and culminate in the earliest pangs of the American Industrial Revolution. The trail is centered on the Mohawk Valley and its southern rim, and can be utilized as a mechanism for prioritizing public and private investment.

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## **Introduction**

The Headwaters History Trail is the name of a proposed driving tour through the Mohawk Valley and its southern rim. The theme of the trail will be “American Revolutions,” a concept that encompasses the region’s key role in both the Revolutionary War and subsequent Industrial Revolution. The two events are in fact linked as one key function of the war was to enable westward expansion of American settlers along the coast across the Appalachian Mountains and into the Great Lakes Plain. This was made possible by the building of the Erie Canal and one of the earliest railroads in the United States. The driving tour will highlight sites of interest within this theme, but communities along its route can add additional elements of interest in their local areas. The trail serves as an organizing principle for a drive through the region, tying together historical and other area attractions.

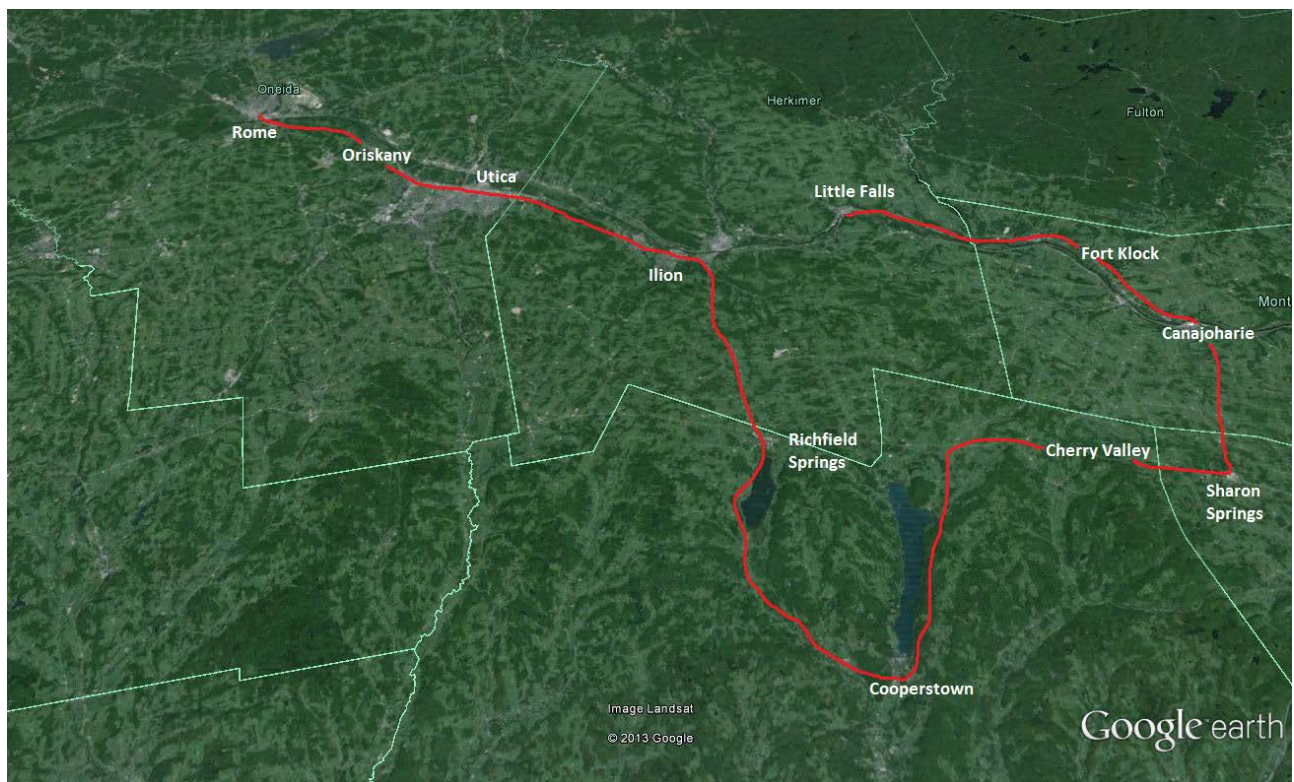
The Headwaters Region is a geologically important region for east coast habitats. Spanning nine counties from the Pennsylvania line to the heart of the Adirondacks, the region includes the starting points of the Black, Delaware, Mohawk and Susquehanna Rivers, and as such a drop of rain falling within a twenty mile radius of Utica could enter the ocean anywhere from the Gulf of Saint Lawrence to Chesapeake Bay. The area’s two mountainous regions—the Adirondacks and the Catskills—are parts of two different geological systems: the Laurentian Plateau for the former and the Appalachian Mountains for the latter. The Mohawk River, the primary outlet for the Great Lakes system millennia ago, forms a natural gap between the mountains from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes. The Hudson-Mohawk River system provides the only water route through the Appalachian Mountains, and as such has served as a major population corridor since before European settlement.

The geological significance of the region has translated into historical significance as well. One of the primary causes of the American Revolution was the Proclamation of 1763. The British government declared that there would be no more colonial settlement west of the Appalachians. The local manifestation of this line was the Fort Stanwix Treaty line that ran from modern Rome to the headwaters of the Unadilla River near Unadilla Forks, and then proceeded south along the river. The treaty line remains today the western boundary of Otsego and Delaware Counties. With the outbreak of hostilities between the colonists and the British in 1775, the region’s many forts became battlegrounds in the British attempt to split New England from the rest of the colonies by controlling the Hudson River. When the Battle of Saratoga ended in American victory in 1777, the French were convinced to join the American side and in time independence was won as a result. One factor in American victory at Saratoga was the American victory at Oriskany that denied the British of reinforcements in the Hudson Valley. Subsequently, American independence cleared the way for tens of thousands of New England Yankees to stream west, most utilizing the Mohawk Valley along the way and giving birth to boomtowns like Utica. The Yankees brought with them such cultural traits as the commons or “greens” found in many historical villages, such as Clinton and Whitesboro, as well as

technology. One such technology was the knowledge to build a water-powered textile mill, smuggled from England by Samuel Slater who built the first such mill in America in 1793. In 1808, Slater's engineer, Benjamin Walcott, built the first such mill in New York State in what is now New York Mills. Many such mills followed, such as the Union Textile Mill in Toddsville in 1810 and numerous others throughout the region. By 1850 Oneida County businessmen claimed to be the most industrialized region in the country after New England; they were likely right. Such a claim also means that the region was one of the earliest places in the world to experience the modern Industrial Revolution. And unlike the several key regions in New England, such as the Blackstone Valley and the Merrimack Valley, the Mohawk Valley and environs witnessed every major stage of industrialization in one place, from early water mills meant to serve an agrarian population to the birth of the world's first commercial computer—the Univac File Computer—in Utica 150 years later. The region continues this tradition today with budding computer and nanotechnology firms.

## The Trail

The trail is designed so that a visitor or local can drive its entire route in a day or simply pick particular places along it for day visits at their leisure. It can be entered or exited at any point, although we will present a sequence based on a driver from the Mohawk Valley.



The first stop is Little Falls. Little Falls was home to the first canal on the Mohawk River. Built in 1793, the Little Falls Canal contained five locks that allowed boats to get around the



rapids; with the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, this first canal was utilized as a feeder for the Erie and as a hydraulic canal to power an array of mills in the city. The mill complex at Little Falls is analogous to the larger complex built at Lowell, Massachusetts at about the same time. The area is today maintained as an arts and antique district. Also in Little Falls is the home of Revolutionary War General Nicholas Herkimer. The Herkimer

Home is a state historic site that features park-like grounds and a tour of the general's eighteenth century Georgian mansion. Visitors to Little Falls can also walk a series of trails by the Erie Canal while looking at stunning views of the city, visit one of the tallest canal locks in the world, and walk inside an earlier canal lock.

East of Little Falls along New York 5 is Fort Klock, a colonial era fort built by Palatine German settlers. Fort Klock offers tours and other events throughout the year.



East of Fort Klock and across the river, Canajoharie was home to Beech Nut Packaging. One legacy of this company is the Arkell Museum at the north end of downtown. The Arkell Museum is a manageable art museum with a



first rate collection of paintings, particularly those of the Hudson River School. In fact, with the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute and the Fenimore Art Museum, the Arkell forms one stop of a "Hudson River School mini-trail." Visitors can take a stroll down Church Street looking at the shops and take in the Canajoharie Gorge.

A short drive south of Canajoharie on

route 10 brings the visitor to Sharon Springs. Near the top of the Appalachian Plateau, Sharon Springs was a popular tourist destination for those looking for the health benefits of its springs and the summer scene. In the last decade a number of its hotels have been restored, and the village is once again a popular day trip. A visitor can check out the shops and restaurants along Main Street, reading the historical markers along the way.



Turning west from Sharon Springs, the driver follows the scenic south rim of the Mohawk Valley on historic route 20. The road was originally built as the main route of the Western Turnpike, also known as the Cherry Valley Turnpike. At Cherry Valley visitors can stroll past fieldstone buildings along Main Street and visit the site of the Cherry Valley Massacre.

At Cooperstown the visitor finds a plethora of activities and sites. The village itself is home to the National Baseball Hall of Fame, the Fenimore Art Museum, and the Farmer’s Museum. Set amid the landscape immortalized in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers*, Otsego Lake itself commemorates this literary achievement at Glimmerglass State Park; Cooper himself is buried with his family on the grounds of the Episcopal Church. In nearby Hartwick Seminary stands the site of the first Lutheran seminary in the United States, deeded by the will of John



Christopher Hartwick, an itinerant preacher influential in establishing the church in America in the late eighteenth century. Hartwick bought his patent to build New Jerusalem, a failed attempt at a utopian community that presaged the famed revivalism of the early nineteenth century. Also in the Cooperstown area is the Fly Creek Cider Mill, a working nineteenth century mill that

entertains the visitor with food and history. The Fly Creek Cider Mill is on a beverage trail that also includes the Brewery Ommegang and Bear Pond Winery. The trip can be complete with

proposed self-guided walking tours of the Cooperstown Historic District, which focuses on the village’s industrial elite, and the Hartwick Historic District, which focuses on the “greater half.”

A short distance north of Cooperstown is Richfield Springs. At the north end of Canadarago Lake, Richfield Springs was, like Sharon Springs, home to popular mineral springs.

From Richfield Springs the visitor travels back into the Mohawk Valley. In Ilion, the Remington Arms Museum educates the public with the history of firearms and early industrial history in the region. Remington not only made firearms, but its subsidiaries also made such items as typewriters. It was a descendent of Remington, Sperry Rand, that made the world’s first commercial computer in Utica. Sperry Rand is now Unisys.

Just west of Ilion is Utica, built on the site of Old Fort Schuyler that once protected a ford in the Mohawk River. The river was moved nearly 100 years ago to make way for the growing city. The Sauquoit and Oriskany Creek Valleys were home to some of the earliest textile mills in America, including the first in the state at New York Mills. The



city continues to enjoy the fruits of this period of prosperity, and is home to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute and a park system designed by Frederick Law Olmstead. In addition, a proposed walking tour of downtown Utica would highlight the city’s abolitionist past. The city is also home to the Mohawk Valley Ballet, the Utica Symphony Orchestra, and the Players of Utica. Visitors will find a rich diversity of food options, from local foods served by the city’s many immigrant groups to suburban fare.

Traveling west of Utica one encounters the suburban community of Oriskany. Just outside of town is the Oriskany Battle Monument that commemorates that important Revolutionary War battle, and in the village is a display dedicated to the retired air craft carrier that bears its name.

The tour ends in downtown Rome where a replica of Fort Stanwix welcomes visitors. Rome is at the “Great Carry,” the point where an early traveler would carry a canoe from the eastward



flowing Mohawk River to the westward flowing Woods Creek; less than a mile separated these two waterways that connected Lake Ontario and the Atlantic Ocean. Fort Stanwix National Monument offers a museum, many educational and cultural events, and of course the fort itself. Also in Rome is Erie Canal Village, a restored section of the original canal that offers visitors a small museum and rides on a genuine packet boat.

## **Future Directions**

A number of challenges are associated with this project. One important component of future work is to reach out to local communities, historical societies, and policy makers for input on appropriate attractions, walking tours, and even signage at each point along its route. The design of brochures, a website, and even an app for the trail is also necessary for future success of the trail. In addition, the designation of a “trail” through the state Scenic Byways program would also help tie these sites together.

## **About the Authors**

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