

HAMMONDVILLE

ESSEX COUNTY GHOST TOWN

By Connie Pope

If ever a village bore the stamp of its founder, that village was Hammondville, carved from the rock of the Adirondacks 13 miles west of Lake Champlain in the town of Crown Point, Essex County. It took a man of uncommon fortitude to plan and build a settlement there, ringed by rugged mountain peaks, and connected to small centers of population by only the most primitive of roads: it took courage, energy, and one fundamental piece of luck, the railroad. If heroic John Hammond was gathering a volunteer cavalry company to serve the Union in the Civil War, the New York to Canada railroad was little more than a wild dream. It became a plan in 1864, when Hammond, who had been brevetted a general, returned from the war and intensified his campaign to provide year-round transportation and communication between the west shore mid-lake region and the heavily populated marketing centers to the south and east.

By 1869, iron rails were being laid in the gap between Whitehall and Plattsburgh, reaching Crown Point village by 1872, when the new Crown Point Iron Company was organized. John Hammond was the instrumental force in the consolidation of his own interests with those of Allen Penfield, James Harwood and the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company to form this iron mining and manufacturing colossus, of which he was president for the last 17 years of his life. The Essex County Republican of October 17th, 1872 announced this consolidation of property, making a total of 20,000 acres of land and the new company's plan to build a railroad from the mines to Lake Champlain.

Within a few years, branches of the company extended from Crown Point, terminus of the railroad and site of blast furnaces and offices, to Paradox Lake, terminus of the stage roads. The corporation owned outright the villages of Hammondville and Ironville as well as the settlements associated with the charcoal kilns, Chilson Hill, Blackman Settlement and Black Brook.

Remarkable parallels can be seen between the villages of Hammondville and Popeville (see York State Tradition, Fall 1968). Both were built on sites of inactive earlier settlements: they share the same birth date, 1873 and the same date of industrial collapse, 1893.

They were one-industry towns, Hammondville mining iron, Popeville manufacturing it. They were company owned and company run through 19 years of existence. The Delaware and Hudson Canal Company invested heavily in both, the total investment running about \$1,500,000. Both were located in desolate spots, Popeville at the outlet of Lower Chateaugay Lake for its incomparable water power, Hammondville deep in the mountains at a source of supposedly inexhaustible iron deposits.

In spite of the similarity, they were two separate operations. Hammondville was a one-man operation. Charles F. and Thomas Hammond, father and brother respectively of the General, were associated only with opening activities of the Crown Point Iron Company, formed in October 1872. In November 1873, Thomas Hammond and his entire family were drowned in the sinking of the ill-fated Ville du Harve, returning from

Europe. The shock was fatal to the 75 year old father, Charles F. Hammond, who passed away in December.

Horse teams were hauling ore from the mines to the forge at Ironville (called Irondale at that time) in January of 1873, the survey for the company railroad was completed and three mines were being worked. Eighty men were working on the railroad and in the mines and houses being built for the miners.

A correspondent of the Essex County Republican noted in 1873 that the town of Crown Point had nearly doubled its population, its business and its general prosperity. All of this was due chiefly to the founding and growth of the village of

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And acting in so outlandish a manner that the General sent for assistance and several arrests were made. Officers and a posse of men went out to the mines on a special train to make further arrests this morning”

Further information was available in the Ticonderoga Sentinel of April 11th: “The company made an agreement with their men to work for certain wages, receiving a portion monthly in cash, the remainder in goods or wait until the company should convert the proceeds of their labor into money, when they should be paid. There were a few, however, who became dissatisfied with waiting and posted notices that they wished to settle April 1st. General Hammond was promptly on hand to pay them the balance due and give them their time: but not wishing to settle that way they...endeavored to keep the other men from their work”. Six ringleaders were arrested, tried and committed to jail. Forty men received “back pay” and left.

With affairs back to normal, the company ordered a passenger car built for the Railroad, took delivery on the first of June and started the same day hauling passengers. In September the cars were usually active, but apparently at little profit, for by December wages had been reduced to \$1.25 per day.

The newspapers called the winter of 1874-75 “the hardest winter in years for money and employment,” but the Company added a new passenger car to the rolling stock. Iron was being sent from furnaces at the lake to the steel works at Troy at a rate of 125 tons per day.

1875

The population at Hammondville had reached 700, 200 permanent residents and 500 boarders. The cars were making three trips with ore and supplies. Theodore Locke managed the company store. The mine boss was Captain McDonald, replacing Professor Herring, who was off surveying for the county. Hammondville had acquired a medical man, a Dr. Tobias: a teacher, a Miss Taylor: and a carpenter, a Mr. Hardy.

In June the mines were running night and day, shipping 8,000 tons of ore per month via six trains per day. The school enrolled 65 pupils and a Sabbath school was organized. The Baldwin Stage Line started running from Old Furnace to Schroon Lake for the tourist season.

From hundred fifty men were employed in the mines by December 1875. A whimsy and blacksmith shop had been built. The New York and Canada Railroad was open and running all the way: a telegraph was installed at Hammondville.

1876

The year 1876 was a quiet one. The company was considering an extension of the railroad to Paradox. Professor Herring returned from county surveying and departed for the West. A Crown Point correspondent for the Ticonderoga Sentinel on April 7th treated the item with brevity: "Professor Herring is disposing of his household goods at auction and private sale, preparatory to taking his departure for the western mines." A number of miners, discontented with wages, were leaving in this period.

Hammondville and Ironville both received post office designation in May 1876 and the Company broke ground for the construction of a new store, having outgrown the old building. Sales averaged \$3,000 per day, keeping a chief clerk and four assistants busy. A new office was built at the lake.

1877

Only three major events relieved the dullness of 1877. In June General Hammond presented the villagers the ground on which to build a Catholic church. In July a baseball team was organized, called the Bessemer's. In December the Company ruled that all employees must live in company owned tenant houses.

1878

The year 1878 was as busy as the previous year had been idle. The furnaces and the forge were at full blast most of the year: for the first time since their completion both furnaces at the lake were fired simultaneously.

A story in the July 12th issue of the Plattsburgh Sentinel described the four year old village. It includes a post office, the company's store, a handsome church (in process) and of the several villages in the town it is the largest. The deposit of ore at this mine...is considered to be literally inexhaustible...During the last two months, 20,500 tons of ore were mined and transported to the lake...The number of miners employed in the mine is 500...The social and moral condition of the miners and operatives is good. The presence of intoxication liquors at the works or upon the ground of the company is positively prohibited.

In September the company built a two-foot tramway to the Hammond pit and filled the gulf under the height trestle. Toward the end of the year, the beehive kilns at Ironville were completed. These ubiquitous accessories to the Catalan forge were described by a correspondent as resembling the pictures of Esquimeaux snow huts in the old Mitchell geography.

1879

The Catholic Church spent all of 1879 in construction, funding the project by the proceeds from a series of fairs and socials. The company built coal kilns at Chilson Hill in April and a 1700-foot railroad to the Red Hill vein in October. A wagon road was completed to the foot of the hill leading to Paradox and all that was needed to shorten the stage route was a bridge across a creek. Engineers converted the Ironville forge to steam power.

The mines store was conduction business at a rate of \$100,000 per annum. General Hammond assumed duties as Congressman-elect, departing for Washington early in the year to observe operations and prepare him-self. One hundred twenty five children were attending school.

A strike at the lakeside furnaces was settled by promising a raise in wages: no such offer was tendered at the mines, although the prices of store goods increased. A clairvoyant and photographer paid business visits to the village.

1880

Activity interspersed with adversity was the theme of the year 1880. On New Year's Day the steam forges and separator at Ironville commenced operation: it was down the following month and required repairs off and on throughout the year.

In spite of a wage increase of two cents in February, many experienced miners were leaving Hammondville, selling off their personal effects and heading west. Four Hundred fifty to five hundred tons of ore were shipped daily: so much was being moved on a single train that the gross weight of one shipment collapsed an ore trestle at Ironville. The company added two new fires to the forge there and built several tenement houses to accommodate the influx of laborers.

1881

By 1881 mine officials undoubtedly realized that the heyday was over. If any single word can be used to describe the year, it has to be disastrous. Three times the Ironville separator broke down, requiring expensive, time-consuming repairs, one time nearly a complete rebuilding.

The cost of repairing the lakeside furnaces totaled \$100,000. A coal shed in Ironville collapsed from the weight of snow. Fires wiped out a tenement house in Hammondville and the coal kilns and wood supply at Putt's Creek. Two men were killed in a mine accident.

Reserves of ore were all but exhausted in two of the three pits, only the North pit continuing to product at a profitable rate. Construction cutbacks were inevitable and the next few years showed little in the way of activity.

1882

In 1882 the Ironville separator continued to give trouble. One of the Company's locomotives smashed up and a second was loaned to the Chateaugay Railroad. The one remaining engine hauled 53 cars to Crown Point during the only active period in May.

Steel track was laid as far as Amy Hill and telephones were installed on the line and in Ironville. The year closed with a ten percent reduction in wages.

1883-1892

Accidents, storms, explosions, production curtailments, labor cuts and wage reductions headlined the year 1883. Business was so slow that the Company reduced prices in the mines stores and sold two railroad engines, ordering one to replace them.

Little happened in 1884 except that steel rails were laid all the way to Hammondville. The Company offices at Crown Point were destroyed by fire at a loss of \$8,000, covered by insurance amounting to \$5,000.

The Crown Point Iron company declared a three per cent dividend in 1885 but wages for the manufacture of iron blooms were down to three dollars per ton, a reduction of more than half in a few years. The Ironville forge turned out its first loup in two years.

Business continued quiet in 1886. A new mine opened at Hammondville and a spur track built to it. A series of fortnightly socials broke the monotony of 1887 and a Chautauqua Circle was organized. In December the Company completed a director's railroad car at the shops in Crown Point.

Social events monopolized the headlines of 1888: band practice, Sunday School presentations, prayer meetings and little else. A place car with reversible seats, closets, baggage racks and good ventilation went into operation on the railroad for the tourist trade

General John Hammond died in May of 1889. If his villagers were not already aware that the end was near, this was the incontrovertible proof. Two hundred miners attended the Memorial Day funeral in Crown Point. Lengthening days were filled with patching, painting and making pretense of industry. November brought a diphtheria epidemic. All the elements seemed to conspire in a plan of doom for the mining town.

Improvement in the business climate brought false hope to Hammondville in 1890 and 1891. Wages were raised ten cents a day, but experienced miners were still leaving for the West. The school flourished and the railroad reactivated its palace car and passenger coach. The furnaces, forges and separator were running spasmodically but an air of unquiet pervaded the settlement.

In June of 1892 the last of the big three mines, the North pit was abandoned. Although the diamond drill hunted unceasingly, no new reserves could be located. Only the West End mine, which showed a greater propensity for caving in than for producing, was still being operated and the Number 4 shaft shut down to one shift. The village doctor moved to Mineville.

A letter written by William C. Northey, a supervisor in the mines, was reprinted in the Ticonderoga Sentinel of July 5th, 1962. Describing Hammondville's active period, he said, "For several years there was quite a development of outcroppings of ore in the various ledges of rock that were exposed until we had at one time as many as 50 pits, large and small, and 750 men on payroll".

Describing the end, he said, "The facts are that the Hammond pit was cleaned out in the late 70's, the Penfield pit in the early 80's. From this time our production began to drop off and we started to explore in advance of our workings with diamond drills but without finding any increased ore bodies. This we followed up until the end of 1892,

when those of us who were in a position to know were of the opinion that we would have all of the available ore taken out with six months of that time”.

The Crown Point Iron Company made application for voluntary dissolution in February of 1896. At that time the mines and furnaces had not been in operation for nearly four years. The receivers were searching without much hope of success for a buyer for the complete plant and equipment.

A postscript to this ghost town account appears in the Northey letter. In 1900, Northey wrote, ” I was opening up some new mines for the American Steel and Wire Company at Hibbing, Minnesota and when I got on the ground, I found four carloads of boilers and mining machinery from Hammondville. It seemed like meeting an old friend. I was told later that it was the last shipment over the Crown Point Railroad before the rails were taken up. I saw this machinery installed at Hammondville in 1873 and used it again in the development of the Clark mine in 1900.”