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History of Poughkeepsie

When someone goes through a town, they rarely think about its historical significance or its past. And this is a disturbing trend because almost every city has something interesting about it. But when someone drives through Poughkeepsie, what do they see? They most likely see it as a small city on the Hudson and the home IBM. It is surrounded by the beautiful Catskills Mountains and it has easy connection to New York City, but no one would think it had a very significant history. Yet, Poughkeepsie does have this and to truly appreciate the historically rich area we must have a complete view of its past, from geography, to its origins all the way up to present day.

Poughkeepsie is significant in the area because of many geographical features, its proximity to the Hudson River, its central location between Albany and New York City and its creeks and coves. With Poughkeepsie's closeness with the river, water traffic and trade made it a fast growing port and town. It encouraged trade from the city and made business thrive. The fact that Poughkeepsie is situated in the middle of two great cities made it a sensible stop for many travelers and traders. This also brought money to the growing town. This made it an important stop for future train rails because it was a place to refuel.¹ Poughkeepsie's coves provided a place for ships to anchor and it provided easy access inland, while the creeks provided the future town with water power which was a key of success for industry growth in the area.

Poughkeepsie was originally settled in the seventeenth century by Dutch settlers. They purchased the land from Indians. They quickly began to build up and they named the town Poughkeepsie, which was the phonetic spelling of the Indian word Apo-keep-sinck, literally

¹ Joyce Ghee and Joan Spence, *Poughkeepsie: Halfway up the Hudson* (Dover: Arcadia Publishing, 1997), 7.

meaning “safe harbor.”² According to an old Indian legend, this was the area where a young chief rescued his fiancé from Huron warriors and hid her here, thus making this place the girl’s safe haven. These original settlers were a Dutchman and an Englishman, named Myndert Harmse and Thomas Sanders respectfully, bought the land on 1688.³

The little village was nothing much compared to any other shire town during this time,



<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~swarthout/History/jpg/pomural.jpg>

people came and went and it was not certain if it would grow. However, in 1714 one Dutchman named Jacobus Van Den Bogert decided to give two tracts of his land for the building of a church and courthouse. The church became a famous landmark and still stands today, the

Reformed Dutch Church. His decision provided

Poughkeepsie the utilities it needed to be a permanent

village. The construction of the first courthouse was not completed until 1746, and when it was finished a second courthouse was already built, yet when construction began development occurred in Poughkeepsie, “homes, offices, hotels, and stores appeared nearby. Between Upper and Lower Landings along the river, business and industry flourished, changing with the times, the talents of the new populations, technology and transportation.”⁴

While Poughkeepsie continued to grow, the American Revolution broke out. The state capital which was close by, Kingston, was burned down but Poughkeepsie was spared. This made Poughkeepsie the center of New York Legislation and its second capital during the Revolution until 1797 when it was moved to Albany. This town was even more historically

² Philip Henry Smith, *General History of Dutchess County from 1609 to 1876*, (Armenia: DeLacey & Walsh Printers, 1877). 332.

³ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁴ Ghee., 10.

significant because this was where New York signed not only the Articles of Confederation but the Constitution as well in 1788. And in eleven years, the settlement of Poughkeepsie became incorporated as an official village in 1799.

Poughkeepsie continued to thrive during the 19th century. It had many palatial estates right along the river and the post road, which later became King's Highway, was one of the few roads that actually connected Poughkeepsie with the rest of New York and Connecticut was full of wagons full of tradable goods and travelers.⁵ What truly helped Poughkeepsie grow was the development of the Hudson River Railroad which opened on 1851. This allowed easier transportation of people and goods from New York and Albany. With this connection and



<http://www.worldmapsonline.com/images/1whistoricmaps/1w-ny-po-1874.jpg>

proximity the city, Poughkeepsie was turned into a suburb of New York City. It also led to new ethnicities to move in to the town. Irish and Italians came through, and they were responsible for the foundation of many catholic churches in the areas. Many African Americans from the south moved in to Poughkeepsie during the Great Migration in 1910. This lead to a huge

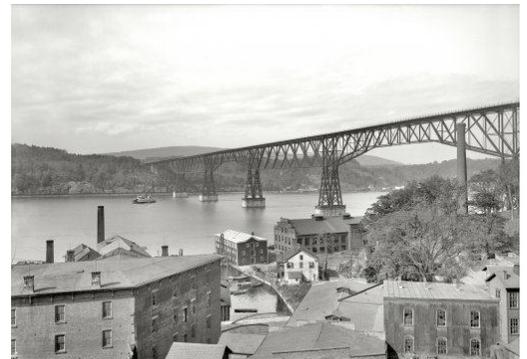
population increase and Poughkeepsie was incorporated as a city in 1854.⁶ The new train line lead to a boom in business as well. New industries sprung up around town, including a few breweries, owned by Matthew Vassar. At this time Vassar was a very successful businessman; he lead to the formation of banks, breweries and a whaling company all in Poughkeepsie. However, what makes him even more notable was that he led to the foundation of Vassar College, an all-

⁵ Edmund Platt, *The Eagle's History of Poughkeepsie from Earliest Settlements: 1683 to 1905* (Poughkeepsie: Platt and Platt, 1905) 32.

⁶ Ghee., 85.

women's school. Education has always been an important factor in the area for more schools and colleges began to be built up in the area. Two of the biggest were Marist College and Dutchess Community College. Marist College was built by the Marist Brothers in 1905 and the college was chartered in 1929. Dutchess Community College was founded in 1957 and housed over 9,000 undergraduates. Another influential man in the city at this time was Samuel F.B. Morse. Morse was an artist and an inventor and during his stay in Poughkeepsie. His greatest invention was the telegraph and the development of Morse code. This was revolutionary because it had opened up the city to "the 'larger' world."⁷ He also went on to giving large sums of money to Vassar College and local hospitals.

As Morse and Vassar helped the city through donations and philanthropy, more railways and roads were being constructed around town. Even the famous Poughkeepsie Bridge which we see almost every day was just an idea at the time. Plans were made for the Poughkeepsie Bridge as early as 1851 to allow trains over the river but it was not implemented until 1871. The bridge was the most viable in this location due to the closeness of the banks at this section of the river. Construction began on the bridge and was completed on 1889. This allowed even more traffic to come through Poughkeepsie and the city benefited.



<http://www.shorpy.com/node/10190>

At the turn of the twentieth century, Poughkeepsie had begun a technological shift. Electric trolleys were built around the city in 1900's to help the population get around easier.⁸ The Poughkeepsie Train Station was built 1918 and the Mid-Hudson Bridge was completed in 1930. Even ferries still ran on the river which made the riverfront a thriving commercial zone in

⁷ Ghee,. 126.

⁸ Joyce Ghee and Joan Spence, Poughkeepsie: A Century of Change (Dover: Arcadia Publishing, 1999), 62.

the city. All three of these developments connected it to the rest of the country. However, it was not until the invention of the automobile which changed Poughkeepsie the most. The car made travel to this city even easier yet the city was not designed for cars so there were huge traffic jams. This led to the complete overhaul of the city's infrastructure. New roads, signs and traffic lights were constructed to alleviate the problem. IBM built its plant in Poughkeepsie in 1948. It started as a card punching machine but within ten years they began to construct computers.⁹ This company brought Poughkeepsie even more prosperity because it was a very successful business. It is still here today too.

Even though the city of Poughkeepsie has only a small population of 32,736 people, it is a very historically significant city not just in New York but the Country. Some of the country's most important documents, The Articles of Confederation and the Constitution, were signed here and it was the state capital. Great Inventers were born and lived here. It is impossible to write the whole history of Poughkeepsie in one paper because so much has occurred here. I have simply gone over the most important events in Poughkeepsie's history that led to what it is today. Yet it is amazing when you step back you see this city was one of most influential cities in New York State history, and only the future can tell if it will be as impactful in the next two hundred years as it was for the last two hundred years.

⁹ Ghee., 124.

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