

The Villages of Carthage and West Carthage were started on the strength of what the area had in plentiful supply - and still has in abundance - an accessible waterway, natural wood and mineral supplies, a community of hard-working individuals and a spirit of cooperation.

Industry began to take shape in the land where the Oneida Indians once made their homes as French entrepreneurs and aristocrats began financing many commercial enterprises; although it was the industrious New Englanders who are credited with much of the area's development.

The forest supplied the material for one of the Black River Valley's early industries, "pearl ash," or potash, which, along with lumber, was in high demand in the early 1800's. The hemlock forests of the river region also provided the raw material for a developing tanning industry, which helped make the islands along the Black River an early industrial belt. At the same time, livestock farming and butter and cheese production helped to support the early Carthage settlers.

Both the Villages of Carthage and West Carthage, and the islands between them, grew rapidly with the introduction of the tanning and iron milling industries, evident in the naming of Tannery Island and Furnace Island. During a period of great industrial production, Carthage became known for tanning and iron works and also mill machinery, sleigh shoes, plows, nail works, potash kettles and stoves. And in 1849, a cotton factory opened in the area, thus further diversifying the industrial mix.

The opening of the Black River Canal in 1851, and its completion in 1855, opened up many possibilities for commerce along the river, and the area witnessed significant growth. In 1852, the first bank opened in Carthage and in the late 1860's the Great Bend Paper and Pulp Company started doing business. The 1870's saw an agricultural boom and the 1880's witnessed the virtual rebuilding of the entire community.

Two major fires influenced the village landscape during the second half of the nineteenth century. The first fire in 1861 destroyed 20 buildings and leveled the majority of the village. The second major fire began in October of 1884 when hot embers caught a pile of shavings at a saw mill on the west bank of the Black River. A southwesterly wind carried the fire to Guyot and Furnace Islands and to the village. The outcome was the destruction of nearly all the industries along the Black River Valley and most of the residences in the village. Nearly 70 acres and 200 buildings were razed, including four churches, two schools, an opera house, and village hall. The determination of Carthage settlers, however, persisted and the community was once again able to rebuild their homes and mobilize its resources to lead in the industrial revolution.

When technological advances allowed for the manufacture of paper out of wood pulp, the Black River Valley, with its abundance of spruce and poplar trees, became the ideal location for the paper mills that would breathe new life into the Villages and surrounding area. Paper companies grew rapidly and related machine industries followed.

The area has also reaped the benefits of the presence of the United State Military. Prior to World War II, Pine Camp made its presence felt in Jefferson County. That military base expanded and is now Fort Drum. The military commitment is a welcome complement to the current economy.



State Street, 1858



View of Carthage Waterfront



State Street, c. 1930s.



State Street, c. 1900.



Boardwalk known as "The Dugway" downstream from the state bridge in W. Carthage, c. 1930.