

### CHAPTER 3: COMMUNITY PROFILE

This *Community Profile* provides useful background information for Town's Comprehensive Plan. General knowledge of the Town's geographic and topographic features, its climatic conditions, and its history of settlement and development are useful for understanding both its current land use patterns as well as the recommendations for future land uses.

#### Section 3.1: Geography and Topography.

The Town of Torrey is located in the northeastern section of Yates County, New York. The Town is bordered on the north by the Town of Benton, on the east by Seneca Lake and the Yates-Seneca County line, on the south by the Town of Milo, and on the west by the Towns of Benton and Milo. The Village of Dresden is located entirely within the Town's boundaries in the east-central part of the town. The Towns of Romulus and Ovid lie directly east across Seneca Lake from Torrey.

The Town covers about 40 square miles, making it one of the smaller towns in Yates County. The highest points in the Town are along its western boundary; elevations in these areas rise to about 940 feet above sea level in the northwest corner of the Town and are over 900 feet above sea level along much of the Town's western boundary with Benton. The Town's far southwest corner also tops 920 feet above sea level. From these high points, the land slopes gently down to the east until it reaches Seneca Lake; the elevation of the lake is typically in the range of 444 – 446 feet above sea level. Numerous small gullies with streams flowing through them are readily apparent in the slopes just above the lakeshore.

The Keuka Lake Outlet bisects the Town on a northeast/southwest axis. The Outlet is a stream that drains the waters of Keuka Lake into Seneca Lake through a deep gorge. This gorge was first formed about 10,000 years ago and has been steadily eroding ever since. The Outlet was once the industrial hub of Yates County and was lined with mills and dams, which were served first by a canal and later by a railroad. Today, a scenic recreational trail known as the Keuka Outlet Trail runs from Dresden westward into Penn Yan.

Ice Age glaciers played a critical role in shaping the Town's topography and creating its rich agricultural soils. While a detailed account of the glacial processes that formed the Finger Lakes region is beyond the scope of this Plan, a basic understanding of these processes is useful for understanding the appearance of the Town's landscape. In pre-glacial times, the future basin of Seneca Lake was shaped like a funnel, with the wide end facing north. As glaciers gradually ground south into the funnel, the narrowing valley forced the ice to speed up, which increased the rate of erosion. This process created the steep slopes visible along the southern slopes of Seneca Lake. Furthermore, the glacial ice transported broken limestone from the north and mixed it with rocks already in the area to eventually form soils with high lime content, which are ideal for growing crops.

The Town's landscape generally consists of open fields interspersed with forested areas. Much of the Town is devoted to farming operations. Working agricultural fields, along with pastures and vineyards, are the Town's most common landscape features. Complexes of farm buildings, along with scattered residences and a variety of agricultural-based businesses, are also typical of the area. The Town's lakefront, however, is for the most part densely built up with both seasonal and year-round residences. In addition, there are several manufacturing plants around the Village of Dresden and near the eastern end of the Keuka Lake Outlet. The most notable impact of these facilities on the landscape are the smokestacks of the Greenridge Power Plant, a coal fired electric generating facility operated by the AES Corporation.



**Figure 3.1:** *A view inside an active gravel mining pit in the Town. An important prop for the local economy, this gravel pit is the direct result of the Town's geological history.*

### **Section 3.2: Climate.**

The Finger Lakes region experiences a humid, continental type climate, which is modified by the proximity of the Great Lakes. Precipitation is rather evenly distributed throughout the year in quantity, but frequency is much higher in the cloudy winter months. Snowfall is significant, approximately 60 inches annually in Yates County, but far less than either Rochester or Syracuse, and is highly variable over short distances.

Overall, the local climate is variable, especially in the hill and valley topography of the Finger Lakes. South facing slopes warm more quickly in the spring, while sheltered valleys can receive killing frosts earlier in the fall. Hilltops sometimes receive snow that does not reach valley floors. The Town's location along the western shore of Seneca Lake means that the local climate benefits from the moderating influence of the lake on the growing season.

Winters are generally cold, cloudy and snowy across the region, but are very changeable and include frequent thaws. A portion of the annual snowfall comes from the "lake effect" process and is highly localized. Lake effect snow develops when cold air crosses the warmer lake waters and becomes saturated, creating clouds and precipitation downwind. The area receives much less lake effect snow than Rochester or Syracuse. The Finger Lakes are also subject to occasional general or "synoptic" snowfalls but the worst effects usually pass to the east. Torrey does see somewhat lower temperatures than those places closer to the modifying effects of the Great Lakes, although anything below -10F is uncommon.

During the winter the water temperature of Seneca Lake rarely falls below the freezing mark. This means that the lake acts as a warming agent for the shores and slopes above it. Heat from the lake radiates up the slopes above the lake, sheltering the vineyards there from harsh winter temperatures.

Spring comes slowly to the region. The last frosts can occur as late as mid-May. Sunshine increases markedly in May. In the springtime, Seneca Lake's cooler temperatures help delay the budding of grapevines until the risk of damage from sudden frosts has safely passed.

Summers are warm and sunny across the region. The average temperature is in the 70 to 72 degree (Fahrenheit) range. Rain can be expected every third or fourth day, almost always in the form of showers and thunderstorms. Completely overcast days in summer are rare. Severe weather is uncommon, but typically a few cases of damaging winds occur each year in the region. There usually are several periods of uncomfortably warm and muggy weather in an average summer, with several days reaching the 90F degree mark. Still, the area usually experiences some of the most comfortable summer weather in the East.

Autumn is pleasant, but rather brief. Mild and dry conditions predominate through September and much of October, but colder air masses cross the Great Lakes with increasing frequency starting in late October, and result in a drastic increase in cloud cover across the region in late October and early November. Although the first frosts may not occur until mid October, the first lake effect snows of the season usually follow by mid November. These early snows melt off quickly, with a general snow cover seldom established before mid-December. The growing season is relatively long for the latitude, averaging about 180 days. Seneca Lake's warm surface water temperature helps postpone the first frosts, allowing grapes to hang on the vines and ripen.



**Figure 3.2:** *A view of a local vineyard looking eastward over Seneca Lake. Local climatic conditions support the growth of grapes on the slopes around the lake. The retention of large open spaces for vineyards is a key concern of the Town's grape producers.*

### Section 3.3: History.

The Town of Torrey was formed in 1851, making it the youngest of Yates County's nine towns. However, Torrey was the site of the first white settlement in the area that would eventually become Yates County. In 1788 a group of pioneers from New England established a mill at a large waterfall along the Keuka Outlet that is today known as Seneca Falls. Led by a charismatic religious leader named Jemima Wilkinson, who was known as the "Public Universal Friend," this group settled on a knoll known as City Hill, which was located about a mile south of the Keuka Outlet. In 1790 this settlement was the largest in western New York, with a population of about 60 families or 260 people. Today, the only remnant of this settlement is the historic cemetery located along City Hill Road.



**Figure 3.3:** *A view of City Hill Cemetery. This historic cemetery is located near the site of the Friend's settlement; the first recorded burial here occurred in 1788, at the very dawn of pioneer settlement in Western New York.*

Apart from the City Hill settlement, the other early settlement in the Town was a village known as Hopeton Landing, Yates County's famous "lost village." Established by Captain Charles Williamson, land agent for the powerful Pulteney Estate, Hopeton Landing was located near the present day intersection Routes 14 and 54. Captain Williamson was deeply involved with the settlement and development of the vast frontier lands owned by the Pulteney Estate in Western New York; he built many of Yates County's first roads and mills and worked hard to attract settlers to the area. This small settlement reached the height of its prosperity around 1810, and was centered on a large gristmill that operated from 1796 until it burned in 1826. From the 1820s on, Hopeton declined as milling operations and local businesses shifted eastward to Dresden. By the end of the 1830s, the settlement was virtually abandoned.

Transportation infrastructure exerted a profound influence on the Town's development. The earliest roads were simply improved Native American trails through the woods that served to connect the area's first farmsteads and mills. The waterpower of the Keuka Outlet was harnessed for milling operations; the earliest mills were typically sawmills and gristmills. By the 1830s the Keuka Outlet was the industrial hub of the newly formed Yates County. In addition to sawmills and gristmills, carding and fulling mills, linseed oil mills, triphammers, asheries, plaster mills and distilleries operated along the Outlet. The remains of these long-abandoned structures, such as their foundations, dams, and raceways, are still clearly visible in the undergrowth along the Keuka Outlet Trail.

The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 encouraged local business interests to build a canal linking Keuka and Seneca Lakes; if local millers and merchants could get their products to Seneca Lake, they could use the Cayuga-Seneca Canal to ship their products to New York City and beyond. In 1828 a potential canal route was surveyed along the north side of the Keuka Outlet. The Crooked Lake Canal, named after Keuka Lake's old name, opened in 1833 and operated until 1877. It never turned a profit; it required boats to navigate through twenty-eight locks and was cumbersome and inefficient to manage. In 1884 a railroad was built along the abandoned canal's towpath; this rail line (originally the Penn Yan & New York Railroad) served the mills and factories along the old canal route until it too declined in the mid twentieth century as a result of the closing of many mills and an increase in the use of trucks. The railroad tracks were finally abandoned after being severely damaged by floods caused by Tropical Storm Agnes in 1972. The tracks were removed and today the Keuka Outlet Trail runs along the old railroad bed; however, relics of the canal and railroad such as old locks and railroad signals still remain visible in the landscape.

Prior to 1851, the present day Town of Torrey was divided between the Towns of Milo and Benton. However, as the settlement at Dresden grew in wealth and prosperity during the 1830s and 1840s, the idea of forming a new town that would center on Dresden grew in popularity. As a result, the Town of Torrey was formed in 1851. Dresden was incorporated as a village in 1867, but even by then it was apparent that it would never grow to the extent that its early promoters hoped for. Still, throughout the late 1800s, Dresden acted as the industrial and commercial center of Torrey and became an important regional railroad hub.

In the late 1800s the Town's economy was largely based on agriculture. The moderating influence of Seneca Lake encouraged farmers to grow fruit; by the 1870s local farmers produced apples, grapes, cherries, plums, pears and peaches. Local evaporators dried much of this fruit for shipping to faraway markets. In 1894 there were 38 vineyards located in the Town. Other local businesses relied on the growing summer tourist trade; a hotel was built at Long Point in 1880. The hotel later burned down and the site is today the location of a large camp and retreat center run by the Salvation Army. The only industry in the Town outside the Village of Dresden was a paper factory, established in 1867, that was located at Cascade Mills on the Keuka Outlet.

By the early 1900s the Town's landscape was essentially unchanged from a century before. Some farms produced a variety of fruit crops, while other farms concentrating on grain or dairying. During this time the mechanization of agriculture contributed to a decline in the Town's population, as small family farms were combined into larger operations and fewer workers were needed. Many local youths left the Town to work in nearby cities and villages, while others who left for military service in World War I settled elsewhere after the war. The only industrial center in the Town outside Dresden was a chemical factory established on the site of the old paper factory at Cascade Mills in 1901 to manufacture pesticides. This factory operated under several successive owners until 1967. Local railroads provided an effective means of transporting agricultural produce to markets outside the Town, and the spur between Dresden and Penn Yan afforded residents of Dresden the opportunity to commute to jobs in Penn Yan.

Perhaps the two major changes in the Town's landscape during the early 1900s were the development of high quality paved highways and the expansion of industrial uses in the area immediately south of the Village of Dresden. New York State stepped in to support the improvement of local roads at this time; in 1914 the road between Dresden and Penn Yan was paved with State assistance. During the 1920s and 1930s other local roads were paved; Route 14 was paved in the 1920s. In 1938 the Greenridge power station, a coal fired power plant, was built just south of the Village. The signature smokestacks of this plant still stand today and provide one of the defining features of the Town's landscape. Other industrial uses in this area that were active in the mid twentieth century included a chemical plant operated by Dupont and gasoline distribution tanks operated by Standard Oil.

Paved roads and automobiles helped turn the Finger Lakes region into a tourism and vacation destination in the 1930s. Lakefront cottages began to appear during this time, some of these small structures still stand along the shoreline. However, the real boom in lakefront development began in the 1950s and continues to the present day. Today, while agriculture and industrial operations remain critical aspects of the Town's economy, the Town also draws support as a destination for tourists and seasonal residents.



**Figure 3.4:** *This nineteenth century cobblestone house in Torrey is still used as a residence. The skylight in the roof is evidence that this historic structure has been refitted for use as a modern home, thus providing a direct link to the Town's early residents.*

**Note on Sources:** This brief sketch of Torrey's history was compiled from several sources, including *A Good Country, A Pleasant Habitation: An Outline History of Yates County*, published in 1990 by Yates County Historian Frances Dumas; *The Outlet Trail*, a short guidebook about the Keuka Outlet Trail, published in 1984 by Frances Dumas; and *Yates County Looking Ahead: A Planning and Design Guide*, published in 1990 by Roger Trancik.