

Forward, into the Past

We Celebrate Our Country's Birthday

by Marion M. Dumond

Former Town of Wawarsing Historian
and Ellenville Public Library Director (Retired)

For many years in fairly recent memory, each Fourth of July in Ellenville would begin with Bob Mangels of *WELV* playing traditional patriotic music to start the morning. He would speak about the importance of Independence Day in America and, later in the morning, he would interview Town of Wawarsing Historian Katharine T. Terwilliger about how the holiday had been celebrated locally in the past.

Throughout his hours on the air, he would talk about holding a Fourth of July parade in the Town of Wawarsing, a celebration that had not been held since the early 1900s. His persistence, determination and enthusiasm paid off. July 4, 1982 was the first of the new series of *Independence Day Parades*, which continue in 2003 through the yearlong efforts of the *Ellenville-Wawarsing Independence Day Celebration Committee*, a dedicated group of 18 volunteers, currently chaired by Jane M. Eck.

It is good news, indeed, that Bob is returning to Ellenville to announce the parade on Independence Day. Francis Irwin of Napanoch, one of the most senior members, serving since the original committee was formed, will be the 2003 Grand Marshal.

In a 1989 interview with Michelle Snyder for the *Times Herald Record*, Mangels said, "What we've done is made the Fourth of July not just a day for businesses to have sales, but for the Fourth of July to actually mean something again... It's our country's birthday and it should be remembered."

In keeping with that sentiment, Katharine T. Terwilliger, our well-loved and respected KT, spoke at the 1984 celebration. Her notes for that speech are reprinted here from her personal files, now owned, lightly edited, and shared by a friend:

"A few years ago, the Methodist Church bulletin board had a little sermonette on it I rather liked: 'The past is a lovely place to visit but I wouldn't want to live there.'

Certainly, it would be unhealthy to live only in the past. On the other hand, it is unhealthy and unwise to ignore the past because it has much bearing always on the present.

Our thoughts on this 4th of July go back to the beginning of our country.

Much as we are doing today, it was once the joyous custom for crowds to gather in **Liberty Square** as part of the celebration of the 4th. There were speeches, music, and always the Declaration of Independence was read. I promise not to do that. But I would like to think with you for just a moment about the words of that Declaration which created our country.

It began: *'When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them to another...'* The important words are 'one people.' Jefferson, when he wrote that, and others who read it, knew that the only way the colonists could successfully break with England would be to act as one people. Next, the document lists some 27 things that George III had been doing to make their lives intolerable. This part was a long tirade against the king.

Then came their strong belief that these colonies *'are, and of a right ought to be, free and independent States...'*



And, lastly, their commitment to this achievement in strong, emotional words: *'...we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.'*

July 4th was the day they chose to sign this cherished document. This is our birthday. The glorious 4th we call it; and so it is.

What was it like here on July 4, 1776?

Wawarsing and Napanoch had been settled communities for some 60 years by that date. There were settlements on the Top of the Mountain and in Leurenkill. Older and larger settlements stretched from Kerhonkson north somewhat along the present **Route 209**.

But there was no Ellenville, and there would not be until well after the Revolution when the first four houses were erected right here in today's **Liberty Square**.

There was a Dutch Reformed Church in Wawarsing. People came for miles around to worship there, and perhaps to have a little social life with one another.

There had been a militia here ever since 1715, organized mainly in case of trouble with the Indians. As war became more certain, Ulster County reorganized its militia and strengthened it. Our men belonged.

We were then part of the large Town of Rochester. Town government and the courts were efficient. Our town's supervisors went regularly to Kingston to participate in Ulster County affairs.

We can be sure the people living here knew pretty much about the fervor in all the colonies to break with England. There was correspondence between the colonies, leaflets were sent around and broadsides posted. Horseback riders brought up-to-the-minute news. The men going to meetings in Kingston certainly brought back news of what was going on. Within five days word had come of the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

The Declaration had pronounced the colonies free and independent states. Now they had to fight England to prove it.

War brought great hardships to this valley.

There were no big battles fought here but the threat of Tory and Indian raids hung over everyone. People were massacred at the Fantinekill, just above the *Channel Master* plant [Note: the *Imperial Schrade* plant in 2003], and Wawarsing was burned. Tories and Indians crept up on farms at night and pillaged them, often setting fires too.