

Alfred's Town Name

Historical Record

The naming of Alfred, NY has traditionally been attributed to Alfred the Great. That attribution may never be definitively verified because there appears to be no extant document from the period when the town was named that ties it to King Alfred -- i.e., no town, county, or state record regarding the source of the name.

Despite that missing documentation --

There is, however, evidence in support of the legend, and there are no records that point to any other source for the name. Nineteenth-century accounts do cite Alfred the Great as the source. In addition, there was no early settler named Alfred (first or last name) for whom the town might have been named.

This whole area of the country (six million acres) was first purchased, in 1788, from Massachusetts by two land developers named Phelps and Gorham, and therefore called the Phelps and Gorham Purchase. They hired surveyors who traversed the forested area and laid out range and township lines, which established a skeletal structure for future development. A 1790 map shows these range and township lines, including Alfred's block at that time. Legal townships only began to fill the surveyors' grid when there were sufficient settlers. The surveyors' rectilinear scheme still exists; just check the maps of Western New York.

Part of the Phelps and Gorham Purchase was then bought in 1791 by Pulteney, an Englishman from London with ties to the Bath, England area (his daughter was Countess of Bath), and two other Englishmen. The land was then called the Pulteney Estate. Their agent located his headquarters in the town that became Bath, New York.

1795: Nathaniel Dike, Revolutionary War soldier and Yale student, settled in what became Wellsville. Dwight Bruce notes that settlement of New York's "far West" was "stimulated by the accounts of soldiers, who had taken part in the campaign of retaliation under General Sullivan in 1779....The reports they gave of the fertility of the lands there induced many people from the settlements, and especially from New England, to try their fortunes here as pioneers." (Bruce, I, 377)

1806: Allegany County was formed (split off from a larger county) by the state legislature. Petitions to the legislature had asked for formation of Allegany, Cattaraugus, and Niagara counties, from the southern and western portions of Genesee County. On April 7, 1806, the legislature formed Allegany County from the large Genesee County (formed in 1802 and containing all of New York west of the Genesee River) and appointed James W. Stevens, Philip Church, and William Rumsey as Commissioners. Angelica, the only town in the county, was named county seat. The Allegany County line was then west of Alfred.

Genesee County itself was preceded by the even larger Ontario County (formed in 1789 and ultimately broken in thirty-six counties), which was preceded by the yet-larger Montgomery County (renamed in 1784 from Tryon County, formed in 1772 and named for a British governor, which contained most of New York west of Albany). Even earlier, Albany County contained all of New York west and north of Albany.

1807: The first settlers moved in the Alfred area, began clearing forests and building log cabins in order to bring their families in. These settlers were three men -- Seventh Day Baptists -- from Berlin and Brookfield, New York: Clark Crandall, Nathan Green, and Edward Green. Crandall later became a county judge and joined the state legislature.

1808: March 11, 1808, Allegany County was re-organized by adding the seventh (most western) range from Steuben County (this moved Alfred's range from Steuben to Allegany) and shedding Allegany's western three ranges to Cattaraugus County. At the same time, the town of Alfred was named and organized by the state legislature as one of five towns formed from the larger town (actually co-extensive with the county) of Angelica: Angelica, Alfred, Caneadea, Nunda, and Ossian.

The first town meeting was held in April and the real civil life of the town began. By then, there were enough settlers that about twenty men took various town offices: clerk, assessors, highways, fences, etc.

1821: Almond, Andover, and Independence were formed by splitting off from the town of Alfred. Judge Crandall was in the legislature by then and remembered how Almond reputedly got its name (a boy was selling almonds down the aisle). (There are other versions of the story of the origin of Almond's name.)

Alfred's Name: What Evidence is Left?

1881: Jonathan Allen's article in *The Sabbath Recorder* relates that the name signifies "wise counselor," derives from King Alfred, and that a large legislative committee "stood sponsors."

1926: Clawson's *History of Alfred* relates, "The town of Alfred was named after King Alfred the Great....It is currently reported that some English commercial travelers early visiting this territory, and noticing its close resemblance to the country about Stirling castle in its natural features, named it Alfred after the sovereign of England, who was noted as a patron of learning."

1941: The WPA Writers' Project on Place Names collected information. The field worker was asked, "Take a try at the name origin," and reported that "constant research and exhausting every possible error, fails to disclose why and by whom TWS [township] was named - Alfred."

1944: An article in the Wellsville, NY paper on local place names related that Alfred was named for Alfred the Great.

1968: An article in the *Alfred Sun* states, "The choice of the name Alfred for this community is traceable directly to the Saxon King Alfred. One explanation is that the name was chosen by the

English noblemen who bought the area from the Phelps and Gorham land company in 1788. Another interpretation claims that the site was named by English travelers who saw a resemblance between local scenery and King Alfred's capital. Both reasons are based on quotations from journals and private diaries of early settlers." [quotations not seen by the author]

Arguments in Favor of the Traditional Belief

1. Occasionally, towns have two or more stories of their names' origins. Alfred has only the one traditional belief.
2. Many towns are named after an early settler. There was no settler or landowner with the first or last name of Alfred.
3. Some people, living now in the early twenty-first century, believe that Alfred is not a well-known English king. However, from the sixteenth-century (when Alfred was first dubbed "Alfred the Great") to the late nineteenth-century, there was a cult of Alfred and he was indeed well-known. That cult of the Saxon king reached its peak during the Victorian period (perhaps in homage to Victoria's German husband) and has faded in our century (perhaps in reaction to German hostilities of the World Wars). Nevertheless, his fame was near its peak at the time Alfred was named, nearly two hundred years ago.
4. The entire region was part of the Pulteney Estate, owned by Englishmen.
5. Angelica itself was the first settled area of the county (and its county seat until the railroad came through) and it was named by Philip Church (a wealthy landowner who left England to live in America) for his mother Angelica, in 1802. Therefore, Alfred was formed from "an Englishman's town" from land owned by English developers.
6. Philip Church had no near relative named Alfred.
7. The earliest extant written reference to the town's name was in a series of historical articles written by Jonathan Allen (whose grandfather was one of the early settlers) for *The Sabbath Recorder* in 1881. In describing "those early times when towns were born, in Western New York, faster than the Legislators could furnish names for them," Allen wrote: "Alfred, signifying 'Wise Counselor,' given by the Legislature to this town, March 11th, 1808, and for which a large Legislative Committee stood sponsors...."
8. There is earlier evidence that the Jonathan and Abigail Allen believed the town, and hence the University, was named for Alfred the Great, and that they named their son after the king as well. A library copy of Thomas Hughes' *Alfred the Great* is inscribed, "Alfred Allen, April 8, 1868: A present from his mother, A.A. Allen." April 8 was the boy's birth date.

There Remains One Argument Against

No official written record survives at town, county, or state level. However, it was a state action and state records for this time period were destroyed in a fire at the state capital building in 1911.

Sources

(Sources reviewed and researchers contacted include:)

Beers' county history

Minard's county history

Clawson's *History of Alfred*

Western NY Historical Collection, Hinkle Library, Alfred State College

Alfred University Archives, Herrick Memorial Library

Peggy Rase, Village of Alfred Historian

Craig Braack, Allegany County Historian

Coreen Hallenbeck, researcher, Albany

(author: Dr. Susan Strong, 1997)