Northern New York. A vast, unpeopled wilderness, trees and rivers, hills and valleys, the bear and the deer. Not even the Indians lived in Northern New York; it was a hunting ground, and save when Indian hunting parties threaded their way through the tangled woods, it was silent, dark, mysterious.

The Indians were the first possessors of the land. Title was vested in them by an established law, recognized by all civilized nations by virtue of their primitive occupancy, and they could not be dispossessed, save by purchase, and with their consent. Of Northern New York prior to the Revolution, little was known, and but little more for several years thereafter. Save for Father Picquet’s settlement at La Presentation, now Ogdensburg, there were no white men nearer than Plattsburgh on the east, and Oswego, on the west. Expeditions, it is true, had passed up and down the St. Lawrence River both before and during the Revolution, but they made no settlement, and probably no landing, on the soil of what we know as St. Lawrence County. In a map of New York state made in 1771, the Oneida Indians are indicated as owning the lands on the western slope of the Adirondacks, and the Mohocks the eastern slope.

In a map of Canada and the north part of Louisiana, for it must be remembered that Louisiana once bordered Canada, published in Jeffrey’s French Dominions in America, the country bordering on the St. Lawrence River was marked “deer hunting grounds of the Iroquis.” And in an old map, published in the Documentary History of New York State, it is called the beaver hunting ground of the Six Nations.
Across the territory now comprised in St. Lawrence and Franklin counties is written: "Through this tract of land runs a chain of mountains, which from Lake Champlain on one side, and the River St. Lawrence on the other side, shew their tops always white with snow, but altho this one unfavorable circumstance has hitherto secured it from the claws of the harpy land jobbers, yet no doubt it is as fertile as the land on the east side of the lake, and will in future furnish a comfortable retreat for many industrious families."

There was a reason for the generally unfavorable opinion of the land north of the Adirondacks, though this way of putting it is liable to misconception. It might be better to say that there was at this time no demand for land in general north of the Mohawk Valley. Before the Revolution the English crown had granted, or patented, as the word was, several large tracts of land in New York state. One of these patents was the famous Livingston patent, on the banks of the Hudson River, and running far back into what is now Sullivan County. The Van Rensselaer patent, also in the Hudson Valley, was another. The demand for land, which quite naturally progressed inward from the coast, had not yet caused the white man to cast envious eyes on the northern part of the state.

In 1773, before the Revolution, there was patented a grant of land that has since formed a part of our history of northern New York. This was the Totten and Crossfield purchase, the northernmost one of the patents I have referred to. The northern line of the Totten and Crossfield purchase forms the southern border
of St. Lawrence and Franklin counties today. It was when the
surveyors began to run out this line, and penetrated farther and
yet farther into the Adirondack wilderness that the opinion began
to be formed that Northern New York was not undesirable territory.

With the close of the Revolution, however, and the
consequent increase in population as the growth of the United States
began, there arose a demand for land, the beginning of that great
demand that eventuated in the settling of the United States.
Attention was turned to the "unappropriated" lands in Northern New
York, and so we come back again to the Indians, the first owners.
In 1782 and in 1788 the state purchased from the Oneidas, the
Cayugas and the Onondagas the whole of their lands in the central
part of the state, and running up into what is now St. Lawrence
county and Jefferson counties, reserving to the Indians certain
tracts for their own use for residential purposes. Again in 1795,
the state purchased from the Mohawks title to lands in the Northern
part of the state, the same lands for which in 1796 the St. Regis
lands demanded compensation. To make a long story short, the state,
in quieting the title from the Indians, bought the same territory
three times.

And with the Indians out of the way, it is now time to
turn to the white man, the eventual possessor and settler.

In 1786, with a desire to promote the settlement of
the state, the legislature took action to bring into the market
the then unpatented lands of the state. An act was passed creating
land commissioners and empowering them to dispose of such unsold lands as they might see fit, within the limits of the state. The commissioners were authorized to designate each township which they might lay out, by such name as they might deem proper and the name was to be mentioned in the latter's patent. Accordingly, in pursuance of powers vested in them, the board, on May 25, 1787, passed the following resolution:

"Resolved, That the surveyor-general be, and he is here-by required and directed, to lay down on a map, two ranges of townships for sale, each township to contain as nearly as may be 64,000 acres, and as nearly square as local circumstances will permit, and to subdivide each township into lots, as nearly square as may be, and each lot to contain 640 acres, as nearly as maybe. That each range contain five townships adjoining each other, and one of said ranges to be bounded on the St. Lawrence River and the said townships to be laid out within the following limits and bounds, to wit and then follows the delimitations."

Thus were born the St. Lawrence Ten Towns. Hough, in his History, invaluable to any writer on the history of Northern New York, says that the value of the tract was entirely unknown, that there was no knowledge of its formation, rivers, lakes or streams, and that all that was known was the location of the shore of the great river.

The St. Lawrence Ten Towns were sold by auction at the
Merchants' Coffee House, in the city of New York, on July 10, 1787 at eleven o'clock in the forenoon. It was the intention of the board, in offering the lands in small parcels, to induce those of limited means to join in the purchasing, but larger and more powerful individuals, combining, emerged as the holders when the sale was concluded. The principal purchaser was Alexander Macomb, representing, it is believed, many other hidden purchasers. Alexander Macomb, a man of good family and lineage of the city of New York, with a brother who eventually became commander in chief of the army of the United States, and who, during the War of 1812, saw service within St. Lawrence County, afterward became known to fame as the patentee of the Macomb Purchase. This purchase and its history form an important part of the history of St. Lawrence County, but it is not directly concerned with the subject of this afternoon's paper. It is interesting to note, however, that Alexander Macomb, always an adventurous and speculative individual, was in early life a fur trader in Detroit, and it was during his frequent trips up and down the St. Lawrence River that his mind turned toward land speculation in Northern New York.

The Ten Towns of St. Lawrence County were Louisville, Stockholm, Potsdam, Madrid, Lisbon, Canton, DeKalb, Oswegatchie, Hague and Cambray. You will recall that the act creating the land board gave the commissioners to name the townships. Hence it is to those gentlemen that we owe the designations that remain to this day. Attention was given to the capitals of the Old World first, and for our town of Canton the designators went to China.
Swagatchie, of course, was obvious. The name was already there. And admiration for Baran DeKalb on the part of some unnamed state official may reasonably be held to account for the name of that one of the Ten. It is well established that in the setting off of these towns the state was responding to the call of the land speculators, rather than to any great demand on the part of intending settlers, though it is true that settlement was beginning.

It is in 1801, that we find the first stirring among the people of what we now fondly call the North country. For in that year the inhabitants of the township of Lisbon, meeting at the house of Andrew J. Turner, petitioned the Legislature as follows: "To the Honorable the Legislature of the State of New York, in Senate and Assembly convened:

The memorial of the subscribers, for themselves, and in behalf of the settlers on the ten townships of land, situate on the River St. Lawrence, heretofore sold by the people of the state respectfully sheweth:

That many settlers are now established on the said townships, and have already made valuable improvements thereon, that great inconvenience ensues, by reason of their remoteness from the settled parts of the state and they are daily exposed to loss and injury in their property, by the waste and spoil committed by persons from the opposite side of the river St. Lawrence, and having no magistrates or constables among themselves, such injuries cannot be
redressed; that the said ten towns are situate in the counties of Montgomery, Oneida and Herkimer, that it has become highly necessary for the encouragement and prosperity of the settlers on the said townships that they should be incorporated into one town. They therefore humbly pray that the said townships, as described in the map, filed in the secretary's office, and known by the names of Louisville, Stockholm, Madrid, Potsdam, Lisbon, Canton, Oswegatchie, DeKalb, Hague and Cambray, may be erected into one town, and to be known as the town of Lisbon, and that the same may be annexed to the county of Clinton, and that the town meetings of the said town may be held in the township of Lisbon, being the center township, at the house of Alexander J. Turner, and as in duty bound they will ever pray.

Twenty-four names were signed to this petition, all, with possibly one exception, settlers in Lisbon. The one exception was Festus Tracy, who was, certainly a little later, a resident of the town of Canton. The petition was received and acted upon and Lisbon was accordingly erected. It is significant that it was Lisbon alone that presented this petition. It has been suggested that the settlers in Lisbon were looking ahead to the day when a county should be needed along the St. Lawrence and that they were getting ready to be the county seat.

For a moment let us look at one or two phrases in this petition, that serve unconsciously to reveal the hardships of that pioneer day. "Remoteness from the settled parts of the state." - Only Judge Ford's Oswegatchie road from the Long Falls or Carthage to Oswegatchie gave access to the outside world. The Chateaugay Road
from Plattsburg through the Chateaugay wood at this time came no farther than the settlement on the site of Malone, then called Enraville. Did you ever stop to think that there were no highway commissioners in that day. No, their title was pathmasters, and it was over the forest path, the Indian trail, and the surface of the great river, that our forefathers struggled into St. Lawrence County, to locate their homes and build up their fortunes. "Waste and spoil committed by persons from the opposite side of the River St. "awrence."

Remember that it was not until 1796 that Great Britain surrendered possession of Oswegatchie, and we may understand that ill feeling still persisted on both sides of the line and that Revolutionary animosities had barely had time to cool. But though this was true, Canada was yet our nearest neighbor, and to it settlers fled in times of danger, or for the help that conditions sometimes demanded.

Inasmuch as Judge Ford's road has been mentioned let us see just what a road meant to our forefathers. Here are the specifications of that road, built largely by D. W. Church: "At sixteen dollars per mile; the road to be cut and cleared one rod, cradle knolls and sides of ridges to be levelled, small crossings and bridges over small streams to be made. Trees eighteen inches and under to be cut out. Stumps to be cut so low as not to obstruct a wheel and large trees to be girdled." This last would seem to imply that large trees were to be allowed to stand until they had died before attempts were made to remove them. In which case the traveller would have to go around them.
The town of Lisbon lasted but one year. Clinton county proved to be a long ways off - so far off that the courts and county offices were well-nigh inaccessible. In fact, the situation amounted to a denial of justice to the inhabitants of the town. Hence, on March 3, 1802, the inhabitants of the town, to the number of 156 petitioned the Legislature for a county to be set off upon the river St. Lawrence. It is significant that in drawing up this petition, the signers described themselves as inhabitants of the "ten townships upon the river St. Lawrence," and not as inhabitants of the town of Lisbon, which in law they were. This fact, and the further fact that the petition for the county followed so closely upon the heels of the one asking for the creation of the great town of Lisbon, indicates that all of the people of the northern country were not in accord with the first-named petition.

The petition is too long to be recited here. One paragraph, however, should be given. "Your petitioners therefore beg leave humbly to state, that much less hardship and expense would arise to them, by having a county set off, upon the river St. Lawrence, and your petitioners humbly pray, that a county may be set off upon the aforesaid river, in such manner as your honorable body shall deem most proper; and your petitioners would beg leave further to show, that one of the old stone buildings at the Old Oswegatchie Fort (which the proprietors are willing to appropriate until the county is able to build a court house) may at a small expense be repaired and will make good accommodations not only for the purpose of holding courts, but also for a goal, and your petitioners pray, that place may be assigned for the
above purpose."

On the 18th of February, 1802, the Legislature passed the act creating the county of St. Lawrence. Note that in the petition no name was mentioned. St. Lawrence is, however, a natural name for this county, and some member of the committee to which the petition was first referred, may and probably did, suggest the title. In creating the county, however, the Legislature rearranged the St. Lawrence Ten Towns, an arrangement which has caused some misapprehension at times as to the chronological series. All that part of the county lying west of the town line of Canton and Lisbon was made into the town of Oswegatchie. Canton and Lisbon were combined and called Lisbon; Madrid and Potsdam became Madrid, and all of the remaining part of the county became the town of Massena. Thus was St. Lawrence county started upon its way. There has since been readjustment of its boundaries, but to follow all of these readjustments would be too fatiguing to recite them here. Sufficient to say, that all of the territory north of the north line of the Totten and Crossfield purchase, being parts of Macomb’s Purchase, were added to the town of Massena. And until further notice, which meant that until the county could support a government, it was annexed to the district containing Herkimer, Otsego, Oneida and Chenango counties.

The first board of supervisors of St. Lawrence County, therefore, was made up of four men, representing the four towns of the county; From Lisbon, Alexander J. Turner, from Madrid, Joseph Edsall, from Massena, Amos Lay, and from Oswegatchie, Nathan Ford; all names
familiar to those of us who have lived for any time in St. Lawrence County. And in the stone building at the Old Oswegatchie Fort were held the first courts of the county, though by the act creating the county it was provided that courts need not be held yearly unless necessary. Thus it would seem that only the presence of an available building dictated the first choice of a county seat.

In 1803 a court house and goal was built, on the east side of the Oswegatchie, and in 1813 the board of supervisors were authorized by act of the Legislature to raise by tax the sum of $900 for the purpose of erecting a fire-proof clerk's office. Therefore the records had been kept in the office of Louis Hasbrouck, clerk of the board. In 1821 the board voted an appropriation for $500 for the purpose, and a stone building was accordingly erected at the corner of Ford and Green streets, in the village of Ogdensburg.

From the beginning, there had been opposition to the location of the county seat in Ogdensburg. Ogdensburg was felt to be on the frontier and the military incursions incident to the war of 1812 added to the feeling. But it was not until 1818 that the movement for a change in the county seat took form. In that year a petition with 700 signers asked for the appointment of commissioners to select a new site for the public buildings. Ogdensburg successfully combated this resolution and the movement failed. Potsdam joined in the movement and asked that the county seat be located in that village. The movement would not down, however, and the next year arose a plan to divide the county into two parts along the line between Lisbon and Canton on the
west and Madrid and Potsdam on the east. The new county was to be known as Fayette. It was estimated that in the proposed western section there were 934 taxpayers and in the Eastern, 1066. Canton has been indicated as the proponent of this plan. This movement failed. In 1827 the subject came up again, this time in the Legislature, but it was permitted to go over until the next session, for the purpose of obtaining a more distinct expression of the popular wish on the measure, and, as Hough says, it became a test question in the election of members of assembly in that year. In that election 4,542 votes were cast for removal and 3,757 against. Not a large majority, but sufficient.

Only part of the question, however, as settled by this referendum. The Legislature declined to locate the county seat, and instead, appointed three commissioners from Oneida county, Joseph Grant, George Brayton and John E. Hinman, who were authorized to visit St. Lawrence County, examine the situation, gather the views of the citizenry, and actually to settle the question of site. The commissioners, on horse-back, made the long journey from Utica up the Black River Valley, through Turin, Martinsburgh, then the capital of Lewis County, to the Long Falls, and then over the Ogdensburg Road to Oswegatchie. How long they took to make their examinations we do not know, but that in 1828 the county seat was located in Canton, and that $2,500 was authorized for the erection of the new buildings, we do know. The site was to be bought with money realized from the sale of the site in Ogdensburg.
Go back with me for a minute, and view with your mind's eye, those commissioners, travelling through the county. We see them here in Canton, looking at the land whereon we stand today, walking over the ground, planning and figuring. Not in their wildest dreams could they visualize the St. Lawrence County of today, this magnificent building, with its complementary buildings, a prosperous and united county, a county containing 32 towns — a far ways from that statement quoted earlier in this sketch — "and will in future furnish a comfortable retreat for many industrious families."

The first record in the county clerk's office in Canton made after its removal, was on the 8th of January, 1830. Each building was of a tone. The court house was two stories in height, 44 feet by 40. The lower story was divided into four rooms, a grand jury room, a room for constables and witnesses, and two rooms for petit jurors. The upper story was devoted entirely to a court room, 41 feet in length by 37 feet in breadth. The clerk's office was of approximately the same size, and stood to the north of the court house, about where our present clerk's office stands. The jail was 36 x 40, with five cells.

In 1851 on an appropriation of $2,000, 24 feet was added to the east end of the court house, and a contemporaneous account says that St. Lawrence County can now justly boast of a court house which will compare favorably in point of convenience although perhaps not in splendor of architectural display, with that of most county buildings of the state.
The fire of 1894 is still within the memory of most of us here today. These magnificent structures, which house us this afternoon, have risen on the ashes of the buildings our fathers built, firm in the faith that St. Lawrence County was destined to be in truth, the home of many industrious families. And may I add, happy and prosperous families, of the best stock of our America, sending forth year by year, young men and women to bear an honorable part in the development of our country.

The time at my command this afternoon had allowed for but a brief resume of the founding and organization of our county. Reference should be made, in fitting words, of the sterling men who started our county on its upward way and their successors who in the years that have followed, have worthily maintained the standards set before them. Our lawyers, our judges, our business men and financiers, our farmers and our mechanics, the women of the North county, from good New England stock, or from the best of our early immigration, deserve to be remembered by name. Perhaps some time the historian may rise who shall do justice to St. Lawrence County.