

**Rising from the Ashes:
A history of dairying in the Town of Columbus**

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Dairying has been the chief economic endeavor in Chenango County since the early nineteenth century. While Chenango County itself ranked among the top dairy-producing counties in the nation, the Town of Columbus played a significant role within the county in the development of the dairy industry. As dairy production shifted from a home-based industry to a centralized industry in the mid-nineteenth century, cheese factories popped up all across rural New York counties like Chenango. The Empire Cheese Company and its later incarnation, the Phenix Cheese Company, at Lamb's Corners in the Town of Columbus came from humble beginnings to chart an unlikely course of success and perseverance.

Prior to 1850 nearly all of the cheese produced in New York State was made in private homes. Families made cheese for both their own consumption and for sale at market. Expanding transportation options with canal and railroad systems made the transport of perishable products like cheese more feasible. New York-made cheese had a wide market ranging from the southern states where the climate prevented serious dairying to points overseas in Europe (McMurray 1995:45).

The Town of Columbus led Chenango County in Hiram Clark's 1850 assessment of the dairy industry with the production of 345,559 pounds of cheese- nearly one third of that which the county produced as a whole (Clark 1850: 75). According to a writer in the *New Berlin Pioneer* on Saturday, June 11, 1859:

"The Town of Columbus, in proportion to the number of its inhabitants, manufactures and ships to market annually, more butter and cheese than any other town in Chenango County. In agricultural products, in public spirit and enterprise, in every work of utility and usefulness, the Columbusians are decidedly ahead of their neighbors" (Avery 1994).

It was clear that Columbusian households excelled in the production of dairy products. But on the cusp of such large-scale household dairy production, a shift in agricultural was underway that would ultimately change dairy farming and cheese production for good. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rise and monopoly of the cheese "factory:" a centralized location for the delivery, processing, and distribution of cheese.

The idea of a factory itself was not new. Large textile, grist and lumber milling operations where raw materials were brought in by private farmers in order to be processed by a skilled professional had been functioning across Chenango County from as early as the 1790s when

permanent European settlement occurred (Smith 1880). The idea of co-operative and centralized dairying was also not new. European and New England precedents for collective cheese making were widely published across New York agricultural press as well. Sally McMurray reports that *Moore's Rural New Yorker* stated in 1866 "that the factory was 'but a complement' of an old New England custom, whereby farmers 'changed' or 'swopped' milk to make cheese" (McMurray 1995:126).

The model for what would become the common cheese factory type across dairying portions of New York State and Chenango County came from Rome, New York. In Rome, Jesse Williams is credited with opening the first cheese factory in the United States around 1850 when he arranged to make cheese in a centralized location with the milk from both his and his son's cows. The underlying principle being the participation of a handful of local farmers, or *patrons*, who would send milk to a centralized location where large quantities of milk could be processed into cheese more efficiently and uniformly. Within a span of four years, the Williams' Rome Cheese Manufacturing Association grew from processing just two farms' milk to receiving milk from ten patrons (McMurray 1995:124). A group of workers within the centralized facility, or factory, would then process milk into cheese and distribute it to larger markets. A proportional profit was then returned to the original patrons.

The idea behind the cheese factory was linked to the ongoing Industrial Revolution and played well into the capitalist ventures swept across the country. But the factory also offered a few practical solutions for farming families. The cheese factory took milk from many farms and uniformly crafted a singular product. A steady and dependable product was thought to bring a higher market value. The cheese factory also alleviated the farm family of the arduous work of cheese making. The result allowed farmers to concentrate on raising a quality herd and women, who had once overseen the entire household cheese production, were nearly completely removed from the cheese making process altogether (McMurray 1995).

Cheese factories also brought change to the agrarian landscape. Most cheese factories across New York State were sited at rural crossroads in close proximity to both the perishable raw material and a transportation network. In 1892, a state-wide survey reported that cheese factories were located relatively close to one another, on average 2.5 miles apart, ensuring a relatively short passage for most patrons who would customarily bring their milk to the factory up to two times daily (Durand 1967:33). The cheese factory building stood out sharply against the agricultural landscape. These large two-three story frame factory buildings stood alone or with a cluster of industrial buildings where smoke billowed from a boiler room and wagons full of milk hustled to and from a delivery window. Regularly-spaced large windows provided the typical factory with ample lighting and from the exterior, suggested a uniformity and scale that could have only been associated with industrial activity.

Although cheese factories grew slowly in the decade following Jesse Williams' venture, economic and labor demands of the Civil War prompted a surge of factory construction beginning in the early 1860s (McMurray 1995: 129-133). In the Town Columbus, multiple men were listed in the 1869-1870 Chenango County Gazetteer and Business Directory as cheese factory proprietors on the western outskirts of South Edmeston (Otesgo County). In South Edmeston itself, Albert Parker opened the first cheese factory in 1861 on the south side of

County Route 20 behind the church. Parker sold his factory to A. N. Spurr who made cheddar cheese and apple cider in the facility. The company was eventually sold to the Empire Cheese Company (Edmeston Museum 1976:39). The factory under the Empire's ownership resembled many cheese factory complexes across rural New York (Figure 1). The wooden buildings were large and uncommonly industrial within the agrarian landscape of South Edmeston and neighboring Columbus. Smoke stacks and well-lighted building facades fit into the pre-established pattern for cheese factory buildings. But unlike many crossroads cheese factories, the cheese factory at South Edmeston was destined for greater things.



Figure 1. The Empire Cheese Factory before it burned in 1900, looking east into South Edmeston. (Edmeston Museum, 1976:38)

In 1880, a New York City dairy distributor named C. D. Reynolds contracted with the recent inventor of cream cheese, a man named W. A. Lawrence of Chester, NY. Lawrence had already begun the small-scale production of his highly unusual and sought-after soft cheese, but Reynolds proposed to manufacture the cheese on a larger scale. Reynolds chose the Empire Cheese Company in South Edmeston, NY and purchased the facility for his new cream cheese manufactory (Patrick 2008). Reynolds chose the name “Philadelphia Brand cream cheese” for the product. Speculation remains as to whether Reynolds chose the name because of some connection to Philadelphia, New York or because the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania was reputed for a fine quality of food. Regardless, the cheese was not actually named “Philadelphia” because it had any direct production or affiliation with the city itself.

The Empire Cheese Company served as the first manufactory of the increasingly popular cream cheese for twenty years before many of the factory buildings were destroyed by fire in November of 1900 (Edmeston Museum, 1976:39). Following the ruinous end to the Empire Cheese Company, a group of local businessmen and prosperous farmers rallied to erect a new cheese factory. The Phenix Cheese Company was formed within three years of the Empire's fire, with nominal nod to the mythological phoenix, a bird who rose out of the ashes. The spelling error on their part was unintentional. In 1903, the Phenix Cheese Company purchased the rights to the Philadelphia brand and resumed production of the cream cheese.

Phenix continued to operate on the site of the original Empire factory until 1920 when the present factory was constructed on the west side of the Unadilla (Edmeston Museum, 1976:39). By that time, Phenix and their famous Philadelphia cream cheese had become a highly successful company and actively competed with other top national brands. The decision to construct a new facility meant that the factory could be larger while meeting the increasingly strict standards for sanitation. The new factory was constructed of concrete block in the emerging Art Moderne style, a subtype of the popular Art Deco style popular in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Figure 2). Art Moderne buildings were thought to epitomize the machine age and advances made in technology. The use of glass block windows and a smooth white exterior surface on industrial buildings were key features of this style. Concrete was also quickly becoming the building material of choice in the dairy industry, both in barns and processing facility. Masonry, like concrete, was less porous and thereby easier to clean (Visser 1997:98). Siting of the new factory was also strategic. Being located immediately adjacent to the pre-existing Unadilla Valley Railroad South Edmeston Station, the new Phenix plant was poised to take full advantage of the railroad's speedy transport.



Figure 2. The Kraft-Phenix Company cheese factory at South Edmeston shortly after the merge. (Edmeston Museum, 1976:38)

The new plant was less than a decade old when, in 1928, J. L. Kraft, the founder and leader of one of Phenix's chief competitors, purchased both the rights to the cream cheese formula and the Phenix Cheese Company. The renamed Kraft-Phenix Company went on to dominate the cheese market not only in this country, but around the world. As for the 1920 Art Moderne factory, Kraft operated the facility for nearly 75 years. The plant produced many of Kraft's well-known products and during the 1980s was the sole producer of the Kraft-owned Breyers yogurt (Johnson 1989). In 2005, the factory was purchased by AgroFarma who produces Greek-style yogurt under the Chobani label (Grace 2009). Although much of the original Phenix factory has been altered with modern additions, portions of the front façade are still visible including the bold numbering, "1920."

Dairying in central New York has come a long way from the home-based industries of the early 1800s. As the ways and means by which cheese was manufactured evolved, so too did a landscape of dairy buildings. The legacy of cheese-making that was begun by Albert Parker in 1861 not only followed suit with larger cheese factory trends across the state, but it also led a community into an unassuming role as a leader in the dairy market, 100 years ago and today.

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