

Colonel John Hendy
Soldier, Pioneer and Early White Settler
by: Scott W. Deming

To many residents of West Elmira the name Hendy evokes a vision of the local grade school by that name, or the street next to the grade school or possibly the road leading to Golden Glow or the creek by that name that runs through Golden Glow. To many local historians the name Hendy brings to mind the first white settler of Newtown (now Elmira). Colonel John Hendy was a veteran of the Revolutionary War under General John Sullivan. He was born on September 3, 1757 and it is believed he was an only child of Samuel (born in New Jersey on 4/6/1733 and died 9/20/1808) and Rebecca Hendy (born in New Jersey on 1/4/1735 and died 4/20/1814). His ancestor's originated from a small island off the coast of Ireland and the family name was originally spelled Hende.

Colonel Hendy's first visit to the area was as a Captain in General Sullivan's army around 1779. Under General Sullivan he fought in the battles of Bunker Hill, Princeton, Trenton and Monmouth. He returned to the area in the spring of 1788 some nine years later than the first visit. Many soldiers who fought in the area during the war were attracted back to the area by the topography and soil of the fertile Chemung Valley. Col. Hendy came up the Susquehanna and the Chemung Rivers from Wyoming, Pennsylvania. He landed at the point where Newtown Creek meets the Chemung River near the present Kennedy Valve location on the east side of Elmira. He set-up camp among the Indians of the area and his nearest white neighbor was located at Tioga Point in Athens, Pa.

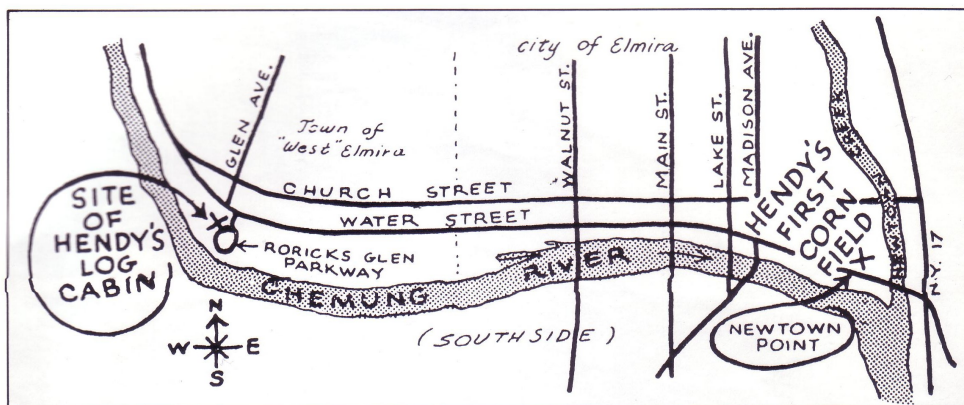
John was married to Mary (Polly) Baker (daughter of Henry Baker) who originated from Shawnee Flats, Pa. near Wilkes Barre, Pa. but was born in New Jersey. John and Polly had eight children; Samuel, Thomas, John Jr, Rebecca (wife of John Culp), Sally (wife of William Bartlett), Hannah (wife of Cushing Snow), Elizabeth (wife of John Rhodes) and Polly (wife of Joseph Beidelman). In the fall of 1788 John returned down river to bring Polly and their three children (at the time Samuel, Rebecca and Sally) to their new home at Newtown.

Colonel Hendy was a tall athletic man at six foot seven inches with long flowing hair. The Indians nicknamed John "Shinawanee" or the "Strong One" probably because of his size and stature. Escapades of Col. Hendy and his family with the Indians; some friendly, some hostile and tales of his bravery and prodigious strength became legend in the vicinity of Newtown. On April 12, 1791 John bought 800 acres from James Clinton for 1 schilling an acre. He relocated his cabin from the original site at Newtown Point which was somewhat of a swampy marsh and overflowed with water during the wet weather to a location near what is now Rorick's Glen Parkway where he felt the land was better suited for growing wheat and other crops.

The First Presbyterian Church, one of the oldest churches in Elmira, was organized in the Hendy cabin in 1795. John's wife Polly and daughter Sally were the first two members of the church. For over 50 years John farmed the land he lived on planting corn, wheat and tobacco. He was a man greatly respected and esteemed for his honesty, integrity and kindness of heart. John also is known to have thrown the first shovel of dirt for the building of the Chemung Canal in 1831. Polly died on January 20, 1828 at the age of 69 years. John died on March 15, 1840 at the age of 82 years 6 mos 12 days. His body was first buried in the Wisner Park burial ground and was later moved to Woodlawn Cemetery and was the first buried at Woodlawn with Polly Hendy being the second buried there.



Picture taken around 1880



The late Harry B. Kelsey, Chemung County historian, drew this map locating Hendy cabin in relation to Newtown Point, where Hendy first stopped in 1788.
(From Chemung Historical Journal, March 1959)