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Discovering Watertown Part 1

[MUSIC]

Narration: In 1800, three men ventured into the wilderness in Northern New York with one goal in mind.

[MUSIC}

Narrator: These pioneers set forth to forge and shape a city that would forever weave itself into the fabric of American history.

Announcer: Major funding for Discovering Watertown is provided by the Daisy Marquis Jones Foundation. Dedicated to improving the well-being of communities by helping disadvantaged children and families.

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[MUSIC]

Narration:

From a glance, Watertown might appear to be just like any other town. It has streets, buildings, houses and schools. And like every town, in every country, the world over, Watertown has its own particular history. Its own unique story to tell. A story filled with adventure, ingenuity, crime and passion. A story that's waiting to be discovered.

Transition to timeline. [MUSIC]

Narration:

If we were to look at the history of Watertown, the people, the places, the years... we would begin to see the layers that have helped build this town into what it is, and what it will become. But in order to fully appreciate the scope of Watertown's creation, we must travel

further back in time... (timeline stops and travels backwards) **a time when this part of the earth was under ice.**

(Dissolve to drone footage of Watertown – AfterEffects effect of the de-evolution to wilderness Watertown, freeze frame and transition into timeline. The graphics begin to move forward in time then suddenly stops and quickly moves backward in time) (Dissolve to either a map graphic or footage of ice and glaciers)

Narrator: Around twenty thousand years ago, the latest glacial period or ice age had covered most of North America including what is now Watertown. After thousands of years, the ice age began its retreat and the resulting effects from this climate change began to alter this region's landscape.

Dr. Timothy Abel, Archaeologist:

Around 14,000 years ago up until present day, Northern New York underwent a lot of changes. For the first couple of thousand years after the ice started receding, Watertown was actually submerged under a glacial lake. That lasted in the area up until 13,000 years ago.

Dr. Laurie Rush, Archaeologist:

The geological evidence points to the idea of St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes basin having been blocked by a giant dam made of ice at the end of the glacial period. That resulted in a series of very, very large lakes in our Great Lakes system, so our current set of Great Lakes are smaller lakes sitting in bigger basins. So geologists refer to the glacial iteration of Lake Ontario as Glacial Lake Iroquois. When that dam broke, the water rushed away, and they would have actually seen the land emerging out of these great bodies of water. And that lake, we have the beaches that stretch across the training areas of Fort Drum.

Dr. Timothy Abel, Archaeologist:

And that's the period when the first Native American arrived in Northern NY. They were following herds of caribou as the grasslands moved north.

Narrator:

Three Native American tribes most closely identify with this region today: the Mohawk, the Oneida, and the Onondaga nations. Their ancestors hunted, fished, and lived in these lands.

Dr. Laurie Rush, Archaeologist:

As we moved down through Watertown there's evidence of the palisaded villages all through the Dry Hill region, some of them with gorgeous views of the lake. We also have a Rutland Hollow cluster of another set of villages. So, actually it was a very, very busy place with lots of people living here year round.

Narrator:

And as the years moved on, Europeans began reaching the shores of North America. It wasn't long before the new world had old world problems.

Dr. Laurie Rush, Archaeologist:

So it's an interesting process because, of course, Europeans are all about ownership, creating boundaries, drawing lines on maps and setting aside; whereas, in the Native Americans were much more oriented toward the land being a part of the creator and living a bit more in harmony.

Donald Whitney, Historian:

Well, the relationship between the early settlers and the Native Americans was pretty well set by a treaty of 1788. The Oneidas wanted the treaty because after the Revolutionary War, which was completed in 1783, they wanted a place where they could live where they would be safe from the Americans, the British or the French. Because many different tribes had taken one side or the other in the war and it gave them an opportunity to have a safe sanctuary where they could go and be safe from all the parties.

Narrator: In 1791, New York City resident Alexander Macomb, along with William Constable and Daniel McCormick, purchased a parcel of land so large that included Jefferson, Lewis, St. Lawrence, and Oswego Counties.

Patrick Wilder, Historian:

Alexander MacComb, who played a huge role in buying about three and a half million acres of land in Northern New York State for just pennies an acre. The lands in Northern New York were totally uninhabited by European peoples. And now we have Alexander Macomb who is sending out surveyors to create plots and huge lots, military tracts, etcetera that would then be given to new incoming settlers at reasonable prices.

(We transition back into the timeline. Years fly past us with appropriate pictures like Columbus, Mayflower, pilgrims, etc., and eventually we see pictures of French and Indian Wars, and the American Revolution.)

Narrator: In order for the newly formed United States to pay its debt to certain French men who were Patriot sympathizers during the American Revolution, land was used as currency; and with the promise of new settlements westward, the stage was set for the eventual survey and settlement of Watertown.

[MUSIC]

Narrator: In 1796, surveyor Benjamin Wright encountered land rich in natural resources and he set out to map what is now Jefferson County and the city of Watertown.

Donald Whitney, Historian:

Well, Benjamin Wright is a pretty impressive character. He came up here with his brother and some other surveyors and they surveyed the whole Macomb purchase. They did it within a two-

year period. And before that, no one really realized, actually, the flow of the Black River. They even had that wrong. In fact, many early people didn't even realize the Black River existed.

[MUSIC]

[Geese honking, sound of bird wings in flight]

[MUSIC]

Re-enactment:

CHANTELLE: It's cold today, little brother. "Eso U-isto" "Lee guh uhn"

BRANDON: PK. Old woman. "zuks STAH-huh"

She stops, he continues to walk with a smirk. She grabs a hand full of snow.

Cut to WRIGHT preparing his gun. [Gun clicks]

Cut back to CHANTELLE and BRANDON.

CHANTELLE: Did you hear that? "way zuttOON deh. Gahte"

BRANDON: Hear what? "nah HO-dah"

CHANTELLE creeps closer to BRANDON and then she throws snow down his back and he reacts.

CHANTELLE This! "ki ken"

BRANDON: yells and says "Why!?" "oohn GEH Lah!"

CHANTELLE laughs.

BRANDON: (annoyed) Why are you always playing... "oohn-geh GOOT-goh. Zuts ZWAH don"

[Then they both hear a gun shot in the distance]

CHANTELLE: A hunter? "Luh DOH Lutz"

BRANDON: Maybe. "deh what NOON wah"

CHANTELLE: We should go. "oTSI kuh TAWnti"

Dr. Timothy Abel, Archaeologist:

If you think about it, Europeans have lived in Jefferson County for a little over 200 years. But Native Americans have been here for well over 10,000 years. So you can't really talk about the history of the Watertown area without at least mentioning Native American habitation because they were here for much longer than we were.

Next scene

[MUSIC] CHANTELLE and BRANDON are standing across from WRIGHT in the woods. WRIGHT sees them and grips his rifle intensely. BRANDON then grips his weapon tightly as well.

CHANTELLE grabs her brother's wrist as to state not to do anything rash.

Still in Mohawk

BRANDON: It was **his** shot we heard. "yoon gwah toon det, wah huh loon duh deh"

BRANDON gives WRIGHT a look over and then says...

BRANDON: He doesn't look like a hunter. "yehgi dole LUM ha. Luh DOLE lutz"

CHANTELLE laughs under her breath.

WRIGHT: (listens to BRANDON speak and realizes they are Mohawks): Hello. (in Mohawk)

"She:kon"

CHANTELLE: releases her grip, *in english* annoyed, “Hello, we can speak in your language.”

WRIGHT: Good, I am Benjamin WRIGHT. I am making maps of this territory for the men who own this land.

CHANTELLE. You can not own the land. Even if you put it on a map.

WRIGHT: I am employed to do so.

BRANDON: Who is the map for?

WRIGHT: (pauses to think) White people who are coming to settle this land.

CHANTELLE: I will never understand the way you people think about land.

WRIGHT: It is not my choice nor place to explain such matters, I’m merely an explorer.

BRANDON: This land has already been explored... by us.

CHANTELLE: We know the treaty. Are you sure *your* people can survive out here?

WRIGHT: (laughs) That is purely between them and God.

CHANTELLE and BRANDON looking at each other. Realize it’s time to move on. They begin to walk away.

BRANDON: So where are you exploring now?

WRIGHT: Somewhere North of here, where there’s an abundance of trees with many trails.

(He hands CHANTELLE tobacco. Here, take it, please.)

CHANTELLE: Keep heading this way until you meet the river.

WRIGHT: River... What river?

BRANDON: You will see it.

Narrator: Pioneers like Wright symbolized the inevitable change of the country and the way the land became divided. Benjamin Wright found the river, as well as ample trees and land to support a new civilization. His surveys and maps of Jefferson County would open the door for a new beginning and a new town.

Donald Whitney, Historian:

First of all, the land was cheap. It was great land. When Wright had surveyed it he had given descriptions of the land. So they knew what to look for when they came. And of course water power and timber were two big reasons, plus the price of land.

Patrick Lapiere, SUNY Canton Professor of History:

When the Revolution ended in 1783 people just flooded into what we generally call the Trans-Appalachian West and western New York. The British had created policies that had held people back, kept them from migrating west, so when the war ended and independence was achieved, people just flooded those regions. In fact, they probably settled more territory within a generation than the colonials had in over 100 years. So it was just pretty intense.

Donald Whitney, Historian:

Many of the people that came here were not poor people. They wanted to up the ante. They wanted to improve their lot in life. So they had an opportunity to buy land on a river where there was good water power. River and streams in the area. Also the timber was huge around here. So they had resources that they could see that there was an economic reason to live here.

Narrator:

Most of Watertown's first settlers came from New England. Some made homes along the Mohawk River, and later, came north up the Black River.

Patrick LaPierre:

If you can believe it, it seems rather weird by our standards, but they thought that New England was rather crowded, land was expensive. So there was the idea that if you move further west, you might be able to find something that was inexpensive, unharnessed, you know, all yours. And that's why people went west, and they went for timber as well. And of course, finding the Black River was something that was tremendous for people, who were able to start industry as it was you know, in the early 19th century.

Narrator:

In 1798, Watertown founding fathers Henry Coffeen, Zachariah Butterfield, and Hart Massey built cabins on what is now Public Square in downtown Watertown. At that time, Public Square was uneven and uncleared territory, more of a ravine than flat land. Early settlers eventually leveled out the property, creating one of the country's first landfill projects. In early 1800, Henry Coffeen moved his family to Watertown.

Dr. Timothy Abel, Archaeologist:

When those three men came here, of course the area was a wilderness. Before they could do anything to get some return on their investments of the land, they had to clear fields. They had to clear roads, they had to build roads, number one, to get some of the raw materials, the timber to sell. But also to get that raw material out to the saw mills where it could be turned into lumber and then shipped out to build things with. So, they really were responsible to building many of the early road infrastructure, transportation infrastructure, as well as clearing a lot of the fields that would be later sold for agricultural land.

And they would have hired a crew probably composed of relatives of other men that they hired from where they came from in Connecticut and New Hampshire and anywhere else to come here and work for them and to build these roads. Those later people were probably people that later settled here and became laborers in many of the industries that followed.

Narrator:

Jefferson County, with a population of approximately 1500, and nearby Lewis County, were both created on March 28, 1805. Until that time, the region was part of Oneida County. The new county needed a county seat. Watertown was one of the least populated towns in the county, but Henry Coffeen was determined that the county seat would reside in Watertown.

Donald Whitney, Historian:

Now at the time Brown wanted it for Brownville because Watertown was a lot smaller than Brownville. Watertown was a lot smaller than Sackets Harbor. Brownville was a lot smaller than Ellisburg. But through the efforts of Henry Coffeen, Watertown was made the county seat.

Re-enactment: Henry Coffeen is seated at a table writing a letter... he is obviously having trouble completing the letter.

[Birds chirping, outdoor noises, sheep bleats, thunder]

[Door bangs]

[MUSIC]

Donald Whitney, Historian:

Coffeen came here, he was 39 years old when he came to Watertown. He wasn't a young man. Of the pioneers that came here, he was one of the older pioneers, but I think he wanted to ... he could see that there was great gain in coming here, and he certainly was a man of a lot of vision, because he also started the first newspaper, he built the first bridge across the river, he did a lot of things for Watertown. Plus he donated the land for the courthouse and the jail. And donated a lot of other land.

[MUSIC]

SARA (she is standing preparing dough): "Henry. Henry! If your letter shows half of your ambitions, Henry, I am sure Albany will be generously persuaded to grant the **county seat**."

Henry looks up at Sara briefly and continues to write.

SARA (annoyed Henry is not speaking, she stops handling the dough): "Must you travel all the way to Albany again?"

HENRY (frustrated but calm): "Decisions are not made by politicians, Sara, they are created by favor and influence. Especially when absent a King."

SARA: "Henry!"

HENRY: "Well, it is not a lie."

SARA: "But what of Jacob Brown and his land? Is he not more established... he has more people, more shops, and a saw mill."

HENRY: "Jacob Brown and the others are good men, and they **are** more established. But they are young and therefore do not feel threatened by me. But I will use this to my advantage. I shall go towards Albany and obtain the county seat which will elevate us highest in the county. This is my advantage."

SARA: "You have always been ambitious, Henry. Even more so than Mr. Butterfield or Mr. Massey I would presume."

HENRY: "They believe as I do. And with that river, this land will become central in commerce and development. This I know to be true above all else."

SARA: "Have you created a name for our town?"

HENRY: "Well, with the river and water, a name I have always had a fondness for comes to mind.... Wobegon."

[Sheep bleats]

SARA: "Well, we don't have to decide right now." (Sara adjusts her clothing is pricked by a pin) "Ow! Since you are traveling to Albany... might you procure a few items for me."

HENRY (not looking up at her but back to writing): "What ever my arms can carry."

SARA: "Some new garment would not disappoint. These materials are lacking in... vigor."

HENRY: (stops and looks up confused) "Vigor?"

SARA: "It's these pins...I keep pricking myself."

HENRY: "Your hands should be practiced at dressing yourself properly."

SARA: "My ability is not the complaint. These pins are sharp..."

HENRY: (amused) "Would you have me purchase **dull** pins? Would that not go counter to their purpose?"

SARA: "I would have you be a considerate husband, and not diminish my grievance."

HENRY: "I can not alter the laws of nature... a pin is designed to pierce... One cannot change its intentions. There is no such thing as a ... safe pin. (laughing)"

SARA (just stares at Henry)

HENRY (somber): "Albany has many fine garments, I shall purchase one... or two."

SARA: "What will you do after all of this? I know you're thinking there is too much wilderness left in this country to remain in civilization."

HENRY: "Well, I must first build this into a town. Andrew Evans and I are determined to build a bridge over that river. And once we acquire the county seat, they will come in herds. Our history, Sara, is being written, now."

Don Whitney:

When you're the county seat all county business comes from here. He certainly knew what he was doing, because after that was done in 1804, Watertown started to grow at a rapid rate.

Narrator:

Another reason why Watertown developed as fast as it did was the ability of its founding fathers to think ahead. Coffeen, Butterfield and Massey had the foresight to donate land to create what is now Public Square. With this land available to potential business and industry, Watertown suddenly became very tantalizing for many entrepreneurs.

Dr. Abel:

Goods that were extracted from Jefferson County could be moved directly to Canada through the Great Lakes, through Lake Ontario. That was a very efficient means of transportation. That ease of transportation and that major market is what drove and fueled the early industrial development of the City of Watertown.

Narrator:

All was going well for the fledgling town of Watertown. But a new threat was beginning to develop that would challenge Watertown's future.

Patrick Lapierre, SUNY Canto Professor of History:

The War of 1812 is interesting, rather unfortunate war that didn't need to happen but did. What happens prior to the war that affects the economy of New York and other places is Thomas Jefferson's in office, in 1807 he creates the embargo act and what it does is it basically cuts off trade.

Dr. Timothy Abel, Archaeologist:

Pretty much shutting down the Watertown economy, because it was critically dependent upon trade with Britain. And that's when things turned to smuggling.

The articles they were smuggling for the most part included things like potash. Potash is a derivative of the burning off of forests and is a chief ingredient in the production of gunpowder, soap, many other products. Very lucrative commodity if you can get your hands on it. It sold for about \$100.00 a ton down in New York City, but if you could smuggle it into Canada, you could get \$300.00 a ton.

Narrator:

After the War of 1812, Watertown's economic engine was once again underway, thanks in no small part to the water power of the Black River. Downtown Watertown was dotted with all kinds of mills, from Public Square all the way to Factory Street and beyond. Many downtown landmarks are named after these early entrepreneurs, including Beebee Island and Sewall's Island in the Black River.

Patrick Wilder, Historian:

The Black River was a fast flowing river. A river that fell from what is now Carthage, New York down to the level of Lake Ontario, it fell four hundred and eighty feet, this meant fast rushing water that was permanent. And they could put factories along these banks that would then turn water wheels and turbines and saw mills, you'd have grist mills, you would have mills that would be able to manufacture such things as nails.

Narrator:

Through war, harsh environments, and an ever-changing new world, Watertown not only survived, it prospered.

Donald Whitney, Historian:

There were a lot of cotton companies in the area. Not only in Watertown but in Brownville, in Dexter. In fact, the river had a ton of different industries. But cotton was big for a while in Watertown. It didn't last long. After Beebee's factory burned in 1833 it was never rebuilt again. Cotton moved to where the cotton was. They finally decided it was easier to have the cotton mills where the cotton was growing. And that's one of the reasons why it left the area.

Narrator: Wool manufacturing, however, remained, and became a major industry in the area going into the Civil War.

The men and women who first built their log cabins on Public Square couldn't have imagined just how much their town would progress in only fifty years.

Watertown, New York, was well on its way to becoming a major area for commerce, manufacturing, local government, and more. But the future of this growing community still had a few surprises. Civil War loomed right around the corner, and the changes from the industrial revolution would impact Watertown in a profound way. On Part II of Discovering Watertown.

Narrator:

On Part 2 of *Discovering Watertown*

Patrick Lapierre:

Yeah, railroads became really important. You know, really in the 1850's they started to make a serious appearance on the American landscape, and what they did was, they in a sense put

canals out of business. They also became a site of great corruption. Railroad magnates would gladly line the pockets of politicians to get their hands on some cheap land.

Dr. White:

In Watertown, we always took part in the national events. One of the ways was helping the country overcome in wartime need.

Pat Wilder

When the Civil War broke out of course Watertown and the people of Jefferson County for the most part supported the effort to keep the Union together.

Pat Wilder

And we see by the Civil War ammunition was being produced here. And this continues really right up until World War One when the brake shop employed about seven-thousand people producing war material for the Great War.

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CREDITS: [MUSIC]