

CHAPTER I

The Historical Background²



During the first century of American independence, at least thirty spiritual movements, cults, utopian communities, or new religions started in Upstate New York. The Shakers, the Mormons, the Oneida Community, and spiritualism are merely the best known. The others range from the obscure to the ephemeral; all were “eccentric,” in the sense of being outside the political and social norms of the era, and in rejecting the Protestant churches that supposedly formed its spiritual bedrock. The whole phenomenon, with its concentration in time and space, is without parallel in social or religious history.

In trying to account for it, historians have turned to the Christian revivals of the “Burned-over District,” as the central and western region came to be known; the mass emigration of New Englanders cut loose from their home churches; the mushrooming towns along the Erie Canal and the opening to the West, with its sense of a new world dawning; and the growing disgust with institutionalized racial and gender injustice. Others see a “psychic highway” across the state, nourished by native spirits, earth energies, and other intangibles.³ In an epilogue I will reconsider these ideas, but for now this book is more about facts than theory. It emphasizes the lesser-known personalities and, when possible, goes to the primary sources. Each succeeding chapter begins with an original statement, a credo, or an account of some extraordinary happening. It is for the reader to wonder at these outer reaches of human experience, which some call folly, others the broaching of boundaries between worlds.

I find this study by turns fascinating, comical, and moving. Besides its value as a human document, it is a laboratory for the study of religious origins. Here are recent cases of men and women who had visions or encounters with divine beings, assumed missions of cosmic importance, received doctrines or sacred books, attracted disciples, and started movements. Some blazed for a moment, then fizzled out like the ancient religious radicals Apollonius of Tyana, Marcion the Gnostic, al-Hallaj, or Sabbatai Zevi.⁴ Others, like Moses, Jesus, or Mohammed, succeeded in planting an inextinguishable root. What determines the difference? I do not know, any more than I know why one particular acorn becomes an oak tree. My principle is always to respect, and usually to credit, the experience that lit the fuse, but not its interpretation or the doctrinal baggage train that follows it. That is a study in itself, reflecting the character, limitations, prior beliefs, and motivations of the person reporting the experience.

Readers familiar with Western esoteric traditions will notice many echoes among our provincial visionaries, such as astral journeys like those recounted in Plato's *Republic* and the Hermetic *Poimandres*, the search for hidden meanings in the books of Genesis and Revelation, and the mythic origins of Freemasonry and the Rosicrucians. Early Mormonism owes a distant debt to alchemy, as does spiritualism to Swedenborg, while the Theosophical Society and the occultist movement that appeared in the later nineteenth century were explicitly rooted in Egyptian tradition.

On a more mundane level, every character portrayed in this book had to deal with historical and geographical realities. They all had ancestors, parents, a childhood, and some sort of education. Like everyone else they needed money, companionship, and a home. Many of them started as dirt-poor subsistence farmers. Yet unencumbered by today's legal and governmental controls, they could move around freely, reinvent themselves, and live quite well on next to nothing. To consider their material conditions brings them to life, and often earns our sympathy. So this chapter continues by sketching the main events and currents of their world.

We begin with geography. Tourists are often surprised to find that New York's two major attractions, Manhattan and Niagara Falls, are at either end of a state the size of England. Everything in between is considered "up" with respect to New York City and Long Island, but exactly where the Upstate region begins will depend on whom you ask. In Manhattan they may answer, "Yonkers." Others will exclude the commuter belt, the Catskills, even the Hudson Valley up to Albany. As a longtime resident I have my own definition, which suits the subject matter of this book: Upstate begins where the magnetism of New York City no longer affects the mental compass.

In the period of this study, which is roughly from the Revolution of 1776 until the First World War, the region was transformed from a wilderness

into an economic powerhouse. At least, that was the point of view of the colonists and their descendants. The whole territory originally belonged to the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy: from east to west the Mohawk, Oneida, Tuscarora, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca.⁵ Both natives and colonists had long traded in animal furs: otter, mink, wildcat, bear, and especially beaver, which supplied the felt hat industry on both sides of the Atlantic. The Indians trapped the animals and provided the pelts in exchange for tools, cottons, firearms, and liquor. This arrangement faltered when the colonists coveted the Indians' lands as well. During the eighteenth century their settlements crept up the Mohawk River to its navigable end at Fort Stanwix (in present-day Rome), and up its southern tributaries to Schoharie and Cherry Valley. Many of the pioneers were German refugees from the Palatinate, dispossessed by European wars. Others emigrated out of opportunism, like the Irish-born magnate Sir William Johnson, who became the British Superintendent of Indian Affairs and accumulated about 170,000 acres. The Van Rensselaers, Dutch patroons, owned even more, including the present capital district. Among their innumerable tenants were Ann Lee and her Shaker community (see chapter 3). The oldest churches and mansions of the Mohawk Valley are rare survivals of this semi-feudal frontier period.⁶

In the eighteenth century, the native tribes were dragged into the rivalries of French and English colonists, themselves the reflection of wars in Europe. It was largely Sir William Johnson's diplomacy and empathy for the Indians that enabled the settlers along the Mohawk to live in peace. This was not to last. At the Revolution the Oneidas and the small Tuscarora nation sided with the rebels, advised by their missionary, the Rev. Samuel Kirkland.⁷ The other four Iroquois nations took the British side and helped to harass the rebels, spreading a reign of terror among the settlers. Following the massacre of Cherry Valley, where Mohawks, unrestrained by their Tory leaders, scalped and mutilated men, women, and children, George Washington ordered a punitive expedition. In the summer of 1779, Generals John Sullivan and James Clinton set out, Sullivan marching from Pennsylvania and Clinton from Schenectady. Both made use of the Susquehanna River, Clinton with a celebrated damming of its source in Otsego Lake to generate enough flow to carry his transport boats.⁸ The two generals converged at Tioga with a force of about four thousand and proceeded to destroy the Iroquois settlements of central New York, driving the surviving inhabitants into British-held territory and burning houses and crops to prevent their return. Much the same happened to the Mohawks, as their valley became the scene of raids and atrocities, and by the end of the war was virtually a wasteland. Broken and demoralized, the Iroquois Confederacy dissolved, though ironically it served as a model for Franklin, Jefferson, and their colleagues as they designed their own union of states.

The Sullivan Expedition returned with news of the potential richness of the Finger Lakes region. Once the war was over, it served to reward veterans with their promised grants of land. In true military fashion, the area from Manlius to Geneva and from Watkins Glen to Lake Ontario was divided on a regular grid into townships, and these into plots of about five hundred acres. A clerk in the surveying office baptized the towns with classical names, to match the new nation's self-identification with republican Rome and democratic Athens, and threw in some English cultural heroes for good measure: hence the place names of Ithaca, Hector, Scipio, Camillus, Cincinnatus, Locke, Dryden, and the rest.

The Military Tract, as it was called, ended at the Preemption Line that ran north-south from Sodus Point, just clearing Seneca Lake. Present-day roads still follow it and bear its name. Whether by chance or by geodetic intention, it is the exact meridian of Washington, D.C. (77°02'E). During the 1780s the region to the west of the line, officially Seneca country, hatched a new breed of speculators and land agents, and new complications of ownership. Jemima Wilkinson's utopian community (see chapter 3) was both a beneficiary and a victim of these. Some of the deals beggar the imagination. For instance, in 1788 Oliver Phelps and Nathaniel Gorham bought preemptive rights to the entire tract of about six million acres from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, whose title went back to pre-Revolutionary times. This gave them the right to sell it, once they had persuaded the Indians to sell *their* title. The company's land office in Canandaigua made their village into an economic hub for the region. After Phelps and Gorham had failed to complete their deals, the Holland Land Company, owned by investors from the Netherlands, took over and did the same for the village of Batavia, named for their native land. Nor was the process limited to the west. To the north, the state disposed of millions of acres of wilderness and Black River country to Alexander Macomb and other investors. This is where Charles Grandison Finney (see chapter 2) turned from lawyer to revivalist firebrand. We will be hearing later (see chapter 13) of a central New York land agent, Gerrit Smith, who stood at the nexus of the radical and spiritualist movements. He sold former Oneida acreage from his red-brick office in the village of Peterboro. A very few land agents chose to settle Upstate and build mansions in Georgian style, such as William Constable, Jr.'s Constable Hall in Constableville (!), or Lorenzo, the house of John Lincklaen in Cazenovia.

While fortunes were made and lost during this redistribution, the greatest losers were the Indians themselves. Those who had not already fled the state at the Sullivan campaign were either induced to leave for reservations in Wisconsin or Kansas, or confined to a few widely separated reservations in New York: Buffalo Creek and Tonawanda near Buffalo, Cat-

taugaus on Lake Erie, Allegany on the Allegheny River, tiny Oil Spring on Cuba Lake, Onondaga south of Syracuse, and Oneida south of that city. The latter four remain in tribal possession to this day. This set the stage for the appearance of Handsome Lake (see chapter 4), the Seneca prophet whose personal life paralleled his tribe's descent into wretchedness. The new religion he brought them was a first step toward reasserting their racial and spiritual identity.

This is where our history really begins. A flood of emigrants left the New England states, where the farmland was poor and scarce and there were few opportunities for younger sons to set up on their own. A number of our characters belonged to such families. The Mormon leaders Joseph Smith and Brigham Young (see chapter 6) were both born in Vermont in the early years of the century, left as children, and were raised respectively in Wayne and Chenango counties. The spiritualist and world traveler James Peebles (see chapter 21) was also born in Vermont and raised on the Chenango River. Rachel Baker (see chapter 5), the sleeping preacher, was born in Massachusetts and raised in Onondaga County. Others came from Pennsylvania, Canada, or directly from Europe, like the German Inspirationists (see chapter 9), who emigrated as a group and bought land near Buffalo. Ann Lee (see chapter 3) came from England as a religious refugee with her first Shaker companions. The parents of Thomas Lake Harris (see chapter 16), leaving England for reasons unknown, set up shop in Utica. Mary Andrews (see chapter 13) came from famine-struck Ireland to work as a servant, until her mediumistic talents made her a celebrity in Moravia and beyond.

The motives of those who arrived Upstate as adults were more varied. John Humphrey Noyes (see chapter 10) and John Murray Spear (see chapter 15) left New England on their own initiative, finding New York a less hostile environment for their social experiments and theological heresies. Spear's community at Kiantone was short-lived and he returned to Massachusetts; Noyes's at Oneida made social history. Paschal Beverly Randolph, medium and sexologist (see chapter 14), came from Boston to Peterboro because Gerrit Smith was giving farmland to free blacks. Timothy Brown, the builder of the Spirit House in Georgetown (see chapter 17), sold his sawmill and land holdings in Vermont and joined relatives already in Madison County.

Some of our characters were born in the state and felt its influences from an early age. Parley Pratt (see chapter 7) came from Burlington, a hamlet in Otsego County, and encountered first the Shakers, then the Mormons. Cyrus Teed, proponent of the concave earth theory (see chapter 19), came from an equally obscure corner of Delaware County, where his father built waterwheels. He discovered the speculative blend of magnetism, electricity, and alchemy that was still taken seriously outside the dominant institutions. Among the spiritualists and mediums, Andrew Jackson Davis (see chapter

11) was born a cobbler's son and grew up on the Hudson among Swedenborgians and mesmerizers; the Fox sisters came of age in the radical hotbed of Rochester. Theirs must have been a different experience from life on the inland routes, like Amanda Theodosia Jones's in East Bloomfield (see chapter 17), Amelia Bloomer's in Homer, or Cora Richmond's in distant Cuba. Of those mentioned so far, only Noyes had a privileged upbringing and a Yale education. Somehow that did not matter as it might have in stuffer parts of the country, or in Europe. Snobbery came late to a region without an aristocracy or venerated institutions.

The first challenge facing Upstate pioneers was to turn forest into farmland, unless they were fortunate to own areas that the Indians had already cleared and cultivated. The very trees that stood in their way yielded a first cash crop: they were felled, burned, and the ashes soaked in water and dried to make potash. An acre of virgin forest produced two tons of this chemical compound,⁹ essential for making soap and glass and in high demand by European countries that had already destroyed their forests. Potash and beaver pelts were the foundation of Upstate's prosperity, but the farmers dreamed of fields of waving wheat and contented cattle. It was one thing to be a homesteader, supplying one family's needs, and another to be an investor. Many of the settlers had sunk considerable cash into their land purchases, and expected to become rich through them.

Two of the main requirements for development were a sawmill and a gristmill: the first, to cut trees into manageable and saleable lumber, and the second, to grind grain into flour. In a region of lakes, rivers, and streams there was no lack of free power from falling water. The building of mills on every available watercourse seeded many of the villages, towns, and indeed cities. The radical and spiritualist capital of Rochester would never have arisen without the falls of the Genesee River. Once a surplus was produced, a market for it had to be found, and here nature was less obliging. The Appalachian mountain chain, which stretches from Alabama to the Adirondacks and beyond, forms a barrier between the inland states and the East Coast, with its cities and ports. The first and only river to cut through the range is the Mohawk. If the newly settled regions were to flourish, they had to find a way to use this river for access to the Hudson, and thence to New York City and the world.

Transportation might seem to have little to do with spiritual matters, but the protagonists of this book owed their mobility and consequent renown to its improvements. The Mohawk itself was not a perfect river for commerce. The first obstacle was the ninety-foot drop of Cohoes Falls near its mouth. Goods coming downriver had to be unloaded at Schenectady for an eighteen-mile wagon ride to the port of Albany. Further upriver there were stretches of shallow rapids and waterfalls, especially where the Mohawk

passes its narrowest defile at Little Falls. The boats and their cargoes were landed and lugged along a well-worn portage route. At Rome, where the Mohawk effectively ends, the Indians had long operated a "Carrying Place" to the head of Wood Creek, one or two miles away depending on the season. From there they could paddle down a sluggish and convoluted stream to Oneida Lake. Such portage routes suited the Indians' canoes, but they severely limited the size of boats, as did the creeks whose waters might be only inches deep. The wonderfully readable journal of Simon Desjardins and Nicolas Pharoux, who were sent in 1797 to survey lands in the Macomb Purchase bought by a French consortium, describes the hazards of such a journey.

During the 1790s the Western Inland Lock Navigation Company took the situation in hand.¹⁰ By digging short stretches of canal around the various obstacles, it made navigation possible—though still far from easy—from Schenectady to Oneida Lake, and then down the Oneida and Oswego rivers to Lake Erie. Meanwhile there was competition, as the land routes were greatly extended and improved. The turnpike system allowed entrepreneurs to improve a stretch of track, paving it with cinders, planks, or a bumpy "corduroy road" of logs, and to charge a toll for its use. Today's Routes 5, 20, and 80 trace the principal turnpikes between Albany and the Finger Lakes. Along with the turnpikes came stagecoaches on regular schedules. In winter, wheels and mud gave way to snow and sleds. Many of the older houses along these routes were once taverns, serving everyone from land speculators to cattle drovers.

The Erie Canal, completed in 1825, lowered the cost of freight by an order of magnitude compared to the land routes. Forced through the legislature by the energetic DeWitt Clinton, planned and engineered by complete amateurs, and dug at first by local labor, it was the most ingenious and effective example of water management since Roman times. European travelers especially admired the aqueducts that carried the canal over natural streams and rivers.

The canal enabled the produce of the interior—iron ore, lumber, salt, potash, furs and hides, grains and flour, pork and cattle, hops, liquor, cheese, ginseng¹¹—to be sold in the coastal cities or exported. In the other direction it brought manufactured goods, machinery, bricks, window glass, clothing, luxury items. In time the Upstate cities became manufacturing centers in their turn, and the exchange more complex. Additional canals brought Pennsylvania coal to fuel their factories, which shipped their products down the Delaware to Philadelphia and the Susquehanna to Baltimore. The consequences went far beyond the commercialization of the Upstate region. The Erie Canal helped to open up Ohio to settlement and to make Cleveland and then Chicago into industrial cities, to say nothing of Buffalo

as its prime loading station. At the other end it made New York City the financial center of the nation and its busiest port. As if a cork were pulled from a barrel, the natural wealth of the American interior now spilled out upon the whole world.

Second in importance were the railroads, which passengers preferred to the tedium of endless locks and the company of the notoriously rough “canawlers.” The first trains in the state rattled from Albany to Schenectady in little more than an hour, while the canal boats spent all day circumventing Cohoes Falls. In 1851, when the state, jealous of its canal profits, at last allowed freight trains, the Erie Railway completed the southern route from the Hudson to Lake Erie, restoring opportunity to a region that the canal had somewhat drained. The golden years of the Upstate region saw both canals and railroads running at full capacity, providing a network of public transport with no equivalent today. It accounts for the surprising mobility of some of our characters, such as Paschal Beverly Randolph (see chapter 14), who in one February day rode from Syracuse to Utica (fifty miles, presumably by train), then twenty-four miles by sleigh to Edmeston, arriving in time for tea and a séance.

Alongside the economic and demographic boom came the social revolution. Although New York was fifty years late in abolishing slavery—Vermont had led the way in 1777—during the 1830s and 1840s many of its citizens defied the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, which obliged northern states to return runaway slaves to their southern masters. After the passing of a sterner act in 1850, the Underground Railroad developed as an informal system of hosting escaped slaves and helping them to reach Canada. Until the Civil War, the abolitionists worked hand in hand with those campaigning for women’s rights. Both movements could accuse the nation’s lawmakers of infidelity to the Constitution, which proclaimed the equality of all before the Creator. Gerrit Smith, William Lloyd Garrison, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joslyn Gage are some of the radical leaders who will play an important part in our narrative (see chapters 13 and 20). Their first victory was New York’s Married Women’s Property Act, passed on April 7, 1848. It allowed married women to retain property they had owned before marriage and earned during it, but still left much to be won, such as the right to divorce abusive husbands, obtain custody of children, administer estates as widows, and of course, to vote.

These were heady times. The Californian gold rush had started in January 1848. On February 21 Karl Marx published the *Communist Manifesto*. Revolutions broke out in the Italian states in January, in France in February, and in the Austrian empire and German states in March, plunging continental Europe into turmoil for the rest of the year. On April 27 France

abolished slavery in her colonies. Closer to home, on March 1 the first Perfectionists arrived to form the Oneida Community. On March 31, the Fox sisters launched the spiritualist movement in Hydesville, and Andrew Jackson Davis heard a voice saying, "Brother, the good work has begun."¹² On July 9 the first women's rights convention was planned (see chapter 13). It was announced on the eleventh and held on the nineteenth and twentieth of the same month, bringing some three hundred participants to Seneca Falls.

One hesitates to play down such a momentous episode as the Civil War, but it did not interrupt the processes described up to now. New York State was far from the battle lines. Its industries and farms prospered by supplying the Union Army with weapons, uniforms, and food, while its bankers loaned money to the government at high interest. The economic historian Peter Bernstein writes that the New York canal network and the consequent industrial revolution "helps to explain northern superiority" when the war came.¹³ The state emerged from the war richer and more powerful than ever. This was little comfort to the more than forty-six thousand volunteers and draftees from New York who had lost their lives, though spiritualism flourished as the bereaved turned to it for solace.

The postwar settlement granted freedom to former slaves and voting rights to the males among them, but not to women of any color. This irked the women's movement, which felt that it had helped both abolition and the war effort and received nothing in return. It turned its energies inward or to other causes such as temperance, as the freed blacks continued their equally unfinished struggle for true civil rights. While all the movements that we shall study here favored women's equality, they tended to avoid public activism. Instead, the Oneida Perfectionists, the Fourierists, and the "free lovers" of Harmonia practiced equality within their own communities (see chapters 9, 10, and 15) in ways more radical than anything imagined at Seneca Falls. In theory they also favored racial equality, but black membership in these groups was close to nil, and the only Indians present were spirit guides. As for state and national politics, and all the emotions and ambitions they created in the wider world, our groups virtually ignored them. They had more important matters to get excited about, such as commerce with higher planes of existence and the pursuit of immortality. This chapter has concentrated on the material and geographic environment with which, however unworldly, they had to contend.

This suggests one explanation for why so many eccentric spiritual movements did arise in Upstate New York. Those with the gumption to set out for virgin territory and carve a livelihood out of its natural riches were unbound by authority or tradition. They knew the resilience and resistance



ILLUSTRATION 1.2. Ruins of the Richmond (or Montezuma) Aqueduct, 1849, the second-largest construction on the Erie Canal, on which the canal crossed the Seneca River. *Author's photograph.*

of the physical world more keenly than town dwellers. They were building a civilization from the ground up, and along with that endeavor came a freedom in the construction of their mental worlds. Into this wilderness came the Erie Canal. Defying the skeptics and city politicians, overcoming all the obstacles nature had put in its path, its completion was an achievement of mythic dimensions. To ride the canal from Albany to Buffalo, to see its booming towns and cities and then perhaps to visit Niagara Falls, must have given a sense of the grandeur of nature and of human ingenuity and power that we can hardly imagine. In such a state of mind, anything seemed possible, in heaven as well as on earth.

Easier to explain is the decline of such movements in the twentieth century. By 1900 the Upstate cities had all the appurtenances of cities elsewhere: tall buildings, crowded streets, hospitals and lawyers, local politicking, the very rich and the very poor. Outside the Adirondacks the state was almost deforested in favor of farming.¹⁴ The examples I have drawn from this period, Elbert Hubbard, Gustav Stickley, and Claude Bragdon (see chapters 22, 23, and 24) had quite different motivations from the visionaries and mediums of the pioneer generations. Familiar with the industrial system,

even compromised by it, they longed for the real or imagined values of the past, such as craftsmanship, self-reliance, and an honest aesthetic.

Today, Upstate is in transition once again. Its cities have lost their industrial base and have yet to find a comparable source of wealth. The Barge Canal that replaced the Erie is almost unused. Family farms are vanishing. The small towns and villages offer little in the way of employment or encouragement for ambitious youngsters. Yet if there is a special product or a tourist attraction, the state's very decline has been to its advantage. Outside the large cities, with their irreparable scars of urban renewal, there are places scarcely altered since the nineteenth century, with all the grace and variety of its domestic and public architecture. One finds them along the canals and the turnpikes; in the wine country and the Finger Lakes; in the college and university towns; in Cooperstown with its museums. Tourists may well feel nostalgic for the quality of life that they imagine to exist there. And in between there are miles upon miles of field, forest, and lake, much of it without a human habitation in sight. There one may sense the inexplicable spirit of place that transcends the ups and downs of human history.