

History of the 1747 Nellis Tavern St. Johnsville, NY

The Palatine Germans who settled in the Mohawk Valley originated in the Palatinate of Germany, which is in the modern West German region of Pfalz, between Frankfort and Luxembourg. The Palatinate was a region that was constantly swept by war; first by the Thirty Years and then by the many wars of Louis XIV. In early 1700's, the Nellises, among others, fled the village of Sitters in the parish of Obermoschel and left for England. The Palatines stayed in England until 1709-10, when Queen Anne granted them land in America. The Palatines were guaranteed land as long as they produced naval supplies such as ship parts and tar, for England (Frothingham 1892: 185). The Palatines found that this didn't work out and some moved into the Schoharie Valley as farmers. Unfortunately others claimed the land they used there and the Palatines decided they needed to move again, this time several families progressed into the Mohawk Valley.

William, Christian and Catharine Nellis left the Schoharie Valley in 1722 and settled near present day St. Johnsville. In 1725 Christian Nellis settled on the 650 acres of lot No. 12 of the Harrison Land Patent, including the site where the Tavern stands now (Digan and Smith 1983: 3). There was a house standing at the tavern site as early as 1747.

In 1767, Christian Nellis sold his land to his son Christian, Jr. for 300 pounds (Deed Book Montgomery County cited in Digan and Smith 1983: 3). Before this sale, the structure known as "Fort Nellis," apparently a stone blockhouse and a stone gristmill were built. Rufus Grider, a 19th century artist who worked in the Mohawk Valley and who drew the fort and the grist mill, placed these buildings between the Mohawk River and the location of the present day railroad tracks (Grider 1878: 89). "Fort Nellis" is referred to in reports of the Revolutionary War battle of Stone Arabia, a running engagement that swept through the Stone Arabia – St. Johnsville area in 1781 (Vrooman 1943: 151). Frothingham (1892: 307) reports that in 1783, Christian Nellis, Jr., kept a tavern in the present day structure and that in 1801 a farm equipment store was opened there. After the death of Christian Nellis, Jr. in 1808, the land was kept in the family and maintained as a farm and tavern until the 1850's. In 1887 Alpha Nellis, descendant of William Nellis, bought the property.

During the 19th century, the Nellises constructed a barn directly to the east of the tavern. The date for this barn was determined by the presence of several metal objects that date to the 19th century. After this point in time, and up until the 1920's, the Nellises used the land for farming. At some point before 1905, two outbuildings were constructed as shown in the 1905 Montgomery County Atlas (1905)(Fig.1). The 1868 map does not show any type of outbuilding, so it is assumed that there were not any (Nichols and Stranahan 1868). (A picture from the 1880's shows one or more outbuildings to the west.)

The house was occupied until the 1950's, after which it fell into disrepair. Today, the tavern is being renovated to its 1835 appearance, as close as possible, through the efforts of its owners, the Palatine Settlement Society. The Society purchased the building and eight acres of land in the mid 1980's.