

Mapping Early Dunkirk  
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2013

In his *History of Chautauqua County* in 1875 (p. 304), Andrew **Young** describes the early settlement of today's Dunkirk and notes that he had the original account "orally given to the writer by one of its early and most distinguished citizens, as well as one of its principal business men," no doubt referring to Walter **Smith**. That summary account explained that in 1816 or 1817 a group of the earliest settlers "sold or assigned their [Holland Land Company] contracts to Elisha **Jenkins**, of Albany, as trustee for a company composed of Isaiah and John **Townsend**, DeWitt **Clinton**, and \_\_\_\_\_**Thorn**, who bought 1,008 acres of land, a part of the present site of the village of Dunkirk, and took a deed from the Holland Land Company. About 40 or 50 acres they surveyed into village lots." That survey of 40 to 50 acres seems to have resulted in a map that no longer exists. Although the Dunkirk map of 1834 seems to be the earliest extant, there is clear evidence that an earlier map or maps existed. Further evidence can be found in the assessment rolls of the period.

Because what is now the City of Dunkirk was originally part of the Town of Pomfret until November 1859, the property there was assessed along with all the others in the town. Although there were minor variations, by and large each year's assessment roll presented the owner's or occupier's name in roughly alphabetical order, usually followed by the property's location, using the Holland Land Company's Lot-Town-Range system. The approximate acreage was given, as well as the assessed valuation and the amount of tax to be paid. For example, beginning with the assessment roll for 1816, we find landholders in what is today's Dunkirk listed along with all the others in Pomfret, distinguished only by the number of the particular Holland Land Company lot or lots that each landholder occupied. For the "Dunkirk" area, that was Lots 17 and 18, 23 and 24, and part of 29. It is in the roll dated 23 June 1817 that we find the first reference to what the assessors called the "Dunkirk Association." That group, whose names Walter **Smith** provided to **Young**, had land on Lot 29 (165 acres), 24 (300 acres), 18 (300 acres), and the North part of 23 (90 acres). That made an (overestimated) total of 855 acres. The "1008 acres" in Walter **Smith's** account probably represents the final total when the property was sold off years later.

It should be noted that the area directly touching the shore of Lake Erie at the bay has had various names. According to Lewis H. **Morgan** in his *League of the Ho-De-No-Sau-Neé or Iroquois* (1901 Edition, Vol.II, pp.127-128) the Seneca called Dunkirk Ga-na-da-wa-o, that is, running through the hemlocks, no doubt taken from the name of the creek: Ga-na-da-wa-o Ga-hun-da, the river running through the hemlocks. As the white settlers later said, Canadaway. In October 1807 "Theron **Strong** & Co." contracted for the west half of Lot 18 and all of Lot 19, which the 1810 assessment roll counted as 324 acres. On 23 April 1808 the road which years later became part of Central Avenue, was surveyed beginning at what was then known as "**Strong's** Bay on Lake Erie." **Strong** was there in 1810 but gone by 1811. Timothy **Goulding**, who located near Point Gratiot in 1808, persuaded his brother Luther and brother-in-law Solomon **Chadwick** to settle near him. **Chadwick** was one of those who sold to the Dunkirk Land Co., referred to by the Pomfret assessors as the "Dunkirk Association." The fact that the "Dunkirk" term is used in the assessment roll dated as of June 1817 indicates that whoever renamed **Chadwick's** Bay did so well before the 1818 date usually given. Although the village that was being formed was called Dunkirk, the general area, as seen in entries in James **Holly's** Day Book about 1820, was referred to as "the Bay," or, later, "**Garnsey's** Bay."

The previously mentioned pattern of assessment roll entries for the Dunkirk Association appears in 1818 and 1819. In 1820 two "Village lots," 1/5 acre each were added to make a total of 906 2/5 acres. What that means is that they were not being located according to the Holland Land Company system but by another locating system. That system may have only been in the planning stages, because it is not until the 1822 assessment roll that the two lots are further described as "Village lots 18 & 19." Later evidence suggests they were the two corner lots at Front Street and Center Street (today's Lake Shore Drive and Central Avenue). The fact that the Town assessor could specify their locations in that way shows that somebody has made a map of some kind, dividing the land into units which have been assigned numbers. The assessors are here recognizing that a "Village" is being formed and that its design and interior configuration are being planned. (In 1824 through 1826, and again in 1831, the assessors used the term "Dunkirk Company" in place of "Dunkirk Association." The differing usage does not seem to reflect any change in ownership or status.)

The roll for the following year, 1823, is even clearer. Interfiled with all the other Pomfret landholders are six "Dunkirk" residents with street addresses: John **Beggs** had lots 11 and 12 on Front Street; John **Bond** was at 7 Center Street; Ellis **Doty** had property on Front Street, perhaps a wharf; William **Gifford** had the same; William A. **Lynde** had 2 and 4 Center Street; and John **Langdon** had 6 Center Street.

Subsequent rolls show additional locations. For example, in 1826 Benjamin **Day**, Non-resident, had number "15 Front Street" as well as the "Lynd house Main street" which may have been the locals' name for Center Street. It was in that same year, 1826, that Walter **Smith** and his partner, George A. **French**, opened a store in Dunkirk. The assessment roll for 1827 shows **French** with properties at 9 and 10 Front Street, 24 Front Street, and 1 Buffalo Street, the last apparently his home site. However, his store partner, **Smith**, went him one better. For \$10,000 he bought an entire undivided half interest in the Dunkirk Land Company's property, the "1008 acres" of 1817.

For the next ten years, from 1826, the area experienced a real estate boom. In 1832 **Smith** had a three-mile long raceway dug from Canadaway Creek, supplementing the supply from Crooked Brook, to a mill pond and dam powering a grist mill to serve the growing community, and soon after a saw mill.

Following, in 1833, **Smith** pulled off a major coup. *Young's History* (p.304) summarizes the event very clearly. "In or about 1833, Mr. **Smith** sold out his half interest to men in the city of New York at a large advance above the cost; and, for less than half of the sum received, he bought of the [Dunkirk Land] Company the other half." The man representing the New York City buyers was Russell H. **Nevins**, a prominent real estate developer and broker in New York City who had recently been President of the New York Stock Exchange. As part of the transfer a map was drawn to accompany the deed. There is a copy of a map dated 1834 which shows the property in Dunkirk which was part of the transaction. It was endorsed by **Smith** and certified. "Know all men by these presents That I, Walter **Smith** of the town of Pomfret in the County of Chautauque Do hereby declare this to be one of the copies of the Map mentioned and referred to in a conveyance of even date herewith from myself Walter **Smith** and Minerva his wife of the first part to Russell H. **Nevins** of the second part of an undivided half part of certain lands in the said town of Pomfret particularly described in the said conveyance. In Witness whereof I have hereto set my hand and seal this sixth day of November in the year one thousand eight hundred and thirty four."

The **Smith-Nevins** map records the village plat as **Smith** had “inherited” it from the original developers. It would be immediately familiar to any Dunkirk resident today: a rectangular grid made up of numbered streets running east and west crossed by named streets running north to south. Because it would be familiar, its oddities are not immediately apparent.

The rectangular street grid is plunked down immediately adjacent to the curving shoreline of the Bay. Nowhere is there any concession to that U-shaped northern edge, nor of the then significant Crooked Brook cutting across the village plat from the southeast to the northwest. No streets following old Indian paths, no animal trails or natural geographic contours. This was a village plan worked out, not on the ground, but on someone’s work table.

There are several other oddities to be noted. Within its limits, the original designers strove for symmetry. (The one exception was the large mill site, at the southwest corner of their plat, which Walter **Smith** later enlarged.) The village was designed with two halves more or less equal, divided by a street they named “Center” or “Centre,” animal names in the east part, bird names in the west. Underlining this desire for symmetry was the setting aside of a large block — bounded by Buffalo (today’s Washington), Fifth, Elk (today’s Park), and Sixth streets — for a “Parade” ground (today’s Washington Park). West of Center Street was a mirror image block at Swan, Fifth, Eagle and Sixth streets intended for a “Cemetery” (later the Academy block and today’s Middle School).

This early plan had fewer named streets than were later added. East of Center Street were only Buffalo, Elk, Deer, and Lion. To its west were only Eagle, Swan, Dove and Robin. Today’s narrower streets in between were not shown yet. That allowed for larger lots on each street. Those lots were all assigned numbers, which will need some clarification as well. For some reason, perhaps because they were seen as the most desirable, the lots on the south side of Front Street at its eastern edge, between Lion and Deer, were marked A, B, C, D, E, F. Those on the north side of Front Street were G, H, I, J, K, L. The rest of the lots on Front Street were given numbers beginning again on the south side at the west corner of Deer Street with 1 through lot number 42 at the corner of Robin Street. That sequence picked up again on the north side of Front Street, at the west side of Deer Street, with lot 43 through lot number 84 at Robin Street. The lots on north-south streets were treated more traditionally. Beginning at the north end, odd-numbered lots 1-79 were on the east side of each street, even-numbered lots 2-80 on the west side.

There is another map, almost identical to the **Smith-Nevins** one. That is the “**Burr** map” probably dating from 1836, although it is most likely merely a reprint from an 1834 or 1835 original. David H. **Burr** was a well-known, well-respected cartographer. His *Atlas of New York State* of 1829 was very highly regarded. In 1834 he issued a “new and elegant map of the State of New-York. . . . It is intended to embellish the new map with correct plans of the principal cities and villages in the state” according to *The Fredonia Censor* of 12 March 1834.

In July 1896 *The Grape Belt* had a “Souvenir Harbor Issue” which noted that the original lighthouse was “marked on the original map of Dunkirk made by David H. **Burr** some years before the Doughty map of 1838 was made. Upon this map, generally known as the ‘**Johnson** Map,’ the latitude and longitude [of the lighthouse] are given. . . .” There seems to be some confusion here. A map of the Dunkirk plat, made by Elisha **Johnson** in 1828 to accompany a property deed, was reputedly filed at Liber 544 Page 452, although the county clerk finds no map with this deed. Elisha **Johnson** was a well known surveyor and engineer. He was born in Chautauqua County, probably in Harmony, and settled in Rochester in 1817. The “**Johnson**

map” was copied for the transfer of property between Walter **Smith** and Russell H. **Nevins** in 1834 as well as by David H. **Burr**.

The differences between the **Burr** map and the **Smith-Nevins** map are small but interesting. **Burr** includes specific details about the sizes of the lots on the various streets. Also a few lots are color-coded blue or red. Since there is no legend with this map, we can only speculate what the colors mean and whether they are original with the map-maker.

The only significant difference is that the tail race from the sawmill site west of Swan and below Sixth Street includes another mill building about at West Second and Mullett streets. This probably was what Canon **Chard** was referring to when he wrote in his history of Dunkirk that **Smith** “also built and operated a saw-mill near Mullett Street.” It stands on the lot that the **Burr** map labels “Mill Lot No. 2.”

Through 1835 and 1836 the Dunkirk settlement grew as the real estate boom continued. In 1836 the New York City proprietors had a new map drawn to document the “terminus of the New York and Erie Railroad” as the map legend reads. In fact the map claimed to be a “Map of the Town of Dunkirk” although “Village” would be more accurate.

By this time many more streets had been added to the plan, including some streets where the mill pond had been. The only remnant was a flour mill on the west side of Robin Street just below Third Street. There were also stark differences with its predecessor. An entirely new numbering system was in place. It was a single sequence assigning numbers to the street blocks, not the individual lots on a street, beginning at the upper west side. Number 1 was assigned to the lot north of West Sycamore Street and west of West Point Avenue. The sequence ended at the upper east side in the 700s. There were also numbers for individual lot line measurements.

One of the added streets was Water Street. It lay one block north of Front Street, with one “stub” marked as West Water Street west of the Bay and another marked East Water Street east of the Bay. Apparently the plan was to fill in the shallow lakefront and run Water Street straight across. The map has dotted lines showing the proposed location and the north end of each named street has a small dock or pier extending north from its Water Street location. There is a copy of the 1836 map in the Dunkirk Historical Society’s collection that was saved from the fire of 1924 and seems to be identical, except it does not show the proposed middle section of Water Street. It is not clear if this is an earlier or a later version of the map. There are other, almost identical, copies of this map in which East Water Street is named and West Water Street is shown but not named.

Each of these maps is known as the “Doughty” map. In order to record the expected terminus of the New York & Erie Railroad at Dunkirk, surveyor Henry P. **Benton** was sent in 1836 to survey the village area again. Henry Parker **Benton** was a well-known surveyor and civil engineer living in Angelica NY. In 1819 he had been one of the Deputy Surveyors of the Delaware and Kickapoo lands in Indiana and, in the same year, of the Big Miami Reserve in Ohio. Although the 1836 map credits **Benton** with the surveying, he apparently worked under the personal supervision of New York City surveyor Edward **Doughty**, whose son Samuel S. **Doughty** proudly wrote in his biography of his father, *Edward Doughty, His Life, Time and Friends* (p.25), “When the Town of Dunkirk was selected as the western terminus of the Erie Railroad, my father was employed to go there, and lay out the City, which it was thought would grow to be a great business centre. He took with him a theodolite, for which a large price was offered, and he sold it to the Engineers of the Railroad Company. That instrument was the best I ever handled and the comparisons made subsequently, were very unfavorable to other

theodolites.” From the Dunkirk field notes, the proprietors, **Nevins, Townsend & Co.**, had the two well-known New York City surveyors, Edward and Samuel S. **Doughty**, draw the definitive map that had been surveyed with that very superior theodolite.

The map was certified by Russell H. **Nevins** as part of a deed dated 13 March 1838. Earlier, on 7 January 1838, **Nevins** and the other “Proprietors” had met in New York City and agreed to a plan for the sale of lots in the part of Dunkirk they owned. Walter **Smith** and E. **Lord** were appointed a committee to plan how the property was to be divided in light of an earlier grant to the Erie R.R. Co. That grant gave one fourth of the lands to the railroad company, provided the rails actually reached Dunkirk within six years. The plan **Smith** and **Lord** devised was for the other three-fourths to be divided into shares for each proprietor, for which the 1836 map was intended to be the guide.

It is ironic that soon after the 1836 map was drawn, the Village of Dunkirk was triumphantly declared incorporated on 5 May 1837, at the same time that the bank panic and business failures of 1837 caused the real estate market to collapse, almost closing down Dunkirk in the process. It seems clear that the New York City investors, at least, thought the railroad’s arrival would save them, otherwise the subsequent deeding and the division into shares of 1838 would make no sense.

There was some encouragement from the Federal Government. A map of the Dunkirk harbor was drawn with the official title of *Map of Dunkirk Harbor, showing the works erected by the United States and the plan of those projected for its further improvement, together with the changes of outline of shore caused by their erection up to Sep. 30<sup>th</sup> 1838.*

This map, which focused on the shoreline and the Bay, incorporated one drawn by a Lt. T. S. **Brown** in 1835. Actually these “improvements” had begun in 1827 with the building of the first breakwaters to improve harbor access. The harbor map does show a few of the streets closest to the shore: part of Water Street and all of Front and Second streets, although none is named. There are ten lots marked off at “East Water Street,” two at the center point of the Bay, and three at “West Water Street.” The other 1838 map is an interesting contrast to the Federal Government’s version. That showed a few of the streets as they were on the ground. The **Nevins** map of 1838, on the other hand, showed what the developers then *intended*. That included abandoning the full Water Street but adding six piers to the waterfront. For the first time, lots within the blocks were shown and numbered. In the matter of symmetry, the square that had been for a cemetery was now a “Donation to endow an Academy” (today’s Middle School block), balanced again by “Washington Square” (today’s Washington Park) to the east. In addition, with the Village now incorporated, the block between Eagle and Lark streets south of Fourth Street was set aside for the Town Hall, and here too, to its west between Swan and Canary, was a Lot for a “Public Ground” balanced to the east between Buffalo and Fawn by a matching “Public Ground.”

These were all significant changes, no doubt, but looking closely at any one in this series of early maps, many copies of which belong to private collectors, we can see where it all started with a simple street grid, once mapped and now recovered from the assessment rolls, beginning back in 1817.