



Tompkins County Overview

Located in the Finger Lakes Region of Central New York, Tompkins County contains an uncommon mixture of spectacular natural features, a vibrant urban center, internationally renowned academic institutions, and a productive and attractive working landscape. With its mixture of urban, suburban, and rural landscapes, Tompkins County offers a diverse living environment.

Tompkins County is an area of remarkable beauty in which a disproportionate quantity of worldly culture has taken root. These two elements have defined the County since Cornell University was established in 1865 as an institution where “any person can find instruction in any study.”¹ The County’s glacier-carved geology, its place in the growth of the new American nation, and the strength of its enterprises and industries have all contributed to its unique character.

¹ Ezra Cornell

History of Settlement

While most who live here now may feel our history began with the first settlers to arrive in the wake of the American Revolution, the generations of previous residents stretch back to the Stone Age. Archeological evidence suggests the first humans to set foot in Upstate New York were nomadic hunters who, thousands of years ago, roamed the forests in search of game.

More recently, this area was home to the Cayuga Indians, one of the five – and later six – tribes that made up the Iroquois Confederation. The Cayugas used the land lightly, placing semi-permanent settlements near the sources of fresh water, cultivating produce and orchards. In 1779 General George Washington, concerned that the Iroquois nations would ally with the British, sent troops into Iroquoia to drive the Indians west and out of the conflict raging between the colonies and Britain. Two of Washington's generals took their forces down either side of Cayuga Lake and systematically destroyed the Native American villages. The devastation was complete, and in 1789, the Cayugas surrendered their land.²

Following the Revolutionary War, Simeon DeWitt, the State Surveyor General and later founder of Ithaca, placed the northern portion of what became Tompkins County in the “New Military Tract,” lands to be given to veterans in payment for their military service. The southern portion of what became Tompkins County was owned by a private land development company.

Settlement began around 1792. Some new arrivals were squatters willing to take a chance on finding land; others came seeking their military allotments. Following the first settlers came ministers, lawyers, and merchants. By 1810, the village of Ithaca had a few houses, a sprinkling of stores and taverns, and several mills powered by the fast-moving streams. With the opening of the Ithaca-Owego Turnpike, Ithaca became a trans-shipment point for goods flowing south.

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Early settlers were predominantly American-born farmers seeking new land. Some from the East and South brought slaves with them, although their numbers were small.

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Slavery was abolished in New York State in 1827. Many, but not all, of the people of the county supported emancipation and some helped fugitive slaves make their way to freedom.

The opening of the Erie and Seneca Canals in the early nineteenth century kept local goods flowing to the eastern markets. Railroad development linked Tompkins County with even more destinations beginning in 1832 with the Ithaca-Owego Railroad. By 1870, the County was served by four railroads.

The establishment of Cornell University in 1865 brought stability to the county's economy. The university attracted students, faculty, and many new residents to the county. Ithaca College opened in several downtown Ithaca buildings in 1892. The village of Ithaca had a steady increase in population while most of the towns in the County reached a peak population around 1850 and then dipped to half that level in the early years of the twentieth century. Population in Tompkins County rose gradually over the course of the nineteenth century and into the mid-twentieth.

From a collection of farms and mills, Tompkins County grew into an area of pleasant towns and villages connected by roads and turnpikes, ferries, and railroads. In 1900, with a population of just 33,830, the County entered the age of the automobile, electrification, industrialization, and world wars. For a decade, beginning in 1914, movies were made in Ithaca. Significant industries established in the next few decades included the Ithaca Gun Company, the Thomas-Morse airplane company, and the Groton Iron Bridge Company. By 1960, the population had doubled to 66,164, and the local economy was booming.³

From 1960 to today, the population of Tompkins County grew from 66,164 residents to 96,501 residents and the local economy began to move away from traditional manufacturing and industry to focus on education, high-tech, and service sectors.

Our Demographic Profile

County population growth in the twentieth century continued slowly, although Cornell University increased in size yearly, from 1885 on. In 1910 the county had 33,647 residents. Increases were slight through 1940 when the total population was 42,340. In the next ten years, however, the overall population jumped by more than 16,000 residents to

² Jane March Dieckmann, *A Short History of Tompkins County*

³ Highlights, Tompkins County Comprehensive Plan, 1975

59,122, with the major gain occurring in Ithaca, reflecting the growth of Cornell University following World War II. An additional jump by 10,000 residents between 1960 and 1970 brought the county population to 77,064. That decade's figures reveal a shift in living patterns with a major increase in the Town of Ithaca, especially in the northeast portion and in the areas adjacent to Cornell.

According to the most recent U.S. Census, conducted in 2000, 96,501 people were living in Tompkins County. Approximately one in three residents were under 21 years of age. On the other end of the scale, one in ten residents were at least 65 years old. About half the adults had at least a bachelor's degree. The census also showed that residents of Tompkins County move their households frequently. In 2000, less than half of residents lived in the same house they inhabited in 1995. This reflects,

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in part, the nature of a university community as well as national trends. Population projections for Tompkins County indicate a very gradual increase in population over the next thirty years. These projections take into account birth rates, mortality rates, in-migration, and out-migration and assume that current trends will continue into the future. While the total population is expected to increase to only 102,121 by 2030, the proportion by age will change more dramatically. The under-21 population is expected to increase from 33 percent (current) to 38 percent. The population 65 and older is expected to increase to one in every eight persons.

Correspondingly, the population between ages 21 and 64 is projected to decline to less than half of all residents. Because this group represents the portion of our population that forms the core of our labor force, this anticipated decline will impact employment and economic development in the future. If these trends continue, the impacts may include:

- A decrease in the number of jobs created,
- An increase in commuters from surrounding counties, or more 'distance' jobs, where employees will telecommute from other communities,
- More in-migration to the county in response to increasing economic opportunities, with a resulting increase in population beyond that in the projection,
- More employment of older and younger workers.

Geology and Natural Surroundings

Tompkins County is made up of approximately 305,000 acres of land. The southern area is dominated by rugged hills with the highest, Connecticut Hill, reaching over 2,000 feet. The northern portion has a more gentle terrain and generally more fertile soils. Approximately one-quarter of the land in Tompkins County is covered by high quality agricultural soils, concentrated in Ulysses, northwestern Enfield, and northern Lansing, although there are smaller pockets located throughout the county.

The most dominant natural feature in Tompkins County is Cayuga Lake. Cayuga Lake is the second-largest Finger Lake and the longest, widest and one of the deepest of the eleven Finger Lakes. Tompkins County has approximately 26 miles of shoreline on Cayuga Lake. It is located in a glacial valley with steep slopes along the lakeshore punctuated by many picturesque gorges. Wall elevations in the gorges

TOMPKINS COUNTY POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS, 2000 CENSUS

	All residents	Excluding college students
	96,501	69,295
Sex		
Male	47,667 (49%)	not available
Female	48,834 (51%)	not available
Age		
Under 21	32,036 (33%)	19,975 (29%)
21 – 64	55,208 (57%)	40,140 (58%)
65 or older	9,257 (10%)	9,180 (13%)
Race (one race)		
White	82,507 (85%)	62,495 (90%)
Asian	6,943 (7%)	2,385 (3%)
Black	3,508 (4%)	2,305 (3%)
American Indian/Alaska Native	275 (<1%)	150 (<1%)
Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	36 (<1%)	20 (<1%)
Other	1,052 (1%)	525 (1%)
Two or More Races	2,180 (2%)	1,420 (2%)
Hispanic/Latino (of any race)	2,968 (3%)	1,395 (2%)

can reach 300 feet. The higher elevations of the lake’s tributaries, combined with the steep gorges, produce numerous waterfalls.

The lake divides the northern portion of the county in two. As the principal water body, nearly three quarters of the county’s land area drains into Cayuga Lake before moving northward, ultimately to Lake Ontario. The southern fifth of the County drains southward into the Upper Susquehanna River.

Cayuga Lake has served an important economic role in Tompkins County. In the nineteenth century, the lake was an important link in the transportation route connecting central and southern New York to Buffalo and points west. Today, it serves as a supply for public drinking water, a major regional recreational and tourism resource, and an important link in the waterfowl flyway of the Atlantic Coast.

The topography of the watershed was formed as the land began uplifting approximately 200 million years ago. At that time, drainage flowed to the south, through the Susquehanna River system. During the Ice Age, two glacial events produced the deep gorges that became the Finger Lakes. The retreat of the second glacier resulted in the reversal of drainage in the watershed from the south to the north. This glacial action resulted in the creation of the relatively flat lands in the northern portion of the county (in Ulysses, Lansing, and Groton) and the steep hills and valleys of the south (in Newfield, Danby, and Caroline).

With its varied topography and landforms, the County contains a number of interesting ecological communities, including streams, lakes, ponds, marshes, meadows, fens, forests, swamps, and cliffs. Many important natural areas have been identified in the county with the help of Cornell University’s strong natural resource programs, and a local community of outdoor enthusiasts. Nearly 200 such areas have been identified by the County’s Environmental Management Council in the Unique Natural Areas Inventory of Tompkins County. Tompkins County is also home to a National Natural Landmark, McLean Bog, located in the Town of Dryden. In addition, the County has one Recreational River (a portion of Fall Creek), one Critical Environmental Area (Coy Glen), four State Parks, all or part of eight State Forests, several Audubon-designated Important Bird Areas, and a variety of lands protected by the local Finger Lakes Land Trust, Cornell University, and The Nature Conservancy.

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What Lies Ahead

In the past decade, the population of Tompkins County, as in many parts of the Northeast, has grown at a modest rate while the amount of land taken up by development has increased at a rate that has far outpaced population. This

trend is also highlighted in the loss of households in traditional population centers of cities and villages and an increase in the number of households in suburban and rural areas. Upstate New York saw the loss of 40,000 urban households in the 1990s, and an increase in rural and suburban households of 160,000. This type of growth puts at risk many of the characteristics of Tompkins County that we treasure.

When trying to envision life in the future, one thing

is a given: things will change. If past growth patterns give us an indication of future growth, the types of changes we could see include:

- Loss of population, and related loss of businesses and tax base, in the city and villages;
- More new commercial and residential development along roads in the rural and agricultural areas;
- Increased traffic along rural roads and in the urban areas;
- Increased taxes and fees to pay for additional public services such as water, sewer, schools, police, fire, public transportation, and road construction and maintenance;
- Loss of vitality in traditional community centers;
- Loss of agricultural lands, natural habitats, and open space;
- Increased amount of time people spend in their cars;
- Degradation of the quality and quantity of drinking water supplies, streams, and lakes.

Decisions such as where to site a housing development, what land to protect, or where to encourage economic development all have land-use implications and impacts. Planning for the future is the only way to preserve and enhance the characteristics and attributes of Tompkins County that we most cherish, and to ensure that our communities remain healthy, vibrant, and vital.⁴

⁴ Vital Communities Initiative