

## McKOWNVILLE

McKOWNVILLE is a hamlet, an unincorporated settlement of undefined boundaries, situated within the Town of Guilderland, and having no political status.

McKOWNVILLE FIRE DISTRICT is a political subdivision within the Hamlet, created by the County of Albany in 1918 at the petition of residents of the Hamlet. It is administered by a Board of Fire Commissioners elected by the residents, having five members, one elected each year.

McKOWNVILLE WATER DISTRICT - is a special district created by the Town of Guilderland in 1948 at the petition of the residents to construct and operate a water supply and distribution system in the Hamlet. It is administered by the Town of Guilderland.

McKOWNVILLE or originally McKOWNSVILLE<sup>[a]</sup> - derives its name from the McKown family who settled in the area in the late 1700-s.

[a] While this alternative usage was quite common before about 1900, both forms were in use. However, the official documents of the Post Office, established in 1862, specifically use McKownville. So do the US Geological Survey topographic maps, from the first survey made in 1891.

**Notes:** notes keyed to superscript markers add information not available to Fred Abele. Some correct mistakes of various origins, likely including some that came from oral information from elderly residents. Corrections are based only on written or printed sources judged reliable. Locations identified in the text by business names, many of them now long defunct, are given present street and street number identification.

The transcription is faithful to the original document written by Fred Abele. It is not dated, but on what is and is not included (no Crossgates items, for instance), it probably dates from about 1980, or perhaps a few years earlier.

## McKOWNVILLE

## BACKGROUND AND ORIGIN

To explore the origins of McKownville, one must go back to the mid to late 1600's when the entire area was a part of the Colonie of Rensselaerswyck.

The first settlement outside Fort Orange (later Albany) was established at Schenectady. In the latter part of the 1600's a road of sorts developed through the Pine Plains to Schenectady. It followed present Central Avenue to a point in the vicinity of Manning Boulevard, then angled in a westerly direction, passing through what is now the state Office Campus, then changing direction and passing through the site of present State University. It was called variously the Schenectady Path, the Albany Path and later the Kings Highway. It was in use at the time of the Schenectady Massacre in 1690. Stage coaches were using it by 1700.

When the City of Albany received its charter in 1686 and became separated from the west Manor of Rensselaerwyck a long strip of land extending northwesterly to the Manor line was reserved to the City for access to wood and water. This was called the "Liberty of Albany". The Kings Highway passed through a long stretch of this strip in the Pine Barrens.

Inevitably as traffic on the Highway increased, places for food and lodging, albeit primitive, were established along the route. Those located within the City holdings were owned by the City of Albany and leased to operators. One of these, the "Five Mile House" at the Kyl, was located in the area now occupied by the "Indian Quadrangle" of State University, behind the University pond along a branch of the Krum (Kromme) Kyl. This was the first building to be located in the area of McKownville. Its exact date of construction is not known but on March 6, 1765 its lease was transferred from John Rickey to Michael Hallenbeck, to run to 1786 as recounted in Munsells Annals.

To this "Five Mile House" in the 1760's<sup>[b]</sup> came John McKown from Scotland. He was born 1722 and lived until 1809. He may have worked for the lessee of the Tavern. From the book "Door to the Mohawk Valley" by Veeder we note that when George Washington visited Albany in 1782 he traveled over the Kings Highway to Schenectady, being met by the Schenectady delegations at McKown's Tavern, undoubtedly the "Five Mile House", apparently then already operated by McKown. We find further that his son William McKown (1764-1843) in 1786 became the lessee of the Tavern, which lease continued until 1808.

<sup>[b]</sup> this statement is not supported by documentary evidence. Oral evidence recorded in a biographical sketch of John McKown's great-great grandson William McKown, in Parker's 1897 compendium Landscapes of Albany County, say the family arrived in North America about 1767, but where they arrived, and where they went prior to 1778 is not recorded. The Annals of Tryon County contain the first record of John McKown and his family in 1778, in Cherry Valley, the summer before the Cherry Valley massacre. In 1782 it is recorded that George Washington was met on the "King's Highway" at McKown's Tavern by the delegation from Schenectady before his visit; in 1786 John McKown's son William takes a 21 year lease on this tavern, the "Five Mile House".

During this period the McKowns acquired a tremendous parcel of land which stretched from near the present Albany City Line to a point in what is now Westmere and from the Kings Highway to the Norman's Kill. This was all located within the bounds of the Jan Hendrickse Van Baal Patent, the disputed parcel of land in the middle of the Van Rensselaer holdings which Van Baal purchased from the Indians, which Van Rensselaer sued to recover and which was finally settled in a compromise. Probably McKown was able to purchase the land rather than lease it because of this location. The Van Rensselaer's never sold land outright.

William McKown was apparently an astute politician, a fact that is attested to by the fact that he was elected Town Supervisor of Guilderland and reelected from 1813 through 1824, the Town's seventh Supervisor. He apparently had advance information on the building of the proposed Great Western Turnpike and its route. Accordingly he built a road from the old Five Mile House, through the woods, to a clearing where Kings Shell station<sup>[c]</sup> is now located. In 1796 he built an enormous tavern on this site. When the First Company of the Great Western Turnpike was formed in 1799 he leased a right of way to it, through his land and directly in front of the tavern. The road was completed in this area in 1800. This tavern was the nucleus of the Hamlet of McKownville.

William was apparently a genial, well liked and well thought of man. He was known generally as Billy McKown. His tavern was a popular and well known stopover for drovers bringing livestock and fowls to the Albany markets as well as local people and travelers going west. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, in his writings, describes McKown and the Tavern.

William, in time built outbuildings for the Tavern and dammed the west branch of the Krum Kill in five places to establish a water supply. Water was piped to the tavern through hollow log water pipes, a few of which were turned over in the late 1960's to the Altamont Fair Museum for preservation. One of the dams was at the site of the Church Pond dam, one at the site of the Niagara Mohawk Power Corp. right of way, one at the site of the present McKownville reservoir dam, one behind Kings Shell and the other at McKowns Grove.

William (Billy) married Catherine Sprung while still at the Five Mile House. One of their children was John, born there in 1787 lived until 1870. He married Catherine Hilton and they had a son James F. (1818-1880). John built a large Georgian style farmhouse on McKown Road beyond Short Street between 1810 and 1820. It was in later years best known as the residence of William and Margaret Knowles. It was demolished in August 1970 after being badly vandalized.

[c] On the south side of Western Avenue, which started as the Great Western Turnpike, at the intersection with Fuller Road. The gas station was succeeded by a burger drive-through (1470 Western Avenue).

## THE HAMLET OF MCKOWNVILLE - A FARMING COMMUNITY

The "Liberty of Albany", previously mentioned, figures in the history of the Hamlet because of the various surveys which changed location of these boundaries. These boundaries shifted over the years through McKownville.

In 1702, a survey by John Betty changed the south boundary of the Liberty to a line which ran northwest-southeast *[sub]*parallel to Western Avenue, midway between Williams Court and Westlyn Place. It is identified as the northerly property line of the residents on the north side of Williams Court and formed the northerly boundary of the Birchmont Water District. It crossed Western Avenue on a skew at the intersection of Western Avenue and Schoolhouse Road. It can still be traced on aerial photographs and maps.

In 1767, a survey by Bleecker shifted this south boundary to a line which is now the north limit of the road from Fuller Road to Executive Park behind Stuyvesant Plaza. Projected easterly it passes through the ends of original construction on Norwood, Glenwood, Parkwood streets, the present end of Knowles Terrace. This became the Town Line of Guilderland in 1803 and intercepted the Bethlehem Town Line in the vicinity of Russell Road.

In 1870<sup>[d]</sup> Albany and Guilderland traded land and the present<sup>[e]</sup> boundaries were established with the Krum Kill serving as the boundary.

The Hamlet as it originally existed, therefore, stretched from the point of intersection of the Bethlehem and Guilderland lines at Russell Road (then called Blessing Road) westerly along the Great Western Turnpike to Johnson Road (then called Norman's Kill<sup>[f]</sup> Road) or (the Road to LaGranges Mill) and in a north-south direction from the Kings Highway through Krum Kill Road.

Other settlers followed McKown and acquired farms. Near Russell Road, Martin M. Blessing, married Elizabeth McKown, daughter of John (1787-1870). The farm was called the "Three Hills Farm" and included the area of Bridge Street and Cross Street, still in Guilderland and presently called "Three Hills Terrace".

The Helme family built a farmhouse which stood until the late 1950's on what is now the site of the Silo Restaurant<sup>[g]</sup>. It was built about 1843. Dr. Thomas Helme, (1831-1889) served as a surgeon in the New York Volunteers Regiments during the Civil War. He was wounded at Fort Harrison and was honorably discharged at the end of the war. He married Elizabeth Knowles (1836-1908). His son, Dr. Thomas Helme (1867-1921) was a member of the Albany County Medical Society. He was a charter member of the McKownville Fire Dept. in 1918 and Served as a Fire Commissioner for the McKownville Fire District until his death on January 4, 1921. They are buried in Prospect Hill Cemetery.

[d] The first of three changes to the Guilderland-City of Albany boundaries, the first made sometime in the years 1870-71.

[e] The present boundaries were (more-or-less) established in 1916, not 1870. There was also a rearrangement in 1912.

[f] It was called the "Kill Road". The "Normanskill Road" was what is now called Church Road. And just to confuse things completely, the "White Church Road" is now called Schoolhouse Road (the white church in question being not the McKownville Methodist Church, but the church in the Town of Bethlehem on the Krumkill Road.

[g] 1228 Western Avenue; the restaurant no longer exists, although the structure is still part of the former hotel building.

James F. McKown, (1818-1880), grandson of Billy McKown, the Tavern keeper, married Sarah A. White. In 1835 they acquired<sup>[h]</sup> a parcel of land on the north side of the Western Turnpike and about 1840 built the brick farm house, now 1245 Western Avenue, west of Hannan's Drug Store<sup>[i]</sup> and still standing. When a Post Office was--established for McKownville at the McKown Hotel in 1862 he was its first postmaster. The Post Office was discontinued in 1905.

The Amsdell family lived east of the Albany City Line , in a brick house still standing. They ran a brewery in Albany. Other family names were Enos, along the Kings Highway, McMillen, Sager, Knowles, Hein, Brown and many others along the Great Western Turnpike.

In 1849 the Great Western Turnpike became a plank road through McKownville and as far as Fullers. James F. McKown and Sarah White had a son William (1842-1924). This William married C. Lavina McMillen and entered the grocery business in Albany. In 1887 he built a fine house at the corner of McKown Road and Western Turnpike. When the Arco gas station<sup>[k]</sup> was built it was moved back and is presently #1 McKown Road, occupied by Mrs. Strasburg. This William, great grandson of old Billy, built McKowns Grove in 1896 and ran it for many years.

In 1853 a parcel of land at the southwest corner of Johnson Road, behind the present Hess station<sup>[l]</sup> was conveyed to the McKownville School District. A schoolhouse\* was built which is presently a residence directly behind the Hess filling station.

The original McKownville School was located in the Town of Bethlehem on Krum Kill Road, next door to the white church, on land deeded in 1816 to Trustees William McKown of Guilderland and Everte Jacobson and John McKormick of Bethlehem. A former school building is still standing on the site in 1983.

On July 3, 1877 land was transferred by the McKown Estate to Trustees James Fitzpatrick, David Scott and Lawrence Albright, Trustees of School District No. 11, at the southeast corner of Schoolhouse Road and Western. A one room brick school was constructed. In the early 1900's a wing was added. The school served until 1953 when it was retired. It became Myers Red Schoolhouse store and various other things until it was burned in 1973 after an unsuccessful attempt by the Guilderland Historical Society to save it. Its site is presently occupied by the ME<sup>[m]</sup> bank.

In 1887 the \*District 11 Annex School was built on Johnson Road opposite Veeder Road. It too was retired in 1953 and became a residence.

In 1865 John McKown donated the land upon which the first structure of the McKownville Methodist Church was built in 1866. The site is now occupied by <sup>[n]</sup>Healey's Funeral Parlor. The second structure, built 1896, is still standing.

<sup>[h]</sup> this is incorrect. The deed trail shows that 1245 Western Avenue was never the property of James F McKown. He owned 1257 Western Avenue; it is unclear whether the house that occupied that lot when Abele was writing this history was the one James F McKown owned, or a younger replacement structure. And while the statement about the brick house at 1245 Western being the oldest surviving structure in McKownville (as that now is) is right, it was built in 1850, not 1840.

<sup>[i]</sup> 1237 Western Avenue. The drugstore became a tanning salon, now also closed.

<sup>[k]</sup> 1236 Western Avenue; now just a garage, no gas

<sup>[l]</sup> 1724 Western Avenue; not a gas station for many years now, but a small business structure.

<sup>[m]</sup> 1516 Western Avenue now a different bank, by takeover or purchase

<sup>[n]</sup> 1561 Western Avenue, now a florist/decorater business

For many years tolls on the Great Western Turnpike were collected at a toll gate which stood on the north side of Western Avenue east of the State University entrance. This was later abandoned in favor of a gate erected at Winthrop Avenue in Albany. William Knowles was the last toll collector at Toll Gate No.1. He lived 1833-1912. He built<sup>[o]</sup> the house on the north east corner of Knowles Terrace and western, opposite the firehouse in 1884.

When the Turnpike was closed as a toll road in 1906 Toll Gate No. 1 at Winthrop Avenue was moved through McKownville with seven teams of horses and relocated at #1 Lehner Road, west of the McKownville Methodist Church where its living quarters survive<sup>[p]</sup> today, still facing the same points of the compass as they did in its former location. It is white with red trim.

In 1884 the old McKown Tavern was leased to William H. Witbeck who subsequently purchased the Tavern and its land in 1907. The building survived until 1917 when it burned to the ground. Some of its foundation wall and burned timbers were exposed in 1970 when a new tank was installed at Kings gas station.

In 1889 the Albany Hunt and Country Club was formed, taking over the area surrounding the old Five Mile House and First McKown Tavern. Its first headquarters were located in what was probably the old Enos farmhouse, but some speculate it may have been the old Five Mile Tavern. In 1896 the Albany Country Club was formed and occupied most of the site now occupied by State University. The old buildings were demolished and a new clubhouse was built next to the pond. It survived until Feb. 14, 1963 when it was intentionally destroyed by fire to remove it.

In the late 1880's the house now Huckleberry Finn Pottery was built by George Manville. For many years it was occupied by the Crouse family. It was virtually a twin to 1 McKown Road.

During the latter half of the 1800's members of the Hein family ran blacksmith shops, one located on the south side of Western Avenue west of Russell Road and the other east of the McKownville Methodist Church on the north side of western Avenue.

West of the McKownville Church was the <sup>[q]</sup>Gibbs Tavern formerly that of George Brown and indicated on a map of 1803. It burned in <sup>[q]</sup>1939.

Fuller Road was named for the Fuller Family who ran a farm on the site of the present A&P warehouse on the far side of the railroad tracks in the Town of Colonie.

[o] The house was built by Andrew and Henry Drumm about 1879; Henry Drumm lived there until the Drumm's sold it to William J Knowles in late 1894

[p] When Abele was writing, yes, but the Crossgates monster destroyed this later, before the hotel was built that swallowed the site of this house and Lehner Road.

[q] Clark Gibson (not Gibbs) was the last owner; destroyed by fire in 1936, not 1939.

## MCKOWNVILLE - SUBURBAN COMMUNITY

The McKownville post office was closed August 15, 1905.

Its postmasters had been as follows:

1. James F. McKown, appointed January 7, 1862
2. Martin J. Blessing, appointed October 25, 1864
3. Lucius W. Barnes, Jr. appointed August 18, 1871
4. John B. LaGrange, appointed April 21, 1875
5. Adam Witherwax, appointed May 4, 1877
6. Jacob A. LaGrange, appointed April 28, 1879
7. John Hyne, appointed Sept. 18, 1885
8. Thomas Helme, appointed November 6, 1889
9. Henry Hein, appointed November 22, 1893
10. Willard Helme, appointed November 4, 1897

On June 11, 1906 the collection of tolls on the Great Western Turnpike was suspended and the road ceased operations. Earlier in the year the United Traction Co. had acquired the control of the Company and a strip of land along its south side from Manning Boulevard to Fullers, passing through McKownville. This was surveyed for a double track trolley line. All that was actually built was a single track line from Manning Boulevard to the Guilderland Town Line at the Krum Kill. This was opened about 1911. The highway on the north side was paved with macadam. The trolley line ended in front of 1200 Western Avenue, now Sutters Mill and Mining Co. but then Grover Klings store. It was route #4 - Country Club.

In 1912 portions of the former McKown Hotel property then owned by Wm. H. Witbeck were transferred to Arthur Pitkin and Benjamin Witbeck who began to sell off lots for residential purposes.

In 1926 this became Pitkin-Witbeck Realty Co.

In 1916 a fire company was organized at a meeting at the McKown or Witbeck Hotel. First apparatus was a hand drawn hose cart supplied by Mr. Witbeck, later equipped with chemical tanks. The Hotel burned shortly after in 1917.

In 1918 a Fire District was organized and created by action of the Albany County Board of Supervisors acting on petition of the McKownville residents. The same year McKownville Fire Dept. was organized. A [r]Graham-Paige touring car was equipped as a fire truck. The truck was housed in various rented garages. In 1924 an old locomotive tire was hung as a fire alarm at the site of the old Witbeck Hotel and a sledge provided to sound it.

In 1924 the McKownville Improvement Association was formed and has been in continuous existence since that time. Early projects were street signs, better fire protection, a water supply and they seemed a closely knit community group.

In 1925 the Fire Dept. acquired a Packard Touring Car to replace the Graham-Paige and it was housed on the [s]second floor of the Country Club Garage, operated by O. Wendell Holmes and now the site of the "Across the Street Pub"[t].

[r] the Fire Department's car make was Paige; Graham was an entirely separate auto company; possibly the confusion is because the Witbeck's had dealerships for both brands at various times.

[s] the fire car and cart were housed at the back of the Garage building, in the lowest level, accessed from Hillcrest Ave (not the second floor).

[t] 1238 Western Avenue

On August 24, 1925 trolley operation on the Country Club line (west of Manning Blvd) was discontinued and a new bus line, the Western Avenue line began, extended to Fuller Road where a turnaround was provided on the south side where Oak Ebel operated a tavern in one of the surviving outbuildings of the old McKown Hotel. In later years this was shifted to the north side where the doctors offices are located and continued until 1959 when Stuyvesant Plaza opened.

In the area occupied by Tom Sawyer Motel was an open field used as a ball field. Here the McKownville Arcadians took on all comers during the 1920's and 1930's.

In 1933 a parcel of land on Arcadia was made available by the Shell Oil Co. and deeded to the Fire District for the erection of a firehouse. This firehouse was completed in 1935 paid for by a bond issue by the Fire District. It was constructed by Herbert W. Best. The new Brockway Fire truck purchased in 1931 was from that time housed in the "new" firehouse.

In 1932 the Witbeck water supply was <sup>[u]</sup>opened as a private water company, using the present reservoir. Fire hydrants on this system were installed and paid for by the McKownville Fire District.

In 1940 New York State acquired the United Traction Co. interest in the old right of way on the south side of western Avenue and the road was widened to four lanes.

On December 17, 1949 the new McKownville Water District public water supply was placed in service, replacing the Witbeck Supply and the Farley supply which had been installed to serve the development on the west side of Fuller Road known as Garden Park Estates.

In 1950 the Tom Sawyer Motel was built and in 1951 a traffic light was installed on western Avenue at Fuller Road. In 1957 modern lights were installed on western Avenue in McKownville, first in the Town, at the request of the Improvement Association. In 1957 Christ Lutheran Church was built. In November of 1959 Stuyvesant Plaza opened.

Late in 1962<sup>[v]</sup> State University acquired the land of the Albany Country Club for construction of State University. The old clubhouse was burned February 14, 1963 to remove it.

In 1957 McKownville Fire District acquired a modern American LaFrance pumper and the 1931 Brockway was retired. A Dodge Fire Truck purchased in 1950 remained in service until late 1975.

In 1960 the Board of Fire Commissioners of the Fire District began a frustrating task of acquiring a site for a new fire house, finding available sites all skyrocketing in value and non available due to the new University construction and much land having been acquired by outside speculators. The present site was acquired by condemnation at a greatly inflated cost.

[u] The Pitkin-Witbeck partnership operated the water supply from 1912, and may have started operation a year or two before under William H Witbeck. Possibly some legal change occurred around 1930 to separate the water company from the real estate sales operation, but no clear evidence of this has been found. A larger main was installed along some of Western Avenue and the first hydrants put in along it around 1930.

[v] The State took the Country Club land on 3rd January 1961; it may have been the final settlement agreement that occurred in later 1962

It was the first time in record in the state that such a procedure had been necessary in a small community. In contrast in other small hamlets land is frequently donated for this purpose. In any event a modern fire house was opened in 1968 on this parcel.

The McKownville Fire Department furnishes protection for the portions of the State University which are located within its boundaries, including Indian Quadrangle (once the site of William McKown's Five Mile House), the power plant, commissary and a portion of the Dutch Quadrangle dormitory as well as the field house and have responded to many fires in these locations both during construction and since.

McKownville has been on the map many times because of the intense interest of its residents to see the community improved through its Improvement Association which keeps abreast of all developments in the construction, zoning and water supply problems.

Latest additions to the McKownville Community were the 1450 Western Avenue office building and in 1973 the Ramada Inn<sup>[aa]</sup>. On November 19, 1974 the upper or Church Pond dam burst dumping its contents into the Plaza, the Reservoir and flooding Western Avenue. This dam, built in 1917 replaced an earlier one which also burst in 1914. The old Harrington Ice House had long since disappeared by this time.

Today McKownville is a busy crossroads, University Town and residential center. It has a modern water and sewer facilities. It has come a long way since the days of the dusty turnpike, the drovers going to market and leisurely stops at McKowns to wet down the dust.

Little remains to remind one of the founders. The children of William McKown (1842-1924) were girls<sup>[w]</sup>. The last one died in 1965. They left no children and the family name in this area had died out. The earlier McKowns were buried in a little family plot behind McKowns Grove. When the area was developed as Highlands Drive<sup>[x]</sup> the remains were placed in Prospect Hill Cemetery. However, the original stones of many were recovered in the cellar of 2120 Western Avenue at the entrance to present Regency Park and those of John and Billy and their wives have been <sup>[y]</sup>preserved by the Guilderland Historical Society.

The chief remains of the name are found in a sign<sup>[z]</sup> "McKownville" on top of the Arco station at McKown Road as well as the sign for McKown Road itself. A sign at the entrance to the Hamlet on Western Avenue proclaims "McKownville". Too bad we can't get up a little parochial pride and use the name more frequently. McKownville Fire District, fire house and fire trucks, of course are a visible evidence of the name and will carry on.

[aa] 1228 Western Avenue; the hotel later became a Best Western, then a elder care facility

[w] There was a son, Alexander, who married Viola Albright; they had a son Arthur, who died age 21 in 1932.

[x] Prospect Hill cemetery roster is clear that the McKown remains were removed to Prospect Hill in 1865.

[y] three stones in disrepair have reappeared after being lost for more than 47 years. It is still not clear (in 2021) where these will be placed.

[z] that sign disappeared a long time ago

Fred B. Abele  
Guilderland Historical Society

MCKOWNVILLE, N. Y.

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Town Historian Arthur B. Gregg

Fred B. Abele

Guilderland Historical Society