Chapter 2: Community Analysis

The H. Douglas Barclay Court House, built in 1879 in the Village of Pulaski
If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it.

- Abraham Lincoln, president

To adequately plan for the community’s future, and as part of the comprehensive planning process, it is important to understand the history of the Town of Richland and Village of Pulaski and to determine the existing conditions in the community. This section of the comprehensive plan describes the existing conditions of various components of the town and village including socio-demographic trends, cultural and natural resources, environmental features, land use composition and regulation, and infrastructure.

**Location**

The Town of Richland is located in the northwest corner of Oswego County, New York and covers a total area of 60.1 square miles (155.6 square kilometers). Lake Ontario serves as the town’s westernmost boundary, while the Town of Sandy Creek serves as Richland’s northern border, the Town of Mexico serves as the southern border, and the Towns of Albion and Orwell serve as the eastern border of Richland. Richland is located approximately 42 miles (50 minutes) north of the City of Syracuse, 27 miles (45 minutes) northeast of the City of Oswego, and 33 miles (40 minutes) south of the City of Watertown (Map 2).

The Village of Pulaski is within the Town of Richland, and lies between the eastern shore of Lake Ontario and the Tug Hill region on Rt. 11 adjacent to Interstate 81. It covers 3.3 square miles (8.6 square kilometers) of land and is a short distance away from some of the major cities in Upstate New York (Table 1). Pulaski lies in the snowbelt region, characterized by heavy amounts of lake effect snow and has a regional reputation for heavy snow accumulations and adverse traveling conditions in winter.

**Table 1. Distance and travel time between Pulaski and Syracuse, Oswego and Watertown.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Direction from Pulaski</th>
<th>Distance from Pulaski (miles)</th>
<th>Travel Time from Pulaski (minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City of Oswego</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Syracuse</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watertown</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
History of the Community

Prior to early nineteenth century settlement, the land and waters today known as the Town of Richland were the sacred hunting and fishing grounds of generations of the Haudenosaunee people, Native Americans of the Iroquois Confederacy. The Haudenosaunee name for the Salmon River is Heh-hah-wa-gah, meaning “where swim the sweet fish.” As early as 1657 Jesuit missionaries witnessed Iroquois fishermen hauling boats full of salmon from the river.

Early Euro-American settlement of the area can be traced to 1801 when Nathan Tuttle and Nathan Wilcox of Canada settled near the mouth of the Salmon River. An earlier French-built fortification was also constructed in this area, along the north bank of the river near Bethel Corners. In 1804, Benjamin Winch, a surveyor with the Pierrepont Company who had been in the region since 1801, settled inland along the Salmon River in what would later become Pulaski. Winch’s first structure was a log cabin, which served as a tavern and the center of town activity as the community grew around it.

The Town of Richland was established on February 20, 1807 and included the modern day Towns of Sandy Creek, Orwell, Boylston, and Albion, along with a small coastal portion of the Town of Mexico. Lands for these latter towns were gradually separated from Richland leaving the town, in 1844, with its present area of 35,932 acres bordered on the north by the town of Sandy Creek, on the east by the towns of Orwell and Albion, on the south by Mexico, and on the west by Lake Ontario.

The first meeting of the Town of Richland was held at the home of Ephraim Brewster in the spring of 1807. No record of this meeting beyond the elected officers survives; in fact, few important records of the town government exist before 1881. Most of the records prior to 1881 were destroyed by the great fire of October 6, 1881 that leveled the business section of Pulaski, including the town clerk’s office.
The Village of Pulaski, named after General Pulaski, a hero of the American Revolution, was first settled in 1804 and incorporated on April 26, 1832. The village has served as the “Half-Shire” or co-county seat of Oswego County since 1816. Its name was chosen by lottery, the choice of Thomas Baker, a revolutionary war veteran whose son was then serving as town clerk. The previous name for the Village was “Fishville”. In 1819, the Court House at the south end of the village commons was built to serve as the headquarters for County Officials. A building for the County Clerk’s records was later constructed. Throughout each election year in the early 1800’s, the County offices moved according to which geographic faction won office.

Because of Pulaski’s location on the Salmon River, and as a result of the associated abundance of waterpower, many mills were established. One such location is the former site of the Ontario Iron Works, one of the first foundries. This company was co-built by Benjamin Snow, Sr. The Snow legacy continues to live in the community in the form of the John Benjamin Snow Foundation, a philanthropic foundation established by John Ben Snow, Benjamin Snow’s grandson. The Snow Memorial Library was the private residence of the Snow family prior to their donation to the village.

In the 1840’s, eastern Oswego County residents agitated for separation to form “Salmon County” with Pulaski as the County Seat. Legislation to this effect was introduced into the New York State Assembly in 1847, but was never advanced. A tradition of proud “eastern political factionalism” has continued through history to this day.
Hamlets and Historic Settlements

Several distinct settlements were established near the mouth of the Salmon River, in the Town of Richland. The least noticeable is Brown’s Landing, on modern County Route 5. The early site of a small ship building operation, this settlement also had a cluster of worker’s cabins. The only remnant of Brown’s Landing is a cemetery on the banks of the Salmon River and a privately-owned residence.

On the north bank of the river at its intersection with Scenic Route 3 (the Seaway Trail) is Bethel Corners, site of the 150-year-old “Toothpick” Union Church and one room school. Originally, the church was located on the east side of Route 3, but was moved in 2003 by the State to the opposite side of the road when roadway expansion threatened the building. The church was founded by abolitionist George Bragdon and took its name from ornate “toothpick-like” steeple ornaments it once had. Bragdon, who lived just north of the corner at “Chestnut Hill,” was a political activist in the early 1800’s and his farm was a part of the Underground Railroad. The former church and school are now connected and are undergoing renovations by the Toothpick Community Group.

Port Ontario, just east of the lake on the south shore of the Salmon River, was once an incorporated village (April 24, 1837), with aspirations to be a city. The ill-fated community was charted out in 1837, just as the nation entered a depression induced by a bank “panic”. Also in that year, the Port Ontario Hydraulic Canal Company was formed and began dredging a channel along the south bank of the Salmon River from about the current Port Ontario Bridge eastward. The intent of the canal was to expand shipping capability from Port Ontario. Residency then, as now, fluctuated by the seasons in Port Ontario, and the settlement never developed a sustainable shipping industry or a solid population base. Many of the early buildings of Port Ontario are now gone. Woody’s Tackle Shop occupies the property that once was part of the three-story Ontario House Hotel, but today the community is comprised almost entirely of mid-to-late twentieth century construction.
The Hamlet of Selkirk is located at the mouth of the Salmon River, and is named in honor of the Scottish Noblemen who once owned a large tract of land on the north shore of the river. Selkirk has been the site of a stone lighthouse since 1838, and it has long been a seasonal settlement featuring several unique old cottages. The role of the lighthouse during the nineteenth century was to provide an aide to navigation along the seaway and as a site for the collection of tariffs on goods arriving from Canada. Today the Selkirk Lighthouse is privately owned and operated as a part of the Salmon River Lighthouse Marina with guest quarters and charter excursions on Lake Ontario.

The old Daysville Railroad Depot was moved just east of Selkirk many years ago, and at present it is used as a private family camp. The Hamlet of Daysville has disappeared from most recent maps. The community developed along the Oswego Division of the Rome, Watertown, and Ogdensburg Railroad that wound its way from Oswego through many small farming communities into Pulaski. Daysville once had a milk station, a cheese factory, a school, and a church all clustered along Daysville and Krebs Roads in the southern portion of the Town of Richland.

The Hamlet of Fernwood is located in the south central portion of the town. Settled and founded by John Holmes, the community was known as Holmesville until the railroad agents forced a name change to the station around 1904. The community was home to the last active gristmill in the town, a school (later the Grange Hall), a tannery, and several other mills along Grindstone Creek. Two churches are located in the Hamlet of Fernwood, one of which remains very active.
In the far eastern part of the town, along the old Ridge Road stagecoach route, was a settlement known as Mellon’s Corners. Around 1854, the heart of the settlement “moved” west less than a mile, to meet the tracks of the new Rome, Watertown, and Ogdensburg Railroad. A few years later tracks from Pulaski were built, making the hamlet of Richland an important railroad junction. In the late 1800s, a commodious depot, roundhouse, and many other railroad buildings were located in the hamlet of Richland. Other small industries were attracted to locate in the hamlet, including factories specializing in basket making, furniture, canning, and other smaller mills. Two hotels, several stores and a Trout Farm (conducted by Charles Field at the headwaters of Spring Brook) also rounded out the hamlet's businesses. A paint factory and a milk station were both located just south of Richland in the hamlet of Centerville, located in the Town of Albion. Several cheese factories associated with surrounding dairies also utilized the railroad for transport.

Today, although the county retains ownership of much of the railroad right-of-way, CSX Corporation, operates on and maintains the rail track through the Town of Richland.

**Background of Settlers**

By and large, most early settlers of the Town of Richland were from New England Puritan stock. Some families can trace their lineage to Mayflower passengers. Most of the early families who came to Pulaski, the hamlet of Richland and other districts in between were from the central Vermont region, especially Pawlet, Vermont, which has been considered the “mother town” of Richland’s settlers. Significant numbers of other settlers came to the area from Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts, along with many residents of the Mohawk Valley in New York. The early settlers were primarily Congregational, Methodist with some Baptists.

In the mid 1800’s a few Irish settlers came to Pulaski, settling together on Bridge Street, which became known as “Little Dublin.” These were the first traceable Catholics by faith in the community. By the end of the 1800’s there were small numbers of French, German, and northern Europeans in the town. Pulaski was known as a tolerant community with regards to race relations, having free blacks among the population before the Civil War. A few early settlers were even active in the Underground Railroad movement.

**Cemeteries and other records of the Township**

The town of Richland has five active cemeteries, and at least six that are inactive or abandoned. The active cemeteries are: Pulaski Village Cemetery on Rt. 11 north of Pulaski; Brookside Cemetery in Richland hamlet; Willis or South Richland Cemetery in the south portion of the town near Tyler’s Corners, Sand Ridge, or Daysville Cemetery on Rt. 3 south of Port Ontario and Riverside Cemetery, just east of Pulaski on Rt. 13. Inactive or abandoned cemeteries include: McClelland Cemetery, just off exit 34 of I-81; Blue Springs or Ferguson Cemetery, on Stowell Drive east of Richland hamlet; Browns Landing Cemetery on Rt. 5 between Pulaski and Bethel Corners; Holmes Family Cemetery, Rt. 11 south of Pulaski; an unnamed cemetery, which once sat on the north bank of Grindstone Creek west of Rt. 3; and the Trumbull-Bunce family cemetery, by the County Barn at Fox Corners, east of Pulaski.