

# Albany. The three cities

PAUL BRAY<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The City of Albany was one of the earliest cities established during the European settlement of what became the United States of America. Albany is a cross roads city located on Hudson River near where the Mohawk River joins the Hudson. It is between New York City and Montreal, Canada and it became a Gateway city to the west of the nation when the Erie Canal was opened in 1825. Goods flowed into and through Albany mostly on their way to New York City.

**Keywords:** City of Troy, City of Schenectady, City of Albany, Albany Plan of Union, Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, Erie Canal.

## *Colonial Period*

Albany was first established as Fort Orange in 1624. It evolved as a crude settlement growing up around the Fort. Its initial years there was Dutch settlement by the Dutch West India Company, a trading post to trade for furs with Native Americans who had long settled as tribes in what is now New York State.

Under the Dutch there was the emergence of a new concept of colonization, the “patron” system, permitting members of the Dutch West India Company to establish settlements of 50 adults tenants on tracts of land of 16 miles on one side of the navigable Hudson River or 8 miles on each bank. The patron was lord of his domain and tenants needed his consent to hunt, fish, trade or mill lumber or grain. The patron system is long gone but vestiges could be said to have persisted in the boss or political machine system of politics in Albany.

The first decades of settlement in what is now Albany were characterized by disputes between native American tribes and, like

1. Paul M. Bray is an Albany attorney, a former adjunct professor at UAlbany, a columnist with the Times Union newspaper, editor of capchips.com (a tech news website about the Albany region and founder and first President of the Albany Roundtable civic lunch forum. Email: PMBRAY@aol.com.

the Anglo-Dutch commercial war and the “Glorious Revolution” in England, within and between European nations that reverberated in the new world. During this period, Governor Dongan of New York in 1686 signed a Charter making Albany a city for the first time.

In a number of ways, Albany has had a role in most epochs of American history, but it has never been one of the great cities of the United States like Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, Miami and Los Angeles. Yet, for example, the famed Albany Plan of Union was negotiated in Albany in 1754 by Governors from seven colonies of that time. Though never ratified by the British Parliament, it was the first acknowledgement of common colonial interests and the need for concerted action to realize them.

In 1797 Albany became New York State’s capital with the political significance that came with it. Great Presidents of the USA like Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt used the state governorship based in Albany as a stepping stone to the Presidency. While New York State is no longer the richest or most populated state in the USA, New York City is still has one of the richest and most populated cities in the world and the State has a great Atlantic Ocean harbor, and location along two Great Lakes. New York State also has many other water bodies, fertile farm land, great parks like Niagara Falls and Letchworth State Parks, great forests and mountainous regions like the Adirondack and Catskill mountains. While the finance industry in New York City is world class in dimension, agriculture is one of the State’s leading industries.

### *Industrial age*

Albany played an important role an industrial age between 1807 and 1860. In 1807 Robert Fulton’s side wheeler steamboat made the approximately 180 km trip on the Hudson River from New York City to Albany in 29 hours. By harnessing steam power to transportation, the age of steam began.

Most important to Albany’s growth was enactment of a law in the New York State Legislature in 1817 for the construction of the Erie Canal. Mountains blocked easy travel between the east coast of the United State and the nation’s interior. The Erie Canal would provide access to the west through the Great Lakes and other canals built after

the Erie Canal was completed. It would make Albany the terminus for produce from the west and products of the east coast by connecting the Hudson River and New York City harbor to the Great Lakes and therefore the mid-west. For a period of time after completion of the Erie Canal, Albany was a national gateway city for lumber, cattle, farm products and other resources from the west. As the nation grew in population and the emergence occurred of new means of transportation like the railroad and new technologies like the telegraph both of which were developed in part in Albany, the nation began to shrink in accessibility. Cities like Buffalo, New York and ultimately Chicago replaced Albany as the great Gateway cities of the nation. But Albany pioneered many of these changes like electromagnetic induction and it became an early leader, for example, in the science of geology in the first half of the 19th century.

The birth of the industrial revolution in the USA occurred in the 19th century and the city of Albany and its neighboring cities of Schenectady, Troy and some smaller industrial areas were very much the foundation of industrialization. Albany, Schenectady and Troy were three points on a triangle. General Electric was formed by the 1892 merger of Edison General Electric Company of Schenectady, New York, and Thomson-Houston Electric Company of Lynn, Massachusetts, with the help of Drexel, Morgan & Co. Both plants continue to operate under the GE banner to this day. The company was incorporated in New York, with the Schenectady plant used as headquarters for many years thereafter. GE moved its headquarters from Schenectady after World War 11. The number of GE workers fell from 30,000 to about 3,000 at this time, but generator production and GE's research facility remained in Schenectady and its suburb of Niskayuna.

Troy was known for production of iron and for the collar and cuff industry. Neighboring communities like Cohoes, the site of one of the nation's largest cotton mills and Watervliet, the home of the Watervliet arsenal producing massive canons for the military and a bell factory are examples of the industry around Albany. Albany was a financial center at this time with a number of small industries like publishing, breweries and cast iron stoves. With the breweries came many neighborhood saloons.

Despite the proximity of Albany, Schenectady and Troy, called the tri-cities, each of these cities were independent and inward looking. Each had its own library system, museum, parks, theaters, commercial downtowns, rail connections and other features common in cities. This fragmentation kept Albany from encompassing its neighboring cities and growing to become a large metropolitan city.

The 19th century was also noted for immigration which provided the work force for industry and for bakeries and other shops. Italians, Irish, Germans and Eastern Europeans were the primary immigrants. Some immigrants clustered in areas where the residents were predominantly Italian, Irish or Jewish. But Albany also had neighborhoods with a mix of immigrant nationalities.

### *Capital City*

The architectural highlight of Albany is the state governmental buildings that Albany's former mayor for 40 years, Mayor Erastus Corning, 2nd, called "one of the greatest governmental complexes the world has so far known". The center piece is the State Capitol that took 30 years to build between 1867 and 1899. Three teams of architects worked on the design of the Capitol during the years of its construction. They were managed by: 1867-75: Thomas Fuller, 1875-83: Leopold Eidlitz and Henry Hobson Richardson, 1883-99: Isaac G. Perry. Fuller, the initial architect, was an Englishman who also designed the Canadian Parliament buildings of Parliament Hill, Ottawa.

The delay in construction of the Capitol was a drama. The ground floor of the state capitol was designed by Fuller and built in the Classical/Romanesque style. Fuller was then dismissed in favor of Eidlitz and Richardson who built the next two floors in a Renaissance Classical style, noticeable on the exterior two floors as light, open column work. Increasing construction costs became an ongoing source of conflict and Eidlitz and Richardson were dismissed by a future President Grover Cleveland upon his election to governorship. He hired Perry to complete the project. The legislative chambers, the fourth floor and roof work were all finished in Victorian-modified Romanesque that was distinctively Richardson's design. It "was Richardson who dominated the final outcome of the grand building, which evolved

into his distinguished Romanesque style". It came to be known as Richardsonian Romanesque. It is claimed that Richardson was imitating the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall) in Paris, France. Not far from the Capitol is the Albany City Hall also designed by nationally prominent architect Henry Hobson Richardson in his Romanesque style.

The Capitol in a park setting has the two chambers of the state legislature and the office of the State Governor. It is the center piece of government in Albany including entities of state, county and city government with every level of the State Court system from traffic court to the highest court in the State and every executive and legislative level of government from city to state.

Across from the Capitol on its north side is the classical State Education Building built in 1912 that has the longest or one of the longest colonnaded facades in the nation. It housed the State Museum until the Empire State Plaza was constructed in the late 1960s. On its west side is the Alfred E. Smith Building with several distinctive features. These include the engraving of the names of all 62 New York State counties around the street-level facade and an Art Deco lobby with a mural depicting famous New Yorkers. An underground tunnel connects the building to the Capitol. This skyscraper is constructed of limestone and granite, and offers spectacular views of Albany and the nearby landscape.

In the 1960s Queen Beatrice of the Netherlands was planning a trip to Albany to celebrate Dutch history. At that time Governor Nelson Rockefeller from one of the nation's richest families was inspired to create the new government complex. Before becoming Governor, Rockefeller played a lead role in organizing the development of Rockefeller Center on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Rockefeller Center is known to have changed the center of gravity in Manhattan. It is one of the largest attractions in New York City. Rockefeller was embarrassed by how Albany looked when Queen Beatrice made her visit. Rockefeller later said, "there's no question that the city did not look as I think the Princess thought it was going to".

Rockefeller conceived the basic design of the Empire State Plaza complex with architect Wallace Harrison in flight aboard the governor's private plane. Rockefeller doodled his ideas in pen on the back of a postcard, and Harrison revised them. They used the vast scope and style

of Brasilia, Versailles as models. The massive scale was designed to be appreciated from across the Hudson River, as the dominant feature of the Albany skyline.

The buildings are placed on a six-story, quarter mile stone-clad Main Platform. The placement of starkly abstract geometric white marble building forms on a monolithic plaza is said to represent Rockefeller's concept of architecture as similar to sculpture. The exterior columns and narrow windows of the buildings resemble the style of the former World Trade Center towers in New York City, which were completed around the same time.

The Plaza's main structures were for state offices, but amenities were also included. On the Plaza had two large pools of water and, like Rockefeller Center, a skating rink. Large modern sculptures were also placed around the Plaza and a striking building housing the State Museum, State Library and the State Archive is on the opposite end of the Plaza from the Capitol. A structure called the "Egg", but looking more like a tilted half of a grapefruit had two theaters.

The Empire State Plaza gained the admiration of contemporary architect Rem Koolhaas. It is loved by some and hated by others in Albany, in part, because it displaced a community of Italian immigrants. On the other or western portion of Albany, Rockefeller added to the Albany Teacher's College to transform it into one of 4 State Universities located in New York State. This new University campus was designed by architect Edward Durrell Stone.

In 1948 the State University of New York system was created, comprising the College for Teachers and several other institutions throughout the state. SUNY, including the Albany campus, became a manifestation of the grand vision of Governor Rockefeller, who wanted a public university system to accommodate the college students of the post-World War II baby boom. To do so, he launched a massive construction program that developed over 50 new campuses.

In 1962 the State University of New York at Albany was officially designated a doctoral-degree granting university center of SUNY. The same year, Rockefeller broke ground for the current Uptown Campus on the former site of the Albany Country Club. The new campus's first dormitory opened in 1964, and the first classes on the

academic podium in the fall of 1966. The Uptown Campus, designed by Edward Durrell Stone with four dormitory towers and a podium in the middle, accommodated growth and gave visible evidence of the school's transition from a teachers college to a broad-based liberal arts university. The Downtown Campus became dedicated to the fields of public policy: criminal justice, public affairs, information science and social welfare. In 1985, the university added the School of Public Health, a joint endeavor with the state's Department of Health. It is located in the City of Rensselaer across the Hudson River from Albany. Albany also has other institutions of higher education. Clustered between the governmental center on the east and UAlbany on the west is an ad hoc grouping of education institutions. This cluster of institutions has the Albany Law School, the Albany School of Pharmacy, the Albany Medical College along with the Albany Hospital, the Albany campus of Sage College and the Veterans Memorial Hospital.

In the 1990s a civic group proposed that the aforementioned cluster be named University Heights, that a route that runs from the downtown where the offices of SUNY are located and connects a number of educational institutions throughout Albany be named the Albany Educationway and that the City of Albany, itself, be named an "Education City". The intention was to highlight the educational assets of Albany which some citizens believed were ignored.

### *Suburban Era*

After World War II northeastern cities like Albany and other American Cities faced depopulation and decline of their commercial districts and many of their neighborhoods as auto dependent suburbs and shopping malls grew outside of traditional cities. This was called suburban sprawl. A national highway system paid for by the Federal government made this mass movement easily possible.

Albany was different than other cities because of the triangle that connected it like three points of a triangle with the cities of Schenectady and Troy. Both Schenectady and Troy were distressed cities because they lost their manufacturing base. Albany declined, but as a seat of Government it did not decline as much as its Schenectady and Troy. As suburban development sprawled out from other cities, Albany's primary



suburb named the Town of Colonie developed inside the triangle. Colonie grew in population to be about the same as the city of Albany. Colonie's location at the cross roads of two major highways, the New York State Thruway that connected New York City with the City of Buffalo at the far west of the State and the Northway that connected Colonie with Montreal, Canada made Colonie into a commercial hub with the region's first large shopping mall and numerous other commercial business on a roadway at the heart of Colonie. So as Albany lost its large department stores, movie theaters and other commercial activity, Colonie took its place as the region's commercial center.

Signs of restoration of cities like Albany are appearing. In the 1980s no developer in Albany would build new housing or adaptively change existing but under used office structures into residential apartments. In recent years numerous office and commercial buildings have been adaptively restored to become apartment houses in Albany. This is the result of a new generation of 20 and 30 year olds call "millennials" that grew up in the suburbs and now prefer to live in walkable and active cities. Slowly distressed areas of Albany are also reviving. A distressed former parochial school in a poor neighborhood was recently and successfully restored to provide apartments for artists and studio and performing space for artists to work. It is now fully occupied. In Albany, Schenectady and Troy the movement to foster a high tech ecosystem has led to the restoration of vacant buildings to become something called "maker space" where startup companies can find office space and space is also set aside for individuals interested in tech to work on projects with equipment available to support their creativity. Local boosters about a decade ago named the Albany area as "tech valley".

### *Livable, Cultural and Environmental City*

For a small city with a population under 100,000 citizens, Albany has a number of assets that would distinguish larger and richer cities. These include a pastoral park designed in the 19th century for the most part in the style of Frederick Law Olmsted, unique historical structures and residential districts, an ecological preserve recently designated by the National Park Service as National Natural Landscape, a first class public golf course, an equity theater and civic theaters, a writer's institute



initiated by renown Pulitzer Prize winning author, William Kennedy, who has told portions of the story of Albany in his novels and other books like “O, Albany” and State Designated Heritage Area with a visitor center in Quackenbush Square. The Albany Institute of History and Art, located on Washington Avenue near the Center Square Neighborhood and State Capitol, is “dedicated to collecting, preserving, interpreting and promoting interest in the history, art, culture of Albany and the Upper Hudson Valley region.” The museum’s most notable permanent exhibits include an extensive collection of paintings by the Hudson River School and an exhibit on Ancient Egypt featuring the Institute’s “Albany Mummies.” This Institute is celebrating its 225th anniversary in 2016 making it older than the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC and the Louvre in Paris. Albany is home to 57 listings on National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and five National Historic Landmarks.

### *Conclusion*

In the context of the growth and prosperity of the United States of America, the city of Albany has had many roles including roles in colonization, formation of a nation, the opening of the nation through the Erie Canal, development of the steam engine and the development of trains, having the seat of government of one of the greatest states in the nation, a role in the industrial revolution and the settlement of immigrants, and, while still a work in progress, taking leadership in the high tech revolution while also recognizing and protecting an historic heritage through historic preservation of structures and resources as a heritage area. Albany also has an incomplete agenda that includes taking full advantage of it Hudson River waterfront cut off from the city by an express highway and reviving its once thriving downtown commercial district. With all its assets, it also needs to forego its reliance on leaving too many decisions to political leaders. It has had political machines from both Republican and Democratic parties in the 20th century that has led at times for Albany citizens to be called “sheep” led by politicians. But amongst the sheep, by being a State Capital, leaders and visionaries like Nelson Rockefeller have allowed creativity and visions to flourish and create a legacy the is part of Albany strong foundation.

*Bibliography*

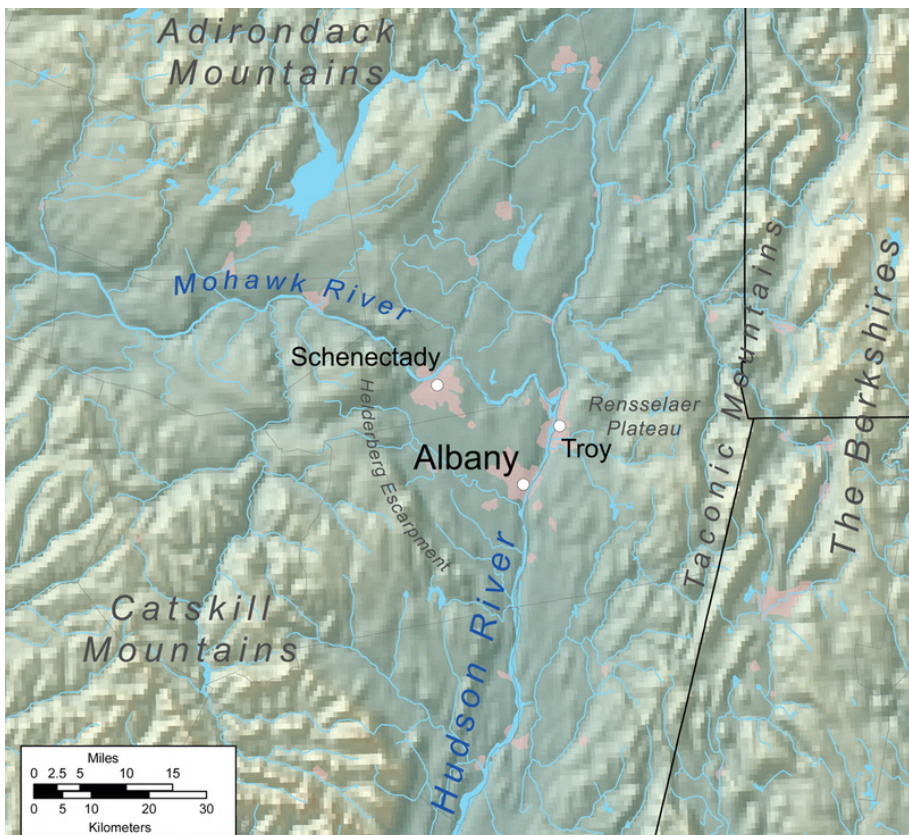
Daniel E. Button, *Take City Hall: Mayor Whalen and the Transformation of New York's Capital City*, Whitstan Publishing Company, Inc., Albany, New York 2003.

Paul Grondahl, *Mayor Corning: Albany Icon, Albany Enigma*, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York 1907.

William Kennedy, *O Albany: Improbable City of Political Wizards, Fearless Ethnics, Spectacular Aristocrats*, Penquin Books, New York, New York 1983.

John J. McEneny, *Albany: Capital City on the Hudson*, Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, New York 1981.

Albany Tricentennial Commission, *Albany Tricentennial Guidebook*, Albany, New York 1985.

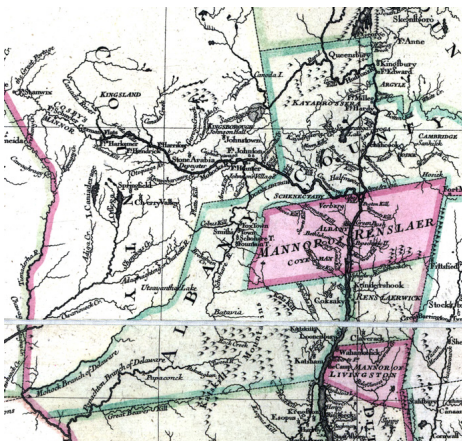


*The Capital District is centered around the Mohawk and Hudson Valleys and surrounded by numerous mountain ranges.*

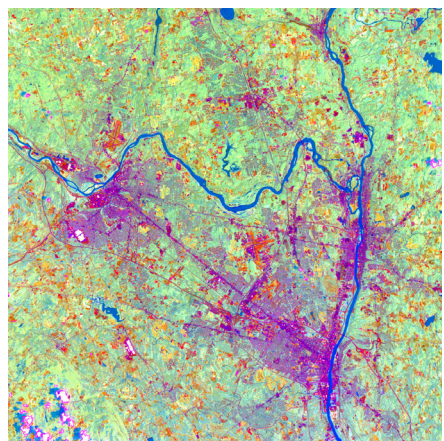




*This mosaic shows the three main cities of the Capital District, along with Cohoes, Rensselaer and Watervliet. Also included are Colonie, Scotia, Voorheesville, Waterford and Clifton Park. Compiled from Albany, Niskayuna, Schenectady, Troy North, Troy South and Voorheesville quadrangles.*

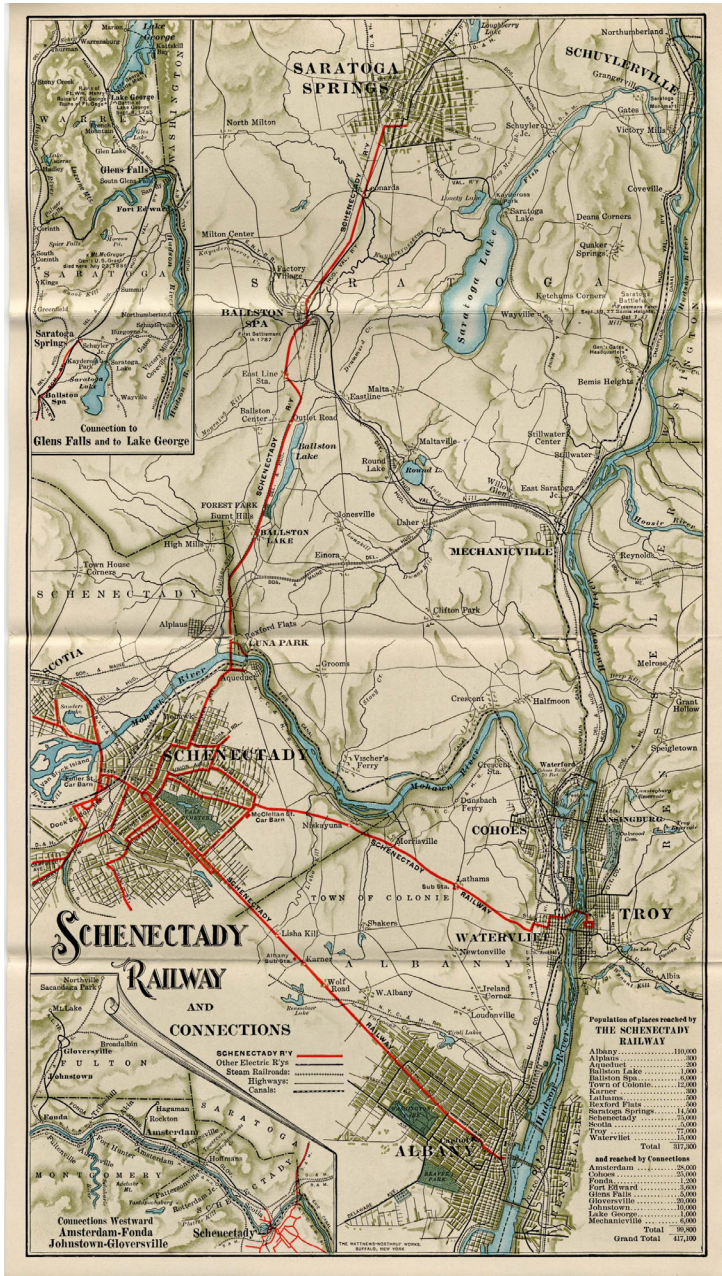


*Albany County in 1777.*



*Albany County Today.*





Schenectady Railway map from around 1910. At the time a person could ride trolleys between Albany Schenectady, Troy, and Saratoga -- and then in those cities, take trolleys around the town.  
 [via the Schenectady County Public Library's Schenectady Digital History Archive]