

Virgil, NY: A Town Rooted in the Land

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Tucked away in the rolling hills of Cortland County, the Town of Virgil, New York, is more than a quiet rural community, it's a living narrative. From Revolutionary War veterans seeking new beginnings on government-granted land to modern families drawn by the beauty of open fields and snowy peaks, Virgil is a town where history isn't buried, it's cultivated.

Named for the Roman poet Virgil, whose works honored civilization and struggle, the town was laid out in the late 18th century as part of the Central New York Military Tract. This initiative granted parcels of land, roughly ten miles square, to soldiers as compensation for their Revolutionary War service. Virgil's first settler, Joseph Chaplin, arrived in 1792 to help lay out a road between Oxford and Cayuga Lake, opening the door for other pioneer families like John M. Frank, John Gee, and John E. Roe. By 1804, Virgil had separated from the Town of Homer and begun shaping its own identity.

From the outset, farming defined life in Virgil. Settlers cleared dense forests, built cabins, and sowed the land with corn, oats, potatoes, and hay. Livestock, particularly cattle and sheep, provided meat, milk, wool, and labor. These were rugged, self-sustaining homesteads, often passed down for generations. The community grew around this agrarian life, building mills, schools, blacksmith shops, and general stores that supported daily farm operations.

By the mid 1800s, dairy farming had taken hold, with milk, butter, and cheese becoming key commodities. A milk station in the hamlet of Messengerville once called Chaplin's Ford served as a vital link between local farms and broader markets via the railroad, until service ended in 1929. Though isolated from major highways and large industry, Virgil's farming families endured by relying on resilience, hard work, and tight-knit community ties.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, agriculture remained the backbone of Virgil's economy and identity. While other parts of New York turned to manufacturing, Virgil stayed rooted in its land. Even as farming began to decline mid-century pressured by industrialization, suburbanization, and shifting economic forces, its cultural imprint remained.

One enduring symbol of Virgil's farming legacy is Hollenbeck's Cider Mill, established in the early 1930s. To this day, the mill produces fresh cider and homemade donuts using time-tested methods. Each fall, its antique presses and wooden crates come to life, drawing visitors and locals alike to a scene that feels untouched by time. It is more than a business; it's a seasonal tradition that continues to nourish both body and community spirit.

Yet even as farming began to fade as a full-time livelihood, Virgil found ways to evolve without abandoning its roots. In the mid-1940s, skiing emerged as a new pursuit. A small ski area known as Snow Crest, developed on the Lang farm, offered rope tows and night skiing. By 1958, a more ambitious project came to life: Greek Peak Mountain Resort. Built from the ground up, not simply a rebranding of Snow Crest, Greek Peak brought chairlifts, snowmaking, and tourism to Virgil's hills. It reshaped the local economy, drawing visitors from across the region.

Today, Greek Peak includes not only ski slopes but also Nordic trails, mountain biking, and Hope Lake Lodge, with a year-round indoor water park. It stands as a testament to Virgil's ability to reinvent itself while honoring its geography.

But it's not the slopes or lodges that best define Virgil, it's the land itself. Fields once tilled by Revolutionary are still be tilled today by local farmers. Many old farmsteads remain, some passed down, others lovingly restored by newcomers seeking rural life. The rhythm of farming seasons, though quieter, still echoes through this resilient town.

Though the railroad whistle no longer blows and post offices have closed, Virgil endures not as a relic of the past, but as a living story stitched together by generations. People continue to come here for the same reasons they did over two centuries ago: open space, connection to the land, and a sense of belonging.

In a world rushing forward, Virgil offers something rare stillness, substance, and continuity. Whether through the crunch of fall leaves at Hollenbeck's, the glide of skis down Greek Peak, or the quiet hum of a tractor at dawn, Virgil speaks to those who listen. Its story is one of resilience, rooted deeply in the soil and still growing.