

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places

Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Essex County Fairgrounds
other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number Main Street (P.O. Box 431) not for publication
city or town Westport vicinity
state New York code NY county Essex code 031 zip code 12993

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. See continuation sheet for additional comments.

Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____
State or Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet for additional comments.

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____
State or Federal agency and bureau _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is: _____ Signature of the Keeper _____ Date of Action _____
 entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the
National Register.
 See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the
National Register.

removed from the National
Register.

other, (explain:)

Essex County Fairgrounds

Name of Property

Essex County, New York

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
23	22	buildings
1	1	sites
		structures
		objects
24	23	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

**Number of contributing resources previously
listed in the National Register**

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: Fair: County Fairgrounds

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Essex County Fairgrounds

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

NO STYLE: vernacular
LATE 19th + 20th CENTURY REVIVALS: Colonial Revival

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Stone/Concrete/Piers
walls WOOD/Shingle/cove siding/clapboard

roof METAL/ASPHALT
other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8 Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria considerations

(mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

- Agriculture
- Entertainment/Recreation
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Period of Significance

- 1881-1955
- _____
- _____

Significant Dates

- 1881
- _____
- _____

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
N/A

Cultural Affiliation

- N/A
- _____
- _____

Architect/Builder

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested

previously listed in the National Register
 previously determined eligible by the National Register

designated a National Historic Landmark
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

recorded by Historic American Engineering
Record # _____

Primary location of additional data

State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency
 Local government
 University
 Other

Name of repository:

Essex County Historical Society, Elizabethtown, NY (records)

Essex County Fairgrounds

Name of Property

Essex County, New York

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property 30

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	18			3		
<i>Zone</i>	<i>Easting</i>	<i>Northing</i>		<i>Zone</i>	<i>Easting</i>	<i>Northing</i>
2				4		

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Heavy black outline on attached map defines boundaries of the nominated district

Boundary Justification

Boundaries were drawn to encompass the greatest concentration of historic resources within the village limits that retain integrity.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title

organization Steven C. Engelhart, Executive Director
Adirondack Architectural Heritage date _____

street & number 1790 Main Street, Civic Center, Suite 37 telephone 3/22/04
(518) 834-9328

city or town Keeseville state NY zip code 12944

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Essex County (Fair)
street & number P.O. Box 431 telephone (518) 962-8650
city or town Westport state NY zip code 12993

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this from to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 7 Page 1

**Essex County Fairgrounds
Town of Westport, Essex County, New York**

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Narrative Description

Setting

The Essex County Fairgrounds is located in the hamlet of Westport in eastern Essex County. Westport is situated on the shores of Lake Champlain’s Northwest Bay at an elevation of about 200 feet. Lake Champlain is 120 miles long and 12 miles wide at its greatest width and extends from Whitehall, New York to across the U.S.-Canadian border to its outlet at the Richelieu River in Quebec. The hamlet (incorporated as a village between 1907 and 1992) includes several hundred residences, civic, ecclesiastical, and commercial buildings, which primarily date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Two major state highways pass through Westport – NYS Route 9N, which runs between Saratoga Springs and Keeseville, and NYS Route 22, which extends from the Canadian border to just outside of New York City. In the Champlain Valley Route 22 is one of three major north-south routes through the region.

The Essex County Fairgrounds is located on and northeast of NYS Route 9N. It is also in close proximity to the Westport Depot, which was built in 1876 to serve the Delaware & Hudson Railroad. The fact that the fairgrounds is located near Lake Champlain, an important water transportation route, two important highways, and the railroad line, is no accident. The present site for the fairgrounds was selected primarily to so that people, livestock, and other fair-related items could have easy access to the venue.

The fairgrounds is located on a fairly flat site that has a beautiful view overlooking Lake Champlain. In addition to the depot, also in the vicinity of fairgrounds are the Westport Hotel (1876), Westport Central School (1933), Champlain Valley Milling Company, Spooner’s Ideal Garage, St. Philip Neri Roman Catholic Church, two cemeteries, and several dozen wood-frame residences. To the north of the fairgrounds, the land is mostly wooded and undeveloped.

The original fairgrounds property was thirty acres in size but has gradually expanded to 44 acres since the 1880s. All of the contributing buildings and other site features are located on the fairground’s original acreage so the boundaries of this National Register nomination include the fairground’s original thirty acres and seventeen contributing historic buildings. Four of these historic structures – the Grandstand, Judge’s Stand, Floral Hall, and Racetrack - were among the original built resources on the site when the fair opened in 1885. The others were built in the first half of the 20th century and are fine utilitarian buildings and representative of the evolution of the fair as an important county institution. All of these are described below as contributing buildings to the National register complex. The property also includes more than twenty noncontributing buildings. These have been determined to be noncontributing because of their age or because their original integrity has been compromised. Brief descriptions of these buildings are also included below. All structures are keyed to the attached site map (A-W for contributing buildings and a-z for noncontributing buildings).

A. CONTRIBUTING BUILDINGS AND FEATURES

Racetrack (A)

The most prominent site feature of the fairgrounds property is its oval racetrack, around which most of the other buildings and activities are located. The track is located adjacent and parallel to NYS Routes 9N/22 (Pleasant Street) and is one-half mile in length and about twenty-five feet wide. Although the original track had a clay surface, in the 1970s and 80s the surface was improved through the addition of Wollostonite (a product mined in nearby Willsboro) and stone dust to its surface. For about half of its length, between the track and most of the fairground's buildings, is a wood, white picket fence. Between the track and NYS Routes 9N/22 is a low chain link fence. In order to control traffic on the track and to protect spectators, there are also several low (portable) concrete barriers in the vicinity of the Grandstands and Judge's Stand.

The Racetrack retains its historic configuration and appearance and continues to be a central focus of the fairgrounds during fair week and throughout the year.

Cooperative Extension Building (B)

The main entrance to the Essex County Fairgrounds, near the intersection of NYS Routes 9N/22 and Sisco Street, is dominated by the Cornell Cooperative Extension Building, which has been historically known as both the Junior Achievement Building and the Agricultural Center. This Colonial Revival style structure is basically rectangular in plan, two stories tall, with a broad hipped roof, and overall dimensions of 93 feet by 32 feet. The long axis of the building runs east-west and its two principle facades face Sisco Street (south façade) and the fairgrounds (north façade).

The building's rectangular plan is broken and augmented by several distinguishing exterior features. The roof is topped by a louvered octagonal cupola with a copper roof and weathervane. The building's asphalt-shingled roof is pierced by a small hip-roofed dormer on the west end of the building and a larger shed dormer on the east end of the building.

The long (south) Sisco Street façade is very symmetrical and has three gable roofed features that project from the building's long façade. The central one of these, a portico, marks one of two main entrances to the building. The portico is defined by a pilaster and column on either side of the entrance. This is topped by an entablature, and from the entablature springs a keystone arch. The recessed doorway consists of a pair of twelve light doors, flanked by sidelights, and topped with a fanlight. At the ends of this façade, the gable roofed projections are each marked by a large Palladian window, above which is a tall wooden flagpole. In the easterly of these two projections is a second entrance, which is defined by a portico consisting of a pair of columns, entablature, and pedimented roof. The first story of this façade has bands of 4/4 wood double hung windows and the second story has a series of 6/6 wood double hung windows. The two stories are further defined and separated by a long, shallow pent roof.

The building sits on a concrete foundation, above which is a two piece wood belt course. Above this, the 7" beveled clapboard siding, which covers the entire building, begins. The eaves of the main roof, gabled projections, porticos, pent roof, and other areas are finished with a crown molding, fascia, and soffit, typical of Colonial Revival architecture.

The north façade is similar to the south façade in that its long exterior wall is broken by three, gable roofed projections. The central one of these, deep portico, defines the second main entrance to the building. The portico includes a pilaster and column on either side of the entrance. This is topped by an entablature, and from the entablature springs a keystone arch. The recessed doorway consists of a pair of ten light doors, flanked by sidelights, and topped with a fanlight. Extending east from this portico is a large screened in porch with a wood floor, square columns, and latticework between its concrete piers. The westerly of the two gable roofed end projections has a doorway, covered with a classical portico. Like the south façade, this façade has 6/6 wood double hung windows on the second floor, 4/4 wood double hung windows on the first floor, and a long pent roof that defines and separates the stories.

The shorter, east and west, facades of the building each have an exterior door, surrounded by a classical portico. The east façade has four symmetrically spaced 6/6 wood double hung windows on the first story and three pairs of 6/6 wood double hung windows in the shed dormer on the second story. The west façade has a band of three wood double windows over which is a short projecting shed roof. There are also two small wood double hung windows on the first story and a pair of 6/6 wood double hung windows in the hip roofed dormer on the second floor.

The building is in good condition and, except for the construction of the handicapped access ramp and a concrete block chimney, retains almost all of its original architectural integrity.

4H Dairy Barn (C)

The main part of this building, a 36' x 110' one-story, gable-roofed structure, was built in 1953 by volunteer 4Hers from all over Essex County. The wood-framed building sits on a concrete block foundation, has a poured concrete floor, is siding by 6" novelty cove siding, and has a metal roof. The roof is punctuated by a small gable-roofed ventilator and the walls are pierced by large, double vertical plank, sliding doors at each end of the building and by long horizontal openings (screened with chicken wire) that run the length of the building on each side. The interior of the building is divided up into a variety of animal pens and is primarily used for cows.

On the west end of the building are two more recent shed additions. These are somewhat more crudely constructed. They are wood-framed, covered with rough 1" boards, roofed with metal roofing, and are pierced by a variety of openings, windows, and doors. These shed additions were designed for the display of fruits and vegetables by 4Hers and, within these spaces, are also changing rooms and sleeping lofts. Date of these additions is unknown. The end of one shed is painted with a mural that depicts several aspects of 4H activity (farm animals and gardening).

The building is in good condition and, except for later, more crudely built additions, retains most of its original integrity.

4H Cattle Show Ring (D)

The 4H Cattle Show Ring is a 35' x 72' open building used for the display and judging of cattle and other animals. It is essentially a large gable roof, created by a series of wood trusses, supported by twenty-four cedar wood poles, and is open on all sides. It has a metal roof, a simple fascia, and the gables are finished with 4" novelty cove siding. It has a dirt floor and a set of wooden bleachers at each end of the building. The building was built circa 1950. It is in fair condition and retains most of its original integrity.

Big Dairy Barn (E)

This Dairy Barn is a 32' x 260' gable-roofed building built originally to house about 100 head of cattle. The roof is constructed of 2" x 6" rafters (braced with collar ties) and it is surfaced with corrugated metal roofing. The roof is supported by 4" x 4" posts and the exterior "half" walls are finished with 5" novelty cove siding, above which is a long horizontal opening that provides ventilation for the building. The original finished floor of the building was concrete but this has been resurfaced with asphalt. The interior of the building has a long enter hall or aisle on each side of which are a series of stalls of various sizes. The stalls are constructed with horizontal boards and posts that are tied into the roof structure. This building was built ca. 1930, is in fair conditions, and retains most of its original integrity.

Between the Big Dairy Barn and the Sheep (Swine/Goat/Rabbit/Poultry) Barn, described below, is a more recently constructed building, the Tack Stalls (h), that now unites the two barns. This connecting structure is a gable-roofed structure, half of which is open to the outside and half of which contains a series of five small rooms. The roof is framed with 2" x 6" rafters and sheathed with corrugated metal roofing. The roof is supported primarily by a series of 4" x 4" posts. The portion of the building with the five rooms is conventionally stud-framed and is sheathed with horizontal board siding. Each of the rooms has a separate hinged door to the outside, a wood floor, and are used for storing tack and saddles by the 4H. The Tack Stalls was built circa 1985.

Sheep (Swine/Goat/Rabbit/Poultry) Barn (F)

This barn now appears to be contiguous with the Big Dairy Barn because of the "connector building," described above. The barn is a 20' x 70' gable-roofed pole barn, with open sides. The roof is framed with 2" x 4" (strengthened by collar ties) rafters and is sheathed with corrugated metal roofing. The roof is supported by a series of wood poles. The building has a dirt floor and within the building are a series of animal stalls and racks for poultry and other animal cages. The long walls of the building are defined by the horizontal boards and screening that make up the animal stalls. The building's gables and end walls are sheathed with 5" novelty cove siding and are punctuated with two large openings that give access to the building's open center aisle or hall. The building is in good condition and retains most of its original integrity.

Horse Barn (G)

The Horse Barn is a 20' x 50' structure used for housing (primarily draft) horses. It is essentially a large gable roof, supported by twenty-six wood poles, which is mostly open on all sides. The roof is framed with 2" x 6" rafters and is sheathed with corrugated metal roofing. The gables are finished with 5" novelty cove siding. It has a dirt floor and the floor area is divided into a series of stalls, which are accessible either through the long center aisle or from the outside. The stalls are formed by half "walls" made from either horizontal or vertical planks. Date of the building is unknown. It is in fair condition and retains most of its original integrity.

Horse/Poultry Barn (H)

The Horse/Poultry Barn is a XX' x XX' structure used originally for housing poultry but now used for housing horses. It is essentially a large gable roof supported by a series of wood poles and 4" x 8" posts and is mostly open on its long sides. The roof is framed with 2" x 6" rafters, is sheathed with metal roofing, and has a simple wood fascia. The ends of the building are sheathed in vertical tongue and groove planks and are pierced with pairs of sliding doors. It has a dirt floor is floor area is divided into twenty-one stalls, which are accessible from the outside. Feeding is done via a central aisle that runs the length of the building. The building is in good condition and retains most of its original integrity.

Draft Horse Barn (I)

This building is a 20' x 40' gable-roofed open pole barn. The roof is constructed with 2" x 6" rafters, spaced 1" x 4" sheathing, and surfaced with metal roofing. The roof system is supported by a series of (18) 8" - 10" poles. The building has a dirt floor and the floor area of the building is divided up into stalls using horizontal 1" boards of varying sizes. The east and west gables of the building are finished with 4" wood clapboards. The building is in good condition and retains most of its original integrity.

Floral Hall (J)

Floral Hall was designed to be and still remains the architectural centerpiece of the fairgrounds. The core of the building is a one-story, cruciform plan, gable roofed structure, in the center of which is an octagonal cupola. To the north and south wings of this core building have been added 30' gable roofed additions that have the effect of elongating two of the aspects of the cross plan.

The original cruciform plan building is or was (before the additions) completely symmetrical. Each of the original arms of the cross is approx. 27' x 30' and is topped by a (clipped or jerkin-headed) gable roof. The roof is constructed with 2" x 6" rafters, which are exposed and shaped in the eaves. Every fourth rafter is incorporated into a more elaborate truss. The roof is sheathed with 1" boards and is surfaced with metal roofing. Below the clipped gable of each roof section is an ornamental truss at the center of which is a large wooden circle. Where the small clipped roof and main gable intersect is a tapered pedestal that supports a tall wooden pole. The cupola is octagonal in plan, is surfaced with a metal roof, and topped with a tapered pedestal that supports a large wooden flagpole. At the eaves, each roof facet also has a small gable dormer, in the center of which is a wooden circle, a detail that mirrors the circles found in the exposed gable trusses of the building. This multifaceted roof makes for a fairly complex roof plan for such a relatively small component of the building. The eight walls of the dormer are surfaced with 4" novelty cove siding from the sill level up and with wood shingles around the base. Each of the walls is pierced by a large louver.

The walls of the building are conventionally framed with 2" x 6" studs, sheathed with 1" boards, and surfaced with 4" novelty cove siding. The siding terminates at the building corners into cornerboards. The six sidewalls of the building are each pierced with a band of five 4/4 double-hung windows. The east and west wings are each pierced with a pair of five panel, sliding wood doors and by two fixed nine light windows. The building sits on short limestone piers.

As mentioned above, fairly early in the building's history, the original symmetrical cruciform plan building was modified by the addition of extensions to the north and south arms of building. These 27' x 30' gable roofed additions were constructed in a manner similar to the earlier work. This includes their 2" x 6" framing, novelty cove siding, exposed rafters, shallow metal clad roofs, pairs of six panel doors and fixed nine light windows. Different from the original part of the building are their concrete piers and lack of an ornamental truss in the gable ends.

Floral Hall was designed and built to house a variety of agricultural exhibits, so consists of large unencumbered spaces with high ceilings. Except for the wainscoting that is found on the lower portions of the exterior walls, the building is unfinished, and its studs, rafters, and trusses are exposed throughout. The building has softwood floors. As part of the 2004 rehabilitation work, basic electrical (lighting and outlets) and fire detection systems were installed or upgraded. The building is now in excellent condition and retains a high degree of its architectural integrity.

CONSERVATION AREA

The Conservation Area consists of a series of seven structures constructed around an open green space. It was built beginning in 1948, largely by staff from the New York State Conservation Department (now the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation) for two purposes: to provide a place for conservation exhibits and to provide a place for fair patrons to rest and relax. In addition to the seven buildings, the site also includes split rail fencing, an entrance structure, several animal cages, and picnic tables. The Conservation Area is in good condition and retains most of its original integrity.

Gate House (K). The Gate House is a small, gable roofed building, just outside of the main circle of buildings. It is conventionally framed with an asphalt shingled roof, waney-edged or brain-storm siding, and two simple wood plank doors. It sits on concrete blocks and is stained brown. Adjacent to the Gate House is the entrance to the Conservation Area, which is defined by a pole frame, a gable roofed canopy, and a split rail fence.

Lean-to #1 (L). There are three lean-tos in the Conservation Area. This lean-to is constructed in typical Adirondack fashion, with heavy log walls, log rafters, a plank floor, and a wood plank roof surfaced with asphalt shingles. It sits on simple stone piers, has two split log steps, and is stained dark brown.

The Long Building (M). This building was originally built for the purpose of showing (conservation) movies but was found to be not long enough, so it was added to in order to increase its length. It is a gable roofed building, conventionally framed with a metal roof, waney-edged or brain-storm siding, several simple wood plank doors, and windows. At one end of the building is a small open porch. The entire exterior has been stained dark brown. In more recent times, two small shed roofed additions and a handicapped access ramp have been added to the building using more modern materials (plywood, TX-111, and pressure-treated wood).

Lean-to #2 (N). This lean-to is constructed in typical Adirondack fashion, with heavy log walls, log rafters, a plank floor, and a wood plank roof surfaced with asphalt shingles. It sits on simple stone piers is stained dark brown.

Lean-to #3 (O). This lean-to is constructed in typical Adirondack fashion, with heavy log walls, log rafters, a plank floor, and a wood plank roof surfaced with asphalt shingles. It sits on simple stone piers is stained dark brown.

Open Shed #1 (P). This is a simple, gable roofed, building enclosed on three sides. It is constructed with conventional materials, including TX-111 siding and asphalt roofing.

Open Shed #2 (Q). This is a simple, gable roofed, building enclosed on three sides. It is constructed with conventional materials, including half-log siding and asphalt roofing.

Grandstands (R)

The Grandstands is a large open gable roofed structure that covers the bleachers, an inclined seating area used by spectators to view the harness racing and other track events at the fairgrounds. The overall dimensions of the building are approx. 30' x 70'. The roof is constructed with 2" x 4" rafters, 6" x 6" purlins, and a series of eight king post trusses and braces that support the purlins. The roof deck is 1' x 6" tongue and groove sheathing and this is surfaced with corrugated metal roofing, painted red. The roof structure is supported by sixteen 8" x 8" posts with angle braces around the perimeter of the building and eight 6" x 6" intermediary posts that support the king post trusses. The bleachers consist of a set on twelve benches built on an incline up the grandstand. The bleachers are supported by a heavy timber frame (check this out) structure, some of which rests on stone foundation piers, the largest of which can be seen along the back (east) side of the structure. The floor of the bleachers, the benches and the risers are constructed with 2" thick lumber of varying dimensions.

The bleachers are enclosed by vertical 1" x 6" wood siding. The gable ends of the building and a small area under the eaves and over the angle braces is also covered with 1" x 6" vertical wood siding. Access to the bleachers (center aisle and two side

aisles) is via three sets of wood steps. Metal hand railings have been added to the access steps and along the center aisle and the rear uppermost section of the bleachers has been screened off with latticework as a safety precaution. Besides occasionally replacing building components with in-kind materials, the structures remains much as it was when it was built. The Grandstands retain a fairly high level of architectural integrity.

Judge's Stand (S)

The Judge's Stand is an 10' x 10' open structure designed and built so that judges and race officials could better see the activities taking place on the. The structure has a moderately pitched, slightly concave, hipped roof, which is surfaced with asphalt shingles. At the apex of the roof is a tall wooden pole. The roof rafters are exposed in the eaves and the roof has a ceiling of tongue and groove wood. The roof is supported by four 6" x 6" pressure-treated corner posts. Between the corner posts are simple wood railings fabricated of pressure-treated 2" x 4" top and bottom rails and 2" x 2" spindles. A set of wooden, pressure-treated, open riser steps leads from the ground level to the elevated floor of the structure. The floor and structural underpinnings of the Judge's Stand are made of pressure-treated wood materials and the structure's base is skirted with TX-111, painted white.

The roof of the building appears to be original or nearly so. From the roof down - the posts, railings, floor system, steps, and exterior skirting have been replaced within the past decade. Although they appear to represent the general configuration of the original structure, the use of pressure-treated materials and TX-111 siding detracts from the overall integrity of the structure.

Horse Barn #1 (T)

There are three barns in a row that all serve the horses, their riders, and caretakers, connected with the fair's annual harness racing and other equestrian events. The first is a long 36' x 100' structure. The overall form of the building is a long, two story, gable roofed center section with long, one story shed roofed wings. The main center section of the barn covers a long aisle, off of which are a series of horse stalls in the one-story shed portions of the building.

The building is essentially a pole barn, where all or most of the major vertical framing members are round poles to which are attached 2" horizontal members of various widths to create the rest of the structure. The roof is framed with 2" members of various sizes, both as conventional rafters and as parts of simple trusses. On top of the rafters is spaced 1" x 4" sheathing and this is surfaced with metal roofing. The barn is sided with 1" x 8" novelty cove siding. The higher, center section is punctuated by a series of fixed, four light windows (ten per side) that provide light to the center aisle. The sheds are punctuated with (ten per side) single light, fixed sash, which provide light to the stalls and other areas of the barn. Access to the building's long center aisle is via a pair of sliding doors on each end of the building. These are constructed with vertical planks, with a single window in each door section. Above the sliding doors on the south end of the building is a three light transom window.

The barn has a dirt floor and its interior is divided into a series of horse stalls, ten per side. The stalls and other interior walls are formed with conventional framing and (mostly) 10" vertical planks. The building is in fair condition and retains most of its original integrity.

Horse Barn #2 (U)

The second barn is a long, 20' x 100', one story, gable roofed building that houses a series of horse stalls. Its walls are framed primarily with 4" x 4" members and this frame sits on simple stone piers. The roof is framed with 2" x 6" rafters and is surfaced with corrugated metal roofing. The open rafter eaves project about 3' beyond the wall plane in order to provide shade and protection from precipitation for the horses. Every fifth rafter is braced back to the wall of the building. The walls are surfaced with 5" novelty cove siding. Access to the horse stalls and other interior spaces is via a series of Dutch and vertical plank doors. These are typically constructed with 1" planks and braced with either "X" or "Z" bracing. There is a hay loft above the stalls that runs the length of the building. Access to the hayloft is via a square vertical plank door in each gable end of the building. Access to the door is via a vertical ladder affixed to each end of the building.

The barn has a dirt floor and its interior is divided into a series of horse stalls. The stalls and other interior walls are formed with conventional framing and planks. The building is in fair condition and retains most of its original integrity.

Racing Barn (V)

The third barn is a 30' x 100', one story, gable roofed building that houses a series of horse stalls. The building consists of two 30' x 42' sections that are connected together by a lower 30' x 15' section. Along the long sides of the building is shallow-pitched shed roofed canopy or open porch that provides shade and a protected working area around the building. Anecdotal information and an inspection of the building indicate that this barn is made up of two structures, said to have once been located in another area of the fairgrounds and later moved and reconfigured into its present form in its present location.

The building is framed with sawn materials of various sizes, which is surfaced with vertical board siding or board and batten siding (center section). The walls are pierced with a variety of door and window openings that provide light and access to the series of wooden horse stalls in the building. One interior space is used as the "racing office," hence the name for the barn. The roof is framed with sawn rafters and is surfaced with metal roofing. The long canopies are framed with sawn rafters, sheathed with 1" boards, and surfaced with metal roofing. The roofs are supported by a series of poles (nine per side). The floors are dirt.

In 2004, some major rehabilitation work was done to the building. This included the insertion of a poured concrete footing to provide support for the exterior walls, replacement of deteriorated wall framing, siding, and doors. For the most part, the work was done using in-kind materials. The building is now in relatively good condition and still retains much of its original integrity.

Old Church (W)

This building was originally used for religious services during fair week. More recently, it has been converted into a workshop for the fair staff. Although the building's essential function has changed, it still retains most of its original features. It is a 25' x 25' one story gable roofed structure with a shed roofed addition. Like many of the early fair buildings, it has a metal roof, novelty cove siding, wood windows, and wood doors. In addition, it has simple decorative wood ornamentation in its gables.

B. NONCONTRIBUTING BUILDINGS

The following buildings at the Essex County Fairgrounds are considered to be noncontributing to the proposed National Register area because they are either not fifty years old or they have been so modified or altered over time so as to significantly diminish their original integrity. Those deemed to be noncontributing for reason of age are marked with {A} and those deemed to be noncontributing because of integrity issues are marked with {I}.

Hospitality Room or First Aid Station (a). This building is a one-story, 10' x 16', wood-framed, gabled-roofed structure to the east of the Cooperative Extension Building. The roof is surfaced with asphalt shingles, the siding is 4" novelty cove siding, and the building sits on concrete blocks. The building has one wood door and two 1/1 double hung windows. Built in the late 1950s or early 1960s. It is in good condition. {A}

4H Storage Building or BBQ Building (b). This building is a one-story, 12' x 32', wood-framed, gable-roofed building to the east of the First Aid Station/Hospitality Room and the Cooperative Extension Building. It has a modern type metal roof, 4" novelty cove siding, and sits on concrete blocks. The roof extends another 12' past the walls of the building in order to create a sheltered area for cooking or eating. The building has two vertical plank wood doors and a hinged wooden shutter. It is in fair condition. {A}

Ticket Booth (c). The Ticket Booth is a small, shed roofed building currently located at the south (Sisco Street) entrance to the fairgrounds. It is constructed with contemporary materials including plywood and 2" x 4" framing. {A}

Milking Parlor (d). The Milking Parlor is a 16' x 32' wood-framed, gable-roofed building. It has a poured concrete and concrete block foundation, chipboard-sided walls, and asphalt shingles on the roof. The walls are punctuated by a variety of sliding and hinged doors and windows. The building was built in the 1970s with donated materials and labor and was built to milk cows while at the fair. Fair attendees were also able to watch this process and learn something about this aspect of farm life. {A}

Wash Racks (e). This animal washing area was built in the 1970s and is used for washing and grooming animals that are kept at the fairgrounds. It consists of a short wooden three-sided enclosure, a rail to tie the animals up to, and a water supply for washing. {A}

Performance Stage (f). The Performance Stage was built in 2004 as a venue for live performances within the carnival area of the fairgrounds. {A}

4H Saddle Horse Barn (g). The 4H Saddle Horse Barn is a 25' x 77' gable-roofed pole barn. The roof is constructed with 2" x 6" rafters, where every third rafter is part of a truss. The roof is surfaced with metal roofing and is pierced by two round metal ventilators. The roof system is supported by a series of 4" x 4" posts and angle braces. The long "half" walls of the building are finished with 1" x 6" tongue and groove wood, above which is a long screened opening that allows the building to ventilate well. On the south end of the building the wall and gable are finished with 1" x 6" tongue and groove wood and this wall is punctuated by a large door opening (no door) and an opening (for ventilation) in the gable. The north end of the building is finished with 8" novelty cove siding and is punctuated by a pair of hinged doors. Murals have been painted on some of the exterior of the building. The building has a dirt floor and the floor area is divided into a series of stalls off either side of a central hall or aisle. The stalls are created by spaced horizontal planks and are accessed by sliding or swinging doors. The building was built in the 1970s or 1980s. {A}

Tack Stalls (h). Between the Big Dairy Barn and the Sheep (Swine/Goat/Rabbit/Poultry) Barn, is a more recently constructed building, the Tack Stalls, that now unites the two barns. This connecting structure is a gable-roofed structure, half of which is open to the outside and half of which contains a series of five small rooms. The roof is framed with 2" x 6" rafters and sheathed with corrugated metal roofing. The roof is supported primarily by a series of 4" x 4" posts. The portion of the building with the five rooms is conventionally stud-framed and is sheathed with horizontal board siding. Each of the rooms has a separate hinged door to the outside, a wood floor, and are used for storing tack and saddles by the 4H. The Tack Stalls was built circa 1985 and is in good condition.

MIDWAY AREA

The Midway is a centrally located cluster of buildings that provide food, entertainment, exhibits, and essential amenities (bathrooms) to fair patrons.

Midway Diner (i). The Midway Diner is a one story, gable roofed building, conventionally constructed and finished with modern materials including TX-111 siding and metal roofing. {A}

Exhibition Shed #1 (j). This building is an open, shed roofed pole barn, used for displays, exhibits, and (off season) storage. The roof is constructed with 2' x 5" rafters and is surfaced with a metal roof. It is supported by twelve poles. A portion of the sides of the structure is enclosed with vertical board siding. It has a dirt floor. {A}

Exhibition Shed #2 (k). This building is an open, shed roofed pole barn, used for displays, exhibits, and (off season) storage. The roof is constructed with 2' x 5" rafters and is surfaced with a metal roof. It is supported by twelve poles. A portion of the sides of the structure is enclosed with vertical board siding. It has a dirt floor. {A}

First Aid Building (l). The First Aid Building is a one story, gable roofed building, conventionally constructed and finished with modern materials including TX-111 siding and metal roofing. The roof extends out over one side of the building to create a porch. {A}

Bath House #1 (m). This building is a small gable roofed building, constructed of concrete blocks, with a metal roof, two doors, and several small windows. {A}

Elizabethtown Kiwanis Club Building (n). This building is a one story, gable roofed building, conventionally constructed and finished with modern materials including TX-111 siding and metal roofing. {A}

Bath House #2 (o). This building is a small one story, gable roofed building, conventionally constructed and finished with modern materials including TX-111 siding and asphalt shingle roofing.

Pizza Wings and Things Building (p). This building is a one story, gable roofed building, conventionally constructed and

finished with modern materials including TX-111 siding and metal roofing. A fenced in area to one side of the building creates a small sitting area for patrons.

Fire House (q). The Fire House is gable roofed pole structure to which has been added a shed addition. The earlier 18' x 30' portion of the building has a wood truss roof structure that is covered with metal roofing. It is supported by eight poles. One long side of the building is surfaced with vertical board and batten siding and the, other, with latticework. One side is open to allow access for fire trucks, which are displayed there. The shed addition, added in 2004, has a concrete floor, conventional framing, board and batten siding, a metal roof, and a variety of door and window openings. {A,I}

Open Bleachers (r). Adjacent to the Grandstands is a set of open inclined bleachers, approx. 20' x 48.' This set of twenty benches is constructed with pressure-treated materials, of various sizes. These bleachers were built within the past decade and are in good condition. {A}

Stage (s). The Stage is a 26' x 37' structure built to accommodate performers and other activities related to the track and grandstands. Approx. half of the structure (11' x 37') is covered by an open shed, which is constructed with 2" x 4" framed walls covered with plywood and 2" x 6" rafters surfaced with metal roofing. The 15' x 37' open deck is constructed pressure-treated materials and its base is sided or surfaced with 4" novelty cove siding. {A}

Bandstand/Handicapped Access Viewing Area (t). The Bandstand was originally an open octagonal structure, located adjacent to the Judge's Stand and Stage. Sometime within the past couple decades, it was enlarged to its present form and moved across the track, next to the Grandstands. The current structure is basically rectangular in shape with three sides of the original octagonal floor and roof area projecting from one end of the structure. In this area of the structure, one can find six of the original octagonal posts, twelve ornamental brackets, 2" x 4" roof framing and (edge and center bead) roof sheathing. The larger, newer portion of the structure makes use of the two remaining original posts, in new locations, and is otherwise constructed using 6" x 6" posts and wood materials, of various size, for the floor framing and deck, railings, and roof structure. The roof is surfaced with asphalt shingles. There is a wood handicapped accessible ramp to the bandstand (it is used for viewing the races and other events at the track) and it is skirted with pressure-treated diagonal latticework. {I}

Murphy's Diner (u). Murphy's is one story, gable roofed structure built with contemporary materials including TX-111 siding and rolled (asphalt) roofing. It has a screened in porch around the entire building.

New Bath House (v). The New Bath House is a small gable roofed structure built in 2004. It sits on a concrete slab, is conventionally framed, sheathed with TX-111 siding, has an asphalt shingle roof, and two metal exterior doors.

Horse Corral (w). Adjacent to the three horse barns, is a horse ring, which is used for training, showing, and judging horses. It is roughly oval in shape, approximately 100' x 150' and is enclosed by a wood fence. On the slight rise between the barns and the ring are two open, shed roof, structures that provide shelter for spectator **bleachers** (x and y) underneath them. Between them is a small gable roofed **judge's stand** (z). {A}

The Essex County Fairgrounds in Westport, New York

Narrative Statement of Significance

Introduction

The Essex County Fairgrounds in Westport, New York was constructed beginning in 1881 and is historically significant in the areas of agriculture, entertainment, and recreation. It also has the additional distinction of being closely associated with Elkanah Watson, the “father of the agricultural fair” in America, who lived in nearby Port Kent and who helped to organize both the county’s first agricultural fair and society in 1848 and 1840 respectively. The Essex County Fair was held in four other locations over its first thirty-three years before finally settling opposite the railroad depot in Westport in 1881.

The Essex County Fairgrounds are a testament to the strong agricultural underpinnings that have sustained this part of the Champlain Valley for many years. Central to the fair’s mission was perpetuating and celebrating agricultural life through education, competition, and advances in agricultural technology. In addition, the fair fostered a sense of community pride through participation and events sponsored by various civic groups. One example of the high level of community participation is that many of the buildings in the fairgrounds complex were built with donated labor and materials. Harness racing, still one of the main social and recreational events associated with this county fair, grew out of a long tradition of raising horses and the natural desire to compete with one’s neighbors.

The original Essex County Fairgrounds property in Westport was thirty acres in size and has gradually expanded to 44 acres since the 1880s. The National Register nomination boundaries include the fairground’s original thirty acres and twenty-four historic buildings and sites. Four of these historic structures – the Grandstand, Judge’s Stand, Floral Hall, and Racetrack - were among the original built resources on the site when the fair opened in 1885. The others, including the Agricultural Building, 4H Dairy Barn, and Racing Barn, were built in the first half of the 20th century and are fine utilitarian buildings and representative of the evolution of the fair as an important county institution.

These buildings collectively are an excellent example of a rare surviving property type in New York State - a late 19th and early 20th century county fair. The fair, as at other fairs in New York State, have allowed farmers, their families, and the general public of this agricultural region to come together to share knowledge, educate and promote a sense of community that is essential to maintain their livelihoods and sustain the cultural identity and traditions associated with an agrarian lifestyle.

Essex County Agriculture

The very existence of the Essex County Fairgrounds and its continued use today is due to the huge role that agriculture played and still plays in the economic and social life of the county. Although agriculture does not dominate the economic life of Essex County and the Champlain Valley the way it did in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it still does play an important role. Like many agricultural areas of the United States, farming in Essex County has undergone great changes over the last two hundred years but its impact is still evident in complexion of its communities, in its landscape, and in the hundreds of buildings and structures that remain from its heyday.

Agriculture has been practiced in this region since the time of the Native Americans, when Paleo Indian people cultivated the flat and fertile soils in the Champlain Valley. They lived in summer villages along the lakeshore and cultivated potatoes, beans, tobacco and squash. They also took other sustenance from the land by hunting, fishing, and gathering nuts and berries.

During the 18th century, there was limited European settlement in the Champlain Valley but, in these places, there was significant agricultural activity. For instance, in the vicinity of the French forts at Crown Point (1735) and Ticonderoga (1755), French families or “habitants” lived on the land surrounding the forts and provided wheat, vegetables, cattle, and pigs for the garrisons. It was not until after the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, when the boundaries between America and Canada were firmly established, that widespread settlement and agricultural activity could take place here. This first wave of settlement consisted mainly of people from New England and other areas of New York, many of whom had received land grants in the valley for their service in the wars. These immigrants established the same kinds of small diversified, subsistence farms that their ancestors had worked, where they produced all of the family’s needs and whatever else could produce a little extra cash.

In the early 19th century, the first noteworthy cash crops included potash, maple sugar, charcoal for use in iron furnaces, lime for mortar, and apple cider vinegar. Potash, a major ingredient of fertilizer, soap, and bleaching was produced from the ash of trees that were burned to make space for land cultivation. In 1829, the New York State Atlas identified 46 asheries in Essex County.

The expansion of the agricultural economy, like the local iron and wood products industries, was greatly enhanced by the opening of the Champlain Canal in 1823, which connected Lake Champlain to the Hudson River and points south. Agricultural products, as well as pig iron, logs, lumber, glass, and other manufactured products, could now be transported fairly cheaply to larger urban markets. Besides selling to these distant markets, farmers also provided food for the hundreds of workers who were employed in the nearby industrial settlements of Keeseville, Ausable Forks, and Port Henry and they supplied hay and feed for horses and oxen that did so much of the transport work in and between these enterprises.

The first real shift from subsistence farming to specialized farming began with the widespread raising of sheep for wool. Merino sheep, which produced long staple wool, had been introduced to America from Spain and were particularly well suited to grazing on both the valley's rich bottomland grasses and in poorer upland meadows. Because of protective tariffs imposed in 1824 and 1825, the demand created by the country's growing population, and the establishment of successful American textile mills, there was a great demand for wool and other clothing fibers and prices rose accordingly. By 1850, there were reported 50,000 sheep in Essex County, as compared to only 6,747 milk cows and sheep production reached its peak in 1865 with 62,000 counted. Wool and sheep production then fell off in the early 1900s, due to competition from both domestic and foreign wool producers.



Wool Shearers, ca. 1917

Around the time of the Civil War, more farmers in New York began to raise dairy cattle in place of sheep. In the early days of milk marketing, raw whole milk was sold door to door by individual farmers, along with farm-made cheese and butter. An 1860 report states that Essex County farmers made 634,289 pounds of butter and 106,119 pounds of cheese that year. In 1864, the county's first cheese factory employed two men and five women and converted 2,648,657 pounds of milk into 264,865 pounds of cheese that year.

The late 1800s were marked by several new and beneficial trends for dairy farmers. The growth of nearby urban areas and the ability to transport goods there, via refrigerated railroad cars, made for new markets for Essex County butter and cheese. This

was also a time when considerable scientific and technological advances were being made in American agriculture and many local farmers were open and eager to practice these new methods and adopt the best technologies and techniques.

In the first part of the 20th century, there was an increasing emphasis on producing fluid milk (drinking) milk and the railroad system made it possible to ship whole milk to distant markets. In 1927, the first “milk train” from the county started shipping to Sheffield Farms, a proprietary handler in New York City. In pursuit of an even better return on their products, farmers formed the Dairyman’s League, a cooperative, in 1932. During the Depression, as milk prices plummeted, Essex County was involved in the statewide movement to raise low milk prices. Reflecting a widespread trend in the northeast, the 20th century is marked by a gradual decline in the number of dairy farms and the number of dairy cows in Essex County.

Other agricultural products were and are a part of the picture of farming in Essex County. Wheat was the predominant field crop in the early 1800s. According to the agricultural survey of Essex County in 1853, the county’s farmers were producing high yields of wheat, about 25 bushels per acre. Wheat, along with rye, corn, oats, hay, was in great demand for, among other things, feeding the many horses and other draught animals involved in the region’s iron, lumber, and mineral industries. However, the wheat boom was relatively short and, due to soil depletion and problems with insects, wheat production fell considerably by the end of the century. Fruit orchards, especially apples found widely across the area. In 1889, New York Agricultural census reported there were 128,251 apple trees in the county. was reported by the New York census. Today the Champlain Valley boasts the largest McIntosh orchards in the world, a few of which are located in northern Essex County.

Brief History of Westport

The settlement of the area that was to become the town of Westport began in 1764 when William Gilliland, a successful colonial merchant, surveyed a portion of the southern part of the present town. For his work, he received a grant of 2300 acres, which he called Bessboro, after his daughter Elizabeth. One of the first settlers here was Edward Raymonds, one of Gilliland’s tenants, who settled near the present Camp Dudley. He built a house in 1770 and also built and operated a sawmill and gristmill. Another early settler was Major Hezekiah Barber, who settled at Barber’s Point in 1785, thus beginning a long family line of farming history in that area that continues until the present day.

In 1771, Phillip Skene was granted a land patent covering 2400 acres north of Bessboro, up to the middle of the present village. This land was later turned over to Platt and Rogers, early land speculators, and their friends and families. One friend, John Halstead, went on to undertake a survey in 1800 and built one of the first village structures - a house and tavern at the southwest corner of Washington and Main Street. When another early settler, Judge Charles Hatch, came to Westport in 1804, he found a sawmill, one frame house, three log houses, and a barn in what is now the village center.

The continued settlement of Westport was briefly interrupted during the War of 1812 as hostilities between the British and Americans took place in several places in the Champlain Valley and caused general uneasiness and disinvestments. The British came to within two miles of Westport when they sought to destroy Commodore Macdonough’s fleet at Otter Creek. Shortly after the close of the war, in 1815, Westport became a separate town by breaking away from the town of Elizabethtown. The village of Westport incorporated in 1907.

From 1800 to 1850 the town grew rapidly and, by 1850, it had a population of 2,350. The forests throughout the town were cut and turned into logs, lumber, charcoal, and potash. In the newly cleared fields, residents produced large quantities of farm products, including sheep and cattle, wool and leather, grain, potatoes, and apples. Iron extraction and processing was also an important part of the local economy and there were several small mines in the town, primarily along the Black and Boquet rivers. Several furnaces and forges were also built ca. 1850, including the Sisco Furnace, north of the village, the Norway Furnace near the present Yacht Club, and the Payne Forge in nearby Wadhams. These produced substantial amounts of pig iron but, by 1885, had all gone out of business.

Even as Westport’s industries were declining, its importance as a regional transportation center was growing. Lake Champlain was a major transportation route for commodities and people between Canada and New York City and it linked settlements within the Champlain Valley, both in New York and Vermont. At the south end of the lake, the Champlain Canal, completed in 1823, connected the waterway with the Hudson River system and New York City. After the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, one could also travel within the canal system to western New York and into the quickly developing Midwest. To the north, the lake was connected to Canada and the St. Lawrence River via the Richelieu River and the Chambly Canal, completed in 1843. The earliest lake ferries ran from Rock Harbor to Basin Harbor and from Barber’s Point to Arnold’s Bay

by 1790. Steamboats, barges, sailing barges, schooners, and other vessels plied the lake. Westport's docks and warehouses were used for onloading, offloading, and storing goods coming into and going out of the region. From Westport, early roads threaded their way into the edges of the Champlain Valley and central Adirondacks. By the end of the 19th century Westport was well-established and thriving port village. In 1876, a Delaware and Hudson railroad line was extended through the Lake Champlain Valley and a depot was built in Westport.

The improved rail and lake transportation into the region had the additional benefit of making it easier for people to visit the Champlain Valley and Adirondack region and to make it possible for these visitors to enjoy its natural and scenic beauty. Beginning in the 1850s and 1860s, tourism and recreation became an increasingly large part of the economy of the region and Westport, located as it was along major transportation routes and in a beautiful lake and mountain setting, was ideally situated to be part of this growing trend. During the last half of the 19th century a series of hotels, resorts, and tourist amenities, including a golf course and yacht club. The largest of the hotels was the Westport Inn. Built in 1887, it had a huge main building with extensive verandahs and a central observation cupola, guest cottages and eventually had a capacity of 175 persons. Although the Inn was torn down in 1966, tourism and seasonal residents continue to be an important part of the town's economy.

The Origins of Agricultural Fairs

County agricultural fairs have served as the main educational outlet for American agricultural societies by offering farmers and their families an opportunity to show off their skills, crops, livestock and learn from the successes of others. Over the course of history, fairs have served a variety of religious, economic, commercial, social, agricultural, and educational purposes.

The roots of the county agricultural fair can be traced to early European antecedents and even the ancient Greeks. In these earliest examples, people would engage in ceremonial games and/or sacred feasts and these would, in turn, attract traders. The Romans are credited for establishing fairs in England and during this period, wooden booths, stands, and tents were used at these gatherings. The word fair is derived from the Latin word *feria*, which means holiday.

Up until the 19th century, trade was the primary focus of the typical country fair. Medieval fairs, according to the research of Leslie Prosterman ([Ordinary Life, Festival Days, Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair](#), 1995), festival days were "the common meeting ground of all classes, the common places where men heard news of national events, compared grievances and caught the first breath of new ideas." Physically the fairs were held in either town streets or fields. For some, the fairs functioned as yearly outings. Men and women worked hard during the year to bring something to make some money and participate. In addition, fairs became known for certain specialties such as cloth, horse trading or hiring of servants. Many elements of the modern county fair can be seen here as locals traded with foreign merchants and crafts people, and vendors sold refreshments to the crowds, sometimes adding specialty items to their menus. Entertainment included music, stage plays, and games.

Agricultural Societies, Elkanah Watson and the County Fair in America

Early American fairs in both Canada and the United States shifted quietly, but decisively away from the European festival model into the systematic development of agriculture and animal husbandry while offering education, local resource and local industry promotion and entertainment. Competition became the cornerstone of fair programming and youth development eventually provided a social theme for the fair's work. The agricultural fair as a distinctive institution owes its establishment in America largely to the work of Elkanah Watson (1758-1842) more than to that of any other person. He is generally acknowledged as the "Father of County and State Fairs."

Elkanah Watson was born in 22 Jan 1758 in Plymouth, Massachusetts, a descendent of Mayflower Pilgrims from 1623. He was apprenticed to the prominent Providence merchant in 1773 and went on to become a trusted courier among such notables as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. He wrote extensively about his travels in America and Europe during the time of the Revolution with particular interest in canal infrastructure, and became prominent merchant in France. After winning a lottery in Europe he commissioned the famous artist, Copley, to paint his portrait. When this painting was displayed in England in the 1790s it was the first depiction of the American flag allowed on British territory. After the Revolution, Watson spent some time in North Carolina, and then moved to Albany, New York. There he became a successful businessman, owned a woolen mill, founded the Bank of Albany, and became one of the chief promoters of the Erie Canal project. The success of the bank, in particular, put Watson in a position to retire from an active life in business and to devote his still considerable

energies to new pursuits, namely the promotion of agriculture.



Elkanah Watson, portrait by J.S. Copley

He moved to a large farm outside of Albany near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he experimented with methods and procedures to improve cultivation and livestock breeding. He is best known for his promotion of new breeds of livestock into this country, including Merino sheep. To promote his many discoveries and prize breeds, he staged, in conjunction with his neighbors in 1810, the celebrated ‘cattle show’ that evolved into the American institution we know as the county fair. The event was successful beyond all his expectations and entries included 386 sheep, 109 oxen, 9 cows, 7 folds, 3 heifers, 2 calves and 1 boar. He wrote, “Many farmers, and even women, were excited by curiosity to attend this first novel and humble exhibition.”

In 1811, Watson organized the Berkshire Agricultural Society for the purpose of sponsoring an annual agricultural fair to promote livestock development and improvements in farming practices. After several years, the annual event included livestock competition, a livestock parade, speeches, produce competitions, domestic product displays, and a grand ball to close the fair. Note that most of these early fair components are the same that still define most county agricultural fairs today. In 1816, he retired from farming in order to return to Albany, so that he could lobby for legislation creating county agricultural societies in New York State. In this he was successful through the creation of the New York State Board of Agriculture in 1819. Forty years later, there were 97 different agricultural societies in New York State.



Berkshire Agricultural Fair

It was in the late 1840s and 1850s that the fair movement really began to flourish as farming evolved from subsistence for

family consumption into a commercial enterprise. During this time, faster means of transportation including improved roads, canals and railroads allowed farmers to ship their products much longer distances. At the same time, the industrialization of cities required more produce to feed urban workers. The invention, manufacture and marketing of labor saving farm implements such as mowers, reapers threshers and the hay fork aided the development of commercial farming. Motivated by increasing potential profits, farmers were eager to take advantage of the positive market conditions and to utilize new farming methods to achieve better efficiency and productivity. Fairs were one of the most important means of disseminating information about new equipment to farmers.

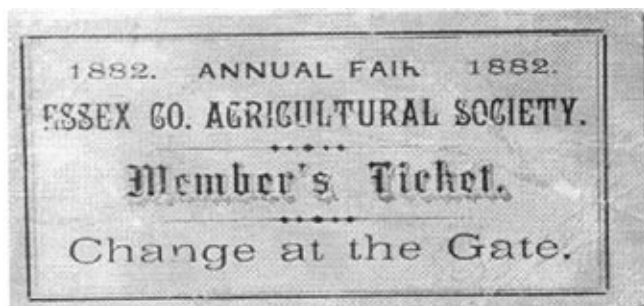
The nineteenth century closed with almost every state and province having one or more agricultural fair or exhibition. Today, over 3,200 fairs are held in North America each year. They provide industrial exhibits, demonstrations and competition aimed at the advancement of livestock, horticulture and agriculture with special emphasis placed on educational activities such as 4-H, Future Farmers of America, and other youth development programs. While enjoying these high-minded pursuits, fair visitors are also able to see, hear, touch, smell and taste the richness and variety of what the world has to offer.

The Essex County Fair

Beginning about 1820, Watson and his son, Winslow, began to develop the Lake Champlain port village of Port Kent, New York. Port Kent was one of a series of settlements along the lake that were part of this very important water highway through the region. Like Plattsburgh, Westport, Port Henry, Essex, Burlington, and others, Port Kent's wharfs, warehouses, and road connections served the growing population of the region and its early industries. The Watsons laid out the village in a formal grid pattern, built wharfs and warehouses, and erected a grand stone house in the village overlooking the lake. The village also was a ferry and stagecoach stop and, later in the 19th century, served both the Delaware & Hudson and the Keeseville, Ausable Chasm & Lake Champlain railroad companies. The Watson home was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1964.

While residing in northern New York, Watson continued to help counties organize agricultural fairs. In 1848, he organized the first Essex-Clinton County Fair, which was held outside the village of Keeseville, in a field on the road to Port Kent. This was a collaborative effort between Clinton and Essex counties for a two-year period.

The county's first agricultural society, the Essex County Agricultural Society, was organized in 1849 in Keeseville with J.N. Macomber, President; Norman Page, Treasurer; and Jonathan Morgan, Secretary. Its objectives were to "promote and improve the agricultural, horticultural mechanical and household arts of Essex County." In 1850, Clinton County separated from Essex County and, thereafter, each held its own fair. The Essex County Fair was moved to Elizabethtown, on land where the cemetery is now located on Hand Avenue. The abolitionist, John Brown, whose farm was located in North Elba, exhibited Devon cattle at the fair, when in this location. He also entered and won an oxen-pulling contest here.



In 1853, the fair activities were moved to the site of the current Cobble Hill Golf course at the intersection of Routes 9 and 9N. At this time, the land was owned by the Hand family. The property was given for free use by the Agricultural Society with the condition that no activities would take place that would interrupt church services.

In 1865, after wrestling with financial problems, high overhead costs, and decreasing attendance, the fair committee decided to relocate the fair to Westport, closer to Lake Champlain. They chose to hold the fair in a field near Old Arsenal Road, close to the Westport wharf. They reasoned that the new location would increase attendance, given its nearness to lake

transportation. As horse racing was an important fair activity, the location on the lake also made it much easier to transport horses for racing. This decision proved to be a good one, as fair attendance did increase and it did attract horses and their owners from Plattsburgh, Crown Point, Port Henry, Ticonderoga, and from nearby Vermont. The first president of the Agricultural Society after the move to Westport was Dr. Dickerson. The Society leased the land for fifteen years at a cost of \$150 a year.

During this time, the village's old arsenal served as the fair's exhibition hall. In this building were displayed the many crafts, flowers, and homemade goods associated with the knowledge and traditions of the community. Renewed energy in the fair seemed to be a natural consequence of this relocation and the change in venue brought about many successful gatherings. At the end of the fifteen-year lease, remaining in this location was not an option, so the Agricultural Society was faced with finding a new home, for which they had two prospects. A group of citizens from nearby Wadhams tried to persuade the Society board to relocate the fair in their village by offering land owned by D.F. Payne and a \$400 bonus for construction materials. Not wanting to lose the fair in their community, Westport town officials made a counteroffer, which the Agricultural Society accepted. In 1881, they purchased 30 acres of land for the exhibition grounds and race track for \$1500 and went on to spend another \$1200 on the construction of several buildings and the oval racetrack.

Bids were solicited for the construction of larger fair buildings, including Floral Hall and the Grandstand. **Floral Hall** was to be the centerpiece of the fairgrounds, as it was the primary space for displaying patchwork quilts, paintings, and other items produced at home and on the farm. The three bidders for Floral Hall were John A. Stanton of Wadhams Mills, Mr. Fuller of Elizabethtown, and D.C. Clark of Westport, who also owned the Westport Wharf. Clark's bid was accepted, construction soon began, and the building was completed in 1885.



Floral Hall



Grandstands

During this same period, John A. Stanton of Wadhams built the **Grandstand**, overlooking the fair's half-mile oval track. It continues to function today as the main viewing area for harness racing and motorized competitions like tractor pulls, demolition derbies, and all-terrain vehicle (ATV) races. At one time, the infield of the track was used for baseball games as well. Another early, if not original, feature of the fairgrounds is its oval **racetrack**. Harness racing was among the first competitive events offered at the fair and still is one of its main attractions. General interest in the sport of harness racing developed in the United States in the 1820s and 1830s and, in 1825, the New York Trotting Club wrote the first rules for the sport.

Barns and stables, used for the housing and exhibition of livestock and the quartering of horses, have been and still are an important part of the fairgrounds complex. These are of various sizes and types and range from 19th century timber frame structures to those built relatively recently.



Junior Achievement Building

The **Junior Achievement Building** (known in the past as the Agricultural Center and now as the Cornell Cooperative Extension Building) was erected in 1923 with funds provided, in part, by Horace Moses. The remainder of the cost came from Junior Achievement, through an annual appropriation from Essex County. The purpose of Junior Achievement was to encourage manual arts and crafts among the young people of the county. Their best work was often shown at the annual Eastern States Exposition in Springfield, Massachusetts. The building was ideally situated, not coincidentally, within the fairgrounds complex and adjacent to the Westport School. Junior Achievement's use of the building continued until 1940, when the organization folded. In 1941, a 4-H chapter was established there and, in 1943, it became home to the Home Bureau, Farm Bureau, Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Presently it houses many agriculture-related organizations, including Cornell Cooperative Extension Association of Essex County, the Essex County Soil and Water Conservation Service, and the offices for the Essex County Fair. It is extensively used for meetings associated with the Extension's work as well as by other organizations throughout the Champlain Valley.

The 4-H movement began in 1896 when Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell University began distributing nature study leaflets to rural schools in New York State. Bailey was concerned about a shortage of people entering the agricultural profession. In turn, Cornell University, published a magazine, which established study clubs to encourage students and teachers to see the educational value of the natural environment. The Agricultural Extension Service, of which 4-H is an outgrowth, was established with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914. In cooperation with county government and land grant colleges such as Cornell, this service provided judging, technical assistance, bulletins, and seminars at agricultural fairs. It was a way in which to disseminate research to the farming community as well as educate others about farming concerns. In 1917, the Smith-Hughes Act was passed, which provided for the organization for local clubs as the "junior division of the extension service." The name 4-H was adopted in 1924 to capture the essence of the club's mission of encouraging heads, heart, hands, and health symbolizing clear thinking, loyalty, community service, and healthy living.

Today the fair provides children and young adults with many opportunities for leadership roles as well as providing a safe space to receive recognition for the creative work they accomplish on a wide variety of projects, including animal husbandry, agriculture, horticulture, domestic arts, technology, human development, and finance.

In 1953, the **4-H Dairy Barn** was constructed through the donated labor and materials from the surrounding communities. It is noted that many of the people who worked on this building are now the proud grandparents of grandchildren who show and display agricultural products and livestock in this area.

Fair Activities

The annual fair books provide documentation of the activities at the fair and those vendors and others participating in each year's event. During the earliest years of the fair, the central activities were exhibiting livestock, farm products, and domestic arts and competitions like harness racing and horse and tractor pulls. Newspaper accounts describe entries in competitions for livestock and animal awards, agricultural products, and domestic goods. An account from 1906 notes the following. R.W. Eggleston won for his five Shropshire sheep and had an unusually good exhibit of White Plymouth Rock and Rose Comb Leghorns. A.J. Gough was the largest exhibitor of vegetables but George H. Vaughn had 60 different varieties of potatoes on exhibit. Mrs. George Vaughn was the largest exhibitor of canned and pickled fruit Department and, in the culinary department, Mr. Litchfield from Westport, was the largest exhibitor of bread and baked goods.



Baseball at Fairgrounds; note Grandstands and Judge's Stand in the background

These were supplemented by exhibits of novel farm machinery and other devices to improve rural life. Gordon Sherman, former Westport town historian, remembers the many home and equipment demonstrations in Floral Hall when he was a small child in the early 1900's. He recalls E.J. Sherman demonstrating stoves and oven cookware, E.O. Adams of Wadhams Mill demonstrating the first cream separator of its kind, and Ashley Miller from Wadhams demonstrating a Gallaway manure spreader. Other newspaper accounts report on "novel exhibitions at the fair" including a "famous Irish jaunty car" and a "Neopolitan harness saddle from Italy complete with tinkering bells, metal banner and engravings of local saints." On a more superfluous note, a considerable space in the center of Floral Hall was devoted one year to an extensive exhibit of skins and fur garments by the Spear Martin Fur Company of Burlington, Vermont. .

In the second half of the 19th century, popular entertainment became an increasing larger part of the fair's events. In 1887, the first Ferris wheel was a popular attraction and, soon thereafter, a horse-driven, merry-go-round appeared for the first time. In 1891 a woman named Lady Aeronaut staged an act where she parachuted out of a hot-air balloon from at a height of 5000 feet. Others describe the Hogan Brothers from Detroit performing trapeze acts from underneath a high-flying, hot air balloon. These, along with the fair's more traditional agricultural activities swelled the fair's attendance, which reached 5000 in 1888.

Vaudeville acts in the early 1940s featuring noon and evening performances of jugglers, acrobats and clowns. Bee Kyle performed a high dive act from a platform 100 feet high into a tank ringed with fire that was 15 feet wide and only 6 feet deep. Many musical acts covering the wide range of styles and format have played at the fair either on the grandstand stage, bandstand or under a tent. Baseball games between local teams were also a highlight for many fairgoers to watch.

The use of the fairground has expanded during the 20th century. The duration of the fair has extended to six days, held typically the third week in August and annual attendance has increased to approximately 11,000 people annually in recent years. Scheduled fair events have also expanded to include a demolition derby, truck and tractor pulls, musical performers as well as interactive educational displays and exhibitions for children.



150th Anniversary cancellation

The Essex County Fairgrounds is indicative of the strong agricultural underpinnings that have sustained this part of the Champlain Valley for more than 200 years. Although agriculture does not dominate the economic life of Essex County

and the Champlain Valley the way it did in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it still does play an important role. Like many agricultural areas of the United States, farming in Essex County has undergone great changes over the last two hundred years but its impact is still evident in complexion of its communities, in its landscape, and in the hundreds of buildings and structures that remain from its heyday.

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