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# Stockport, NY

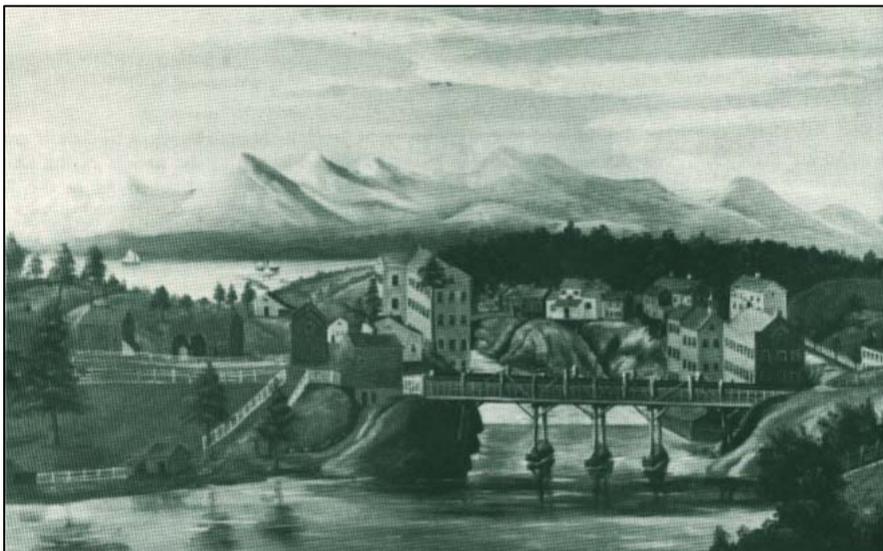
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## Small Town on the Hudson

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Hamlet of Columbiaville, Stockport, NY as it appeared in 1830

Painting by Gus Witzorek 1907, in *A Visible Heritage*, page 100

## Introduction

The town of Stockport is a rural fringe community, situated on the Hudson River between two expanding urban centers. It is located in Columbia County, approximately 30 miles south of Albany, and 100 miles north of New York City. The residents have been watching as communities in neighboring counties go through the changes 20<sup>th</sup> century sprawl brings with it. This paper outlines the present status and prospects for the town as this sprawl inches closer.

## Early History

The first European to set foot in Columbia County was Henry Hudson, on September 17, 1609. Hudson stopped for a day at the mouth of what is now known as Stockport Creek. Here he ate a meal with the natives consisting of corn, beans, pigeons, and "...one fat dog, skinned in great haste..."<sup>1</sup>

The first European settler in Stockport was Abraham Staats, who built a house and farm under Dutch rule around 1660 at the spot Henry Hudson landed. When the English took control of the area, Staats acquired a patent for 200 acres in 1667, with 400 more acres added in 1685.<sup>2</sup>

## Formation of the Town

The town of Stockport was formed in 1833 from parts of Stuyvesant, Ghent, and Hudson.<sup>3</sup> It is the smallest town in Columbia County at 11.6 square miles in area.<sup>4</sup> It was named after Stockport, England, the hometown of James Wild, a prominent resident at the time. At one time, this was the hub of

industrial activity in Columbia County. The Claverack and Kinderhook Creeks join here to form the Stockport Creek, which flows out to the Hudson River. The Stockport Creek is the second largest unobstructed tributary of the Hudson, and drains over 70% of the land area of the County<sup>5</sup>, and over 700 square miles of land (5% of the entire Hudson River watershed)<sup>6</sup>. Waterpower was abundant. There is still evidence of seven dam sites along the creeks, and there were probably more at one time. The historical evidence suggests that the motivation behind the town's formation was to benefit the proprietors of the many mills along these sources of waterpower.

In the Hamlet of Stottville, at the southern end of town, the Columbia White Sulfur Springs was located. In the mid-1800's, these sulfur springs were as well known as those of Saratoga. People came from great distances to drink and bathe in the water. Near the springs are three waterfalls of 53 feet in total descent. These powered an extensive array of woolen mills operated by Jonathan Stott, the hamlet's namesake. These mills and associated buildings were used well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The last of the major manufacturing companies, L&B furniture Co., moved to a new site in the city of Hudson in the 1980's. Another concentration of mills was found in Columbiaville, one mile inland from the Hudson, on the Stockport Creek. Columbiaville was an incorporated village from 1813 until the formation of the town.

## Natural and Historic Resources

With the abundance of water, and its connection with the Hudson River, there are some important natural areas in the town. The Stockport Creek is tidal for over a mile inland, and much of the land along the creeks is in a floodplain. In the 1940's, floods wiped out this author's grandfather's lumberyard, located on the Kinderhook creek, on two occasions.

1,543 acres of land, wetlands, and floodplain along the western edge of the town are owned by the State of New York as part of the Stockport Flats component of the National Estuarine Research



• Figure 1  
View of Hudson River NERR at the point Stockport Creek enters the Hudson River

Reserve. (See figure 5 on page 17) This is a federally protected area, jointly administered by the federal government and five state agencies. This component was formed in 1982 as part of the Reserve System created by the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972. Some of the rare species found at the site are osprey, heartleaf plantain, estuary beggar ticks, kidney leaf mud-plantain, and spongy arrowhead.<sup>7</sup> Bald eagles have recently been found nesting in the area.

Most of the soils found in the town are of heavy clay base. A study, done for the zoning commission in 1986, showed very little land acceptable for on-site septic systems. There are some sandy loams at the northern end of town, but

these are often layered over the heavy clays, resulting in high water tables, also unsuitable for development.

Groundwater is a problem throughout the town. At one time, the sulfur content of the water was seen as a health benefit, but most people today abhor the rotten egg smell that accompanies the water. Quantity is also a problem. The clay-based topsoil's slow aquifer recharge and the underlying shale bedrock do not yield much water. With the steadily increasing use of water by the town's residents, the central water system has been strained to its limit.

Because of the lack of easily developed land in the town, open space has been preserved. It's interesting to note that as one drives from Greenport to Kinderhook along Route 9, it appears that you start off in an area of high-density population, travel through a sparsely populated Stockport, and arrive in another highly populated area. Many find it hard to believe that Stockport is the most densely populated town in Columbia County<sup>8</sup>. I would attribute this to the concentration of development around the existing hamlets. There has been some development along the Route 9 corridor, but a few farms still reach right up to the main road, adding to the rural character of the town.



• Figure 2  
St. Johns Church, modeled after a church in Stockport England

Stockport has many historic buildings. One, St. John's Church in the hamlet of Stockport, is on the National Register of Historic Places. It is a gothic revival building modeled after a church found in Stockport, England. Another structure that has gotten some attention lately is a 190' pedestrian suspension bridge crossing the Kinderhook creek. The bridge was built in 1914 as a connection between the hamlets of Columbiaville and Stockport. Closed in the 1980's, a local group has formed to raise money for its restoration. Many in the area have overlooked the town's historic sites.

There are two reasons for this. One is the buildings are scattered over a wide area instead of being concentrated in one location. This means visitors have to poke



• Figure 3

At 190', "The Footbridge" (circa 1914) is the longest suspension pedestrian bridge in New York State. It is Located at the confluence of the Kinderhook, Claverack, and Stockport Creeks

around town and know about the local history to find the historic buildings. Secondly, two historic "powerhouses", the City of Hudson and the Village of Kinderhook, border the town to the north and south. Many of the town's historic sites are in a state of disrepair, although this is starting to change in the hamlet of Stockport where there is evidence of reinvestment by the homeowners.

The well-watered nature of the town also brings with it some very scenic areas. The clay soils are susceptible to erosion. This results in some very steep ravines and stream banks along the creeks. In turn, this precludes development very close to the water, and some scenic areas have been preserved because of this. Since early development in the town concentrated around the waterpower of the inland streams, the shore of the Hudson has been left in a very natural state. Although views of the Hudson are limited in town, the Catskill Mountains are visible from all around town, and provide a scenic backdrop to this rural area.

### The Residents

As of the 1990 census, the town had a population of 3085. Projections show no substantial change for the next 10 to 20 years (not including immigration), although the population will be getting older. The 1990 census separated figures for the hamlet of Stottville, and shows this area has a significantly older population than the rest of the town and the county. The remaining portion of the town actually has a younger population than the county.

Because of the topography, school district boundaries, and fire district boundaries, Stottville residents often see themselves as distinct from the rest of the town. Combined with the difference in age makeup and lack of connecting roads, it is sometimes difficult to organize the residents for a common goal.

## Land Uses

Industry has left the community. The mills that once stood next to the falls are slowly disappearing. Some have been torn down, some have been converted into residences or artists' studios, and others are just huge eyesores. Most businesses in town are small home-based enterprises. There are a few general contractors, automobile repair shops, and in-home type businesses. Again, the towns of Greenport and Kinderhook attract businesses more easily because of their better water supply and development friendly soils.

Most development in town has been residential in nature. The 1970's brought a 100 home subdivision that overpowered the hamlet of Rossman. Residents now refer to this area as the Kings Acres development. Another subdivision in the 1980's added about 20 more homes to the same area. Most new homes are being built one at a time scattered around the town on large lots. 1996-1998 saw an average of four new housing starts per year.<sup>9</sup> Because of the water and septic limitations of the land, 3 to 5 acres is a common lot size for homes outside the water district. I have seen 10-acre lots that have needed \$25,000 mound systems to get county health department approval.

## Community Facilities and Infrastructure

State Route 9 is the main arterial that runs north south through the town, connecting it with Stuyvesant and Kinderhook to the north, and Hudson and Greenport to the south. County Route 20 runs east west through Stottville, and provides a connection with the town of Ghent to the east. The town only has 20

miles of local roads. For the most part, these are dead ends, and dump the traffic onto Route 9 or County Route 20. Congestion has not been a problem, but traffic is increasing near the border with Greenport, where there has been major strip mall development over the last 30 years.

There is daily bus service to the Albany area along the Route 9 corridor. The County is trying once a week local bus service through the town, connecting it with Hudson, Kinderhook, and Chatham. The Hudson River Greenway and the State of New York have designated Routes 9 and 9J as a bike route, connecting New York City and Montreal. Up until 1941, there was trolley service through town from Hudson to Kinderhook. The rail bed is now owned by the Niagara Mohawk Corporation, but is still potentially usable by pedestrians or hikers.

The town has a central water system, providing service to about two thirds of the town's residents. The water supply is the biggest issue facing the town right now. Two of the four gravel wells have iron and manganese levels that exceed maximum allowable contamination levels. When chlorine is added to the water at the pumping station, the iron and manganese form particles that precipitate and cause a discoloration of the water. Very often, the water runs brown from the residents' taps, ruining laundry, dishes, and causing great anxiety to the homeowners. An inadequate storage tower and the limited flow of the wells compound the problem. Water has to be drawn out of the ground at a fast rate during peak demand, increasing the hardness of the water, and line

flushing can only be done on a limited basis. Estimates for improvements to the system have been given of over \$2 million. There is little reserve money set aside for this project, and the town has been unsuccessful at its attempts for grants and low interest loans.

The town has two large parks, one each in Stottville and Columbiaville. Both have softball fields, and are used by the local Little League teams. Equipment at the sites is very old, and is subject to continuous vandalism. The town has a sizable reserve fund for the parks, (nearly \$40,000<sup>10</sup>) but little has been spent on improvements in the last 10 years.

The town is well served by two volunteer fire districts. One local part-time police officer is supplemented by the County Sheriff Department. The Stottville elementary school was closed in the 1970's, and health care is obtained in nearby Hudson or Kinderhook

## Local Planning

As far as the local town officials can tell, Stockport has never had a comprehensive plan. Although one county level planner insists he has seen a plan for the town, he has not been able to find and deliver a copy to the town board. The town does have zoning and subdivision regulations. In response to a proposed regional trash-to-energy "resource recovery" plant in 1986, the town decided it should have some control over its land uses. A zoning commission was appointed, and delivered their report to the town board in 1987. The

ordinance was adopted on January 6, 1988. The town was divided into 7 districts, outlined in table 1.

• Table 1

<b>District</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Minimum Lot Size</b>
Residential Conservation	Very low density residential in the most ecologically sensitive areas, agriculture, conservation, recreation, large lot residential uses	3 acre
Residential Agricultural	Low density residential and certain institutional uses by special permit	2 acre
Residential	Moderate density residential on less environmentally constrained areas, within the route 9 development corridor, higher densities were central water and sewer are provided	.5 acre with central water and sewer 1 acre with water or sewer 1.5 acre without water or sewer
Hamlet	Residential, commercial and institutional uses can co-exist at moderate densities	.5 acre
Commercial/Light Industrial	Research, commercial, manufacturing and wholesale activities	2 acre
Planned Development District	Provides for a flexible land use design under performance criteria, with review and approval by the town on a project specific basis; large scale commercial, industrial, or residential development including mobile home parks	Project specific
Floodway	Designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), no development allowed	
Flood Fringe Overlay	100 year flood plain designated by FEMA, development subject to special permit	

The 76-paged zoning document goes on to provide area and bulk regulations for development in the various districts. Also included are supplementary regulations regarding parking, signs, fences, excavation, home occupations, cluster development, required screening, and roadside stands. Additional standards are included for certain uses requiring a special permit.

The most noteworthy fact I found about the Subdivision Regulations, is that when the town codified their laws in 1997, no record of their official adoption could be found, even though they had been in use since the 1970's. There is some language on restricting culs-de-sac, and providing for cost efficient infrastructure design.

The town has no Capital improvements Program in place, nor does it rely on a capital budget to estimate its future capital improvement needs.

## SWOT

There have been a few instances in recent years where the town's lack of planning has caused some problems for the residents and various board members. The town board decided to appoint a committee to investigate developing a comprehensive plan for the town. Table 2 outlines some of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats discussed at the committees' meetings.

• Table 2

<b>Strengths</b>	Location between Hudson and Kinderhook River frontage, natural areas, creeks and open space Privacy, from route 9, but close to Route 9 stores Railroad station in Hudson Bus service to Albany Historic buildings and structures Parks Short commute to Albany Low property costs Central water and sewer Natural gas line in Stottville
<b>Weaknesses</b>	State of the water and sewer systems Clay soils all over town No stores No well developed town center Divided by school districts Dilapidated old mills at the center of Stottville Limited river access Lack of recreational facilities Few professional services (doctors, lawyers, etc.)
<b>Opportunities</b>	Encourage businesses to come to town (small businesses) Tie into county wide tourism plan Open up waterfront to appropriate uses More recreational uses Senior citizen housing, especially in Stottville Improvements to water quality
<b>Threats</b>	Inability to fix the water supply High taxes without adequate services Increased traffic congestion

## Prospects and Recommendations

This is a community that has not been investing in itself. In an effort to keep the tax rate low after the disappearance of the larger employers, a Band-Aid approach has been taken with respect to infrastructure maintenance. The town now faces the prospect of paying two million dollars for water system improvements, half a million dollars for a new town highway garage, and

probably another one hundred thousand to provide acceptable recreational equipment at the town parks. On top of this, the higher expense of repairing outdated equipment, the low property values associated with the poor water system, and the high proportion of residents to land area, result in one of the highest tax rates in the county. This has put a strain on the farmers. The decrease in reinvestment by the farmers has become quite visible in the last ten years.

Unless the community leaders take some action, my forecast for the town is a deeper hole to climb out of. The divided nature of the town, and its lack of a well-defined center, would make it difficult to obtain the critical mass needed for a main street revitalization program.



• Figure 4

The former Stockport United Methodist Church located across the street from the previously mentioned St. Johns Episcopal Church.

The town does have great potential. Priority should be given to connecting the town with itself, and with the surrounding towns. The protected river front wetlands could be combined with on-shore protected areas, and linked with a riverfront Greenway trail. The school serving the Stottville area is near the riverfront in Greenport, and has a bike route connecting it to Hudson and the train station there. The trolley line that once connected all four hamlets could be redeveloped into a bike path or trail. This rail bed happens to run right behind the school in Kinderhook serving the northern end of town. The

footbridge over the Kinderhook creek, once repaired, would connect the trolley line with the town park in Columbiaville, and access to the Hudson River NERR.

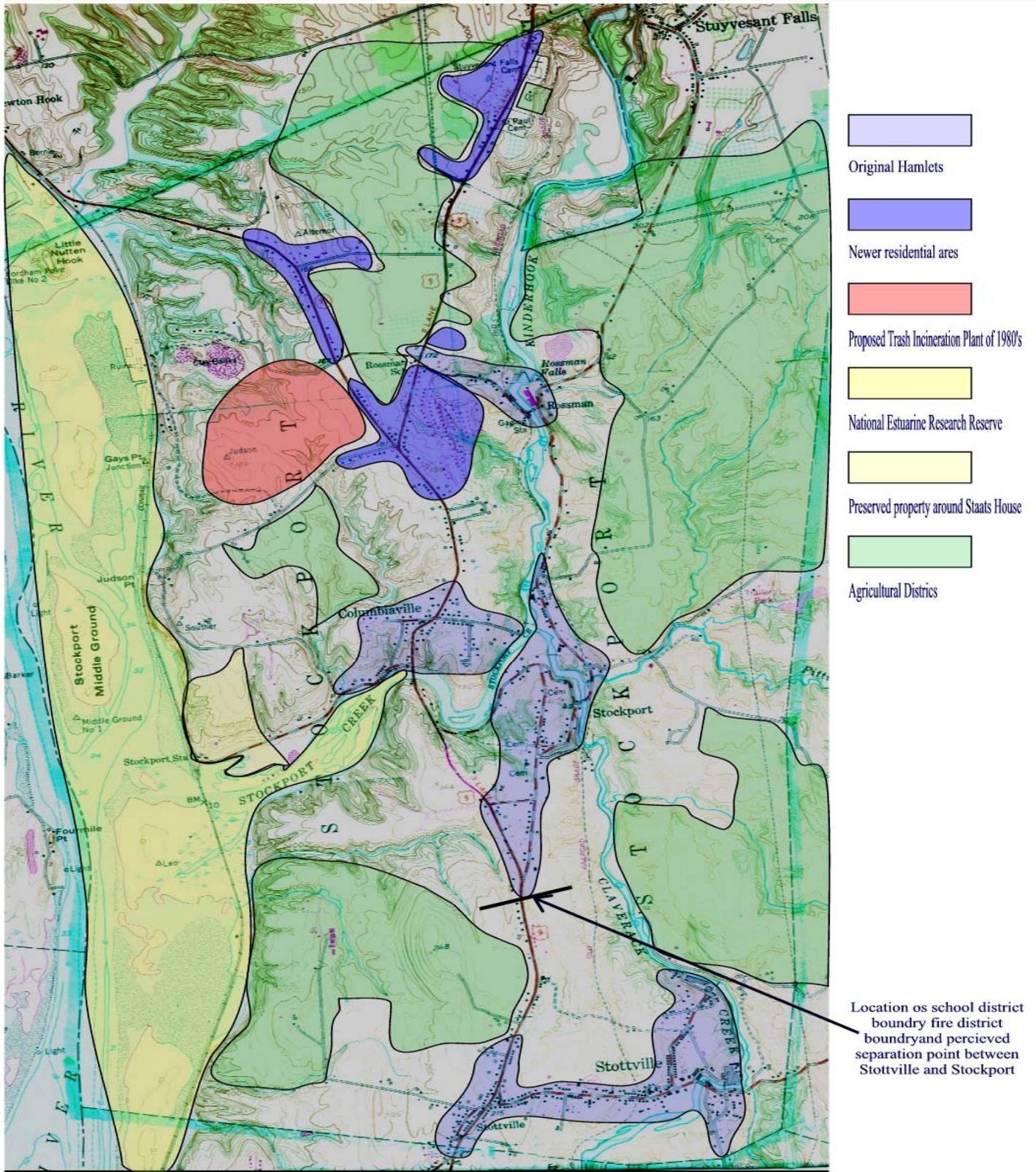
There should be a broadening of the footbridge restoration committee's efforts. A town wide effort to inventory and protect all of its historic properties, while tying into the county level efforts might generate some cooperation between residents.

There should be an emphasis on cost effective community design to maximize return on investment. Although the Subdivision regulations call for development that can be maintained at reasonable cost,<sup>11</sup> The Zoning Ordinance allows development to occur all over town. The half-acre minimum lot size in the hamlet district (Stottville) is much too large for economical sewer and water service. It is also totally out of character with the existing design of the hamlet. The two and three acre lots called for in the other districts would put more strain on the remaining farmland if development pressure increases at all. The clustering provision is, in reality, unusable anywhere in town. The soils could never handle the required on-site septic systems.

The town should develop a capital improvements program. With the high maintenance costs of its infrastructure, and low tax base, the town cannot afford to make any mistakes when it comes to spending money on capital projects. It would also help in obtaining the grants and low interest loans that have eluded the town so far.

Most of all, the town should reach out to the many organizations and state agencies that have taken an interest in this area. The town recently passed resolutions to join the Hudson River Greenway and National Heritage Area. Scenic Hudson is also showing interest in supplying planning support to communities here. The towns of Stuyvesant and Kinderhook have or will have up-to-date comprehensive plans in place. The city of Hudson is starting to develop a plan as well. Even the county, with Chamber of Commerce support, has put together a "Patterns for Progress" task force, outlining the economic development potential for the area. The biggest opportunity the town has is joining in the planning projects occurring in the neighboring towns and the county.

• Figure 5



Topographical Map of Stockport compiled from USGS 7.5 series topographical maps- Hudson North, NY, and Stottville, NY.  
Agricultural Districts are approximations, derived from maps held by- Columbia County Department of Planning and Economic Development.

MAP NOT TO SCALE

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Captain Frank Ellis, *History of Columbia County, NY* (Philadelphia: Everts and Ensign, 1878), 10.
- <sup>2</sup> Ruth Piwonka and Roderic H. Blackburn, *A Visible Heritage, Columbia County, New York: a history in art and architecture* (Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press, 1996), 27.
- <sup>3</sup> Ellis, 347.
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population and Housing*, (Web Site, <http://www.census.gov/>), 7 March 1999.
- <sup>5</sup> Ellis, 9.
- <sup>6</sup> Steven A. Smeltzer, *Columbia County, 1982-2000*, (Columbia County Planning Department), 10.
- <sup>7</sup> National Estuarine Research Reserve System, Stockport Flats Component, (Web Site, <http://inlet.geol.sc.edu/HUD/site3.html#TOP>), 7 October 1999.
- <sup>8</sup> Census, 7 March 1999
- <sup>9</sup> Mario Ferrari, Stockport Code Enforcement Officer, interview by author, 2 November 1999
- <sup>10</sup> *Town of Stockport 2000 Preliminary Budget*, (Stockport Town Hall), 28 October 1999.
- <sup>11</sup> Code of the Town of Stockport, (Rochester: General Code Publishers), 105-2.

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