Bicentennial Walking Tour

In 1793, the Reverend Samuel Kirkland founded a school for the children of the Oneida Indians and of the white settlers coming into Central New York. Alexander Hamilton, the first U.S. secretary of the treasury and Revolutionary War veteran, lent his name to what became the Hamilton-Oneida Academy. In 1812, four years after Kirkland's death, the school became Hamilton College. In the two centuries since, Hamilton has evolved and prospered as one of the nation's leading liberal arts colleges. This walking tour is designed to introduce visitors to the College’s rich history.

The first part (1-4) of the numbering sequence below reflects the chronology of historic events, and the remainder is based on location. Please enjoy the tour in the order that best fits your starting point and convenience.

1. Kirkland Cottage
2. Memorial stone for Hamilton-Oneida Academy building
3. Azel Backus House
4. Buttrick Hall
5. South, Kirkland and North residence halls
6. The Chapel
7. Spanish cannons, gift of Elihu Root, Class of 1864
8. Peters Observatory monument
9. College cemetery
10. Anderson-Connell Alumni Center
11. Kirkland College gate

Celebrating 200 Years
**Kirkland Cottage**
The Reverend Samuel Kirkland had this 17 x 24-foot clapboard cottage constructed as a home at the foot of College Hill in the spring of 1792. Two years later, he built a larger house in the fashionable Federalist style, complete with a columned portico and a Palladian window. (The 1794 Kirkland mansion still stands in Clinton near the junction of Harding Road and College Hill, a property now known as the Harding Farm.) The 1792 cottage was purchased by Hamilton College in 1875 and moved to the campus — at first to a site in the College cemetery and in 1925 to its present location. Since 1975, members of each entering class have been invited to the cottage to sign the College roster as a symbol of matriculation at Hamilton.

**Memorial stone for Hamilton-Oneida Academy building**
On July 1, 1794, Baron Friedrich von Steuben, former inspector general of the Continental Army, accompanied Reverend Kirkland from his house at the base of College Hill Road up the hill to lay the cornerstone of the Hamilton-Oneida Academy. Over the next few years, a wooden structure three stories high was slowly erected on this spot, and in December 1798, classes began to be held in this building. With the chartering of Hamilton College in 1812, the building was renamed Oneida Hall. It was torn down in 1829. Hamilton College’s Class of 1886 donated the monument stone that stands on the site of the original cornerstone.

**Azel Backus House**
Among the oldest buildings on campus, Azel Backus House was built in 1802 as a boarding house for Hamilton-Oneida Academy students. It originally stood a few hundred feet further down the hill, beside present-day Campus Road, and was moved to its current location later in the 19th century. In 1812, the building became the home of Hamilton College’s first president, the Reverend Azel Backus. In subsequent years, the building served as a faculty dwelling and, later, as Alumni House. In 1984, it was refurbished with a faculty dining room and named in honor of the College’s first president.

**Buttrick Hall**
In 1812, construction began on a dining facility known as the Hall of Commons. The building was the first on the Hill to be made of stone, a sandy gray dolostone that turns to an orange-red hue as it weathers. The chance selection of the rock facing of the Hall of Commons set the style for most of the subsequent College buildings constructed throughout the next century-and-a-half. In 1820, the building ceased its role as a dining hall and, in 1834, became home to Horatio Gates Buttrick, superintendent of buildings, for whom it was later named. In 1845, the building became the birthplace of future statesman Elihu Root, the son of Mr. Buttrick’s daughter and her husband Oren Root, a Hamilton College mathematics professor. In the late 19th century, it housed a mineral collection and classrooms. In 1925, the building was turned over to the administration, the first time that the College’s president and other officers had formal space from which to conduct their business on campus.
South, Kirkland and North residence halls
The trustees also appropriated funds in the fall of 1812 for a new dormitory and classroom building, opened in 1814 as Hamilton Hall, later known as South College. (The building was razed in 1906; it was located on the site of present-day South Residence Hall.) Built of stone, at four stories South College was also the tallest building on campus. A second dormitory, named Kirkland Hall, went up in 1825, today’s Kirkland Residence Hall. A third dormitory was started about the same time, finally completed in 1842, today’s North Residence Hall. These dormitories were rather grim places to live in the 19th century, heated with firewood, lit by candles and without indoor plumbing. It was only in the 1890s, in the presidency of Melancthon Woolsey Stryker, that campus buildings acquired electrical lighting and running water.

The Chapel
The College Chapel, erected in 1826-27, was designed by Albany, N.Y., architect Philip Hooker, who had designed the original New York State capitol building (1806-09). The building represented a collaboration between Hooker, who designed the tower-and-steeple façade, and College trustee John Lothrop, who designed the main building. With Isaac Williams as chief carpenter, the building was completed in 1827. The interior of the Chapel underwent substantial redizes in the years that followed, but the exterior remained largely unchanged save for the addition of a clock to the steeple in 1877. The Chapel’s original 250-pound bell sent out a puny peal; it was replaced by a heftier 800-pounder in 1867 and the present 1,500-pound behemoth in 1902. The Chapel was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972 and is thought to be the last remaining three-story church of its era in the United States.

Spanish cannons, gift of Elihu Root
Elihu Root graduated from Hamilton as valedictorian of the Class of 1864. He went on to receive a law degree from New York University and began a lucrative practice in corporate law. In 1899, he became secretary of war in the cabinet of President William McKinley, continuing in that post under McKinley’s successor, Theodore Roosevelt. Joining McKinley’s cabinet in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, Root helped administer the new American empire in the Caribbean and the Pacific. A longtime Hamilton trustee, he donated to the College these two captured Spanish cannons, booby from 1898. Root went on to serve as secretary of state under Theodore Roosevelt, and as U.S. senator from New York. He was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1912 for his service as secretary of state.

Peters Observatory monument
Christian Henry Frederic Peters was born in Germany in 1813, and in 1836 earned his Ph.D. from the University of Berlin. He served as a volunteer with Giuseppe Garibaldi in the First Italian War for Independence in 1848-49, and eventually made his way as an exile to the United States in 1852. Joining the Hamilton faculty in 1858, he was the first to do so holding the degree of Ph.D. Between 1861 and his death in 1890, he discovered and named 47 asteroids. At a time when few other Hamilton faculty members did original research, he was a nationally known scholar, elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1876. Following Peters’ death, the teaching of astronomy and the use of the observatory waned; the building would be torn down in 1918, its site marked by a stone column topped by the metal device that once held the telescope in position.
College cemetery
When President Azel Backus died in 1816, he was buried in the village cemetery. Professor Seth Norton succeeded Backus as acting president but would himself die two years later. In 1820, their bodies were exhumed and reburied in the newly established College cemetery. When Samuel Kirkland died in 1808, he was buried behind his mansion on Harding Road. Oneida chief Skenandoa, upon his death in 1816, was buried beside Kirkland. In 1856, the bodies of Kirkland and Skenandoa, as well as Kirkland’s daughter, Eliza, who died in 1819, were disinterred and transferred to their present sites in the College cemetery. Many other notable administrators and faculty members are buried in the cemetery, including Professor of Classics Edward North, Class of 1841, Hamilton’s longest-serving faculty member, and President Melancthon Woolsey Stryker, Class of 1872, Hamilton’s longest-serving president. Elihu Root, Class of 1864, is also buried here.

Anderson-Connell Alumni Center
Originally constructed in 1799 as a farmhouse, this building was enlarged in 1804 and became Lee’s Tavern. It was converted to a boardinghouse in 1821. In 1850, the building was purchased by Professor of Mathematics Oren Root, who called his new home “The Hemlocks” and later “The Homestead.” An ardent gardener, as were his wife and children (including eldest son Elihu Root), Professor Root began to acquire, clear and plant the acreage stretching down the hill behind his house, present-day Root Glen. Elihu Root’s son, Edward Wales Root, Class of 1905 and the first lecturer of art at Hamilton, along with his wife Grace, lived in The Homestead until Edward’s death in 1956, when it was acquired by the College. The building served as The Edward W. Root Art Center until 1982, and subsequently became the Anderson-Connell Alumni Center.

Kirkland College gate
In 1965, Hamilton established a coordinate college for women, Kirkland College, which welcomed its first class of 172 students in 1968. The three residence halls that went up first (Major, McIntosh and Minor), were followed in years to come by other dormitories (Keehn, Root, Babbitt and Milbank), the McEwen Dining Hall, the List Art Center and the Kirner-Johnson Building housing classrooms and administrative offices. Its curriculum placed a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary and independent learning, as well as the visual and performing arts. Due to financial problems, the Kirkland experiment drew to a close with the 1977-78 school year, and the college merged with Hamilton, which went coeducational beginning in the fall of 1978. Kirkland graduated 1,038 women. The Kirkland College gate, dedicated in 2002, was designed by John von Bergen, Class of 1963, and Ava Stein Bromberg, Class of 2002.

On the Hill: A Bicentennial History of Hamilton College, published on the occasion of Hamilton’s 200th anniversary in 2012, tells the story of the College’s rich history through captivating text and stunning color images. Written by Maurice Isserman, the Publius Virgilius Rogers Professor of American History, the book is available in the Hamilton College Bookstore.

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