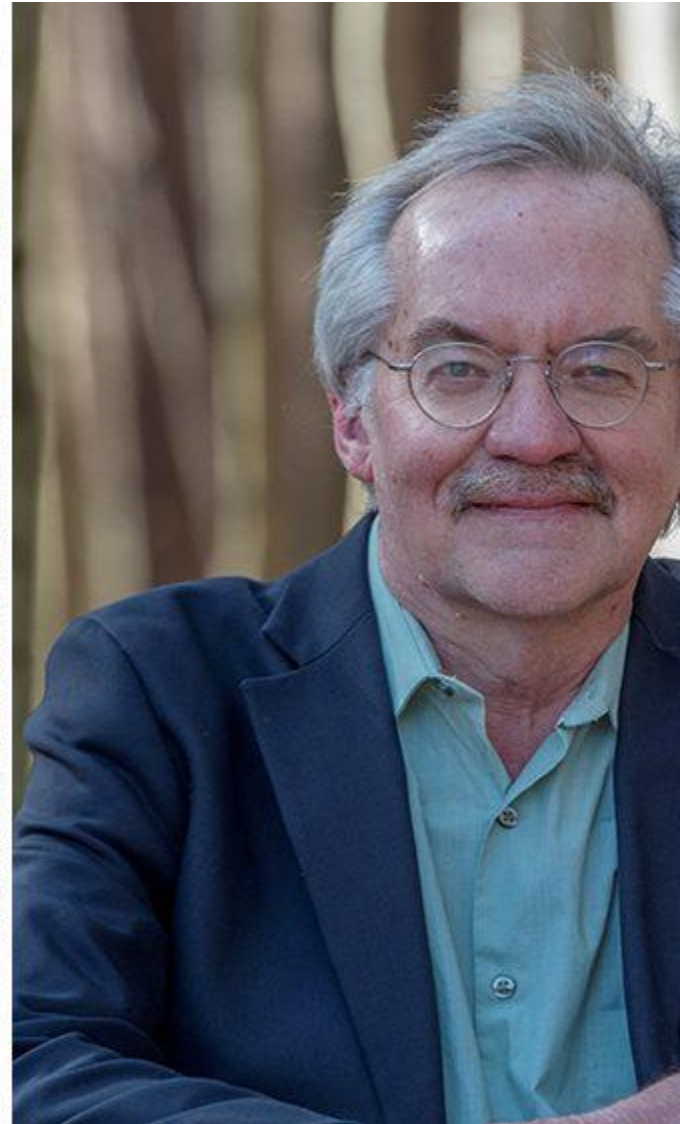
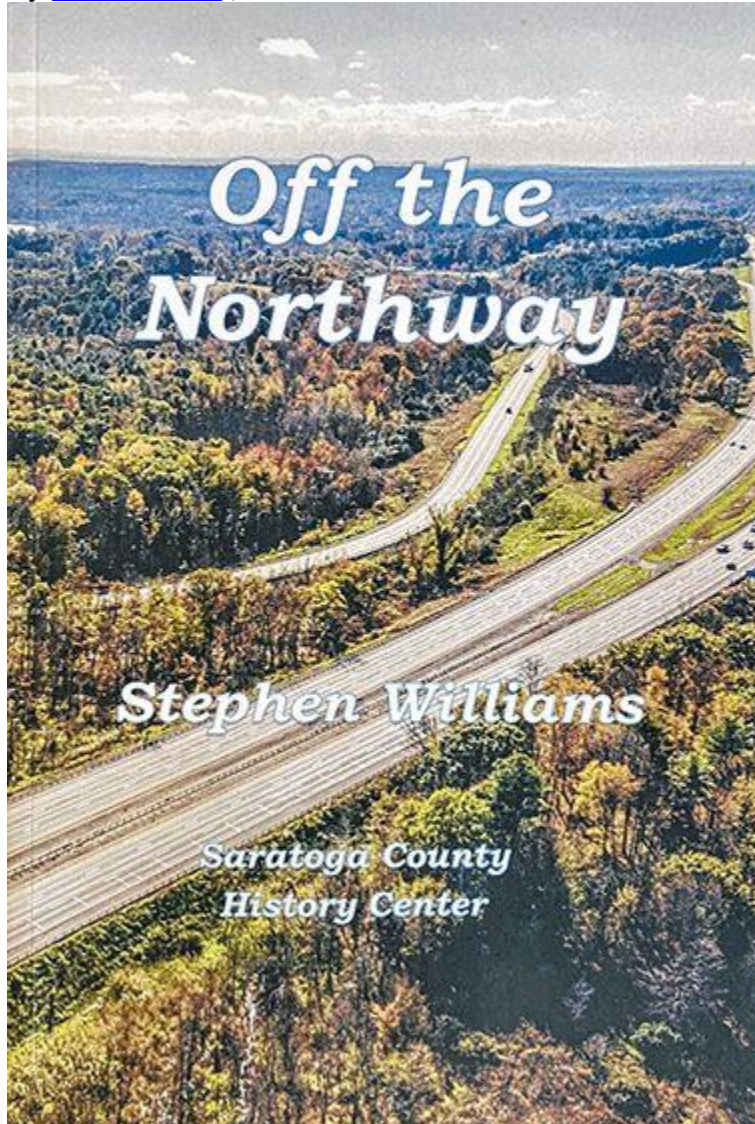


Former Gazette writer highlights Saratoga County history with ‘Off the Northway’

By [Indiana Nash](#) | June 18, 2022



PHOTOGRAPHER:

Stephen Williams and his book, "Off the Northway." (photos provided)

For more than 40 years, Daily Gazette reporter Stephen Williams had a front-row seat to the history unfolding in Saratoga County.

As the population swelled and farms took a back seat to the tech industry along with others that rose up, Williams tracked the changes and put them into context, providing readers a nuanced perspective in his long-running column "Off the Northway."

Eighty-three of the hundreds of columns and stories he penned have been included in a new book, published by the Saratoga County History Center. The book explores Saratoga's distant and recent past, and asks big questions about development and the environment. It also features stories that highlight the history and lore of Saratoga Springs.

"Journalism is the first rough draft of history and this is proof of that because now I'm going back and . . . saying, 'How does this stand up as history?'" Williams said.

He began working on the book shortly after retiring from The Daily Gazette last year. The idea was initially sparked by Jere Blackwelder, who has been involved with the History Center for some time and thought the book would help document the county's history, as well as help raise funds for the center.

"There's a general concern among historians now that because we always send emails or text messages . . . history isn't really being documented," Williams said. "That's another reason they wanted to have a collection of columns in a permanent documentation for some things which have happened in the last 15 years."

It took Williams about six months to read through roughly 400 of his Off the Northway columns. The weekly column started in 2005. At that point, he'd been a reporter for more than two decades, and then-managing editor Tom Woodman approached him with the idea of a Saratoga County column.

"I remember being told, if somebody's a new columnist, don't really read them for the first six months because they've got to find their voice, and there's some truth in that. I really wasn't very confident that I could do it that first year," Williams said.

He soon found the right tone and saw that there were benefits to writing in column format, such as being able to talk about the news in a broader context or spotlighting the quirkier stories buried in local history.

"I pretty quickly realized . . . you can talk about things [in a column] that you can't talk about in a regular news story, which is nice, but I wanted [them] to still have some news value, too. So I was trying to strike a balance," Williams said.

One of the major topics covered in his column, and one of the first included in the book, is the development of GlobalFoundries, which was formerly called Advanced Micro Devices.

Williams covered the long, roller-coaster history of the dream, design and construction of the \$15 billion GlobalFoundries semiconductor facility in Malta, which recently announced plans to construct a second plant at its vast Luther Forest location.

Ahead of each column included in the book, Williams writes brief introductions to provide readers context about when they were written and what was happening at that time. In some cases, he adds a postscript, explaining how things played out after a column was published.

Williams also covers some of the local politics and key political leaders in the state at that time, such as state senators Joe Bruno, Jim Tedisco and Roy McDonald.

“Though he later fell from grace, Sen. Bruno is among the key people who reshaped the Capital Region into a tech hub and brought GlobalFoundries to Saratoga County,” Williams said. “I wanted to tell that story and to write about the changes I’ve seen — as well as the things that haven’t changed — throughout my career.”

Among some of the noteworthy columns featured in the book is “Who Speaks for the Butterflies?” Written in 2008, it examines the question of who has the standing to sue in court over harm to the environment through the case of Save the Pine Bush of Albany, which tried to sue the town of Clifton Park for allowing the construction of an industrial development on land that contained the Karner blue butterfly.

Another standout is “Before the Racetracks, Hog Heaven,” which tracks how in the 1850s, Saratoga County had 4,800 farms, many of which raised pigs, including the popular Duroc breed, which was first identified in the county. However, with the rise of railroads and refrigeration, the pork industry largely moved to the Midwest in the ensuing years.

“In 1855, census figures show there were 26,003 pigs in Saratoga County. Just for comparison, there were 306 pigs being raised in the county in 2002,” Williams writes.

Appropriately, the book’s cover is an aerial view of the Northway, captured by Down to Earth Aerial, as it slices through miles of green-, orange- and red-hued trees.

“The book not only takes the reader down memory lane but many articles have continued relevance to the communities that straddle the Northway,” said Jim Richmond, chairman of the History Center’s publications committee.

A presentation and book signing with Williams will be held at 7 p.m. June 28 at Brookside Museum (6 Charlton St., Ballston Spa). Preregistration can be made at brooksidemuseum.org.

“Off the Northway” will also be available at local bookstores and at amazon.com.