

## communityprofile

PHOTO/ © 2002 DAVE SCRANTON

Hikers enjoy the view of the Fulton Chain Lakes from atop Rondaxe Mountain. The point is a popular scenic overlook in the Adirondack Mountains in Adirondack Park, just north of Utica.

### **City on the Move** Utica, New York has deep roots, but it's not locked in history.

Located on the famous Erie Canal, Utica is moving from “smokestack to laptop” with community spirit, cooperation, and a zest for health.

*By Eileen Lockwood*

IT'S A DITTY ALMOST EVERY SCHOOL CHILD in New York State once knew and sang:

“I've got a mule and her name is Sal;  
Fifteen miles on the Erie Canal.”

The fame is well deserved.

Completed in 1825, the waterway is considered America's first great engineering triumph—363 miles from Albany to Buffalo on Lake Erie. It became a vital commercial link from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. In the Mohawk River Valley, it sparked a

century-long manufacturing boom.

Today at Rome, you can return to the 19th-century as you ride a mule-drawn boat and tour vintage buildings at Erie Canal Village, which commemorates the heyday of the canal. Then drive over to Utica to experience the growing vigor of a city adapting to the 21st century.

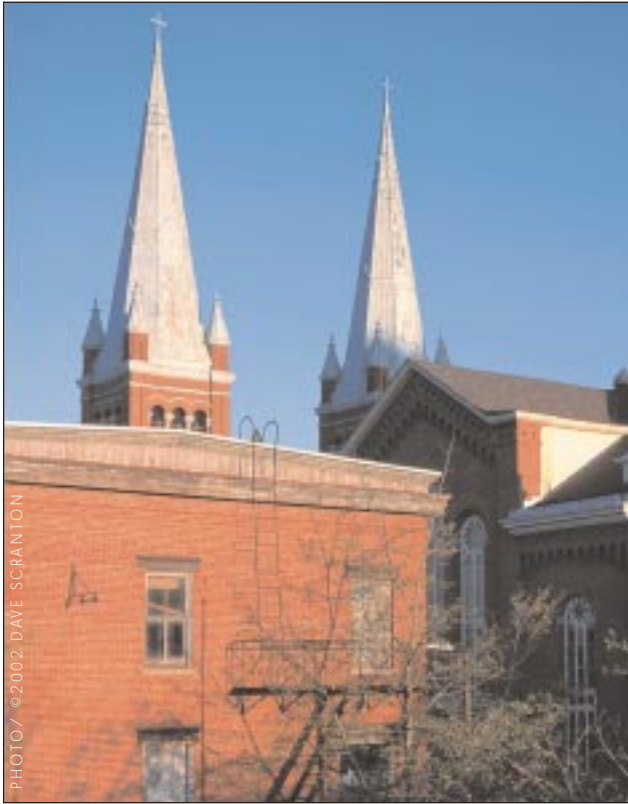
Since Utica's days as the knitting goods capital of America, and producer of everything from fishing tackle to air compressors, this old industrial metropolis (some say they pulled its name out of a hat in 1798)

has ridden an economic roller coaster whose most recent stop is somewhere between “the way we were” and “the way we want to be.”

It was close to “the way we wish we weren't” when Peter Hotvedt, MD, arrived in 1996. “The area was depressed and so was the mood,” he remembers. “Several major employers, including Griffiss Air Force Base in Rome had closed. Houses were for sale inexpensively and yet sat unsold for two to six months.” Between 1988 and 1996, a GE plant there since the 1950s dissolved from 4,000

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### POPULATION

Utica: 61,368

Oneida County:  
229,714

20-mile radius:  
266,285

### CLIMATE

Annual rainfall: 45"

Annual snowfall: 99"

(That sounds like a lot, but 10-30 miles north it's 200-300")

Average High/Low  
Temperatures:

January: 29°/14°

July: 80°/60°

### TRANSPORTATION

AIRPORT — Oneida

County Airport  
(regional  
connections to major  
cities); Hancock  
Field, Syracuse  
(northeast hub for  
several carriers)

RAILROADS —

AMTRAK: Conrail;  
New York  
Susquehanna &  
Western

BUS — Adirondack  
Trailways,

Greyhound, Utica-  
Rome Bus Lines and  
others

INTERSTATES —

I-90 (New York State  
Thruway), west to  
Syracuse, 40 miles,  
and Buffalo, 190  
miles; east to  
Syracuse, 40 miles,  
and New York, 240  
miles.

### COST OF LIVING

AVERAGE HOME  
PRICE: \$88,000

MEDIAN  
HOUSEHOLD

INCOME: \$45,769

SALES TAX:  
8 percent

LEFT, St. John's Catholic Church, a Utica landmark, was built in 1869. The church was organized in 1819, the first Catholic organization in central New York. BELOW, Skiers await the start of a cross-country race during Inlet Winter Fest in the Adirondack Mountains. Winter sports are an integral part of life in the Mohawk River Valley.



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LEFT, Utica prepares for the 15K Boilermaker run with a week-long festival called "A Good Old Summertime." Participants enjoy food, entertainment, rides, and a beauty pageant. BELOW, The Matt Brewing Company was founded in Utica over a century ago. Here they brew Saranac, a line of specialty beers.

to zero employees.

Now, says Hotvedt, a cardiologist, "The mood is more like 'We'd like to do better, but we're doing okay.'" Mayor Timothy Julian takes a more aggressive stand with his motto: "City of Opportunities." And so it's becoming once again, along with Rome (15 miles northwest) and the cluster of towns that make up Oneida County.

Julian's view is well grounded. Some venerable companies never left town, and there's big employment at an Indian casino/resort 20 miles west. But real resuscitation these days seems tied to technology, and so far, it's high-tech hands that hold the defibrillator in Utica.

"Ninety-five percent of all fiber optics in the world have something to do with Utica," says one local businessman, referring to GN Nettetst, which supplies testing equipment for communications networks. In the suburb of New Hartford, Par Technology Corporation leads the world in point-of-sale systems for fast-food restaurants. Even the air force base has sprung back to life as a business/technology park, spurred by a regional agency, the [Economic Development Growth Enterprises](#)



(EDGE).

"The government wanted to close its Air Force research laboratory (in information and communications technology) and shift work to other ones, but we fought to prove that Griffiss was a more efficient location," says Rob Duchow, the EDGE marketing and communications specialist. Now other startups have arrived, and the old base is alive with some 50 business tenants, a new high school, sports facilities, and several physicians' offices. It's also

one of the first places to benefit from new \$9 billion federal legislation to develop cyber-security systems.

Alive with music

The Mohawk Valley reverberates with music and culture. Hotvedt asserts, "As someone who grew up in Washington, DC, I can compare cultural offerings and say Utica compares quite favorably. Admittedly it's not every night at the drop of a hat, but I see more shows here than I did at the

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Kennedy Center.”

An area arts council booklet bulges with listings of performing arts organizations, museums, galleries, and arts centers in a three-county area that includes such easy-to-reach communities as Clinton, Hamilton, Cooperstown, and Cazenovia. A special treat for Gilbert A. Lawrence, MD, a radiation oncologist, and his wife is [Utica Monday Nite](#), a summer-long downtown entertainment series. “Many different events are there each week (in eight locations), and they include open-air live American bands, plus music presented by various ethnic clubs and social groups.”

The series benefits from the city’s surprising ethnic diversity, says Lynne Mishalanie, the series founder. “The demographics here are not a lot different from New York. You can hear people speaking 32 different languages.”

The spin-off is a pleasing diversity of ethnic (and other) restaurants. “One thing that really sets the area apart is the food,” says Rich Lupia, a TV meteorologist and lifelong resident. “It’s tremendous!” And, he insists, you can’t leave Utica without trying one of the Italian originals—Chicken Riggies, a pasta delight (rigatoni) in the chef’s secret marinara sauce.

There are plenty of low-key summer concerts in surrounding villages, too, says Lawrence, in addition to Utica’s own [70-piece symphony, chamber orchestra, and ballet company](#). And there are festivals almost everywhere, if you search them out. “It took me two or three years to figure out where the different towns

are, but a person needs to make an effort to find them and drive 30 to 50 minutes,” he says.

Andrew Wickline, MD, an orthopaedic surgeon, seconds the thought, with a special vote for Meelan’s in Clark Mills where he finds “the best home-made hot dogs you have ever eaten” and “several wonderful Polish shops” in New York Mills, also the place where “the women still hand-pinch the pierogis (ravioli-like turnovers). Each town has its own flavor.”

Wickline says among the biggest R&R attractions are the [Adirondack Mountains](#), practically on the Oneida County doorstep. Hiking and “top-notch trout fishing” are high on his list, and his five-star experiences have been trips aboard the steam-driven [Adirondack Scenic Railroad](#). He, his wife, and two children load canoes onto a special car, get off at Old Forge, 35 miles north, paddle on the Black River and Nelson Lake, “where you can watch the ospreys hunt and ‘carnivorous’ pitcher plants eat insects.” Afterward, they chug back to Utica.

Besides his delight in the cultural scene, Lawrence marvels over his real estate bargain. “I have a bigger house at one-tenth the price my daughter paid in California,” he says.

During the downturn, “we saw houses sit on the market for years,” recalls Ed Jekel, the office manager for a large realty company. “Now the average time is about 100 days.” Jekel likes the fact that there aren’t many “cookie cutter neighborhoods.” The mix of styles includes 100-year-old Victorian, Cape Cod, contemporary, and 20-year-old split

levels.

“Today Utica is kind of a hidden jewel,” says native North Dakotan Kathy Kellogg, the president of the [Chamber Alliance of the Mohawk Valley](#), a coalition of 10 area towns. “The architecture downtown is wonderful, and visitors are astounded by the people’s spirit of enthusiasm.” Kellogg also cites “a massive amount of new retail,” including new and upgraded malls in the immediate area and plans to expand a Syracuse shopping center 40 miles away into a conglomerate rivaling Minneapolis’ Mall of America.

Historic ups and downs

In today’s fast-track lifestyle, ubiquitous Interstates let us forget an early American fact: For a long time, the Mohawk Valley provided the only easy passage through the Appalachian Mountains from Quebec to Alabama. That made it a perfect route for trade as well as military movement. In 1777 the bloodiest Revolutionary War battle erupted at Fort Stanwix (a.k.a. Fort Schuyler) and in the surrounding woods. The British had hoped to divide and conquer the colonies by sending three forces from different directions to meet at Albany. An American victory halted the scheme and set the stage for the Redcoat defeat at Saratoga and final American victory six years later.

Impressed by American toughness in New York, the French had joined our side, and it was their armada that cut off a final British sea retreat at Yorktown, Virginia. Today Fort Stanwix has been reconstructed, and a large monument in the town of Oriskany, just north of Utica,

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commemorates the Mohawk Valley victory.

Hospitality was Utica's earliest industry, with stagecoach and canal travelers filling its inns. But once the era of train travel emerged, stops weren't long enough for overnight stays, and tourism shriveled.

Cotton and woolen operations boomed until New England mills undercut them by using cheaper steam instead of water power and hand labor. But Utica bounced back, with even more mills, after civic leaders pressured wealthy citizens into financing steam conversions. It was an early example of the citizens pulling together.

In the late 1840s, Utica became the home of the world's first commercial telegraph company. One of its three founding partners, entrepreneur Theodore Faxton, later founded [Faxton Hospital](#), one of today's two surviving general health-care facilities. Faxton was a pacesetter who helped set the tone that made his city a magnet for new enterprises and for politics. Two of America's most powerful legislators in the rough-and-tumble 19th century were Utica native sons: Governor Horatio Seymour and U.S. Senator Roscoe Conkling.

Fast forward to the 20th century. The economic roller coaster went down with The Great Depression, up during World War II when the air base opened and with the postwar arrival of GE and other major employers, then down again when the textile industry departed for good to the cheap-labor south. Finally, the closing of the air base and other industrial "fixtures" created the bleak

terrain Hotvedt discovered when he arrived in 1996.

### The promise is showing

A cardiologist with several years of training in Minneapolis and St. Louis, Hotvedt had been introduced to central New York as a medical student at the [University of Rochester](#). In fact, he says, "I was just about to take a job at the university when I saw an ad in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) for a sixth cardiologist at a Utica clinic.

"I had been doing cardiac cath for four years, but this gave me the opportunity to join an established and actively growing practice. The job looked so good that I had to rethink things." It didn't hurt that the state-of-the-art [Mohawk Valley Heart Institute](#) would soon open, a cooperative venture between [St. Elizabeth Medical Center](#) and [Faxton-St. Luke's Healthcare](#).

The area had a different appeal for his wife, Liz, a competitive figure skater. "There are good facilities and good coaches here," Hotvedt reports, "and there's a nominal fee for ice time."

All types of winter sports abound. "It's a defining season in central New York," says Dave Scranton, a writer/photographer for [Quality of Life](#), an annual publication covering life in the valley. "Legendary lake-effect snowfalls drop more snow here than anywhere east of the Rockies." They may not be as high as Vail or Aspen, but, he adds, "New York is home to more downhill ski areas than any other state." He says there is even a ski area within the Utica city limits.

Hardly anyone bridges the gap between smokestack and laptop better than Earle C. Reed, vice-chairman of [ECR International - Utica Boilers](#), founded in 1928 by his grandfather as Utica Radiators. Over the years, the company kept pace with new technologies. But Reed has a different role in current history. A vigorous health enthusiast, he was searching for a dramatic way to celebrate his company's 50th anniversary in 1977. Possibly inspired by the 5K Heart Run and Walk started the year before by the local American Heart Association, he opted to sponsor a 15K run, naming it the "[Boilermaker](#)" to link two of his major life interests.

Today, the Heart Run in February, now consisting of three runs and two walks, and the Boilermaker in July—are international successes. Ahead of all other cities in both participation and dollars raised, the Boilermaker has become the largest 15K run in the country. The 5K Heart Run, now called [America's Greatest Heart Run and Walk](#), weighs in just as heavily.

"We are an example of how a community can pull together to do something extraordinary," says Reed. "There are runners who come back year after year for the Boilermaker because they're so impressed with the community spirit here."

The Boilermaker now encompasses a full week of events, ending with an induction ceremony at the [National Distance Running Hall of Fame](#), a direct spinoff from the two races. Turnouts from the Boilermaker pump more than \$1.4 million into the economy. The return from the heart event is more

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subtle, says Dick Mattia, the executive director of Utica's American Heart Association affiliate, but hefty sums filter back in the form of research grants, especially to the [Masonic Medical Research Laboratory](#) (MMRL).

Health web

"This is one of the most giving communities in the U.S.," marvels Ronald P. Kamp, the development director of MMRL, a world-prominent basic medical research facility just two blocks from the Boilermaker starting point. MMRL specializes in the fields of experimental cardiology and sudden death and has repeatedly made its mark with original findings, such as discovering mechanisms contributing to life-threatening cardiac arrhythmias, and applications for the artificial pacemaker, implantable cardioverter defibrillator, and ablation therapy.

"We revolutionized the world of cardiology with our discovery of the M cell, a new subpopulation of cells within the wall of the ventricles," says Kamp. "These cells have been shown to react differently to various heart medications as well as possessing unique electrical properties. This finding clearly demonstrated that there are differences within the heart and that it is not a homogeneous organ as previously thought."

Kamp goes on to describe more research coups. "MMRL scientists have also discovered the cellular basis of the various waves that appear on the ECG and the first gene responsible for a cause of sudden death—and provided the first direct evidence linking an abnormal heart rhythm to

sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)."

Coincidentally or not, the lab is complemented by another large Utica employer, [CONMED](#), which manufactures advanced surgical instruments, including arthroscopic devices and heart-monitoring electrodes. The lab's success also was a boon to St. Elizabeth Medical Center. Its ultra-modern cardiac program, in turn, played a deciding role in attracting more well-skilled practitioners.

If the two heart races epitomize Utica's extraordinary community spirit and generosity, a recent accolade from the [Healthcare Association of New York State](#) (HANYS) cited all three hospitals for "cooperation that stands out across the state as a model for others."

The praise came for the establishment of the Heart Institute and its continuing success in a kind of three-pronged program of care for cardiac patients. "It's a rarity to find competitors making a joint venture out of something as important as heart surgery," says HANYS' executive vice president Ray Sweeney.

New York has a reputation among health professionals for its tight controls to prevent duplication of health-care services. That's why it took a long time for Mohawk Valley advocates to prove local need for high-tech heart procedures. But when the state finally approved cardiac surgery for Utica in 1995, St. E's (as St. Elizabeth is known), Faxton, and St. Luke's-Memorial Hospitals were ready. (The latter two were merged in 2000 as Faxton-St. Luke's Healthcare.)

Under the Heart Institute aegis, patients undergo catheterization procedures at either St. E's or the St. Luke's campus; angioplasty, cardiac surgery, and intensive care at St. E's; inpatient rehab care at the Faxton campus; and outpatient rehab at the St. Luke's campus. All of these are state-of-the-art settings. Should one wonder why this sophisticated medical system is seemingly in the middle of nowhere, it helps to realize that a quarter million people live within a 20-mile radius.

In a way, the spirit of cooperation was a hard birth. "Hospitals were pretty competitive," says William Hall, MD, a family practitioner who came to Utica in 1978. "Faxton-St. Luke's was always at odds with St. Elizabeth. You couldn't get them to work together—until the state demanded that they get together." They realized that a coop arrangement was the only way they could afford staff and equipment to make them competitive with facilities in cities like Rochester, Syracuse, and even Albany, where many patients were going for intricate surgery and high-tech diagnoses. Today, St. E's is a partner in the regional cancer center opened by Faxton-St. Luke's in 2000, and teamwork in other areas such as orthopaedics and even obstetrics is an example many another medical community would like to emulate.

Besides standard surgery and care, the cancer center offers HDR brachytherapy, prostate seed implants, stereotactic radiosurgery, and intensity modulated radiation therapy. A tumor board is on call for patient recommendations. There's a

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comprehensive breast care center, complete with mastectomy boutique, plus convenient outpatient therapies at several locations.

The cancer center and rehab facilities at the Faxton campus are components of the health-care complex's seven "centers of excellence." St. Luke's specializes in obstetrics, pediatrics, and long-term care.

Last year, Wickline was recruited following a fellowship to head St. E's new [Total Joint Replacement Program](#). Fresh from an orthopaedic residency at Albany Medical College and fellowship in hip and knee reconstruction at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Wickline has already put some new concepts to work.

"With top-of-the-line implants and cutting-edge pain management techniques, we have patients walking more than 60 feet two days after surgery," he says. "The team that the hospital has put together is exceptional, and the patients note the esprit de corps among the staff. On the fourth day, most patients are ready to go home, so on the third evening we treat them to a group dinner, with food brought in from Symeon's, a local Greek restaurant." Who absorbs the cost? The hospital. "We keep other hospital costs down because patients get out sooner."

The first hospital in Utica (1866), St. E's also established the area's first and only training program for nurses (now the [College of Nursing](#)) in 1904. Today's nurse supply could be better, say Hotvedt and others, but many of the 50 or so graduates do stay in the area. Last year, St. E's administration beefed up its employee appeal by starting its Career Ladder Collaboration, a training program

that prepares caregivers to climb the steps to higher positions—and, of course, higher pay.

Other efforts on the part of St. E's to recruit and retain key personnel are its [School of Radiography](#), established in 1945, and its family medicine residency, begun in 1975. "It's rare for a city of this size to have an approved residency," says one of the program's founders, Roger D. Moore, MD. "Eight to ten young doctors finish the program each year."

Hall, now one of a large number of medical professionals who compete every year in the Boilermaker, was in the first residency group. He grew up in Phoenix, whose year-round sun is the main attraction for some people. But other aspects of Phoenix don't appeal to him. "In a big city, you really don't have any control," he says. "What's going to happen professionally is in someone else's hands."

As for the standard of health care in Utica, he says, "Now you don't have to refer patients to Syracuse and Albany." That means greater need for physicians to handle the increasing number of patients staying near home.

If he needed a reason to stay in Utica, he discovered it four years ago when he had a job change and considered moving elsewhere. The idea of a move was short-circuited by his wife. "She said, 'I plan to die here!'" Moore, who recently retired after many years of practice in the nearby college town of Clinton, is a confirmed fan of the Mohawk Valley.

"We researched seven, eight, or nine communities with some objectivity," he recalls, "and have never regretted

settling here. The community is just perfect."

Among Utica's appealing assets, he says, is "a wonderful art institute." He's referring to the [Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute](#), with a creditable collection and art school. Moore, whose first degree was in fine art, also exhibits his many paintings at a gallery in Clinton. Until a few years ago there was an opera company where he and his wife, Joanna, were featured singers. They hope it will be reorganized soon.

Aside from the professional opportunities (he says there's a big need for orthopaedic specialists), Wickline has high hopes for Utica as a community. "I came here because I think this is as yet an undiscovered gem that's waiting to be polished."

Lupia, the TV's weatherman, has noticed an influx of people from New York City since September 11th. For now, life seems more pleasant along the canal than along the East River, and it's far less expensive. His prediction: "Bring in a few big employers giving out paychecks from \$30,000 to \$70,000, cut property taxes by even just a little bit, and you'll have one of the hottest areas in the state." ■

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