

## **Ballston Spa vs Saratoga Springs 1836**

*This blog is based on the "Great Debate" presented at Brookside Museum on August 15<sup>th</sup> on the relative merits of the villages of Ballston Spa and Saratoga Springs in 1836. Joshua B. Aldridge (Jim Richmond) presented Ballston's case and Henry Walton (Charlie Kuenzel) argued on behalf of Saratoga.*

### **Beginnings**

Both Ballston Spa and Saratoga Springs had much in common during the first years of settlement. Both were founded around mineral springs attractive to travelers seeking medical remedies for their ailments. Both were partitioned in 1770 during the survey of the Kayaderoserras Patent. The land around each principle spring – High Rock in Saratoga and the Iron Railing Spring in Ballston – was owned by descendants of prominent merchant families from New York City. Henry Walton' although initially residing at his estate south of Ballston Spa, inherited much of the early village of Saratoga that had come into the possession of his father Jacob through the Van Dam and Livingston families.

Nicholas Low obtained title to 100 acres in Ballston Spa, extending from today's Milton Avenue westward to property belonging to Joshua B. Aldridge. Low, although an absentee landlord who only ventured north each year to check on his investments, is rightly considered the founder of Ballston for his leadership in developing the village,

In 1771 both village's' springs became known to European settlers for the first time. Sir William Johnson visited High Rock with the assistance of members of the Mohawk tribe. A surveying team led by Beriah Palmer discovered the Ballston spring in a swampy valley while partitioning the Patent. The land around both springs remained virtually uninhabited for the next 15 years as the American Revolutions interviewed. Intrepid pioneers that did venture into the area established their homesteads on more hospitable land for farming and along local creeks.

Early attempts to provide rude accommodations for the infrequent visitors to High Rock Spring met with resistance from the Mohawks, who saw the arrivals as interlopers on their land. Although both villages were visited by George Washington during his 1783 northern tour, it was not until 1787 that the first permanent settler, Alexander Bryon, arrived and constructed a tavern on the hill overlooking the High Rock spring.

In the same year, the first log tavern in Ballston was erected by Salmon Tryon, again on high ground above the spring. Benji Douglas, grandfather of Senator Stephen A. Douglas, also arrived in 1787, built a two room cabin in the valley next to the spring and soon thereafter added a four room addition. Both Tryon's and Douglas' first accommodations were labeled as "miserable habitations" by an early visitor.

In 1792 Douglas expanded his tavern into a boarding house that became known as the "First Respectable house" in the village and four years later Joshua Aldridge married Pricilla after the death of her husband, hotel owner Joseph Westcott. As tourists arrived in increasing numbers in the late 1790's, Joshua expanded the hotel each season, adding more rooms, spacious gardens and a Grecian temple on the hill behind the hotel.

Not to be outdone, Nicholas Low, the absentee landlord, built a home on the western end of his property, near the Douglas establishment, later knows of McMaster's Hotel. He also sought to enhance his investment by leasing lots to prospective shopkeepers anxious to supply the needs of the increasing number of visitors to the spring. Finally, in 1804, Low invested in the construction of the largest hotel in the United States, the San Souci, which could accommodate 150 guests. Clearly, at this point, the advantage lay with the southern village – Saratoga Springs clearly began this "competition" in second place.

## **Growth**

That equation began to change in 1798 when Gideon Putnam arrived from Sutton, Massachusetts and settled in Saratoga. He was a man of energy and vision, that soon began to chip away at the dominance of his sister village. After establishing a successful sawmill and lumber business in the vicinity of today's Saratoga Hospital, Gideon leased and then purchased land in the lower village from Henry Walton and built Putnam Tavern in 1802. Soon thereafter he laid out streets and lots for sale to entrepreneurs interested in capitalizing on the newly discovered Congress Spring adjacent to his tavern. In 1811 he began construction of the much larger Congress Hall. An accident during construction led to his death in 1812, but the die had been cast. Soon thereafter, Henry Walton, Nathan Lewis and several other prominent Ballston residents moved to Saratoga Springs, sensing that the opportunities were greater there.

Meanwhile Ballston has taken the lead in another aspect of growth, incorporating as a village in 1807. The three village trustees, led by Aldridge, began to upgrade the access to the springs in an effort to encourage increased visitation through the summer season. Several additional hotels and boarding houses sprung up to complement the two main facilities – Low's San Souci and Aldridge's, today the home of Brookside Museum. In 1819 Ballston received a boost in the competition by being named the shire town of Saratoga County, an event that helped the village to remain an important rival of Saratoga, although the tide was beginning to turn.

During the 1820's Ballston's accommodations were soon overshadowed by those of their neighbor to the north - in size if not at first in elegance. In 1819 Walton sold a prime lot on Broadway in Saratoga to Nathan Lewis for \$1 for the purpose of the construction of the Pavilion Hotel. Walton reasoned that the hotel would increase the value of his surrounding property, which it did. Other hotels followed. Union Hall grew from its Putnam Tavern beginnings into a much larger edifice under the stewardship of Gideon's widow Doanda and their sons Rockwell and Washington. In 1824 the first United States hotel was erected one block to the north. At these and other hotels, Saratoga excelled in developing expansive grounds, tree-line streets, and footpaths designed for the visual pleasure of their visitors.

## **Diverging Paths**

By that time, Saratoga Spring had also established its own government, giving the village fathers the legal means to provide facilities and entertainment designed to attract ever more visitors to take the waters, see and be seen by others, and enjoy pleasurable activities including socializing at gaming tables while enjoying more spiritous drinks.

While Ballston was not above attracting guests with pleasurable activities, by the 1830's that village was clearly at a disadvantage. Not only did they fail to keep up with the more aggressive approach of their neighbor, its springs were also declining, both in flow and taste. During the 1820's an ambitious attempt to improve existing springs and drill new ones came up short, much to the consternation of Aldridge and other Ballston business leaders. Combined with the marketing prowess of Saratogian John Clark - owner, bottler and promoter of the Congress Spring- the springs of the shire town were overshadowed by Saratoga's.

However, Ballston Spa had another card to play - waterpower. Gristmills and sawmills had sprung up along the Kaayaderoseras Creek and its tributaries from the first days of settlement. As it meandered southeast through Milton to the village its mill ponds and dams provided the power for woolen and cotton mills. By the 1830's experienced millwrights began developing the paper mills that would come to dominate the local economy in future years. Saratoga Springs, absent any significant steams, could not match Ballston in these job-producing mills and increasingly depended on the resort industry to attract the social elite looking for excitement.

In 1832, a revolution in transportation had a significant impact on both villages. The incorporation and construction of Schenectady and Saratoga Railroad, in which Henry Walton played a major role, greatly improved access to both resorts. As time went on, the railroad would benefit Ballston's cotton and paper mills along the Kayaderoseras, but even more so the entertainment mecca that Saratoga Spring was to become in future years.

By 1836, both Joshua Aldridge and Henry Walton, who had given their lives and resources to the development of their hometowns, could look back on the legacy of a job well done, and look forward to a bright future.