

This Week in Saratoga County History – Ballston Spa vs Saratoga Springs

Submitted by Jim Richmond – April 30, 2020

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Ballston Springs – 1817 engraving by J. Hill

One hundred and ninety-five years ago, on April 27, 1825 Benjamin Silliman, Professor of Chemistry at Yale University penned a letter to Harvey Loomis, proprietor of the San Souci hotel in Ballston Spa, which was subsequently printed in the Ballston Spa Gazette in August 1825, and copied in travelogues over the next several years. Silliman was a noted geologist who had first visited the resort village at the age of 18 while attending Yale. By 1824 when he returned to Ballston, he was one of the most well-known scientists in the United States. He founded the *American Journal of Science* in 1818 and in 1825, soon after writing this letter, he traveled to Europe to confer with other scientists, including his former student, Samuel F.B. Morse, later to invent the telegraph. Below are some excerpts from this letter, which illustrates the competition that was developing between Ballston Spa and Saratoga Springs in the 1820's.

“Mr Loomis- Dear Sir: You request my opinion of the Mineral Waters of Ballston. They are in my view, very valuable, and I can discover no serious reason why public opinion should be less favorable to them than formerly. I became acquainted with the old spring near Mr. Aldridge's in consequence of using its water uninterruptedly, at the fountain head, for a month in the autumn of 1797.”

Harvey Loomis, who married the step-daughter of Joshua B. Aldridge, purchased the San Souci in 1823 from original owner Nicholas Low and had invested heavily in making improvements to the large, twenty-year old hotel, the flagship hostelry in the village made famous by its springs. His solicitation for an opinion by a well renowned visitor and tourist was paying off.

“The old spring is, I suppose, surpassed by no mineral fountain in the world, as a brisk, copious, slightly saline and strong chalybeate. Its cathartic properties are strong and its tonic powers equally so. There is no spring either at Ballston or Saratoga which I should prefer to this. The Congress spring is also as far as I am concerned, without rival in its class but it is scarcely proper to call it a chalybeate.”

Here Professor Silliman directly addressed the elephant in the room. John Clarke arrived in Saratoga Springs in 1823, the same year Loomis purchased the San Souci, and immediately began developing the Congress Spring, constructing a bottling plant in 1825 in a successful effort to market the spring water. His success was recognized as a threat to the prominence of Ballston Spa, which had been the early leader in the competition for tourists in the area.

“Nothing can exceed the variety, copiousness and excellence of the Springs at Saratoga but those of Ballston are in no respect, except that of number and variety, inferior to them, and I trust the day is not far distant when a truly liberal feeling will, in both villages, lead to mutual commendations and an amiable rivalry in efforts to please and accommodate their guests...With the best wishes for the prosperity of both places, I remain your ob’t servant. B Silliman New-Haven April 25, 1825.”

Silliman ends on a conciliatory note, but the battle had been joined and over the years Saratoga Springs became the victor, although not by the springs alone. But that is another story.