

This Week in Saratoga County History -The Death of John Morrissey

Submitted by Charlie Kuenzel May 7, 2020

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During the 1800's, Saratoga Springs became the number one tourist destination for summer visitors in the United States. Although the reputation of Saratoga Springs was originally built on health practices using the many mineral springs, it was further enhanced with the addition of thoroughbred horse racing and casino gambling. The one single person responsible for the introduction of those new activities was John Morrissey. May 1st each year is the anniversary of his death in Saratoga history.

Morrissey was born in Ireland in 1831 and at about age 2 the family moved to Troy N.Y. Morrissey went to work at the age of 12, being employed at many factories. At 17 he started working on a steamship that made daily runs from Albany to New York City and married the ship captain's daughter, Sarah Smith in 1849. Together they had one child, a son.

The 1849 California Gold Rush lured him to San Francisco in 1851 where he never made any money as a prospector but became a very successful gambler. In 1852 he tried testing his boxing skills and defeated George Thompson in California for a \$5,000 prize. Morrissey then returned to New York to schedule a fight with Yankee Sullivan and at one time was World Heavyweight Champ. Those boxing skills were used in his next job as an enforcer for the Dead Rabbits Gang that supported corrupt Tammany Hall politicians in New York City.

In 1861 John Morrissey came to Saratoga and opened a successful small casino on Woodlawn Avenue that was known at the time as Matilda Street. He knew that the wealthy wanted additional entertainment and made plans to introduce horse racing. Morrissey joined with William Travers, John Hunter and Leonard Jerome to run the first races at the Saratoga Race Track in August of 1863. Even during the height of the Civil War, it was a big hit. This success made him realize that an even larger casino would give him a bigger profit. In 1870 he opened a palatial structure called the Club House that today is known as the Canfield Casino in Congress Park.

The Club House was constructed and decorated to impress wealthy gamblers. Morrissey instituted a few rules of operation of this illegal operation including no locals and no women could ever gamble. By barring locals from the casino, few from the village could ever be against the operation since no locals could ever be harmed by losing money gambling. He also donated a large amount of his profit each year to local churches and non-profits. Locals loved him.

John Morrissey set the tone in the early years of Saratoga Springs by making the village a “fun” location for America’s elite and became the place to see and be seen in the summer. Unfortunately, he died of pneumonia on May 1, 1878 in a room on the second floor of the Adelphi Hotel at the young age of 47. His funeral, in Troy N.Y., saw 20,000 people attend. After his death the last owner of the casino was Richard Canfield, therefore the name today.

Watch for activities during 2020 to celebrate the 150-year anniversary of the Canfield Casino’s opening for business by Morrissey.