

This Week in Saratoga County History

Local Reactions to the Death of Ulysses S. Grant

Submitted by Dave Hubbard July 23, 2020

Dave Hubbard was on staff for 11 years at Grant Cottage. He held several different positions during his time. Dave retired at the end of December, 2019. To share your ideas for future article in this series, please contact Jim Richmond at saratogacohistoryroundtable@gmail.com



Last Photograph of Ulysses Grant in his favorite chair

On July 23, 1885, at 8:08 AM, Ulysses S. Grant lost his final battle, dying from cancer of the throat and tongue. He died on Mt. McGregor in Drexel's Cottage (now known as Grant Cottage) where Grant and his family spent the last 5½ weeks. Grant's doctors felt it was best he leave New York City for the summer to get away from the oppressive heat and pollution of the city and find a place with cool clean air due to his illness.

What brought Grant to Mt. McGregor? His problems and the two biggest battles of his life started the year before. In the spring of 1884, Grant lost all his money in a Ponzi scheme and in the fall, it was discovered that he had terminal cancer.

With no money to support his family, President Grant finally agreed to write his Memoirs to earn money. Mark Twain gave him a liberal contract to publish Grant's Memoirs. Grant successfully provided for his family by finishing his memoirs just three days prior to his death.

Grant had many visitors during his time at the cottage –former soldiers from both the Union and the Confederacy, business men, a group from Mexico who was touring the United States and many tourists from Saratoga and throughout the area. A little girl staying with her

family at the hotel came to the porch of the cottage with a large bouquet of flowers as big as she was. Grant's oldest son, Fred went to help the girl with her flowers when she informed him,

"These flowers are not for you, they are for the sick man."

At the time of Grant's passing his family and his doctors were at his bed side in the cottage.

Shortly after his death the telegraph office in the Hotel Balmoral sent out the message to the world. Within minutes after the message was sent bells began to ring all over the country in churches, firehouses, and other locations. Flags were also lowered to half-mast. By 8:14 AM, the New York Times displayed a special edition in their window announcing the death of the President.

On the eve of Grant's death the Wheeler Post # 92 of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the veterans group for Civil War soldiers, set up guards around the cottage. They were there to protect the family.

Following his death, hundreds of visitors went to Mt. McGregor on the railroad hoping to pay their respects to Grant' and his family. Even though no announcement had been made as when visitors would be allowed to visit, that did not stop them from coming.

On August 4th a funeral service was scheduled at the cottage before Grant was to head for New York City after a night in Albany. Over 1,000 people filled the cottage porch and much of the lawn to pay their respects to the Civil war hero and former two-term President.

When the funeral train left Mt. McGregor for Saratoga, locals lined the tracks at every possible location, to try to catch a glimpse of their hero. The only noise you could hear was the salutes being fired in Grant's honor. Soldiers and D & H trackmen guarded each intersection along the way.

In Saratoga, they moved Grant from the narrow gauge Mt. McGregor Railroad to the D & H main line for the trip to Albany and then on to New York City. Near the D & H depot the streets were blocked by 10,000 people trying to get a final look at their hero.

The evening of August 4, on the way to New York, Grant laid in state in the State Capital where in the one afternoon, over 77,000 paid their respects.

The formal funeral was held in New York City on August 8th. It was and still is the longest funeral ever held in the city, taking over 7 hours for all the people to walk from City Hall to Riverside Park to the temporary tomb was located and the permanent one was built.