

The Gristmill

Saratoga County History Journal



Preserving the History of Saratoga County

Spring 2021

Saratoga's Broughton House

The Affluent African-American Vacation Destination

By Lorie Wies

The Grand Union. The United States. Congress Hall. When one thinks about the great hotels of Saratoga Springs during the pinnacle of the Gilded Age, with all its high fashion and wealth, these are the places one imagines the upper-class tourists of the era spending their time. In those images, standing quietly in the background, ready to provide service on a moment's notice, are the African-American waiters and maids and drivers dutifully going about their tasks, the mantra in their heads "*Lord, please don't take me in August!*"—the wages and tips of the Season being their prime source of annual income. But tucked away, a block off Broadway, behind the Clarendon Hotel and what is now St. Peter's Church, was what once was called "A swell hotel for Colored people or rather, the hotel for swell Colored people" The Broughton House catered to upper middle class African-Americans for over 30 years. Yet very few people have ever heard of it.

The Broughton House was owned and operated by John C. Broughton, a Brooklyn tavern owner and business man. Born in 1823 in Savannah, Georgia, it is probable that Broughton was an enslaved child although this is not verified. Broughton moved to Brooklyn in 1843. He established himself as a fine caterer and owner of a popular saloon. He was active in the politics of the City, serving as a Councilman for several years. Broughton bought the property in Saratoga Springs in 1862. He very quickly began attracting an economically rising African-American clientele well versed in the arts, literature, and politics of the day. In 1879, an article in the *Saratogian* called a party at the Broughton House one of the "Brightest festive gatherings" of the Season. It spoke of "brilliantly illuminated parlors" and the ladies were adorned with "dazzling gems and gay dresses." According to the *Troy Daily Times*, by 1886 Broughton's wealth was valued at a quarter of a million dollars.

The Broughton House property was quite large, encompassing the full corner of Williams St and S. Federal St. The Main building had single and double rooms, all well furnished with much natural light and there was a two-story attached cottage. The café and dining rooms were described in the *New York Globe* in 1883 as



Hartaway Wayland,
A Saratoga patron of the Broughton House

being "neat and comfortable. And a new floor on the dancing platform would prove of great benefit to dancers." There was also a garden with a swing, a bowling alley and billiard room, sweeping lawns, croquet grounds, a barber shop and a bar. While African-Americans were no longer barred from attending cultural events or the Races at the Track by the early 1870's, they were not encouraged to do so. Hence, they created their own mirror image of the opulence experienced by their White counterparts.

Patrons of the Broughton House came from all over the United States, with International guests, as well. Ini-

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Broughton House

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tially, arrivals were noted in the *Saratogian* much like the other hotels. But as the influence of the Jim Crow Laws from the South migrated North, the arrivals to the African-American hotel were no longer published in that paper. Thriving African-American newspapers covered the comings and goings though, in particular The New York Age, a prominent National publication.

The composition of the guest lists is reflective of the breadth of interests shared by and with them. Guests included noted academics who lectured on a variety of topics of the day including an address by Rev. C.A. Leftwich, Chaplain of Howard University on "The Necessity of Literary Societies" and a musical presentation by the Wayland Seminary Choral group. A frequent guest was Dr. Edwin C. Howard, co-founder of Mercy Hospital in Philadelphia. Politicians and businessmen such as John M. Herbert from Trenton, NJ., brother of Priscilla Herbert the first African-American graduate of the College of New Jersey, and a prominent member of the New Jersey Republican Party and successful businessman, and Rev. William T. Dixon, the founder of the New England Baptist Association and the first Black post of the GAR (his funeral was attended by over 6,000 people) were noted guests. Thomas J. Bowers, known as the "Colored Mario" was also a frequent guest- a singer of romantic ballads and popular opera arias, he was nicknamed after a famous Italian Opera singer of the day and his fame was later fictionalized in a 1964 episode of the TV show Bonanza titled Enter Thomas Bowers. A frequent Seasonal guest was Troy native Peter Baltimore. A barber by trade, he was a prominent abolitionist and member of the Underground Railroad, and a close friend of Frederick Douglas. His son, Garnet Douglas Baltimore was the first African-American graduate of RPI. It was noted in a September 1886



Detail from the 1888 Burleigh map showing the Broughton House


issue of the *Troy Daily Times* that the "past season has seen nearly 100 guests at a time from the wealthier classes" staying at the Broughton House.

Contrary to the policies of many of the other hotels, local citizens were welcome at the opulent balls which were regularly held. The social columns of the New York Age noted a program given by Arabella Chapman Miller of Albany, the first African-American graduate of Albany High School and an accomplished musician and teacher. Hartaway A. Wayland, featured at an exhibit in Paris on rising African-American men, was a resident of Saratoga who had attended Howard College and was the Headwaiter at the Worden Hotel; he and his wife owned several pieces of property in Saratoga and were often mentioned as attendees, as were a number of family members. Local Pharmacist Dr. T.H. Sands Pennington often socialized at the Broughton House. Others frequently mentioned were the Ray sisters, the daughters of Abolitionist and Anti-slavery Activist Charles Bennet Ray, who were said to light up the floor with their dancing.

The Broughton House was also a place for Black baseball players to stay when competing in the area. The nearby Clarendon House was a sponsor and a popular destination for the many leagues that came to play ball with racially integrated teams. But apparently, while they may have played baseball together, they still preferred segregated sleeping quarters.

John C. Broughton died in Brooklyn on May 6, 1903. In his will he left the property in Brooklyn to his daughter, Mary Coleman Mosely and his niece, Mary L. Wolff was left the two houses in Saratoga valued at \$30,000. The will was ultimately challenged by another daughter Anna Broughton Campbell, who argued that he was not of his sound mind when he wrote the will. The litigation must have taken its toll on the property, the Broughton House was put up for sale in 1913. Listed in the *Saratogian* as a "3 story, 16 room boarding house with a basement and a 2 story frame cottage with large grounds, fine lawn and shade, the asking price was \$3500, willing to sell for \$3200, \$500 or \$600 down with small yearly payments." The buildings were ultimately razed.

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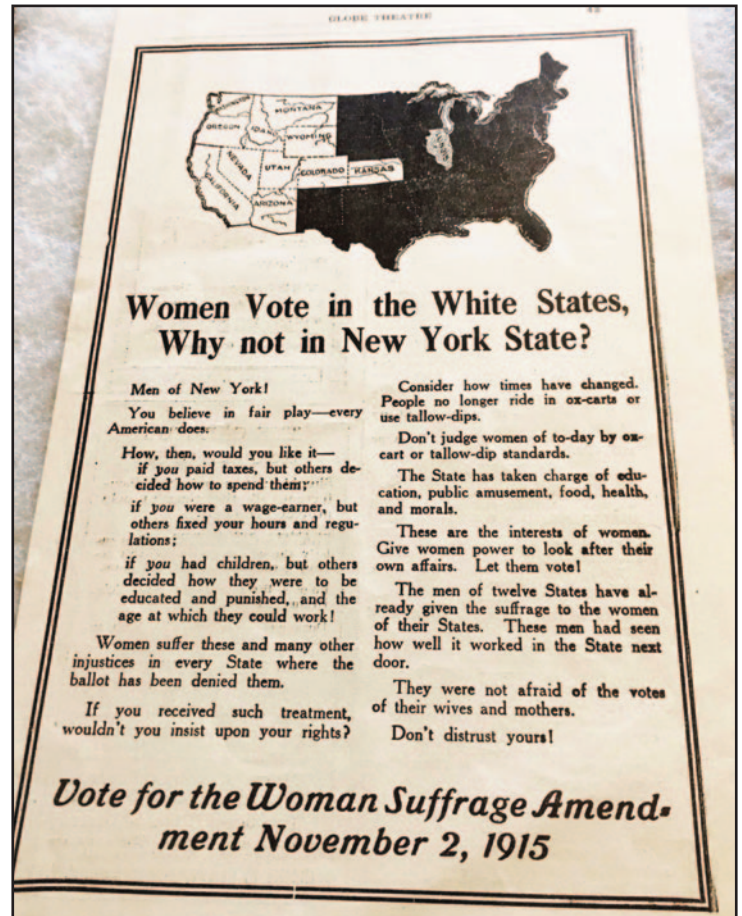
Saratoga County Women Help Win the Vote

By William McPherson

When the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1919 New York women had already secured the right to vote. Victory came in November, 1917 when male voters agreed to a proposition that amended the state constitution and granted them that right. New York's women were not "given" the right to vote as some have phrased it, but earned it through superb organizational skill, hard work and effort over the course of many years. The campaign to amend the state constitution was directed by the New York State Women's Suffrage Association (NYSWSA). Its strategy called for organization on a state wide basis with affiliates in every county, town, city, and village in the state. Kathryn Starbuck (1887-1965) led the effort in Saratoga County. Starbuck was born in Saratoga Springs to a family that owned a Department Store in the city. She attended Vassar College, a suffragist hotbed, and was probably introduced to the movement there. Upon graduation, Kathryn attended Albany Law School and was among its first woman graduates. She practiced law and spent much of her career as a professor and executive secretary at Skidmore College. Starbuck chaired the Saratoga chapter of NYSWSA. The Saratoga branch grew out of the Saratoga Springs Equal Franchise League. It sought to establish suffrage chapters in the towns, cities, and villages of the county. As a result suffrage societies were created throughout the county including in Corinth, Ballston Spa, Schuylerville, and Mechanicville.

The Saratoga chapter of NYSWSA was very active in its promotion of suffrage. In 1912 it sponsored a suffrage booth at the county fair. Fair patrons saw a large white tent when they entered. A big Votes For Women banner in black letters against a yellow background was designed to catch their eye. The tent was almost completely covered with large printed signs advocating for the cause. One sign read "Women vote in Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, California, Idaho, and Washington. Why not New York?" Another said "give your girl an equal chance with your boy". A third sign asked "Women obey the laws why should they not help make them?" Suffragists manned the booth throughout the fair handing out literature and answering questions. They encouraged men to sign a petition in support of suffrage which they planned to present to the elected Saratoga County representatives. John Dix, governor of New York, was the most prominent person to visit the booth. He and his party left wearing votes for women pins.

In 1915 a suffrage proposition appeared on the ballot in New York State and, despite the efforts of suffragists, it failed. However, they were not deterred and in 1917 a second proposition was placed on the ballot. The Saratoga Suffrage Association played an important role in the campaign to win its approval. Toward this end it helped organize the Saratoga Suffrage Conference Aug. 29th and 30th in Saratoga Springs. Women from across the state journeyed to Saratoga for the event and promoted the



The above advertisement was aimed at answering the objections that some men were making against extending voting rights to women. Campaign materials were widely distributed. This ad was in a playbill from the Globe Theater.

cause along the way. Suffragists from the Buffalo region traveled in an automobile caravan, their cars decorated for the cause and stopping in towns and cities along the way to talk suffrage. They stopped in Syracuse where four street rallies were held. The two day convention in Saratoga drew the support of President Wilson who messaged the gathering saying "I hope that the voters of New York State will rally to the support of women's suffrage in overwhelming numbers." The state's political leaders lent their support and Governor Whitman and the Mayor of New York City spoke on behalf of suffrage.

Another significant action that the association took was in support of a huge suffrage parade held in New York City Saturday, Oct. 27, 1917. 20 - 25,000 women marched in support of the proposition. They carried petitions signed by over one million men and women demanding its passage. 7,000 of those signatures came from Saratoga County.

As a result of such efforts the second time proved to be

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Saratoga women

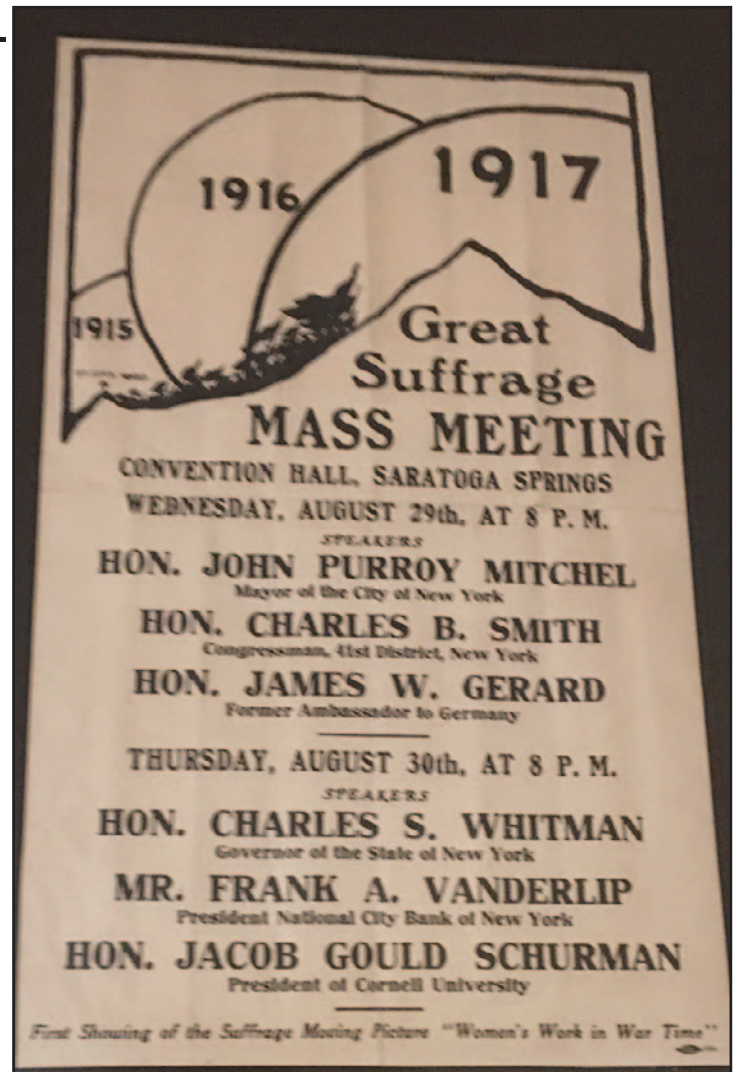
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the charm, and New York amended its constitution and enfranchised women. Kathryn Starbuck would run unsuccessfully for the New York State Assembly in 1918 and when her opponent questioned whether women were ready to play leadership roles in politics, a newspaper noted that Starbuck and the Saratoga Women's Suffrage Association turned a 2,000 vote majority against suffrage in Saratoga County in 1915 into a 1,000 vote majority in 1917.

Note: Information for this article was gathered from numerous period newspapers including *The Saratogian*, *The Albany Argus*, and the, *New York Evening Call*.



Campaign button from the William McPherson collection.



As the Suffrage movement neared victory, rallies drew political heavy weights.

When Yeggs hit Stillwater, again and again...

By David Waite

The quiet that had settled over the Village of Stillwater the night of April 24th, 1905 was shattered at 3 a.m. by a muffled explosion from the vicinity of Lake and Main Streets. Postmaster Frank Stumpf awoke with a start, rose from his bed, and peered out into the darkness to see a faint light in a window of the nearby post office. His response was quick and decisive, first, he fired shots out his bedroom window, then roused his neighbors by ringing a nearby fire alarm. The three robbers quickly fled toward Mechanicville in a wagon, leaving behind some of their tools and a shattered safe still containing \$600 in stamps. Little did Postmaster Stumpf and the Village of Stillwater realize that this was just the beginning.

It was five years before there was another attempt on the post office. This time the robbers were patient, persistent, and successful. The night before the robbery two men

had been seen at the back of the building and were chased off by Frank Stumpf. The next night he kept watch until midnight, finally giving up for the night. A few hours later the thieves struck, this time leaving the safe alone, only grabbing some loose change and a cheap watch owned by Postmaster Stumpf. The big score from the break-in was made at a nearby business, John Hamilton's jewelry store. It took three attempts to get into the store, finally entering through a rear window. Taken in the heist were gold rings, cuff links, chains, and watches valued at seven hundred dollars. Even with a good description of the men and the jewelry the thieves were never apprehended.

Though not identified directly, the methods used pointed to the perpetrators being Yeggs, safe-cracking hobos who were breaking into post offices across the nation during those years.

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Yeggs hit Stillwater

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The next break-in at the Stillwater Post Office came only two years later, early Sunday morning, April 7, 1912. Strangers were seen in the village in the days before, probably staking out the office to prepare for the heist. The safe was again blown open, this time using nitroglycerine with horse blankets stolen from a local livery to deaden the sound of the explosion. It is thought that the Yeggs fled in an automobile, but no clues were found as to what direction they had gone, and the theft was never solved.

The Story of John Yegg

With the colorful title of “Swedish Desperado,” John Yegg first surfaced somewhere in the Pacific Coast States in the late 1870s. Yet the story truly begins thousands of miles and some 20 years before this time at the laboratory of a world-renowned scientist. In 1847 the Italian chemist Ascanio Sobrero synthesized the powerful chemical nitroglycerin. Even though he strongly urged against its use as an explosive due to its unstable elements, the scientist Alfred Nobel began developing the substance as a commercial explosive. It took another three years, and several deadly accidents before a more stable form of this explosive, dynamite, was developed by mixing nitroglycerin with diatomaceous earth.

Soon after the Civil War, the United States government began investigating the use of nitroglycerin for both commercial and military purposes. Unfortunately, the results of these experiments, published and widely distributed, included successful tests on burglar-proof safes. It is here that the urban legend of John Yegg and the history of those named for him begins.

John Yegg came from one of the western states and was said in his time to have been one of the most experienced and expert electrical mechanics in that part of the country. The story goes that due to excessive drink he fell into a life of crime that let from simple robbery to blowing open safes using the slow and tedious process of drilling and dynamite. Learning of nitroglycerine’s power, and with rough instruction provided by the government, he soon perfected both the method of extracting nitroglycerine from dynamite and an effective procedure for breaking open a safe. Soon safe crackers across the country were finding a new level of success in their illegal endeavors.

While banks and other businesses were sometimes robbed by Yeggmen, their main target was a town’s post office. A Yegg had several reasons for this, the most important that the highest sentence for post-office burglary was five years. Another reason was the possibility of escape was greater with federal imprisonment as prisoners were often moved great distances for trials and other pro-

ceedings. Finally, those who had been inmates before felt that federal institutions offered better treatment to those who were serving time.

To successfully pull off their robberies the Yeggs would form gangs, often gathering around a known and successful mastermind. A gang usually consisted of two “inside men” who broke into the post office or other business that was being robbed, one or more “outside men,” who watched out for police or village watchmen. Additionally, the gang often had someone whose job it was to obtain details of the place that they were planning on hitting. Sometimes this was a child who had attached themselves to the gang who would be disguised as an invalid selling pencils or other small items door to door.

There is one important factor that greatly contributed to a Yegg’s success, he lived life in many ways like a freight-train hopping tramp. By using the railroad for transportation these bandits could travel unseen into nearly every area, and then quickly leave again, heading wherever a passing freight car would carry them.

Another unique aspect of the Yeggs lifestyle was their disinterest in accumulating wealth and living “high on the hog” from the proceeds of their burglary. After a successful robbery, it was not abnormal for a gang to head to a tavern, miles from the scene of the crime, and spend all their loot getting drunk. When a gang had been exceptionally successful, they were known to simply throw all their money on the bar and invite anyone present to help drink up the proceeds.

Methods and Tools of a Yeggman

As nitroglycerine was rarely available in a quantity that a Yegg needed to open a safe, the most skilled operator in a gang would extract the nitroglycerine from the inert material in dynamite that made the explosive relatively safe and stable. At a hobo camp along a railroad a fire was built, and dynamite stolen from a construction project was heated in a can of hot water until the nitroglycerine rose to the top. Given the name “soup” by the Yeggs, it was normally put into a pint or smaller-sized rubber container. The extremely unstable nitroglycerine was prone to explode if shaken or jarred, and the death of one or more of a gang from an unexpected explosion was not uncommon.

Once the inside men broke into a business, commonly a village post office not far from the railroad, the work of preparing the safe commenced. A bar of soap was softened and spread around the edge of the door on the safe, making a channel for the nitroglycerine. At the top, a cup was formed, and the explosive slowly poured in. When the channel was full a fuse was attached, sometimes rugs or heavy blankets spread across the safe to muffle the sound and the fuse was lit. If all went well the blast opened the safe and any money, stamps, or change was removed. As the safe manufacturers responded to these attacks, new safes were built that sometimes took two or three explosions to open. There was also the chance that

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Yeggs hit Stillwater

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too much nitroglycerine was used and the safe, its contents, and the building itself was destroyed.

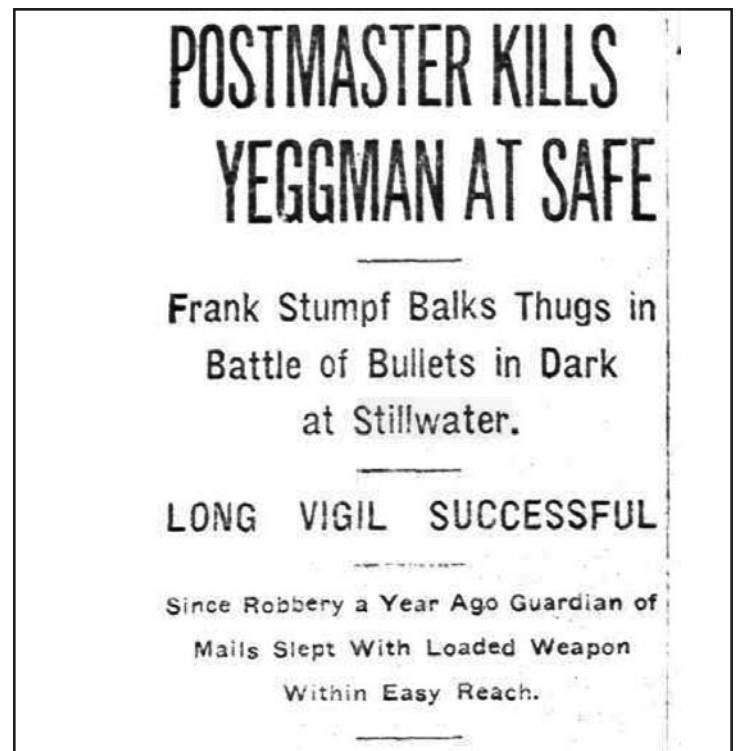
With the safe was opened and emptied, the gang would beat a very hasty retreat often in a stolen wagon or automobile to the closest passing freight train. If during their flight from the scene of the crime any citizen or police intervened, the gang would not hesitate to shoot their way to freedom.

The next attempt in Stillwater

Back in Stillwater, for the next eighteen months after the last robbery, Postmaster Stumpf was watchful and diligent, always on the lookout for strangers and keeping loaded weapons close at hand while he slept. At 2:45 am on a foggy night in early October of 1913 he was again woken by the sound of a muffled explosion at the nearby post office. Following his plan from eight years before, he fired his 54 caliber Springfield rifle at the office's rear window. This time the Yegg's returned fire, the shots hitting the window where Stumpf was standing. Fully armed, Postmaster Stumpf responded with several shots from a double-barreled shotgun. Two of the robbers, one wounded in the exchange of gunfire fled empty-handed into the fog, calling back for a companion who did not follow.

When Frank Stumpf was sure that the coast was clear he left the relative safety of his home and made his way to the post office. When he entered, he found a dead man lying next to the empty safe. One of the shots from his Springfield had found its mark, striking the robber in the temple. The Yegg's identity or that of the others in the gang was never determined. His description, 170 pounds, black wavy hair, and a floral tattoo on his right arm were passed along to police departments locally and statewide without success. Over the next few days, hundreds of people would pass through to view the remains and hopefully identify the man. Ten days after the robbery the unidentified man was buried in Stillwater's Potters field.

The same day as this fatal robbery, the Syracuse Herald ran the story on the front page with the headline announcing, "Safe Blower Shot to Death by Postmaster." The article calls the postmaster "Frank Stunts," and offers an account of the incident that is both sensational and far different from other reports. The Herald has our postmaster leaving his house immediately on hearing the explosion and having a shootout with two of the men while standing behind a tree, killing one in the doorway. After that, the story becomes a narrative in what were purported to be the postmaster's own words: "I decided after a bit to charge him, and I did" declared Stunts. "I rushed across towards him, He fired at me once, as I ran at him, then seemingly frightened, turned and scurried away, firing back at me as he went." The article concluded with Frank's regret over what had happened, "I am mighty



Headline in Albany Knickerbocker Press Oct. 18, 1913

sorry I killed a man. But there seemed no other way for me to do it. I didn't exactly shoot to kill—I just wanted to injure the men so that I could capture them and turn them over to the police."

Frank Stumpf, who served as Stillwater Postmaster from 1897 to 1915, was a former resident of Glens Falls where he worked with J. E. Thompson in the jewelry business. The year that his position as postmaster ended, he ran for Saratoga County Sheriff against Bill Dodge of Edinburgh. His unsuccessful campaign was centered around his thwarting the post office robbery two years earlier. During these years he and his wife Mary Calista Low lived on Lake Street in Stillwater with Frank being employed as a real estate and fire insurance agent. Frank Stumpf died in October of 1927 and was laid to rest at Schuylerville's Prospect Hill Cemetery.

As federal detectives became better equipped to pursue and capture these criminals and safe manufacturers improved their products to thwart their schemes, the attacks on post offices in the rural communities greatly diminished. By the 1920's it was rare when the local paper reported news of a band of these bandits bringing their acts of mayhem to a local community, and the term Yegg quickly fell out of use.

Online Resources: ancestry.com, fultonsearch.org, nyshistoricnewspapers.org

Public Domain Illustrations from nyshistoricnewspapers.org: Albany Knickerbocker Press, October 18, 1913, headline "Postmaster Kills Yeggman at Safe" Albany Knickerbocker Press, October 18, 1912, picture of Postmaster Frank Stumpf