

This Week in Saratoga County History

Walking the Horses to Saratoga

Submitted by Bob Cudmore June 3, 2021

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Sanford Stud Farm (Sam Hildebrandt)

Born in 1826, Stephen Sanford worked with his father John and then on his own to create the Sanford carpet mills in Amsterdam. He went to West Point, served in Congress and was a friend of Ulysses S. Grant.

In the early twentieth century, thoroughbred horses owned by Sanford were walked each summer to Saratoga from Sanford's Hurricana Farm. Racing Hall of Fame trainer Hollie Hughes, who served three generations of Sanfords, recalled the annual trek in Alex M. Robb's book, "The Sanfords of Amsterdam."

The trip began at the Sanford horse farm on what is now Route 30 in the town of Amsterdam. Efforts are underway to preserve remaining buildings at the complex, originally called Hurricana Farm but later known as the Sanford Stud Farm.

“First, we’d go up to Hagaman, a couple of miles away, and then we’d head for Top Notch, or West Galway, as it’s called,” Hughes said. “That would be about five miles. Then we’d go three miles straight east to Galway village. Then we’d go to West Milton, about seven miles farther east, and there we’d stop at the old Dutch Inn and feed the horses and men. My, those breakfasts tasted good! By that time, it would be close to daylight. On the way over, half the horses would be under saddle with boys up. After breakfast the saddles were put on the others which had been led by the men up to this point, and we’d walk the remaining ten miles to Saratoga, coming in by Geysers Spring.”

In 1901, Sanford built his own stable on Nelson Avenue in Saratoga. He had as many as 35 horses at a time. When asked why he kept so many horses, the industrialist replied he was not in the horse raising business for “margin,” in other words for profit.

From 1903 through 1907, the Sanfords invited the people of Amsterdam to the Sanford Matinee Races at Hurricana on the Sunday closest to Fourth of July. Trolleys ran continuously up to Market and Meadow Streets. From there, horse drawn wagons took people to the farm. Some automobiles went to the farm as well but were not admitted to the grounds. There was food, drink, music and, of course, horse racing. Some 15,000 attended the event during its last year.

New York State outlawed betting in 1907 and racing stopped at Saratoga. Temporarily, the Sanfords sold most of their horses to out-of-staters and Canadians, according to Robb.

Stephen Sanford was blind the last five years of his life. The old gentleman doted on his grandchildren, in particular his namesake, born in 1899. He gave the boy a Shetland pony almost before the youngster could walk. Young Stephen called the pony Laddie. The grandfather bestowed the nickname Laddie on his grandson as well. Sanford died on February 13, 1913. Six months later, racing resumed at Saratoga along with the first running of the Sanford Memorial.

Stephen’s 62-year-old son John continued to head the carpet mills and racing stables created during his father’s lifetime. According to Robb, John Sanford inherited \$40 million at his father’s death.

Robb wrote, “Hollie Hughes recalls Stephen Sanford as a man with a magnetic personality, one to whom your eyes would turn instinctively, even though he was but one of a hundred men in a crowd. Hollie describes him as tall, thin, straight as a ramrod, his chin (and the chin whiskers) carried high, his right arm across his back. He had a dry wit.”

A version of this story first appeared in the *Daily Gazette*.