

This Week in Saratoga County History

Suicide in Town Hall

Submitted by Greg Veitch, January 27, 2022

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Caleb Mitchell and Son – Saratoga Springs History Museum

120 years ago this week, a successful businessman and three-time president of the village of Saratoga Springs took his own life in the hallways of Saratoga Springs Town Hall. His story exposes the conflicts that arose over gambling in the resort town at the turn of the 20th century.

Caleb W. "Cale" Mitchell, born in 1837 in Troy, NY, Cale Mitchell made his fortune as a gambler and businessman in New York City and Washington, D.C. before moving north and taking up residence in Saratoga Springs in the 1870's. He built the Glen Mitchel resort on the site of the Maple Avenue Middle School, which boasted a lovely hotel, three freshwater ponds, a racetrack for trotters, and later a long toboggan slide for winter entertainment.

But Mitchell's businesses were not limited to the resort. He also owned an import-export shop and ran two poolrooms in Saratoga Springs, one near the entrance to the thoroughbred racetrack out Union Avenue and another at 402 Broadway, near present-day Uncommon Grounds café. Although Cale was popular with the citizens of Saratoga Springs, in the 1890's he found himself an enemy of the most powerful political figure in Saratoga County at that time, State Senator Edgar T. Brackett.

Although Cale Mitchell was a Democrat and Brackett a Republican, it wasn't their political differences that caused the problems between the two, it was Mitchell's poolroom. Senator Brackett, who once acted as Richard Canfield's lawyer, believed that the Clubhouses, like the one run by Canfield, represented an economic benefit to the town. It attracted wealthy patrons who could afford to lose some money and the clientele was civil, respectful, and discreet.

On the other hand, Cale Mitchell's poolroom on Broadway was dirty, uncarpeted, and smelled of tobacco smoke, stale beer, and bad whiskey. Patrons were described as mere boys, poor clerks, dirty workmen and gamblers down to their last dollar. Women were known to cross the street to avoid having to walk past the ruffians hanging about Mitchell's joint. Making matters worse, Mitchell was the elected president of the village, and his dive was right on the main street of the town. An eyesore for sure and damaging to the reputation of the Spa City.

As a result, a group of powerful men in Saratoga resolved to have Mitchell and the other poolrooms shut down while leaving the more high-class clubhouses alone. Police started raiding the poolrooms in town and harassed the owners and patrons of those gambling joints into closing down.

On the political side, Senator Brackett was successful in legislating Mitchell out of office. In 1894 the state passed a law that the president of the Village of Saratoga Springs was to be appointed by a Board of Trustees, not directly elected by the citizens of the village. Of course, the trustees were all in the Brackett camp and so Mitchell was effectively removed from office by the political maneuvering of Brackett and his allies.

In response, Mitchell hired a private detective to get evidence against Richard Canfield, whom he blamed for his troubles. Unable to get a judge in Saratoga Springs to issue a warrant, Mitchell had to travel to Mechanicville to find a judge and constable willing to arrest Richard Canfield. Canfield was quickly released and later the charges were dropped. Brackett promptly introduced legislation in the State Senate that would change the Criminal Procedure Law and require any warrant applications in the City of Saratoga Springs to be brought before a Saratoga Springs judge exclusively. Of course, all the judges in Saratoga Springs owed their positions to the political backing of Senator Brackett. Canfield would have a virtual monopoly on gambling in Saratoga.

Caleb "Cale" Mitchell was pushed out of business by the authorities and legislated out of office by his political enemies. After years of court battles and public fights, he was running out of money and political power. He was also slowly losing his mind.

On the morning of January 28, 1902, the New York State Assembly was preparing to debate Brackett's bill about the warrants in Saratoga. The bill had passed the senate and if approved by the assembly, it would have become law. The bill was so obviously a move to protect Canfield and the other clubhouse owners that the press had dubbed it the "Saratoga Gambler's Bill."

At the same time on that cold January morning, Cale Mitchell entered Towne's hardware store on Broadway and purchased a .32 caliber hammerless pistol which he loaded with five cartridges. He looked troubled and disheveled as he spoke with several people on his way from Towne's store to the village hall.

At about 8:00 AM a janitor reported seeing Mitchell pacing in front of Senator Brackett's office, hands shoved into his pockets. A few moments later, a shot rang out. One of Brackett's young law clerks, Jim Leary, rushed to the front door of the office, unlocked it, and found Cale Mitchell, slumped down on the floor, dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Speculation was rampant that Mitchell had planned to kill Senator Brackett that morning. Fortunately for Brackett, he had left the office just a few minutes before Mitchell arrived to catch the train to Albany for the legislative session.

The suicide of the former Mayor raised eyebrows. Although the "Saratoga Gamblers bill" passed the State Senate, enough members of the Assembly paused to consider just what necessitated a change in the criminal procedures of the state being pushed by Brackett. The bill failed to pass the Assembly, and a few years later Canfield pulled out of Saratoga Springs for good. Ironically Brackett became a staunch anti-gambling advocate, later pressing for the suppression of all gambling in the Spa City.

Cale Mitchell had made a dramatic statement in taking his own life that January morning in 1902. And yet, gambling carried on. The summer of 1902 was a banner year for gamblers in Saratoga Springs. Any lesson that could have been learned from the tragedy of Caleb Mitchell's life had already been forgotten.