

This Week in Saratoga County History

The Deer of Congress Park

Submitted by Dave Waite, April 28, 2022

Dave Waite is a resident of Blue Corners, Saratoga County and has written many articles on upstate New York history, including several in the recently published book, Saratoga County Stories. Dave can be reached at davewaitefinearts@gmail.com



Illustration by Prentiss Ingraham 1885 Saratoga: Winter and Summer

It is difficult to imagine tame deer roaming freely through Congress Park in downtown Saratoga Springs, yet in its early years, it was both a common sight and an eagerly anticipated part of experiencing the city for both young and old.

It all began with a gift.

Soon after the Civil War, George Mitchell, a Troy, New York native then living in New York City, took a business trip to Tampico, Mexico. During his travels, he acquired both an anteater and a fawn. George was the brother of Caleb Weeks Mitchell, future Saratoga Springs hotel owner, and a two-time village president. At the time of George's trip, the brothers operated a saloon in New York. It quickly became apparent that deer and saloons did not mix. Caleb, at that time a well-known gambler in Saratoga, determined the ideal place for the fawn was Congress Park. The gift was well-received by park management and soon became a favorite of both the employees and visitors.

All went well over the next couple of years, with the fawn quickly growing into a magnificent buck. Having no fear of man, this deer accepted tidbits of food directly from a hand and occasionally tolerated being petted. Not always content with the confines of the park, occasionally the buck would wander out the main gates onto the street.

During one of these forays, troubles began for this wild creature that up to that time had been taken for granted as the village pet. A man only identified as "Col. Johnson" took it upon himself to return the buck to the park during one of his walks along Washington Street. In an act that defies the imagination, Johnson picked the buck up and carried him towards the park gates. Having tired of being held, the deer kicked and fought to be released, tearing into clothing and flesh with powerful hooves.

When Sophie Sparkle visited Saratoga Springs with her family she told of the visiting Congress Park in her 1871 book, *Sparkles from Saratoga*. By this time the park's management had realized the potential danger and at times would close the park to visitors when the deer became aggressive, even posting a policeman at the entrance. Once Park staff were able to move the buck into a fenced enclosure, the park was reopened to visitors.

In Charles Henry Webb's *John Paul's Book*, he tells of his daughter Paulina quickly befriending one of these deer and making a habit to visit daily and feed the soft-eyed creature with cake and other treats. On the day that she neglected to feed her new friend she learned a valuable, but painful lesson:

"Dear Deer, pretty little Dear," she said, fondly caressing his black muzzle, "See Papa, how he loves me!" but the gentle creature had by this found out that she had nothing for him to eat, and on the heels of this discovery struck out at her with one of his forefeet"

It was fortunate that Paulina came away only with a very black eye and hopefully a greater appreciation for the wildness of these seemingly gentle deer.

The end of freedom for the buck occurred when a woman visiting the park attempted to pet the animal in the summer of 1870, coming away with injuries serious enough that a lawsuit was brought against the park's management. The lawsuit was settled with the park being required to pay ten thousand dollars for the assault, and an equal amount in attorney fees in an unsuccessful appeal.

The paddock was enclosed with a high wire fence in 1876 as part of an upgrade to the southern portion of Congress Park where the Deer Park Spring is located today. This spring, originally a source of freshwater that was appropriately called Fresh Water Spring, was appreciated by those who had no taste for mineral water. As the water quality of this spring could not be maintained, it was later retubed to carry mineral water. It was during the park upgrade in 1876 that the present cast-iron fountain was installed.

By 1882 the deer population was again reduced to one buck living in the park's paddock. At that time park Superintendent Schuyler had a doe brought in from Albany's Washington Park. Four years later the herd had increased to four with the birth of twin fawns.

In Lee's 1883 tourist guide "*Saratoga Springs & the Queen of Spas*," a stroll through the south part of the park was said to include a visit to the deer shelter and park, where several animals "roam and skip within the enclosure, greatly to the delight of the children and amusement of

the adults.” The deer population increased again in 1886 when it was reported in the May 7th, Mechanicville Mercury newspaper that “two beautiful fawns” were born that spring.

The deer paddock in Congress Park was finally removed sometime before 1927, though as late as 1901 there were still references in the local newspaper of children visiting the enclosure.

Additional Sources: Durkee’s Reminiscences of Saratoga, and the online newspaper archives at nyshistoricnewspapers.org and fultonsearch.org.