

This Week in Saratoga County History

Before the Racetracks, Hog Heaven

Submitted by Steve Williams, April 21, 2022

Steve Williams is a retired Schenectady Daily Gazette journalist. He spent most of his career covering Saratoga County communities and regional issues. Steve authored the Off the Northway column on Saratoga County which is being compiled into a book to be published this summer by the Saratoga County History Center.



Duroc Pig Source: National Swine Registry

Not that they're boasting, but lots of people like the ring of the "health, history and horses" theme used by the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce. But 150 years ago, the thoroughbreds didn't yet run at that seasonal business on Union Avenue, and the county motto could have been "homesteads, harvests and hogs."

Yes, there were horses. And thousands of sheep and cows and chickens, too. But this is a story about filling the pork barrel, and it has nothing to do with politics.

In the middle of the 19th century, railroads and refrigeration hadn't yet transformed the meat industry, turning Chicago into a city that could support both the Cubs and White Sox. Food distribution was local and regional, not national.

There were 4,800 farms in Saratoga County. Every town had dozens. Many raised pigs to sell at market, and a leading pork-production breed, the Duroc, was first identified here.

Being close to Albany made Saratoga and Washington counties important pork-raising areas from the 1830s to the 1870s, according to *Breeds of Livestock in America*, a livestock history.

At the time, Albany was a meat packing center. Pigs could be brought there, and ham, bacon, sausage and salt pork could move to customers, using the Erie Canal, Hudson River, or any of the gravel turnpikes that converged at the state capital.

In 1855, census figures show there were 26,003 pigs in Saratoga County. Just for comparison, there were 306 pigs being raised in the county in 2002, according to federal agricultural statistics. In 1865, the census said there were 14,704 hogs, and added a new statistic: 2.9 million pounds of pork produced. The number of pigs rebounded to 19,115 in 1875, with 2.2 million pounds produced. But even then, the big slaughterhouse action was moving to the Midwest.

The Duroc, which became a desirable commercial breed because of its quick growth, big litters, hardiness and large size, originated here. Its attributes were recognized by a farmer from Milton, who lived on what today is Camp Boyhaven, the Boy Scout camp in the hilly woods between Rock City Falls and Middle Grove.

The story goes that in 1823 24-year-old Isaac Frink took a mare to a farm near Amsterdam to breed with a famous racing stallion named Duroc. That farmer also had pigs, and Frink bought a young boar and named it Duroc. Its offspring became the Duroc line. The Duroc was later crossed with the Jersey Red, and the Duroc-Jersey has been a leading pork production pig ever since.

Saratoga County Duroc breeders furnished animals to farms in Ohio, Illinois, Iowa and Nebraska as agriculture moved westward. Rails and refrigeration turned meat packing into a national industry by the 1880s, and in Chicago Philip Armour and Gustav Swift became rich. Here, the industry slowly shrank away, and there are no longer any meat processing plants in the Capital Region.

Frink, a prosperous Quaker, may have protected runaway slaves before the Civil War as part of the Underground Railroad. He was a founding director of the Ballston Spa National Bank in 1838. His farmhouse still stands on Boyhaven Road; it is used as the Boy Scout camp's office.

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