

This Week in Saratoga County History

Those Carefree Days When Ballston Was A Spa

Submitted by Sam McKenzie July 20, 2022

Sam McKenzie received a PhD in Chemistry from St. Andrews in Scotland, then worked in the petrochemical industry for 33 years. Since 2015 he has been a volunteer researcher for Brookside Museum. His research interests have included the history of the Mineral Springs of Ballston Spa, and is now studying the lives of the brothers Isaac and Nicholas Low.



The Sans Souci Hotel about 1875

In the more than two hundred years of its existence, the historic village of Ballston Spa has possessed one building which achieved national, perhaps even world-wide, renown. I refer, of course, to the Sans Souci Hotel, which graced the east end of Front Street near Milton Avenue for some 84 years in the 19th century. To more precisely orient the modern reader, while you are enjoying your favorite beverage in a well-known Ballston tea shop, which is exactly opposite the north end of Low Steet, you are sharing the space previously occupied by the main lobby of the Sans Souci Hotel and metaphorically rubbing shoulders with the likes of Joseph Bonaparte, ex-king of Spain and brother of Napoleon.

It is Nicholas Low, owner of the tract which became Ballston Spa, and a man who knew how to think big, to whom must be given the credit for guiding and financing the project which breathed life into the idea of this village becoming a successful resort.

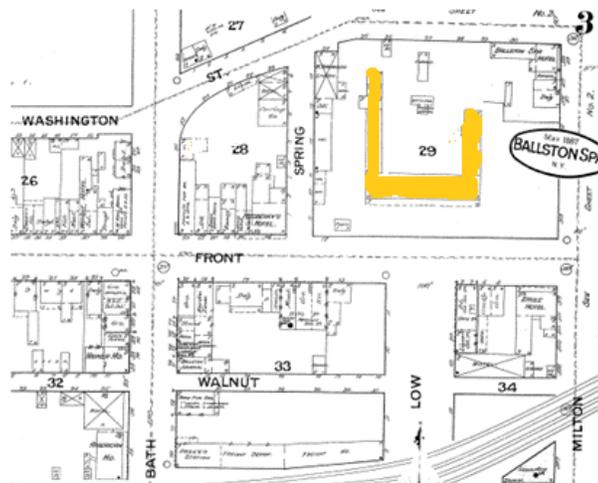
He was advised that the best way to profit from his holdings was to attract visitors to the mineral spring located at the southwestern edge of his property. So Low first built in 1792 a lodging house and a bathing facility hard by the original spring and just opposite the hotel which later became Brookside.

Very soon, more springs were discovered to the east of the original one, in the valley of Gordon's Creek, an area known as the Flats. From the initial steps to capitalize upon these new resources came the idea of a larger hotel located on high ground slightly to the east of the Flats.

It is said that the name comes from the 18th century royal palace called the Sanssouci (meaning carefree) in Potsdam, Germany. Another common assertion is that the design of the building was copied from either the Potsdam palace or from the more famous Palace of Versailles in France. There is no evidence that either of the latter is true.

However, the source of the building plans seems indeed to have been Europe, acquired somehow by that famous reprobate Gouverneur Morris and possibly conveyed to America by his servant, a native of Germany, Martin Bromeling, who was to play an important part in the project.

Construction of the hotel started in the summer of 1803 with Martin Bromeling being paid \$1500 to be the superintendent of the work for the period through 1805. Andre Berger, an immigrant from France, and said to be a protégé of Low, also was involved. Berger would be the hotel manager on startup. Captain James Hawkins, who owned a local carpentry firm, did the bulk of the construction of the all-wood building.



Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1887

The hotel had a frontage of 160 feet facing east-west along Front Street and was three stories high (see the photograph of the hotel ca 1875). At each end were wings about 150 feet in length also three stories in height facing to the north. This gave the hotel almost an E shaped footprint (see the Sanborn map of 1887). Initially the hotel's capacity was said to be 150 guests, but later on 300 was the advertised figure.

Ancillary buildings included a workshop, and woodshed and, across Washington Street, a bathhouse, ice house, wash house, coach house and stables. Other work involved canalizing Gordon's Creek to reduce flooding of the Flats, and constructing a conduit known as the

“Waterworks” to supply water from a reservoir further uphill around the area of the current High Street.

One of the lasting features of the hotel was added early in the construction when 30 young trees were planted. Furniture installed included 526 chairs, 139 beds and 50 tables.

The hotel was ready to receive its first guests in the summer of 1805. Andre Berger was the manager, or boniface, the 19th Century term for his job. Original documents disclose that the total project cost to Low was \$43,000 and that James Hawkins’ company took home \$26,300 (61%) of this sum. (I asked an expert if Hawkins did good work for that impressive pay. It turns out that at best it might be judged inconsistent. – something to do with the doors not opening correctly at the “Grand Opening”!)

The hotel did very well during Nicholas Low’s ownership, which lasted through the 1822 season. Andre Berger seems to have been manager for that entire period. But in early 1823 Low sold the hotel and all his Ballston Spa property to Harvey Loomis. Loomis held on to the hotel for about ten years but thereafter the ownership changed frequently, because of competition from the rising power of Saratoga Springs and the failure of the original springs at Ballston Spa.

In 1849, for the first time the Sans Souci was out of the hotel business and converted into a Law School. This sabbatical lasted till 1853. In 1863 the hotel was converted into a “ladies seminary” but returned to hotel work in 1868, partly because new mineral springs were being developed again in Ballston Spa by the deep drilling technique. Indeed, the Sans Souci Hotel in 1870 activated its own “spouter” by drilling in the rear of the building, directly behind the main lobby.

Nevertheless, time was running out for the venerable institution. The hotel closed permanently in 1883 and was sold to Eugene F. O’Connor in 1887. He was intent on developing the hotel lot for an opera house and retail space, so he had the hotel demolished in the winter of 1887-88.

But in an important sense it lives on still in the form of its spring. The spring operated as a retail outlet of potable mineral water until 1967. Later, the water was piped to a free drinking fountain at Wiswall Park until a few years ago. The spring water is still available at the Medbury Spa on Front Street.

