

This Week in Saratoga County History

Werner Brewery of Halfmoon: Turning Adversity into Opportunity

Submitted by Dave Waite, November 16, 2022

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Werner brewery and farm in Halfmoon

Today there are at least two breweries along the Route 9 corridor in Eastern Saratoga County, each offering their own brand of unique microbrews to their loyal customers. Looking back in county history, we find that the commercial production of ale can trace its roots to well before the Civil War, with one of the earliest being the Werner family brewery in the town of Halfmoon.

The patriarch of this brewing family was Reinhold A. Werner, born in Gulmuthansen, Bavaria in 1827. At the age of twenty, he emigrated to America with his parents, Melchoir and Rose Werner. After entering the country, Reinhold's parents moved west, settling in Iowa, while Reinhold stayed in New York, seeking his own opportunities in his new country.

While it is not recorded if Reinhold and his wife Mary had married before leaving Germany, it was in 1850 in Albany, New York that their first child, Emily was born. Their second, a son named Henry A., followed three years later. Reinhold Werner was granted citizenship in May of 1852 and within three years he and his family had moved to Saratoga County where they purchased twenty acres of farmland in the town of Halfmoon. By 1860 Reinhold had established a brewery and farm on their property along the north side of what is now Werner Road. In 1865 the Werners increased their family again. with Mary giving birth to their third child, a son who they named Herold.



Reinhold Werner

In 1880 Reinhold made his oldest son, 26-year-old Henry, a partner in the family brewery business. The business prospered over the next four years, enabling Reinhold to enlarge and upgrade the brewery and build a new house on his property in Halfmoon. In an attempt to destroy the family business an unidentified arsonist burned down the brewery building in September of 1884. The fire also destroyed a nearby wagon house and storage sheds. Through a determined effort by those who responded to the call for assistance the fire that had spread to the Werner home was extinguished before that building was

also destroyed. The loss, estimated at fifteen thousand dollars, was covered by less than five thousand dollars of insurance. Reinhold and his family immediately set to work together rebuilding their brewery and home.

After the business was rebuilt, Reinhold and his son Henry together ran the operation in Halfmoon until Reinhold died in 1887. At that time Reinhold's younger son, Herold took his father's place in the family business, the boys changing the business name to R. Werner's Sons in honor of their father. In 1890 the plant in Halfmoon was sold to a joint-stock company and was incorporated under the name of Werner Brewing Company. At this time management of the business was split between the two brothers, with Henry moving the Ale business to Mechanicville and Harold overseeing both the lager production and the recently created Malt Medicine Company at that original plant in Halfmoon.

The medicine company came to be known throughout the region for the manufacture of patent medicine products including Werner's Malt Tonic, Werner's Malt Sarsaparilla, Werner's Malt Cough Syrup, Werner's Malt and Beef, and Werner's Great American Anodyne. The Werner medicine products were marketed through salesmen who each covered specific territories solicited sales and delivered directly to local businesses. The Werner brand was also advertised in newspapers across the region, with one example from the *Hammond Advertiser* in St. Lawrence County. In these advertisements, the products were touted as offering cures for ailments as varied as indigestion and "obstinate malarial diseases" at the cost of only one dollar for 112 doses.

In the early hours of June 30, 1891, and only seven years after the first fire, flames again destroyed the Werner lager and medicine plant in Halfmoon. Starting in the boiler house, it quickly spread to the main brewery building, laboratory, then to their home, which was completely destroyed. In the laboratory at the time of the fire were 26,000 bottles of malt extract ready for shipment, none of which were able to be saved. The business was again drastically underinsured, with the loss of buildings and equipment estimated at upwards of twenty thousand dollars.

As part of rebuilding after the fire, the brewing of lager was transferred to the plant in Mechanicville and only the medicine company continued in Halfmoon. The Werner Brewing Company, situated on Viall Avenue in Mechanicville, was housed in a seventy-two by eighty-foot four-story building. In its heyday, the plant produced sixty thousand barrels per year that were distributed in both New England and the Northern counties of New York.

The combination of the financial loss from the fire and the death of Henry A. Werner at the age of thirty-nine two years later started a downhill slide for the Werner brewery in Mechanicville. In 1896 the Saratoga Brewing Company of Saratoga purchased the plant, taking over that part of the business.

Herold Werner continued to operate the medicine side of the business, and in 1909 incorporated under the name of Werner Extract Company to manufacture medicines and flavoring extracts. Over time mail order perfumes were added to Werner's business, with newspaper advertisements as far west as Michigan for Werner's American Rose fragrance, a product that offered "refined, fascinating odors, distinctly individual," for one dollar an ounce.

While the original business model of Werner Extract Company was medicines and bottled extracts, within two years of their incorporation they had switched to the manufacture of fertilizer made by grinding and mixing potash-bearing rock, coal, and bone. One reason for this change could have been the recent enactment of the first *Pure Food and Drug Act*, which required the labeling of ingredients, including alcohol, on all patent medicines. Over the next 18 years, Werner continued to refine the process of making fertilizer as new and more efficient machinery became available.

After a large quarry of four percent potash-bearing shale had been discovered in Halfmoon, the Werner Extract Company took advantage of this business opportunity and in 1920 invested in additional machinery to convert the rock into fertilizer. Advertised as a top dressing for meadows and supplement for fruit-bearing trees and shrubs, the Werner company sold Werner's Natural Fertilizer for the next ten years both by the ton or in 100-pound sacks.

On October 24, 1930, Herold J. Werner was stricken with a fatal heart attack. With his passing the last of the family businesses were closed, ending 70 years and two generations of Werner brewery and patent medicine production in the town of Halfmoon.