

## This Week in Saratoga County History

### The Spirit of Hides-Franklin Spring

Submitted by Timothy Starr November 30, 2022

*Timothy Starr has published 20 books on local history in Saratoga County and the Capital District and is a former board member of the Saratoga County Historical Society.*



*Hides-Franklin Spring - Saratoga County History Center*

Although the mineral springs that made Ballston Spa famous in the late 1700s were surpassed in importance by the industries of the 1800s, several of them were retubed and became part of the manufacturing interests of the village well into the twentieth century. Some mineral springs quickly failed, others were opened to the public, and still others were bottled and sold around the country.

Perhaps the most successful bottling operation involved the Hides-Franklin Spring. This business is probably one of the few in the country to be founded by a spirit. A Ballston Spa blacksmith and member of the Spiritualist Society named Samuel Hides purchased a farm on Malta Avenue between Hyde Boulevard and Columbia Avenue. One of his friends and fellow Spiritualists, Milton resident John Mitchell, told him that Benjamin Franklin's spirit said to drill a well on the property that would someday be "for the healing of a nation." Hides dutifully hired the Artesian Well Company to start drilling a well where Franklin told him. After about a year of effort, water began gushing forth when the drill reached a depth of 715 feet, with an initial gas pressure of 145 pounds per square inch and a continuous flow of 300 gallons of water per hour. In the summer of 1868, Hides and Mitchell brought Elisha Comstock in as a financial backer with one-third interest.

With this funding, Hides organized the Franklin Spring Company in 1870 to bottle and ship the mineral water across the country. After Hides passed away in 1888 the spring fell into disuse for a time, but a few years later was "rediscovered" and went on to be bottled for

several more decades. Hides' son-in-law Abijah Comstock, who married Hides' only surviving daughter Adaline, was a long-time proprietor of the company and renamed it the Comstock Spring in 1897. An analysis of the water showed that it contained large quantities of sodium, lime, and magnesium, and smaller quantities of potassium. Advertisements for the water in the early 1900s claimed that "no mineral water ever yet discovered by man possesses such quantities of reliable salts, and in such exact proportions, as this water, nor can any compound or even imitation compare with it."

The company listed many testimonials as to the curative properties of the water. George Woodworth of Troy was supposedly quoted as saying, "In the year 1884, I was sick with dropsy and kidney trouble for over seven months. Both my doctors gave me up to die. I was advised to drink your water, which I did and took no other medicine. The first week I lost 13 pounds, and in a couple of months I was well and have been ever since." Myron Rose of Mechanic Street testified that he was cured of kidney and liver troubles within one month of beginning a regimen of the spring water.

After Comstock's death the business was operated by the Sowle brothers, who introduced flavorings to the carbonated water. The most successful use of the spring came in 1927 when a company called Natural Mineral Waters of Saratoga County, comprised of the two surviving Sowle brothers (Wilbur and Walter) and several other businessmen took over. The firm was headed by Fred Hoyt, an internationally known yacht enthusiast and naval designer. Once some improvements were made to the spring and machinery, the company began to manufacture ginger ale and assorted flavored sodas such as lemon sour, birch beer, sarsaparilla, orangeade, and chocolate. The soda was said to be "an absolutely pure cathartic water aiding the liver and kidneys." Charles Dake, future founder of Stewart's Shops, was President, Fred Streever of Streever Lumber was Vice President, and Percy Dake was the Secretary and Treasurer.

The bottling plant operated in a beautiful circular stone building 80 feet in diameter. The *Ballston Journal* described the construction as "reminiscent of ancient days and suggestive of the 700-foot deep well beneath it. Its drink hall is of massive beams, hand hewn from local cut native chinquapin chestnut, now about extinct, and is wainscoted with great stone fossils from the dawn of the earth's organic life taken from the cryptozoic ledges made famous by Lester's Park and Ritchie's Petrified Gardens. When the valve of No. 1 well is turned on, the massive stone bottling house vibrates perceptibly as the deep-seated gas and water emerge through the five-inch rock bore and the piped pressure is often above 150 pounds per square inch. The greatest care is needed in seating the artificial hydraulic seals as on two occasions literally tons of pipe have been projected hundreds of feet into the air."

A 1930 New York State legislative study of the principal springs in the state put the Hides-Franklin at the top of the list, stating it "leads all the rest." The spring was reported to have the highest sustained gas pressure of any spring in the area at 110 pounds per square inch. The next highest pressure in Ballston was only 25 pounds per square inch. In 1941

the company manufactured one million bottles of naturally carbonated water which included the Spa Vichy and Hides-Franklin brands and several fruited flavors. The various bottling companies of the spring enjoyed great success for about 40 years, but updated scientific data likely discounted such medicinal claims that had been taken at face value years before. Natural Mineral Waters declared bankruptcy in 1959 and the unique (some may say priceless) building was torn down to make room for residential development.