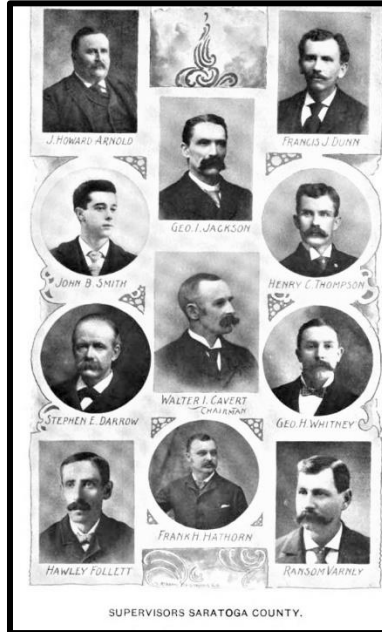


This Week in Saratoga County History

Saratoga County's 1898 Leadership Battle

Submitted by David Wickerham March 29, 2023

Dave Wickerham has had a long-term interest in the political history of Saratoga County. He served as an employee of Saratoga County for more than 33 years, including 25 years as County Administrator.



Saratoga County Supervisors 1898

The recent battle for Speaker of the United States House of Representatives left many astounded that it took so many votes to reach a conclusion. However, Saratoga County once went through a situation that makes the House of Representatives battle look like very small potatoes. It must be noted that Saratoga County was a bastion for the Republican Party since its inception in 1856, and generally voted for the Whig Party before that. The situation changed in 1898, although it is unknown what spurred the change. It could have been the Financial Panic of 1893 or the Spanish American War or some much more local issue that is lost to the minds of the modern citizen.

The makeup of the County was different in 1898. Neither Saratoga Springs nor Mechanicville had been chartered as cities. Saratoga Springs was still a Town and Mechanicville was just a railroad head included in the Boundaries of Halfmoon and Stillwater. Thus, there were just 20 Towns in the County, and since the advent of weighted voting was still 75 years away, each supervisor would cast one vote at meetings of the Saratoga County Board of Supervisors.

This became a problem in 1898 when the voters elected 10 Republicans and 10 Democrats to the Board. Republicans represented Clifton Park, Corinth, Day, Greenfield, Hadley, Halfmoon, Moreau,

Northumberland, Saratoga Springs, and Wilton. Democrats held the Town Supervisor positions in Charlton, Ballston, Edinburg, Galway, Malta, Milton, Providence, Saratoga, Stillwater, and Waterford. The scene was set for an epic struggle for leadership.

The Organizational Meeting was set for 4:00 pm on Monday, November 14, 1898. The meeting began innocently enough with the Clerk of the Board calling the roll and asking each Supervisor to state his choice for Chairman. Ten Supervisors voted for Walter Cavert, D-Charlton and ten voted for George Jackson, R – Moreau. The Clerk took 38 more votes, but there was no change in the outcome. Finally, on the motion of Frank Hathorn, the meeting was adjourned until the next day.

The Board was called to order the next day at 10:00 am. J Howard Arnold moved that the voting be done by written ballots. I assume he intended to free Supervisors from being strongarmed by their respective parties. However, the clerk called the roll for several more ballots , but after 53 votes, the chamber remained deadlocked.

When the Board reconvened on Wednesday, November 16, it seemed like Groundhog Day. Seven more votes were taken with no change. In the afternoon, Frank Hathorn tried to break the impasse by proposing that each party name one member to a special committee to confer and propose a plan of organization. The resolution was blocked by the Democrats. Finally, after the 102nd fruitless vote they adjourned for the day .

On Thursday, they took just one vote, the 103rd, with the results again tied ten to ten. After four hours of arguing, they all agreed to establish a 4 man committee. George Valentine and William Donnelly represented the Democrats while Clarence Griffin and Frank Hathorn were selected by the Republicans. The next morning they reported that they were still deadlocked and the Democrats argued that they had the right to reorganize the Board since they had actually received more votes than the Republicans in the last election. The Republicans, of course rejected the assertion. At 1:30, there appeared to be a breakthrough with a compromise offered by Frank Hathorn. The terms were as follows:

Democrats to appoint the Chair and Republicans to appoint the Clerk to the Board
Parties were to split appointments of the Jail Physician and County Home physician
The Chair and memberships of Standing Committees divided equally
Official printing to be divided equally between the parties

It looked like the stalemate might be resolved before the weekend and a four-man committee was established with instructions that they report back to the Board that afternoon with a final Resolution. However, after asking twice for more time, the Board finally agreed to give them the evening to work out the details and adjourned to Saturday morning.

If the devil is in the details, this devil was exceedingly strong. While there was general agreement on most of the issues, negotiations broke down over the makeup of the standing committees, and both

sides accused the other of bad faith bargaining. After some testy personal exchanges, they took more fruitless votes and after the 110th unsuccessful vote, they adjourned to Monday, November 21.

At the beginning of the 2nd week of this marathon struggle, the Democrats put forth a long resolution to explain why they were unwilling to accept Supervisor Hathorn's proposal for organization and also would not accept his offer to give the terms offered to them to the Republicans. The resolution also offered more than a few personal attacks, and was obviously rejected by the Republican members of the Board. The positions of the two sides hardened and the rest of the session was taken up with more unsuccessful 10-10 votes through ballot 155. They met daily through Saturday November 26, continuing the unsuccessful run of votes through ballot 360.

Finally, on November 28, the Democrats revisited Supervisor Hathorn's proposal of November 18, and decided they could accept it, provided the Chair of the Board had the full power to act in the performance of his duties. The long nightmare was ended, and Walter Cavert of Charlton was unanimously elected as the first Democratic Chairman of the Board.

In all, the Board of Supervisors had deliberated for two weeks, worked through the Thanksgiving holiday, and taken 361 votes before even getting to one piece of the people's business. The Board stayed in session for another 20 days, finally adjourning for the year on December 23.

The Democrats attained an actual majority in 1899 and kept it for a couple of years. With the advent of the 20th century, Republicans recaptured a majority and have held it ever since. Thus, there have been no repeats of the crazy organization battle of 1898. This story is based on the official proceedings of the Board of Supervisors. What really happened behind closed doors is lost in the mists of time, but one can only imagine the horse trading that actually went on!