

# **This Week in Saratoga County History**

## **An Overview of Early Saratoga Religious Communities**

**Submitted by Caleb Taran June 4, 2025**

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*Ballston Center Presbyterian Church*

Throughout Saratoga County's long history, many religious and spiritual communities have called our home their home, with the land even being sacred to some. This article will highlight the founding of several of Saratoga County's religious communities through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with a focus on Saratoga Springs.

Today, diverse people of faith have joined those long established denominations to call Saratoga home, including Jewish communities, several Indigenous Cultural Revival Movements, and a Mosque, Masjid Al-Arqam in Halfmoon. All of them play important roles in the Saratoga Community. While this is not an all-encompassing compendium, it will ideally provide enough information to encourage readers to conduct their own research in this vital aspect of our community life.

We must begin with the first religions in what is now Saratoga County. The Mohawk branch of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy maintains a long-lasting presence here, and they primarily follow The Great Law of Peace (Gayanashagowa). The Great Law functions as a sort of constitution. According to legend, it stems from the Great Peacemaker Tekanawí:ta, who traveled among six warring nations and preached a message of cooperation. This eventually led to their coalescing into one Confederacy, with a unique system of government which mirrors representative democracy. This has led some scholars to point to it as a possible influence on the U.S. Constitution, which was later acknowledged by Congress in 1988. There are some supernatural elements in Tekanawí:ta's story: he was born to a virgin mother, and sailed from the far north on a canoe made of white stone. It is important to remember that religion comes in many forms. This one served as the foundation for an enduring political system.

The earliest Europeans in the region were French Catholic missionaries and traders on their way to and from Quebec, marking the beginning of a Christian presence here. Their attempts to convert the native Mohawks were unsuccessful and often violent. An exception would be St. Kateri Tekakwitha, a Mohawk woman who secretly studied and converted to Catholicism. She is the first indigenous woman of North America to be canonized by the Catholic Church, and has become a symbol for both regional Catholics and Indigenous ones across the continent. Despite limited success in converting the natives, a few French missionaries settled on the foothills of the Adirondacks, becoming the region's first permanent Catholic residents.

Before the American Revolution, Dutch families settled along the Hudson River, bringing the Dutch Reformed Church with them. Today several of these congregations still exist along the eastern and southern borders of the county from Bacon Hill to Vischer Ferry.

As more settlers migrated from New England to Saratoga County (which was considered part of Albany County at the time) they brought their religion with them. In 1769, Eliphalet Ball, a Presbyterian preacher from Bedford, New York on the Connecticut border arrived with members of his congregation. He was an advocate of the New Light movement inspired by the First Great Awakening, which emphasized personal relationships with God and rejected established church power structures. Its less centralized spiritual message heavily resonated with frontier communities. Ball founded the first Presbyterian church in the southwest corner of his farm in 1775, and the town of Ballston came to be named after him.

With the onset of the Second Great Awakening in the early 19th century, upstate New York became known as "the Burned-over District" because of the sheer emotion and energy of Protestant religious activity. This religious fervor along with population growth inspired by the construction of the Erie Canal and railroads lead to a steady rise in Church membership. In 1805, Saratoga County saw its first Anglican Church in Ballston. In 1816, a new Presbyterian Church was founded in Saratoga Springs. Abijah Blanchard was its first ordained deacon, and Darius Oliver

Griswold became Reverend in 1822. Although Presbyterians were not newcomers, they gained many converts and formed new congregations. Other Christian denominations which put down local roots during the Second Great Awakening included Baptists, using land gifted by Gideon Putnam, and the Quakers, who would invite Frederick Douglass to speak in 1849.

Starting in 1815, the fledgling Catholic community was bolstered by a wave of French and Irish immigrants. Most were seeking jobs during the summer season, as Saratoga Springs became a popular tourist destination for wealthy Americans and Europeans. At first, they met in town under the leadership of traveling priests, but not long after the Saratoga and Schenectady railroad opened, the Church of St. Peter was founded in 1839, a permanent Parish for a growing congregation. With the arrival of more Catholics, primarily Italian and Irish immigrants, another parish became necessary. St. Clement's opened in 1917 after the Albany Diocese approved its establishment.

The Saratoga Racetrack opened in 1863, drawing additional ethnic groups into the city. As the African American community grew in mid-century seeking employment in the large hotels, the Dyer-Phelps Memorial AME Zion congregation was founded in 1862. Since then, it has been joined by the Mt. Olivet Baptist church and the Soul Saving Station Church of Saratoga Springs.

Sadly, these new arrivals were not always welcomed in the community. In 1853, a woman whom local newspapers dubbed "Miss Lamb" was attempting to convert to Catholicism. In an effort to prevent this, three Episcopal Priests kidnapped her. Eventually she escaped and fled to Albany, where she finished her conversion.

Jewish newcomers began arriving in the early 20th century, as Jews from Eastern Europe immigrated to the U.S. en masse. A particularly egregious example of discrimination was the Seligman Affair. In 1877, Jewish banker and founder of J. & W. Seligman & Co. Joseph Seliman was denied a stay in Saratoga Springs' Grand Union Hotel because he was Jewish. This social antisemitism may have faded by the 1960s, but at that time it was very real.

Saratoga County is home to many faiths, and there will no doubt be more religious choices available as time goes on. While tensions will sometimes arise, if we respect our differences and work together to build a better community, we will be stronger for it.

**Sources-** *History of Saratoga County* by Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester, 1878

*Around Ballston Lake* by Katherine Q. Briaddy, 1991

[Haudenosaunee Iroquois Religion and Politics](#), [stpetersaratoga.com](http://stpetersaratoga.com), [Skidmore Saratoga Memory Project](#), [bethesdachurch.org](http://bethesdachurch.org), [sacredsaratoga.weebly.com](http://sacredsaratoga.weebly.com), [The Saratoga Native American Festival](#)