

This Week in Saratoga County History

The Ballston Brief: The Law School That Time Misplaced

Submitted by Amy Shannon October 22, 2025

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San Souci Hotel built 1803, Law school 1849-1851.

Long before Ballston Spa was incorporated in 1807, a grand vision rose from its mineral-rich soil: the Sans Souci Hotel. Built in 1803 by Nicholas Low—one of the village’s earliest developers and most influential landowners—the hotel was a marvel of its time. Towering three stories high and capable of hosting 250 guests, it briefly held the title of the largest resort in the United States. With its elegant proximity to the famed mineral springs and a nightly rate of \$8 (a luxury in its day), Sans Souci attracted a glittering clientele of politicians, economists, and literary figures.

However, in 1849 as Saratoga Springs superseded Ballston Spa as the more prominent resort, the property underwent a change of ownership. The Hotel was sold to John W. Fowler, a Connecticut lawyer with a bold idea: to transform this opulent retreat into a place of legal instruction. Fowler, who had previously founded a law school in Cherry Valley, believed law was not just a profession; it was a discipline of both art and science. And so began the curious chapter of Ballston Spa’s forgotten law school, tucked inside the walls of a resort that once defined American leisure.

The law school was known by at least four different names: “State and National Law School,” “New York State and National Law School,” “Ballston Law College,” and “Fowler’s State and National Law School.” Fowler wanted to bring practical training for students and not just teach legal theories. One of the main innovations of the curriculum was that law students get practical

training in the art of courtroom etiquette and learned how to prosecute or defend a client in a court of law. The school even had a chapter of Theta Delta Chi (ΘΔΧ), a fraternity founded in 1847 at Union College, in Schenectady, New York.

Fowler inaugurated the Ballston Spa School of Law with a distinguished faculty and quickly garnered substantial support. His vision for legal education emphasized both theoretical and practical dimensions of discipline, incorporating mock trials as a central pedagogical tool. These simulations required students to assume various courtroom roles—judges, attorneys, jurors, and defendants—fostering a dynamic and immersive learning environment.

Admission to the school was highly selective, with criteria extending beyond academic aptitude to include race and gender; only white males were considered eligible. In 1850, the school denied admission to John Mercer Langston, a Black man who had recently become only the second African American to pass the bar exam. Encouraged by a friend, Langston wrote directly to Fowler and requested a personal meeting. Although he was ultimately offered a place at the school, Langston declined the opportunity, unwilling to compromise his identity or misrepresent his heritage. Instead, he pursued legal studies at Oberlin College in Ohio, where a practicing attorney mentored him. Langston's career would prove remarkable: he served as Inspector General of the Freedmen's Bureau following the Civil War, became Dean of the Howard University School of Law, and was elected to Congress in 1888.

Among the distinguished graduates were Colonel John Slocum, who served in the second Rhode Island Infantry, and fell leading his regiment at the Battle of Bull Run; future Governor of Virginia Gilbert C. Walker; Abraham R. Lawrence, New York Supreme court judge; and Roger A. Pryor, from Virginia who served in Congress before the Civil War, became a Confederate General, and after the war moved to New York City and resumed his law career. These alumni would reflect honor on any institution. A New York State board monitored the school, which was authorized to confer upon each graduate the degree of LL.B. (Bachelor of Laws).

The final graduation commencement occurred in 1852. Unfortunately, the former hotel was not the best environment, and that led to the decision to relocate the school to Poughkeepsie. According to the trustees of the school, "The building in Ballston is old and the rooms are cold, while in Poughkeepsie our accommodations are comfortable and pleasant. The village to which we have removed is much larger and more pleasant than Ballston, containing six or eight flourishing literary institutions, of which four are female seminaries. The people of Poughkeepsie furnish, besides these libraries, adequate funds to place the institution on a high and permanent basis."

Though Fowler's law school remained in Ballston Spa for only a brief period, its impact under the leadership of Fowler was far-reaching. After relocating to Poughkeepsie as the State and National Law School, it continued to produce distinguished alumni, including future-President Chester A. Arthur, Union Army soldier Sullivan Ballou, three senators, and at least nine US Congressman - legal minds who got their initial training at a small short-lived law school in two New York communities.

Future President of the United States, Chester A Arthur studied at the law school in 1853, and then graduated from Union College. He served as quartermaster general of the New York Militia during the Civil War. After the war, he entered politics and went on to be elected Vice President in 1880. When President James A. Garfield was assassinated, he became the 21st President of the United States.

Sullivan Ballou eventually married Fowler's niece, Sara Shumway. Ballou's fame during the war, came after his death, when a letter he wrote to his wife Sara a week before he was killed in action in the Battle of Bull Run, was published, and influenced Ken Burn's 1990 award-winning documentary *The Civil War*.

For a time, the school did well in Poughkeepsie, but enrollment declined as men joined the military to fight in the Civil War and the law school closed for good in 1865. Fowler went on to teach at the American Business College in Springfield, Massachusetts and passed away in Poughkeepsie in 1873.

When the law school in Ballston Spa moved on, the Sans Souci Hotel found new purpose. In 1863, Reverend D. W. Smith transformed the grand structure into a Ladies' Seminary, offering boarding and education to young women until 1886. From luxury resort to legal academy to women's school, the Sans Souci stood as a testament to Ballston Spa's evolving commitment to education. Though demolished in 1887, its legacy endures—proof that even in a time when academic opportunities were uneven, Ballston Spa nurtured learning for both men and women.