

This Week in Saratoga County History

Ballston's Colonial Inn

Submitted by Rick Reynolds November 19,2025

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Colonial Inn at Courthouse Hill 1941

There it is, sitting atop a hill, a hill known 200 years ago as Courthouse Hill, on present-day Middleline Road. It is north of the Middleline Road/Charlton Road intersection where Eliphalet Ball established his church, the center of the community. That community was to become the town of Ballston. And, yes, there it is, still standing to this day, a building then known as the Colonial Inn.

Yes, an inn and a place to relax, eat, drink, sit with friends. Right across from the Saratoga County Courthouse (and the county jail) where barristers argued their cases. A place where the likes of Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr came as lawyers. Ballston Spa's John Taylor, who went on to become the only New Yorker to be the Speaker of the House of

Representatives, argued cases there. And then visitors to the court probably spent the night or a few nights at the Colonial Inn, right across the road from the Courthouse.

But the history of the inn's property goes back to the Watrous family. Edward Watrous came to Ballston in 1775 and, two years later, he married the "girl next door," actually from across the road, Susannah Pierson. But their world was turned upside down in 1780 when the British raided Ballston in search of Patriots. Much of the Watrous family had been sent away to Richmond, Virginia; an earthen breastwork had even been constructed to protect the property but Edward and probably a son remained in Ballston. The British plundered the entire Middleline Road area and burned many of the structures there. Watrous' house was ransacked but not burned. Watrous was taken prisoner and was taken to Montreal where he was held as a prisoner for over two years. He was released in November, 1782.

Several years after the raid, in 1796, the Courthouse was built for \$6750 as Ballston was, at the time, the seat of Saratoga County. It was Edward Watrous who gave the land on which the courthouse was built. The building burned down in 1816 and the seat of the county was moved to Ballston Spa.

On Watrous property, across from the Courthouse, the Inn was built a year after the courthouse. Another year later, the "Saratoga Register," the first newspaper in Saratoga County, was published right at the Inn. That newspaper became the Ballston Journal and is still being published today (online only). The Inn was surrounded by upwards of 25 other buildings, most of them homes for the people who had come to this area with Eliphalet Ball or who had migrated to this area after the initial settlement.

There was also a store on the property. Whether it was in the Inn or as a separate building is yet to be determined but, according to an 1804 ad in a local newspaper, "The Saratoga Advertiser," Watrous had taken over the store from a John Marvin (who moved his business to a different location) and was selling groceries, crockery, glass and hollowware (ie., vessels that can contain something as opposed to flatware) as well as cloth (broad cloths, flannels, and "cassimeres.") Brandies, wines, tea, and sugars were also available at the store. In a Saratoga County business ledger, Edward Watrous is listed as buying "sundries" and tobacco for the store during the years 1804-1805. But those are the only citations attributed to Watrous and listed in this ledger that encompasses much of southern and central Saratoga County.

It seems that Watrous was more than willing to go after debtors who owed the store money. There are legal notices in newspapers in both 1815 and 1819 about he and others trying to procure the money owed to them. In one of the cases, a man's house and property in Greenfield were at stake!

The original building that housed the inn had low doorways and stairs in the center of the building. That was, at the time, the main hallway. There were no fireplaces but wood stoves provided heat. There was a birthing room near the kitchen; that room later became part of the kitchen. One of the rooms upstairs was extremely small and used for guests, sometimes more than two people at a time in the same room, people who did not even know each other.

The building itself has been much changed from the original. Frederick Telford, one of the owners of the property (he purchased it in 1931), bought the property from David, Loretta, and Leland Miller, all minors, who had inherited the property from Robie Miller, presumably their mother, and Dwight Harlow, Robie's brother. Telford removed the ballroom and the barroom which sat on the south side of the inn. Telford's daughter, Doris Collins, writes in a 2002 letter that she well remembered the privy, a wooden building bathroom, that was a three holer: one large hole for men, a smaller one for women, and a small one (with steps!) for the children.

In the 1950's, when Winslow and Mae Lillie owned the property, they built an apartment on the back of the building.

In the 20th century, after the creation of the Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake School District, this property was the northern boundary of the school district. As property north of the house was sold off, those new independent properties also became part of the school district, thus expanding its area northward.

In 1974, a tornado destroyed the very tall barn on the property. A new barn was constructed using the wood from the old barn but making it far shorter in height. All that remains of the original old barn is an old stable post.

As late as the 1920's, long after the demise of the courthouse, the Schenectady Gazette was still mentioning the location "Courthouse Hill" as an identifier in some of its news articles and want ads.

Today, the past is remembered through the presence of a historical marker at the top of Courthouse Hill on Middleline Road, Ballston, New York. A building that ties the past to the present and all of our futures.

Sources:

Ye Olde Days, Katherine Q. Briaddy

Saratoga County Heritage, Violet B. Dunn, Editor

Deeds, Saratoga County Clerks Office, Boyd to Lillie, 1955 and Miller and Harlow to Telford, 1931

Schenectady Gazette, June 18, 1925 and December 1, 1926

Personal Recollections from owners Jane and Parker Baum; Doris Collins, Frederick Telford's daughter; and an unnamed descendant of Dwight Harlow

The Saratoga Advertiser, December 31, 1804

Ballston Spa Journal, April, 1975

Albany Argus, 1815 and 1819

Saratoga Ledger of local stores, stored as "Milton Ledger" at Brookside Museum, from first quarter of 19th century