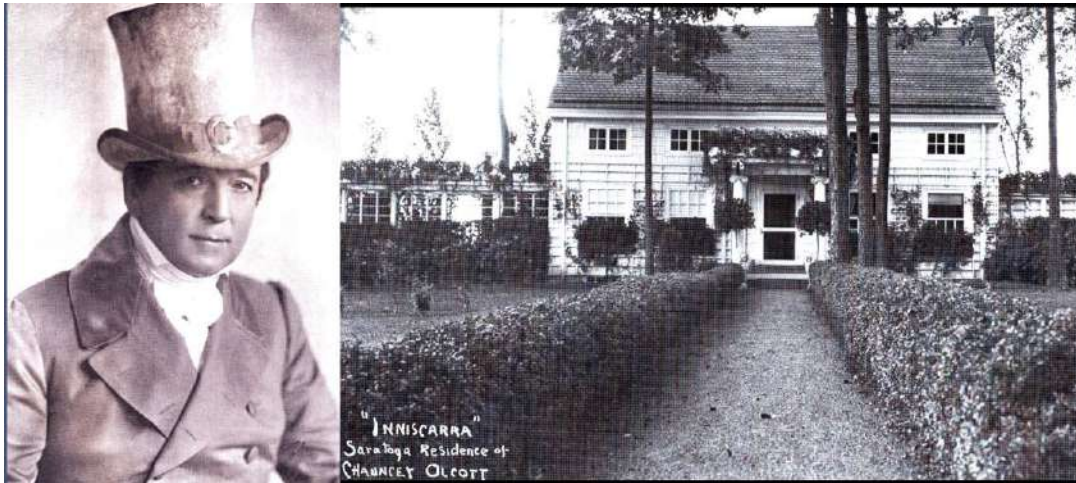


## This Week in Saratoga County History

### Chauncey Olcott: A Saratoga Springs Treasure

Submitted by Mary Ann Fitzgerald June 17, 2026

*Mary Ann Fitzgerald, is the recently retired Saratoga Springs City Historian.*



*Chauncey Olcott and "Inniscarra"- Courtesy of the Saratoga Springs History Museum*

Chauncey Olcott celebrated his 71<sup>st</sup> birthday with a legion of friends at his home, Inniscarra, on July 21st, 1931. Greetings arrived by mail, telephone and telegram. Less than a year later Chauncey passed away leaving his wife Rita with a house full of memories and mementos that told the story of his life. Rita's book *Song in his Heart, The Story of Chauncey Olcott's Life* was published in 1939. She expressed the hope that her book would help the lost generation find its way back home.

Chauncey grew up in the Buffalo area where his parents Margaret "Peggy" Doyle and Mellen Whitney "Jack" Olcott met along the banks of the Erie Canal. As a child Chauncey learned the stories of the heart of Ireland from his Doyle grandparents who lived close by. Summers were spent with his Olcott grandparents in Ausable Chasm in the Adirondacks.

While in public school, Chauncey was known for singing *Father Look Up and See the Flag* on many occasions. When Chauncey was 12 years old his father Jack passed away. Peggy was now the head of the family. Hoping to make a fortune, she went to Oil City PA where she turned her meager sum into \$50,000. Returning to Buffalo she invested in real estate and tugboats.. When asked about college or work plans after graduation, Chauncey replied: *"I don't want to work! I want to be a singer!"* He sang his first Irish song on stage in a local show, *"Where did you get that hat."* He was stage-struck and more eager than ever to follow his dream.

Chauncey set out to find a way to sing on stage by joining a minstrel show in a nearby town. Billie Emerson came to hear Chauncey sing *Maggie May*. Emerson invited Chauncey to join his minstrel show in Chicago where he experienced everything from singing ballads to counting the house. Bill Foote signed Chauncey on with Haverly Minstrels for an 18-week theatre tour of England. On opening night at Her Majesty's Theater in London Chauncey received a double encore singing *Scotch Lassie Jean*.

Despite this recent success, Chauncey was tiring of minstrels. One night while performing in a show at Niblo's Garden in New York City, Lillian Russell, was in the audience with her husband Edward Solomon, a composer. Impressed by the rich purity of Chauncey's voice, they signed him on to the production of *Pepita, or The Girl With the Glass Eyes*, a comic opera. Although the operatic interlude ended abruptly for Chauncey, he would never again be satisfied with minstrels. He could do so much more with theatre.

New opportunities came along. In 1890 Chauncey returned to England for voice lessons and on to Ireland to learn the Irish brogue for his role as Patrick Julius O'Flanagan in the play "*Miss Decima*." Although happy in London, he soon returned to the American stage.

In 1893 William J. Scanlan, the finest portrayeur of Irish Characters at the time, was seriously ill, leaving Augustus Pitou, his manager, in need of a new actor and composer. Chauncey accepted Augustus Pitou's offer to replace Scanlan in "*Mavourneen*." Chauncey was an immediate success in his first role as a star. Chauncey's composing career began at Pitou's urging as more songs were needed for "*The Irish Artist*."

Rita O'Donovan (1879-1949) met Chauncey in New York City, outside Delmonico's after a show at the Fourteenth Street Theatre. They hit it off and met every day for Horseback riding in Central Park. When it was time for Chauncey's show to move on to Boston, he invited Rita to join him there. They married in 1899. On a trip to Ireland a young boy was singing in Gaelic while rowing their boat. Rita inquired about a clump of pale pink flowers. "Why mam, those are wild Irish roses!" This was Chauncey's inspiration for "*My Wild Irish Rose*" in a new play "*A Romance of Athlone*."

They first came to Saratoga Springs in 1901 to look at property to build their home. Saratoga Springs was the perfect place for the Olcott's to settle down and relax during the summer breaks from touring. Although a blizzard was raging the first time they saw the property out Clinton Street, they saw the outline of apple trees. A good omen! Architect Charles Barton Keen created a design that from its inception treated the house and garden just as the Olcott's envisioned. The home was completed in 1902 and the Olcotts named it Inniscarra

Saratoga Springs Town Hall Theatre was located two miles from Inniscarra making it a convenient venue for Olcott's plays, rehearsals and openings. In August 1906, the Saratoga Daily Hotel

Reporter announced the opening of "*Eileen Asthore*" (*Eileen my treasure*), music, lyrics, and play by Chauncey Olcott.

*My Wild Irish Rose* reached its greatest popularity when sung between acts of *Ragged Robin*. The play opened in 1910 in the Town Hall Theatre. Chauncey said it was the biggest first night of his life! The scenery was lovely, the apple tree was gorgeous, and the apple blossoms fell at just the right time.

On July 6, 1914 *The Heart of Paddy Whack*, Rachel Crothers new comedy, featuring a half-dozen new Olcott Songs opened at Town Hall Theatre. Brunner's Book Store, located in the Arcade Building on Broadway, sold tickets for .50, \$1.00 and \$1.50 for the best seats in the house. .

Henry Miller was Chauncey's new manager after Pitou retired. They opened their new partnership in 1913 in Town Hall Theatre with the production of *Isle of Dreams* featuring the song *When Irish Eyes are Smiling*. The play made more money in a single year than any other play of Chauncey's career. It ran for forty weeks in many locations and brought in \$150,000!

Saratoga was Chauncey's first love. Each afternoon of the Spa racing season found Chauncey at the track. Chauncey and Rita frequently entertained at Innischarra after the races. Chauncey enjoyed playing golf at the Saratoga Golf & Polo Club since its opening in 1896. Rita chaired the St. Peter's Parish annual summer bazaar, and Chauncey would sing for the crowds. In 1923 Rita, as vice chair of the Skidmore College campaign, arranged a benefit ball at the Canfield Casino in Congress Park.

Chauncey's last stage role was in *The Rivals* in 1925. When the show had reached Ann Arbor, Michigan, he collapsed when the final curtain came down. When released from the hospital, Rita continued to nurse him back to health to enjoy his retirement years. The remaining summers of his life at Innischarra provided more time for his garden, golfing and the races. Entertaining family and friends were the highlight of their summers.

Every November they returned to their winter home in Monte Carlo, where the view of the sea under a great blue sky was their constant companion. In the winter of 1932 Chauncey's health declined. It was March 17<sup>th</sup>, and everyone was sending him shamrocks. He took one, blessing himself with it and tried to put it in his buttonhole. But there was none in his dressing gown, so he put it in his pocket and decided to lie down. "Good night, everybody" he said, "it's late." Chauncey passed away that night on what was still St. Patrick's Day in America.

*Saratoga Springs Town Hall Theatre is now named The Anthony "Skip" Scirocco Music Hall, located in today's City Hall.*

*Based on Rita Olcott's Book, Song in His Heart. The Story of Chauncey Olcott's Life, 1939*

