

A Tale of Two Centuries



PHOTO: ANNE HALEBRICH

Author Field Horne brings local history to life in his new book that features on its cover an 1816 watercolor of Saratoga Springs by James Skelton Gilliam.

EVER WONDERED HOW A FRONTIER wilderness became a world-famous health spa and recreational resort? The answer is found in a fascinating new book by local author and historian Field Horne titled *The Saratoga Reader: Writing About an American Village 1749-1900*.

Well-researched and creatively written, the informative and entertaining anthology features excerpts from old letters, diaries and travel journals penned by people from all walks of life who visited or lived in the Saratoga Springs area in the 18th and 19th centuries. Their candid opinions and colorful observations about the people, places and things they encountered tell the spellbinding saga of a charming early American settlement that became a horse-racing mecca and the "Queen of Spas."

Indeed, *The Saratoga Reader* is like a walk down Memory Lane during which we meet a parade of 82 colorful characters from the city's past. Each quotation from a historical document is like a friendly encounter with an interesting stranger who is telling us about his or her exciting adventures or everyday experiences in a far away place and time quite different from, yet very similar to, the Saratoga Springs we know today.

The literary passages are detailed and

Discover why 1749 to 1900 was the best of times and the worst of times to be in Saratoga Springs.

dynamic; beautiful and bold; delicate and dreamy; warm and sensitive; or cold. These personal stories are embellished with scholarly research by Horne, who introduces each document with a biographical sketch of the writer and helpful comments about the text.

Many of the documents were transcribed by Horne from hand-written letters and diaries. The author chose to preserve original misspellings and erratic punctuation because he believes that “documents should be read as they were written.”

The narratives are sometimes quite personal, often rather comical, and almost always very insightful. In 1777, for example, a 19-year-old soldier from Massachusetts named Ebenezer Wild kept a journal at the Battle of Saratoga. Like a veteran war correspondent, Wild used calm objectivity to describe a deadly conflict that would change the course of history: “11 October. This morning very foggy. We drew a gill of rum a man, & about 8 o’clk we marched from our encampment in the woods . . . The enemy have been defending and fortifying themselves as well as they could; but our people almost [elbowed] them, and fired on them and did them much harm. . . . 15 October. Very pleasant weather all day. Genl Burgine [Burgoyne] and Genl Gates have this day

agreed on terms of capitulation.”

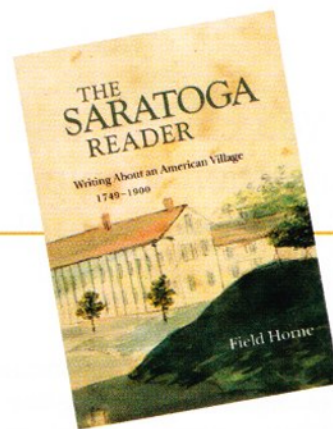
Other testimonies from the 18th Century tell us Saratoga County seemed like an agricultural promised land. A wise man from the East arrived in 1794, shortly after the birth of the United States: William Strickland was a progressive farmer from England who was shocked to see that “The backwoodsman has an utter abhorrence for the works of the creation.” In his journal he notes how an American settler first removes Indians and animals, and “then extirpates the woods that cloath and ornament the country, and that to any one but himself would be of the greatest value, and he finally exhausts and wears out the soil.”

With prophetic warning he concludes: “It is then left for him only to sally forth and seek on the frontiers, a new country which he may again devour.”

Native American Indians regarded the refreshing spring waters of Saratoga as “gifts of the Great Spirit.” In the 1780s, Philip Schuyler cut a road from Schuylerville to the springs so people could come to drink or bathe in the “cathartic” waters that were believed to cure rheumatism, gout and other physical irregularities.

One of the first white men to test “the powerful operation” of the medicinal waters was a New England merchant named Elkanah Watson. He wrote in his

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Book Praise . . .

I LOVE THE HISTORY OF Saratoga. Living in a house that was originally built in 1774, I yearn to read about anyone who visited here in the early days. Field Horne has brought to me many magical moments with his book of letters and diaries of people who visited the springs. It gives one the true feeling of a first-time visit, whether in the 1700s or at the close of the 19th Century. The pages of this book vividly bring the glorious past to life. It is a must-read for anyone who loves history and Saratoga Springs.

—Marylou Whitney



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journal on September 15, 1790: "I arriv'd this Morn'g at the Saratoga Mineral Springs There I remained the day swiming in a pigs trough. I drink these exhilarating waters from the center of a rock The Saratoga waters were discovered about 20 years ago by the Revd Mr. Ball of Ballstown by following a deer trail . . . These waters appear to be strongly impregnated with a saline substance highly charged with fixt air—as animating as champagne wine."

Gideon Putnam realized the potential of the mineral springs as a tourist attraction and opened Putnam's Tavern and Boarding House in 1802. He charged three dollars a week for board and people complained about high prices but continued to patronize his and other establishments in the early 1800s.

In the summer of 1818, Eliza Williams Bridgham of Rhode Island visited Saratoga Springs with her father. The young woman kept a travel journal written as if it were a series of letters to her sister whom she addressed as "Her Royal Highness/The Lady Abigail of Providence." Like a nostalgic Northern Scarlett O'Hara, the following sentimental words flowed from her romantic heart to her poetic pen: "This is one of the finest places to see human nature, you can imagine But, among so much style & fashion . . . I am more convinced than ever that the sweetest spot delineated on the Map of Life is Home!"

Indeed, the census of 1830 shows that Saratoga Springs had 2,204 permanent residents. The population doubled in summer, for in July of 1839 former New York City mayor Philip Hone wrote, "there are 2,000 visitors at this place at the present time All the world is here."

By then, a few grand, white wood-frame hotels with long, colonnaded porches graced Saratoga's tree-lined Broadway. The Pavilion, Congress Hall, and Grand Union and United States hotels

had elegant dining and ballrooms, and could accommodate between 200 and 400 guests each. Many private homes also served as boarding houses.

Horne tells us that among the many Southerners who came north to escape the heat and "diseases of the Low Country in summer" was a South Carolina rice and cotton planter named William Elliot. On August 18, 1823, Elliot wrote the following in a letter to his wife Ann: "We have balls alternatively at the two houses—and we of the Pavilion have completely triumphed over the other party in the splendor of our preparations. We threw open by means of folding doors—133 feet of dancing room—at the upper end we neared a pavilion sparkling with lamps and perfumed with flowers—festoons of wreaths fell from the windows & adorned our chandeliers—and at the head of the pavilion shone this motto in transparency: 'The Stars that lightened many a sphere / In clustering radiance sparkle here!' a compliment the belles were not slow in apprehending, and which gained your husband an ovation of praise"



Francis G. Hauprich –
The poems, essays and reviews of Francis G. Hauprich have warmed the hearts and lifted the spirits of readers of such periodicals as *Poet's*

Review, *Apropos* and *Catholic Digest*. The College of St. Rose graduate, who once lived in Brazil, has also used his literary talents to help draw attention to such global issues as third-world poverty. Frank's other hobbies and interests include playing basketball and tennis.