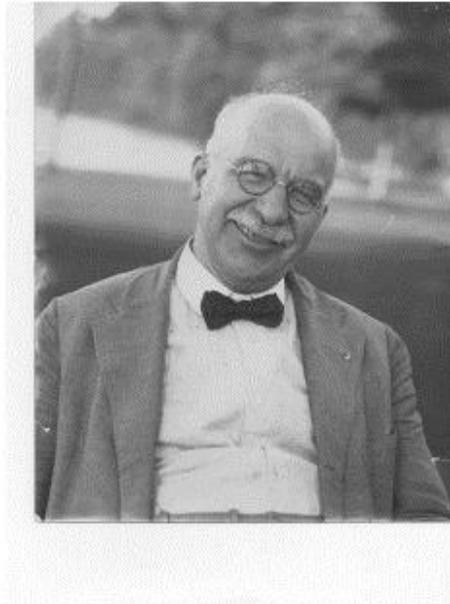


Who Was Thomas Clement Luther

By Paul Perreault, Town of Malta Historian



From his first appearance on the Saratoga Scene in 1883, until his death in 1937, Thomas Clement Luther bested every challenge he faced in life. Successful innkeeper by the age of twenty-five, he then launched a whole new career by reclaiming barren and unproductive land and turning it into the verdant forest which today bears his name and attests to his vision. His strong personality, driving ambition and love of nature caused him and his descendants to create the Luther Forest Preserve. Today, this 7,000 acre gift to the citizens of the towns of Malta and Stillwater provides miles of wooded hiking trails, an eighteen whole golf course, and ball fields for the 1,700 families that call The Forest home. Additionally, Hudson Valley Community College's TEC-SMART facility is preparing the next generation for careers in semiconductor manufacturing and green technologies. The GlobalFoundries plant; assessed at \$596,000,000, employs a highly skilled work force from around the world while also providing hundreds of well-paying jobs to County residents that allow people to live and work in the same community.

Thomas Clement Luther was born in Ballston Spa on November 30, 1862, the son of John J. Luther and Mary Clements Luther. The Luther family traces its history in America back to Captain John Luther from Dorset, England, who came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony around 1630. Thomas's grandfather, Gideon, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, came to Burnt Hills, Saratoga County, from Warren, Rhode Island, in 1790. He was a tanner and farmer and a "Hard Shell Baptist," who is credited with bringing the first seeds of the famous Rhode Island Greening Apples into New York State.

His mother, Mary Clements, was born in Stillwaterⁱ and grew up on Saratoga Lake near Snake Hill. One of her grandfathers was John Arnold who came from Rhode Island to the Snake Hill area in the 1760s. Her father, Thomas Clements, settled in a log cabin in 1790 on a plot near Saratoga Lake. ⁱⁱ. Although the Luther family resided in Ballston Spa, they maintained a summer cottage called Camp Comfort near Mrs. Luther's childhood home at Snake Hill on Saratoga Lake. It was there that young Tommy developed a lifelong love of nature and sport under his mother's tutelage. Mary Clement Luther was described in a newspaper article in 1881 as, "enjoying the reputation of being one of the most successful anglers that has ever cast their line in the waters of Saratoga Lake." On this occasion, she landed 34 black bass and about 25 pounds of perch and pickerel, which were displayed in her husband's store to the amazement of the village residents. The same article mentions that her son Tommy bagged 18 ducks and several squirrels.

Known as Tommy from an early age, he got a start in the hospitality business by helping an aunt, Amanda Hart, who ran an inn near Cedar Bluff on the north end of the Lake. In 1883, at the age of 21, and with the encouragement of his brother-in-law, T. F. Hamilton, a lawyer for the railroad that owned the White Sulphur Spring Hotel, he leased the hotel for the season. The resort was located just south of Snake Hill where Route 9P and Luther Road today meet in the Town of Stillwater. Legend claims that the spring was the result of a tussle between a Mrs. Jones and the Devil and "where the Devil entered the earth a sulfur spring broke forth".

The White Sulphur Spring was in a beautiful setting, surrounded by magnificent woods. When Luther first began renting the hotel from the Troy-Saratoga Northern it was in a dilapidated condition because the railroad had not been putting any money into it. Although Tommy only had \$350 to his name, he secured a loan from the Ballston Spa National Bank, guaranteed by the bank

president who had known him from childhood. He immediately began putting his meager funds into repairing the existing buildings and constructing additional cottages. He also doubled the size of the piazzas where he could entertain crowds of 350 people and built an oak dance floor. From then, until Prohibition spoiled the fun, Tommy ran one of the world's premier rendezvous sites for the sporting set and other "swells" who visited "to see and be seen" and partake of the famous fish dinners he served.

In the mid to late 19th century natural resources were heavily exploited. Assuming a seemingly inexhaustible supply of natural resources, Americans developed a "tradition of waste." Tommy was a keen observer of his surroundings and he did not miss the fact that farms on the east side of the lake were not thriving. The soil on the plain east of Saratoga Lake, with the exception of some alluvial bottoms, is sandy and able to produce only light crops. This fact helps explain why the area was settled later than the nearby areas. Sylvester, when writing his classic *History of Saratoga County* in 1878, interviewed the residents in the area who, for the most part, identified themselves as the second generation on the land. Additionally, they stated that a crop of corn could be gotten from the soil only once in three years. By the beginning of the twentieth century, many family farms were being abandoned or sold for very low prices.

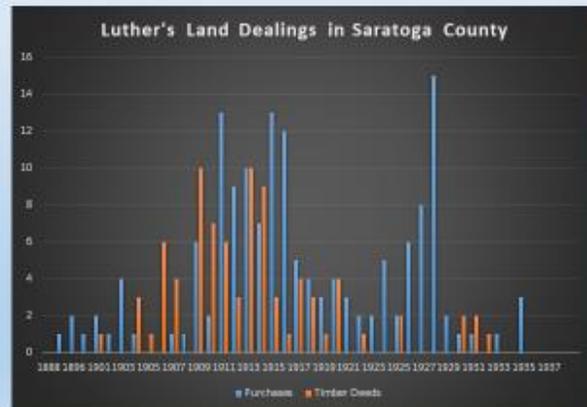
By 1917, when Cornell graduate student Frederic Hartwell Millen wrote his master's thesis on the Luther Preserve, he stated "At present, however, the soil is so completely deprived on the humus content and moisture retaining properties, that the greatest part of the area is completely abandoned as far as agriculture is concerned and only in a few especially favored depressions is any attempt made to raise crops. The abandonment of the area, even though the labor of cropping be so light, testifies to the lack of productivity."

Tommy's first land purchase was the 1888 deal for the White Sulphur Spring Hotel. From that date until his death in 1937, he and his wife Alice recorded an astonishing 253 land transactions with the Saratoga County Clerk's Office: 163 purchases, 107 sales and 83 timber deeds, i.e. the title to the timber passes to the buyer while the title to the land remains with the seller with the length of time and other particulars spelled out in the deed.

While he did make a small number of purchases in the 1890s, they appeared to have been associated with his father's estate but a purchase of 29 acres in Malta in 1897 may have been his first step toward what would become the Luther Forest Preserve. Two acquisitions in 1901, one of 121 acres and the other of 64 acres, were made with the specific idea of reforestation. The year also saw his first timber deed. After that there was no stopping him.

Although the area that would become known as the Preserve is limited to the Towns of Malta and Stillwater, Tommy did not, at first, restrict himself to this area. Sixty-six purchases or timber deeds were executed in the nearby towns of Northumberland, Greenfield, Wilton, Halfmoon, Saratoga, Milton and Clifton Park. These were, however, far over shadowed by the 54 deals made in Malta and the 110 in Stillwater. The years from 1909 to 1916 witnessed the apex of activity. In this seven year period Tommy made 73 purchases and 46 timber deals. After that spurt, deals were limited to single digits each year with the exception of 1928 which saw 14 purchases. After that year, his efforts really slowed and he made only 7 additional purchases and exercised only 6 timber deeds until his death in 1937. His will listed ownership of 4,045 acres in the Town of Stillwater and 2,370 in Malta.

Purchases and Timber Deeds from 1888 until 1935



In addition to Saratoga County, the Luthers timbered in the Washington County towns of Dresden and Putnam and purchased 6,850 acres of virgin forest and a sawmill. They used the money earned from harvesting these trees to support their endeavors in Luther Forest. In 1916, Luther cut a 720 year old elm on his property in the Town of Putnam. He anticipated harvesting 5,600 board feet of lumber but due to the enormous size had to purchase a special saw for his mill. Eventually, the land in Washington County was sold to International Paper.

The result of his activity in Saratoga County was a 7,000 acre preserve, approximately half in the Town of Malta and the other half in Stillwater, in which Tommy would eventually plant over 10,000,000 white, red, Scotch and Riga pine tree. The year 1928 witnessed a record crop of 1,100,000 new trees planted. During planting season, he employed a crew of 80 men who, working in pairs, with one man sinking a hoe in the soft soil and the other planting the seed. Working under “Old Man Luther’s” supervision, they were capable of planting up to 50,000 in a day. These efforts earned him the honor of being named the champion planter by the American Tree Association

At the time, it was the largest privately owned preserve in the Country and brought national recognition to him. Both the New York State Conservation Department and the Department of Forestry at Cornell University maintained experimental stations in the preserve. The state also maintained a fire tower manned by the renowned character, Noah LaCasse, the Adirondack guide who had accompanied Theodore Roosevelt from Mount Marcy when President McKinley was shot. With the assistance provided by the state experts, as well as that of his son, Thomas F., a graduate of the Forestry School at Cornell, Tommy took steps to preserve his vision. In 1930, no trees were planted but instead fire trails were cut throughout the preserve. Sixty foot wide swaths were created where all the vegetation was removed and the soil harrowed and the stumps removed. Two dangers to healthy pines, weevil and blister rust were guarded against by planting alternating rows of Scotch and red pine and ridding the area of currant and gooseberry bushes which supported the blister rust.

The work done at the preserve drew attention from around the world and it was visited by experts from Canada, Mexico, England, France,

Germany, Sweden, India, China and Japan. Prior to reforestation projects in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, legislative committees visited and studied the Preserve. Preceding passage of the Clark-McNeary act, which at the time was the most extensive Federal law regulating forest protection and control of blister rust, prominent Senators and members of the House of Representatives spent several days looking over the preserve.

Luther was very active in professional organizations having served as the president of the New York State Association of Forests and Parks, a director of the Northeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association and membership in the Society of American Foresters and the Saratoga County Farm Bureau.

Tommy is buried with Alice, his parents and his children in the Ballston Spa Village Cemetery. In addition to his tombstone, his son erected a bronze tablet in the forest in his father's memory. It reads:

In Memoriam Thomas Clement Luther Founder in 1898 of the Luther Forest "HE THAT PLANTETH A TREE IS A SERVANT OF GOD HE PROVIDETH A KINDNESS FOR MANY GENERATIONS AND FACES THAT HE HATH NOT SEEN SHALL BLESS HIM.

I would like to thank Carol Luther Mackay and Alec Mackay for granting access to the family archives. All information about land transactions are from the Saratoga County Clerk's website. Information was gathered from contemporary issues of The Saratogian and The Times Union.