

The Role of Rotary in Establishing the Saratoga Battlefield

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The early 1920s was a period of intense growth in the Rotary movement in the small communities of Saratoga, Washington and Warren Counties. Prior to May 1922, only 4 communities- Albany, Troy, Schenectady and Amsterdam- had clubs. But on May 1, 1922 clubs in Glens Falls and Ballston Spa were chartered, followed quickly by Cobleskill, Granville, Mechanicville and Saratoga Springs in 1924: Hudson Falls in 1925 and Cohoes in 1927.

With the energy and enthusiasm of recent converts, they looked around for “big” projects to tackle in order to demonstrate their commitment to the ideals of Rotary. The upcoming 150th. Anniversary of the Battle of Saratoga, scheduled to take place in 1927, must have appealed to the “live wires” of the nearby Rotary Clubs who quickly became a part of a movement which included citizens of Vermont and New England (whose ancestors fought at the Battle of Bennington and Saratoga) and perhaps, most importantly, two men, Adolph Ochs, the owner of the New York Times and George O. Slingerland, Mayor of Mechanicville and founding member of the Mechanicville Rotary Club.

Because of Ochs social status, he is often cited as being the prime mover in the effort but this is what Ochs said of Slingerlands’ role “My interest in the Battlefield of Saratoga is due to the enthusiasm, self-sacrifice and patriotism of Mayor George O. Slingerland of Mechanicville. He is the man who brought me to the field”. Two other members of the Mechanicville Rotary Club (both from Stillwater) active in the effort were Rev. John Finn, pastor of St. Peter’s Church, and lawyer Arthur Vinett who in 1981 wrote of the role his Club played in the early years.

On September 18 and 19, 1925, over 400 Rotarians and their wives from New York, Vermont and Massachusetts gathered at the site of the Battlefield, which at that time was privately owned. Meeting on the porch of the Neilson House, site of the American army encampment in 1777, they passed a resolution calling on Rotarians to work for a 150th anniversary

commemorative event and urged support for permanent recognition of the Battlefield by either the State or Federal government. Spurred on in large part by Slingerland, this grassland campaign took root and blossomed. Slingerland addressed Rotary Clubs in three states with his message and the Ballston Spa Club heard the message. Ballston Spa Rotarians William Andrews and Thomas Kerley became members of the Battlefield Celebration Committees.

In 1926, due in large part to support from Rotarians, the State of New York approved the purchase of four farms and created a State Historic Preserve which became known as the Saratoga Battlefield. Slingerland was appointed the first Superintendent and made the following pledge to the future. "Saratoga will not be neglected in the future as in the past. New York State will not fail... The whole area will be acquired, the entrenchments restored, proper monuments and landscaping will glorify the field, and it will be mecca of not only Rotarians but the whole nation, who will come here to do honor to our forefathers, and to walk reverently over the sacred spot where our own United States was born." Anyone who ever visited the Battlefield know how well Slingerland, and those who followed in his footsteps, keep this promise.

One of Slingerland's first duties was to begin planning for the upcoming 150th Anniversary celebration scheduled for October, 1927. Judging by the numbers involved, the celebration was a great success. An estimated crowd of 100,000 spectators and participants viewed the pageants and heard speeches from the governors of New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Al Smith, of New York. The 25,000 automobiles that tried to get to the event overwhelmed the primitive road system and many were still in long lines at the close of the day's program. Crowd control was handled by a 200 member contingent of State Troopers and logistics by units the New York National Guard.

The pageant was directed by Percy Burrell the "king" of pageants. Each of the 6,200 participants was provided with a four page set of instructions which covered everything from the time and place of assembly to what to do about their costumes and such items as chewing gum, wrist watches and glasses – all prohibited.

The pageant itself started at 2 P.M. but was preceded by a 150 gun salute at 9 A.M., the dedication of the New Hampshire monument at 10

A.M. and speeches by the three governors at 11 A.M. The show was described as “(a) gigantic historical pageant depicting in dance, song, and drama the opening scenes of the American Revolution, and more particularly the striking events and episodes in the Battle of Saratoga.” Participants included musicians, choristers, dancers, and volunteers costumed as soldiers, farmers, Indians, and women and children.

The Saratogian newspaper announced that “Ballston Spa closed down shop this noon and went to the Saratoga Battlefield celebration. Scores of Ballstonians, many of them taking part in the pageant, went to the historic battlefield this morning, but the great exodus did not take place until early this afternoon. Stores, mills, offices and shops closed at noon and throughout the forenoon there was a hustle and bustle of people getting ready to go to the celebration.” The New York Times featured a page one article describing the event as did the Saratogian and Ballston Journal. The Saratogian listed many locals who reenacted original participants, including two participants from the Ballston Spa Rotary Club: Harold Van Aernem and Wendell Townley.

For a few years after the celebration the Mechanicville Rotary Club held patriotic services annually at the Battlefield on October 7th, the anniversary of the Battle of Bemis Heights. In 1929 Slingerland planned a special ceremony on October 17 to commemorate the British surrender and invited Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt to speak. F.D.R. accepted and reminded Slingerlands “Do not forget that I cannot readily get up and down steps.”

After the excitement of the 150th. Anniversary celebration, Superintendent Slingerlands began working toward including the Battlefield in the National Park System. Although he did not live to see it, (dying in 1932) in 1938, with the help of former Governor and later President Franklin Roosevelt, the Saratoga Battlefield became part of the National Park System, as it remains today.

In that same year, area Rotary Clubs dedicated a memorial tablet (now located at the foot of the path leading to the Visitor Center) which reads “In Memoriam George O. Slingerlands 1872-1932 His vision, patriotism and untiring efforts were largely responsible for the acquisition, development and preservation of the Saratoga Battlefield by the State of New York. Erected by the Rotary Clubs of this vicinity. “

Rotarians and all Americans owe a debt of gratitude to those early Rotarians for their foresight, dedication and commitment to the ideals of Rotary. They must have taken great pride in being a part of something that will probably survive forever.