

Village of Ballston Spa

Unlike the Town's other hamlets, whose very existence depended on the early mill sites, the growth of the Village of Ballston was initially based on tourism. The Village of Ballston Spa benefitted from the presence of mineral springs, located near the site of the Old Iron Spring on present day Front Street. For years, Native Americans had been coming to the spring to take the waters which they deemed beneficial to their health. Few white men had knowledge of the spring. Sir William Johnson, of Johnstown, was the King' Superintendent of Indian Affairs and had been told of the "healing" properties of the waters in Ballston by his Mohawk friends. He came for the mineral water more frequently in his later years, as his health began to fail. In 1771, Beriah Palmer, a surveyor and lawyer, and also a Trustee of the Kayaderosseras Patent discovered a spring alongside the creek running at the lower end of today's Front Street. The coming war put off any further development of the area until the 1780's, when visitors began to come in greater numbers. As knowledge of the spring grew people began to camp in the adjacent woods to partake of the mineral waters.



Settlement in the village did not occur at the pace it had along the Middle Line Road, when the Kayaderosseras Patent came up for settlement in 1770. Most early settlers overlooked the area as it was not deemed suitable for agriculture, being in a low-lying wet area around the springs. What would become the Village of Ballston Spa was actually divided between the 14th and 16th Allotments of the Patent. West High Street and Route 67 stand as the dividing line between the two parcels. One of the first permanent settlers on the Milton side of the dividing line was Jonathan Peckham, a Revolutionary War veteran. Jonathan and his brother Silas came to Milton and purchased a plot of land east of today's Milton Avenue, where they built the first cabin. They later moved up the hill and built a frame house along a path which became Church Street. Jonathan was a successful farmer but did not see the commercial potential of the land.

Settlement of the Village would increase largely due to the efforts of an absentee landlord, Nicholas Low. The brothers Nicholas and Isaac Low came into possession of 254 acres, north of West High Street in 1777, following the death of their father. Cornelius Low, a wealthy merchant from New Jersey, purchased the land from the heirs of May Bickley, one of the original 13 grantees of the Kayaderosseras Patent. During the Revolution, Isaac, who was a Loyalist, had his property seized by the New York State Legislature. Nicholas, who had joined the rebel cause was allowed to keep his property and may have also taken his brother Isaac's portion. In 1793, Nicholas contracted a local surveyor, Seth Baldwin, to divide his parcel into 106 building lots which he leased or sold to merchants and craftsmen who were attracted to the area by the growing number of visitors to Ballston Spring. Low built a home, and the first hotel just south of the spring. As Low spent most of his time in New York City, his House and Hotel in the village eventually fell under the control of two brothers, David and James McMaster. Others eventually began to see the possibilities that Ballston had to offer. Benajah Douglass, father to future presidential candidate Stephen Douglas, arrived in Ballston in 1787, and purchased 100 acres near the base of the hill just west of the spring at the end of Front Street. He constructed a small tavern of logs, which he replaced in 1791 with a proper wood frame house of 4 rooms. The following year he built the "First Respectable House" in the village, a two-story framed building with tavern on the lower floor, and several sleeping rooms above for visitors of the nearby spring. This we know today as the Brookside Museum. By 1807, as tourism increased to the area, so did the value of the properties on Front Street, and the village of Ballston Spa had taken form. This street was so labeled on the earliest map, in 1793, of the springs, because the owner, who was speculating to sell lots, wanted to impress buyers with a street that terminated at a waterfront. This location became an increasingly important destination for tourists providing all the amenities of comfort, leisure, and entertainment to amuse those who come for the mineral waters. For the next eight or ten years, Ballston Spa was one of the premier watering places in the country. Front Street was lined with hotels and boarding houses, billiard rooms, dances, masquerades, card games, theater, music, and, of course, hot and cold mineral baths. The Medbery Hotel began life in 1804 as the "Village Hotel." Forty-three years and three additions later, it was sold to Stephen Medbery, who ran it for over 30 years. Nicholas Low continued to invest in the area which culminated in the construction of the San Souci Hotel along Front Street in 1803, The San Souci stands opposite the Civil War Monument in the Middle of Front Street. In its day it was one of the largest in the nation, with about 100 rooms. Many compared it to the finest hotels in Europe. After it was burned in 1887, it took about 40 years for the present set of buildings to be erected in its place.

Ballston Spa experienced a second phase of its development due to its manufacturing possibilities. Early on small efforts were made to meet the needs for the growing number of settlers by the introduction of the first sawmills and grist mills. By 1800 Joshua Aldridge had built a sawmill on Gordon Creek, and Hezekiah Middlebrook had constructed a gristmill on the Kayaderosseras about half a mile north of the spring. Hezekiah Middlebrook was a French and Indian War veteran from Connecticut and came to Ballston in 1772. Eventually he would operate a gristmill, a sawmill, an iron furnace, a cloth and woolen factory, and a tannery. By 1810, John Carter built the first tannery on the hill above the spring near West High Street. Other entrepreneurs quickly realized Ballston Spa had something unique. The principal stream running through it, the Kayaderosseras Creek, had very high banks. Dams could hold back enough water to ensure almost year-round operation, for a series of mills winding up the creek several miles above Ballston Spa. With the introduction of a rail line in 1896, The

Kayaderos Railroad, raw material and finished goods could be shipped more easily to and from the mills and factories. In the years just prior to the Civil War, the primary material being processed in the mills in Ballston was cotton. As business flourished several Ballston Spa families, like the Wiswalls', became very wealthy as bankers. The creek made fortunes for 2 others, Isaiah Blood and George West. Blood employed many of Ballston's residents in an edged tool factory, which supplied the Union Army. Englishman, George West, began making paper upstream in Rock City Falls, and became the Paper bag King of the world. West constructed the Victorian style factory buildings on Milton Avenue by the Kayaderos Creek, which still support a variety of businesses today. The Ballston Tannery also became a major employer for residents of Milton until World War II. After steam and electrical power transferred industry from stream banks to cities, Ballston Spa, with its railroad, became a center for the region's farm communities. Village stores catered to farmers who would come to town, first with wagons and automobiles. The large, red brick building up the hill past Wiswall Park housed refrigerated storage, had its own railroad siding, and sent produce to feed cities down the Hudson to New York City. Today this building houses several antique dealers. Front Street also continues to support many thriving small shops and restaurants.

Milton Avenue is home to three of the village's five churches which accommodate congregations of Methodists, Baptists, and Roman Catholics. The two older churches the Episcopalian, built in 1862, and the Presbyterian built in 1835 are on West High Street (Rte.67). Three other churches on Milton Avenue were built between 1892 and 1897. At the time, most of the congregants of these churches were storekeepers, clerks, and working families. The Baptists have the longest history in the village, dating to the 1790s. The churchyard they left behind when they moved from their first building evolved into the village's cemetery. The current Methodist church is the congregation's third, which was built on the site of their second, which was torn down. St. Mary's Catholic Church was organized by largely Irish families who farmed or worked in the mills along the Kayaderos Creek.

Old Iron Springs



Blue Mill Dam built by
Hezekiah Middlebrook