

Gambling in Saratoga Springs, by James Parillo

The history of gambling in Saratoga Springs dates back to early 19th century. The village flourished because of the spring water; however people needed something more for entertainment. Early on there were no actual gaming houses. Gambling only occurred privately in hotels and boarding houses and in the occasional pool hall. It wasn't until 1842 when Ben Scribner opened the first known gambling house in Saratoga Springs. This was not a high end endeavor and could not keep the interests of the wealthy patrons who visited Saratoga Springs and closed soon after opening.

The State Fair in 1847 brought organized horse racing. The first races were trotters and provided an opportunity for gamblers to play. This led the way to bringing John Morrissey to Saratoga Springs. Morrissey had successfully operated gambling dens in New York City and was drawn to Saratoga. He opened his first house in 1862 on Matilda Street. This is Woodlawn Avenue today. At the same time he raced thoroughbreds on the old Horse Haven Track. This preceded the founding of the Race Track in 1863. Gamblers could play the horses in the day time and then enjoy roulette, faro and whist in the evenings at his gambling house. In 1870 he opened The Saratoga Club House, or the Canfield Casino, as we call it today. Morrissey attracted the wealthiest people in the nation, although his operation was not legal by local law. He was immensely successful operating with little opposition until his death in 1878. The Casino eventually passed to Richard Canfield in 1894. Canfield expanded the business but faced a great deal of opposition from local activists against gambling. Spencer Trask and Edgar Truman Brackett led the fight against Canfield. He served brief prison time in 1904 and 1905 for operating the Casino and after the 1906 season closed the doors for good.

The Track continued to operate through all of this, but it also had its moments of decline. In 1892 Gottfried Walbaum took ownership of the track and for the next decade ran it into the ground. He focused on profits and corruption rather than the good of the track. The 1895 Percy Grey Act was passed which allowed licensed gambling at race tracks. W.C. Whitney acquired the track from Walbaum and is credited with saving it. Legislation was introduced in 1911 that made the owners personally liable for gambling debts. The track closed because of this but was re-opened in 1913 after the law was rescinded and allowed limited book making.

Following the closure of the Club House, a new era was brought in. Arnold Rothstein was one of the first gangsters to establish in Saratoga Springs, soon after Canfield's demise. This saw the end of the gentleman gambler and an increase in organized crime. Arnold Rothstein was perhaps one of the first and most infamous of the gangsters to come to Saratoga. This was the start of the "Lake House" era. The Lake Houses were classy restaurants and entertainment venues mostly on Saratoga Lake. They had back room gambling that operated illegally and openly. Prohibition gave the mob another foot hold in Saratoga Springs. Bootleggers ran illicit alcohol from Canada to and through Saratoga Springs. This brought more infamous names to the City. Bugsy Siegel, Meyer Lansky and more had interests in Saratoga Springs illegal Casinos. The Piping Rock, Newman's, Riley's, The Arrowhead, the Chicago Club were the best known. In many cases there were local interests in the businesses as well. The clubs flourished. Bing Crosby, Mitzie Green and Sophie Tucker were just a few of the high end entertainers these clubs featured. However, although operating openly, these clubs were still illegal. Numerous raids by local and state police were held, but the clubs continued operating.

In 1926, New York State Governor Smith ordered an investigation and called for local officials to answer to charges of "violations of public duty" in their response to, and association with, organized gambling. State Supreme Court Justice Christopher Heffernan later ruled "I am fully satisfied (with the evidence provided) that...gambling, consisting of pool selling, bookmaking, faro, cards, roulette and other games of chance were conducted openly in the City of Saratoga Springs."

The Track saw change in gambling at the same time. In 1934 the 1913 law was rescinded which limited bookmaking. In 1940 NYS passed a law creating the pari-mutuel betting system still used at the track today. In 1941 the Saratoga Harness Track opened providing another legal gambling venue in the city. In 1940 Governor Thomas Dewey ordered another investigation. This was followed by the investigations by the committee led by Senator Estes Kefauver. His probe led the shut down of all of Saratoga Springs' illegal Casinos by 1953.