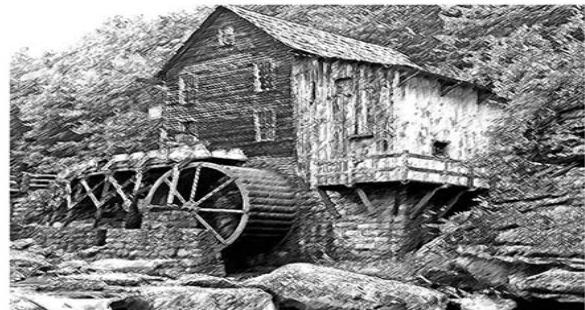


# The Gristmill

## Saratoga County History Journal



Preserving the History of Saratoga County

Fall 2020

## Don't Take History for Granted

By Ben Kemp

Like many, I had grown accustomed to the History channel being associated with reality-based programming so I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the company was looking to produce a documentary on the life of Ulysses S. Grant. Appian Way purchased the rights to the 2017 biography *Grant* by Ron Chernow in preparation for the project. I was even more surprised when in the fall of 2018 Radical Media contacted me to solicit my involvement in the project. They had viewed my segment on the C-SPAN Cities Tour program from 2017 and were interested in interviewing me for the documentary. After a preliminary phone interview, I traveled to the Radical Media studios in Manhattan in November to be interviewed. I had told them my expertise was studying Ulysses S. Grant as a family man, so for three hours, I was interviewed by the producer and writer mainly on that subject. Upon leaving the studios, I pledged to remain in contact to provide additional information and imagery.

After some initial delays, the 3-part miniseries, *Grant*, finally aired on Memorial Day 2020. Reaching about 3 million viewers during its premiere, the documentary served to introduce many to Grant as they had never known him before. In the fall of 2019, History channel had sent a production crew to Grant Cottage State Historic Site in Wilton, N.Y. to record a promotional segment on the importance of historical preservation. I took part in the shooting of the piece which aired with each episode of the miniseries and online. The positive effect of the production and promotional piece on visitation to Grant Cottage will be significant for some time to come.

When I initially discovered a job opportunity at U.S. Grant Cottage State Historic Site in Wilton, N.Y. in 2014,



**Ben Kemp (Left) Operations Manager at the Grant Cottage State Historic Site in the Town of Wilton being interviewed for a segment on the C-SPAN Cities Tour program.**

I thought it was a great opportunity. I had always been interested in history, especially the American Civil War, and had been a reenactor. My job interview was in the off-season (winter) and thus off-site. I shared my interest and enthusiasm but also my embarrassment at having never visited the Historic Site. I found out quickly after being hired, that I was far from alone. Some of the first visitors to the site during my first year working at the site admitted to me they had never visited and when I asked where they traveled from they revealed they lived along the road to the entrance of the site! This is not unusual though, many travel long distances to far-off locales and visit multiple historic sites on their journeys but frequently take for granted the wonderful history in their own back yard. I now make it a point to visit and support more local historical sites and have enjoyed serving on the board of the Hadley-Lake Luzerne Historical Society

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# Grant

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for the past few years.

Grant Cottage is a unique Historic Site that has been preserved for 135 years as a public site. In 1885, Ulysses S. Grant lived his final weeks in the Cottage surrounded by his family as he completed his memoirs. It was a final unselfish act of devotion to provide for his family. Through a series of live-in caretakers, the original furnishings and personal belongings, even floral arrangements have been preserved in a place that is as much a time-capsule as a museum. In the 1980s, the Historic Site was threatened with closure due to the establishment of a New York State prison on the property. It took the formation of the non-profit Friends of the Ulysses S. Grant Cottage to keep the Cottage open to the public. The Friends still operate the site 30 years later with a dedicated staff, a steadfast crew of volunteers, and the generous support of members.

I have had the pleasure of watching the Historic Site and the Friends organization grow over the last seven seasons. I have also watched my responsibility grow and I now serve as the Operations Manager for the site. I oversee daily operations and manage a team of about 30 dedicated volunteers. It is the most fulfilling work I have done in my life and feel fortunate to have such a beautiful and historic place to share with others.

After a delay due to the pandemic, Grant Cottage Historic Site is now open to the public 9:30am - 4:00pm Wed-Fri through Labor Day and on fall weekends into October. The site is operating on limited capacity and has instituted health safety protocols to provide as safe an environment for staff and visitors alike. Visitors are strongly encouraged to book their guided cottage tour online which features an updated exhibit room and a new introductory video. Those who cannot secure a tour can take advantage of the free cell-phone audio tour of the

grounds and the short path to the stunning Eastern Overlook of the Hudson Valley. Historic Site programs will be pre-recorded this season and aired online. More information on tickets, membership, programming, and volunteering can be found at [www.grantcottage.org](http://www.grantcottage.org). or by calling (518) 584-4353. You can follow the site on Facebook as well for updates.



Ulysses Grant working on his Memoirs on the front porch of Grant Cottage. The towel on his neck hides the tumor, that was killing him, from the view of the large numbers of passing well-wishers.



Ben Kemp and another volunteer playing Ulysses Grant and his wife Julie. Bad investments and a glitch in the federal pension law left Grant almost pennyless when he came down with cancer. His pension as a general was canceled when he became president, but presidents did not get a federal pension. Therefore, unlike other soldiers, he had no pension. Grant worked at the cottage, almost to his dying day, to finish his Memoirs in order to provide money for Julia, who he loved deeply.



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# Foote's Pond

## Ballston Spa's Forgotten Walden Pond

*Come, Muse, inspire me now to sing  
glances  
Fit praise of thee, old Iron Spring.  
tell  
Standing beside the silent flow,  
Swift memories of the long ago  
Bring back again the sweet romances,*

*The liquid draughts and laughing  
But thirst assuaged, ah, who shall  
The secrets of the leafy dell  
The evening stroll to old Red Mill  
Or moonlight meet on Uncas' hill*

—*The Centennial Ode, by Howard B. Grose, stanza XXVIII*

By Bruce M. Manzer, Ph.D.

### *Part I - Background*

Foote's Pond, long known as the Red Mill Pond, is a 3-acre secluded pond on the west side of the village of Ballston Spa, surrounded by approximately 10 acres of woodland and situated over the hill and behind the Brookside Museum where it abuts Gordon Creek and is accessed from Charlton Street. It is a secluded, Walden-esque site with a footpath along the south shore for the entire length of the Pond and a rudimentary one along the north shore. The Pond appears to be spring-fed. It has an outlet at the northern end into Gordon Creek, and at one time there was a dam there. More is said about this below.

The Pond was named after Daniel A. Foote (1850-1927) one-time owner and ice dealer in the village for many years. It served as a public bath very early in the history of the village. In the last half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it served the residents of Ballston principally for recreational and social facilities and as a source of ice for their ice boxes. The Pond has been known over the years as Westcot's Pond, The Red Pond, Sylvan Lake, the Red Mill Pond, and today as Foote's Pond.

Epenetus White, Jr. (1779-1832), who settled in Ballston Spa about 1800 near the Old Iron Spring, built the Red Mill (a grist mill) on the Gordon Creek above the Aldridge House in the west end of the village and the pond on which it sat became known as the Red Mill Pond. The mill burned in 1874 and was never rebuilt. Little in the way of archival material exists. Brookside Museum has a number of photographs of the Pond, most issued originally as postcards. More photographs can be found by way of Google or even on eBay. There is nothing on its geology or limnology and almost no mention of its use for fishing and boating. Other than the Pond as shown in Maps 1 & 2, no maps or plans of the site except as part of topographical maps of the area were found. Curiously there appear to be no local folklore surround-



**Red Mill Pond - Circa 1907**

*Source: E.F. Grose, Centennial History of Ballston Spa 1907*

ing the site, except for Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* partially set (according to legend) on Mohican Hill.

### *Part II –The Pond and Its Uses Over the Years*

#### *(a) As a Site for Recreation & Sports*

As a site for recreation and sports, the Pond was long a swimming hole for village youth in summer and an ice-skating rink for everyone in the winter, serving these needs and those of related sports activities such as boating and, on the Mohican Hill above, skiing and tobogganning in the winter. There are reports of its use for swimming as early as 1853 up to the 1950s and probably even today. It was the gathering place, particularly for youngsters from the south end of Ballston Spa, who hurried there after their Bath Street School let out. Being secluded, there was no need for bathing suits and from all accounts none were ever used in those early days. Incidentally, the Pond was only one of several swimming

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# Foote's Pond

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holes in the area. Others included the Blue Mill and Island Mill ponds, and the Mourning Kill Creek.

The earliest mention of the Pond's winter use as a skating rink seems to be in the 1870s until the end of the century, before the ice had been harvested. Mention is made of skating events in the local newspapers in the 1890s where more than 200 people often disported themselves at night, with lights and music. Large crowds were drawn to skating there both in the afternoon and evening.

Other events that took place there were tub races and even a water carnival (in 1878) sponsored by the Ladies Civic Society of Ballston Spa. A skating carnival was held two years later in 1880 attended by about 250 persons on the ice. The Ballston Silver Cornet Band furnished the music. Daniel Foote made the plans and engaged the band, charging a small fee to defray expenses. Entertainments of various sorts often accompanied nighttime skating. One writer speaks of singers serenading the skaters; making sure that George Foote (the then-owner) had retired for the night.

As recently as the summer of 1946 the Boy Scouts of Troop 1 used the Pond as the site for a campfire and games. Later that same summer they played a game of capture-the-flag there.

Needless to say such uses were not without their peril. Over the years, there were a number of drownings, near-drownings, diving and other accidents, including a horse falling through the ice in November 1880 while pulling a machine to scrape the ice. And, sad to say, there was an incident, not so very long ago, of a demented woman drowning her newborn baby there.

Bathing there dwindled as places such as White's Beach, opened by J. B. White in 1932, and pools like the Victoria Pool and the Peerless Pool Complex, opened to cater to people's needs.

As to disasters occurring there, the most notable one seems to have been the flood of October 1869 when the Gordon Creek rose to a great height causing the Red Mill dam to go out as well as the bridge over Gordon Creek at Bath Street.

## (b) As a Source of Ice

As the icebox began to make its way into homes during the early to mid-nineteenth century, well before the invention of the refrigerator, ice collection and distribution became commercially successful and soon became a global industry.

In the winter, usually in late January or early February after the skating season, the ice harvest began. The earliest newspaper reports of ice harvesting in the Red Mill Pond date from January 1871 and extend until January

1896 (although I remember ice being delivered by horse-drawn cart to neighbor's houses as late as the 1940s). As mentioned above, ice harvesting followed the skating season when it finished and when severe cold had set in, late January or early February. Ice was also harvested from nearby lakes – the south end of Saratoga Lake, from Round Lake and Ballston Lake. The work was undertaken by several companies and employed several hundred men.

Daniel Foote apparently sold his ice to the Knickerbocker Ice Company as well as independently. His ice was stored under saw dust or straw in his own ice houses and in those of the Sans Souci Hotel.

The Pond's former ice houses are long gone.

## (c) As a Site for Baptism

In the last half of the nineteenth century, and perhaps earlier, the Pond was one of the sites for Baptisms used by the First Baptist Church, as was the Kayadeross Creek. In December of 1865, Mary A. Garrett and Jane Fox McClew were baptized there. E.F. Grose *Centennial History of Ballston Spa*, names seven Baptist congregants who were immersed in January 1866 in the new baptistery at the Church, that occasion being its first ever use. "From that time forward the custom of repairing to the waterside for the solemn ceremony has given place to observance within the sanctuary." *The Ballston Democrat*, however, says in its issue for October 21, 1871, "the rite of baptism was celebrated at the Red Mill Pond, by Rev. Dr. [George W.] Clark." Dr. Clark was pastor of the First Baptist Church from March 1, 1868 until June 25, 1873.

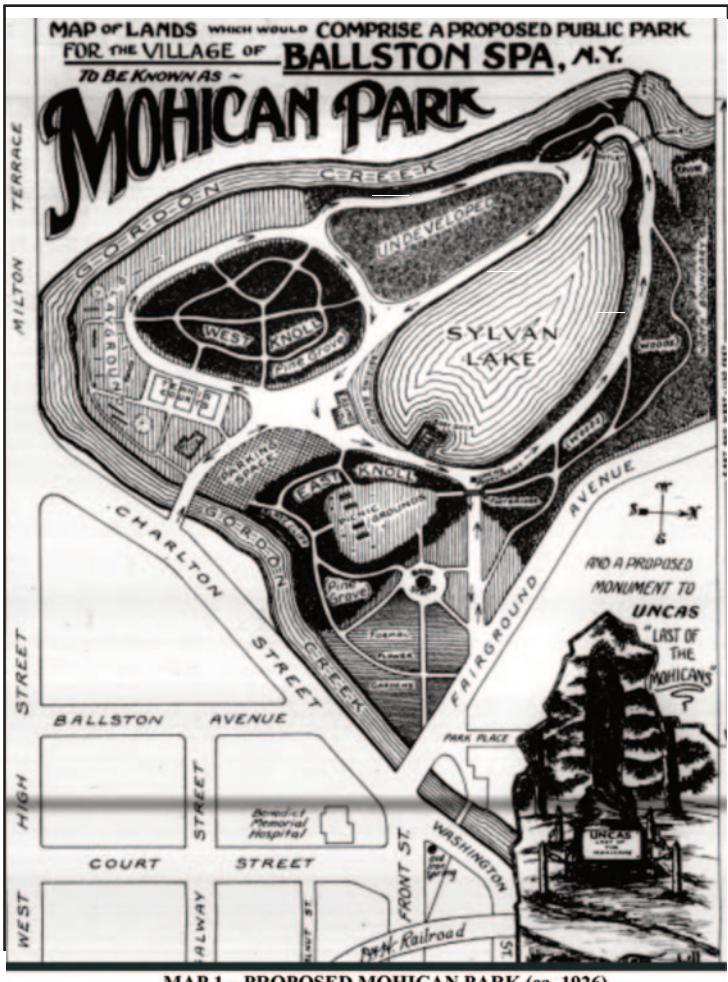
## *Part III – The Pond in The Twentieth Century: Proposals for Its Development*

Over the better part of the twentieth century, the Pond has lain mostly moribund although a number of proposals were set forth by various people and organizations from time to time.

## (a) Mohican Park

One of the earliest proposals for the Pond's development appears to be that of Frederick Arthur Hemphill, a Ballston commercial artist who loved his village and its Indian lore. He used his talent as an artist in the late 1920s to draft a mapped proposal to develop Foote's Pond and the area around it as a park called Mohican Park (see Map 1). In his map, done in colored pencil (the original is with the village historian), the Pond is called Sylvan Lake and is presented with a beach surrounded by formal gardens and recreation areas. On one end of the Pond lies Mohican Hill. Apparently nothing came of his proposal. The Pond was later to be an important part

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MAP 1 – PROPOSED MOHICAN PARK (ca. 1926)

## Foote' Pond

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of the Gordon Creek Project that was to follow (see below, next page).

(b) The Period from 1930 through the Early 1970s – Activity with Regard to Foote's Pond and Swimming Facilities in the Village

This period saw a number of proposals which without exception came to naught.

In January 1930, Walter H. Wiley, executive secretary of the Ballston Spa Chamber of Commerce recommended that the Red Mill Pond and historic Mohican Hill be purchased with local capital and developed as a recreation center for summer and winter sports. In summer, there could be swimming, canoeing and water sports as well as tennis. In winter, there could be skating and hockey and the slope of the hill would make an ideal toboggan slide. It was to be a municipal affair and free to all children.

In February 1939, reference is made to a plan drawn

up by a group of citizens for a simple swimming pool in the Island Mill Pond. The plan was approved by the State Board of Health but was promptly killed by the Board of Trustees who were seeking a smaller, less expensive swimming pool. The Chamber of Commerce continued to discuss the need for a facility for village residents.

In the fall of 1945, the Citizens' Planning Council entertained suggestions to purchase the Foote property to be used as a summer and winter recreation center. It was to be viewed as a Veterans Living War Memorial. Although Council members saw it as a splendid idea and plans were put in place to establish a temporary committee for the War Memorial, definite action was postponed until "all the boys are home." Nothing more seems to have been done.

In 1948 rumors were circulating throughout the village that the tannery had purchased the Foote property including the Foote's Pond. The tannery apparently planned to use the Pond as a water impoundment for operations by controlling the height of the Gordon Creek by means of a dam at its outlet. In addition, it would offer the use of all the property to the village for recreational purposes. In return for the privilege the village was to maintain the property. Both parties to the proposed transaction admitted there had been some talk but that was all.

In August, 1949, Charles Grose, publisher of the *Ballston Journal*, in a talk to Rotary, pointed out that there were no decent places for village children to swim in the area. He suggested that the village develop Foote's Pond, then owned by the Hide and Leather Company, and which they offered for the purpose. Again, nothing resulted.

In May 1950, it was announced that the Ballston Spa Lions Club would investigate the possibility of developing Foote's Pond as a swimming pool. In August of that year, however, a test conducted by the Saratoga County Laboratory found the water to be contaminated. The Club felt the cost of decontamination and the removal of other obstacles required an expenditure of more money than available. Hence, on the advice of the Swimming Pool Committee, it was decided that other sites were to be investigated. Foote's Pond was deemed "unsafe" and its use greatly declined. The recently created East Side Recreational Field afforded some facilities for recreational purposes but not swimming.

In the early 1960s the village opened the village swimming pool on Ralph Street.

In 1961 the property (Foote's Pond and surrounding property) was sold to Thomas J. Diab, a Boston investor. In 1973 when the Saratoga County Historical Society was anticipating the acquisition of the Foote's Pond area it said it had no definite plans for its development.

In 1974 Mr. Thomas J. Diab of Boston donated to the Saratoga County Historical Society approximately 10

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# Foote's Pond

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acres of land surrounding Foote's Pond, land he and his father had owned for several years. The Saratoga County Historical Society set to work to develop a plan for its development – The Gordon Creek Project.

### c) Gordon Creek Project & the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs

Thus, despite many plans over the years to develop the Foote's Pond site for commercial and recreational purposes nothing had come of them until 1974. But plans soon developed as the Gordon Creek Project (see Map 2). The project, under the sponsorship of the Saratoga County Historical Society, envisioned a complex of 25 acres, employing 94 people with 50,000 visitors expected annually.

The plan would use the Brookside Museum (the building was purchased in 1970) as the focal point. Upstream from there would be a 15-acre natural history and recreation site with Foote's Pond as its focal point. Originally the plan merely called for the restoration of Brookside but it came to include Foote's Pond in its natural state with a cluster of buildings and houses typical of more than a century ago as well as other schemes. See the original article in the *Saratogian* in Old Fulton NY Post Cards by searching "Gordon Creek Project". The page is cropped so its date within 1975 is unknown. *The Sche-*

*nectady Gazette* for September 18, 1974 also carries a detailed description of the project.

In 1974, Mr. Bernhard Puckhaber of the Saratoga County Historical Society proposed in conjunction with the Federation of Historical Bottle Clubs, a plan whereby the Federation would locate its headquarters in the village and that a national bottle museum to be constructed on the Foote's Pond to constitute in conjunction with the Saratoga County Historical Society. The Pond site would be developed as a natural history education area as well as a recreational site with nature trails, a picnic area, ice skating facilities reproductions of buildings from an earlier period. Nothing more was ever heard of this project.

## Part IV – The Pond's Last Several Decades

No major developments regarding Foote's Pond have occurred since the mid-1970's. The only newsworthy item regards the proposed construction of Mohican Hill Apartments.

In 2010 during negotiations for the establishment of senior housing on Mohican Hill Foote's Pond came up as an important element before the village board. Specifically, would such housing block access to Foote Pond and the fate of the wetlands nearby. This matter was apparently resolved successfully.

## Part V – Final Note

The Village of Ballston Spa and/or the Saratoga County Historical Society should take this jewel of a pond and site under its wing and attempt to realize the plans, as a recreation and nature conservancy site, as originally laid out in the Gordon Creek Project.

## Factoid

Best known as the father of Luther Forest, Thomas C. Luther got his start as the owner of the world famous White Sulphur Springs hotel on Saratoga Lake. Always a sportsman, Tommy built a boxing ring on the property in 1911 to attract prize-fighters. Among the more famous who trained there was Jack Dempsey.

Map 2 - Proposed Gordon Creek Project - 1974

