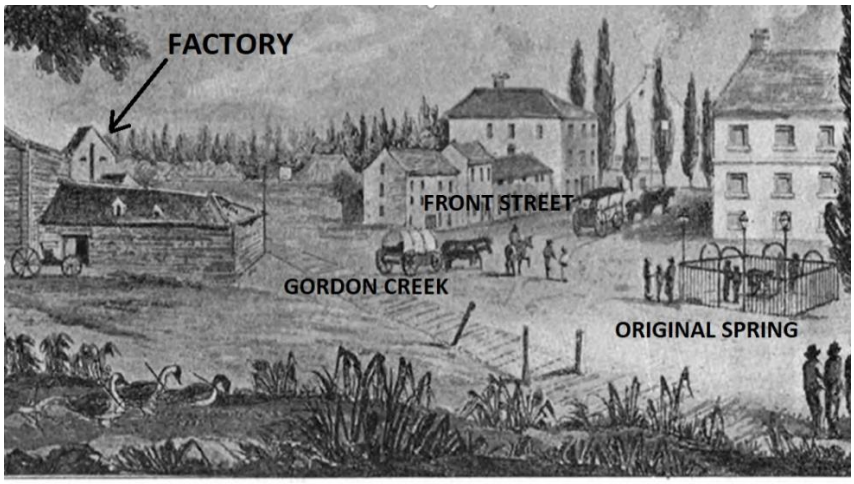
This Week in Saratoga County History

The Manufactory of Nicholas Low

Submitted by Sam McKenzie November 19, 2020

Sam McKenzie received a PhD in Chemistry from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, then worked for 33 years in the petrochemical industry. Since 2015 he has been a volunteer researcher for the Brookside Museum. He has investigated the history of the Mineral Springs of Ballston Spa, the life of climate science pioneer Eunice Newton Foote and the early career of opera diva, and onetime Saratoga Springs resident, Emma Albani. Presently, he is researching the lives of the brothers Isaac and Nicholas Low.



BALLSTON SPA IN 1815.
View from the Porch of Aldridge House (now Brookside Museum)

Two hundred seven years ago, on November 9, 1813, nine men met in New York City to sign an agreement, handwritten by Nicholas Low, to form the Ballston Spa Company for the manufacture of cotton, wool and linen fabrics. They pledged an initial capital of $100,000 in shares of $100 each. A month later the Company announced it would "extend the capital stock" to $800,000, a staggering sum for those days.

Low was a businessman and friend of the rich and powerful of the nation. One was his late colleague Alexander Hamilton. During the 1790's, Low midwifed the birth of the village of Ballston Spa. He owned most of the land upon which it was laid out and spent a fortune developing "his" village, including amenities like the famous Sans Souci Hotel.

The initial investors in the factory were Low's family members as well as New York business men and Benjamin Peck, a mill owner in Ballston Spa. A patriotic venture to promote domestic manufactures, it aimed to sever the cord strangling the U.S economy during the British blockade of the War of 1812. Patriotism ran strong among the investors. Several, including Low, joined New York militia regiments, to defend their city against attack by Britain. A decent profit might also be

had, since most competing fabrics came from Britain and might remain unavailable if wartime restrictions lasted.

A site for the factory had first to be chosen within the Village. The only water supply on Low's land was Gordon Creek**.** Siting it there meant using steam power, at the time almost untried in the U.S., since the flow in Gordon Creek was inadequate to drive water-powered machinery. Nevertheless, a site on Low's land on the North side of Gordon Creek, close to where it crosses Bath Street today, was selected.

Happily, two of Low's investors, Bartholomew Ward and Peter Talman, owned an iron foundry and cotton factory in Manhattan, with a subsidiary which could build a steam engine and ancillaries. They had connections with Robert Fulton, the famed steamboat pioneer, who agreed to inspect and approve the engine when completed. Thus, supply of a power plant and the necessary spinning and weaving machinery seemed assured when contracts were executed with these parties.

Construction of the factory building itself commenced in early 1814 and was completed by that summer. It was described as "*of brick and stone for the engine and spinning, 160 feet long, five stories high, including the attic, several brick and stone buildings, three stories, fitting up for looms and families.*" This was so unusual a sight that it was promoted in travel guides as a highlight of the village.

However, troubles mounted in the project. Low lost a major supporter when Benjamin Peck went bankrupt in September 1814. Then problems with providing the machinery resulted in Messrs. Ward and Tallman backing out. Low had to scramble to obtain new investors, finding another three in New York City. Two citizens of Ballston Spa, Amos P. Alcott and Archy Kasson picked up the shares released by Benjamin Peck.

Another blow was the death of Robert Fulton in January 1815, before the steam engine was ready for inspection. Then, news arrived that the Treaty of Ghent had been signed in December 1814. The War with Britain was over**;** but Low et al had little option but to press on. In July 1815, newspapers announced that the factory was ready to startup. Its steam engine puffed, magically activating the whizzing spindles and chattering looms, to the amazement of all.

A month later all was silent! The 30 feet long iron "walking beam", integral to the operation of the steam engine, had broken. It could have been replaced, but with more than $80,000 already sunk in the project and the prospect of cheap British fabrics again being dumped on the U.S. market, the investors decided to call it quits. The factory equipment was sold off to settle debts and the great shell of a building remained a monument for 40 years before being incorporated into an oil cloth factory erected on the same site. Unseen now within the fabric of what became the old Tannery, the bones of the building await possible re-discovery by an archaeologist of a future age.