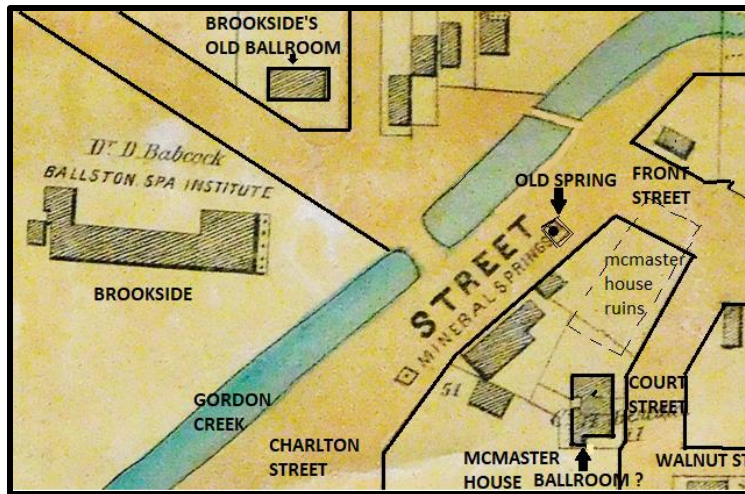


# This Week in Saratoga County History

## Having a Ball at the McMasters'

Submitted by Sam McKenzie August 16, 2023

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*Map by T. & J. Slator 1856 annotated by Sam McKenzie*

Many citizens of Ballston Spa will be aware that in the nineteenth century the east end of Front Street boasted a sumptuous hotel called the Sans Souci. Some of these residents may have mused upon the great events, including balls, which might have enlivened this hotel back in the day, even ones graced by the presence of European Royalty on occasion.

Some also may be aware that at the west end of Front Street stood a smaller, but still well-appointed hotel, a building then called Aldridge's, now Brookside. Less well known is that Brookside, in the early 1800's, boasted an extension, called the North Wing. The ground floor of this wing was a ballroom, in which events were held which could compete with those of the Sans Souci for splendor. The Brookside building thankfully still exists, although shorn of its North Wing. This was sold around 1843 and moved across Fairground Avenue where it serves as an apartment house today.

Few, however, will recall that in the heyday of the Sans Souci and Aldridge's there was a third hostelry in the Village situated less than one hundred yards from Brookside at the corner of Front Street and Court Street. Unknown today, most of it burned down in 1855 and its corner now lies vacant. But, for many years it operated successfully under the name of the McMaster House. It also had an extension tacked on, in which the ground floor comprised yet another ballroom.

When all three of these ballrooms were in vogue, roughly 1805 to 1830, there was quite a competition between them. At times there were not enough musicians in town for more than one to host dancing on

a given evening. The smart folks at the Sans Souci were quite put out when either Aldridge's or McMaster's snaffled the best musicians, because they would not demean themselves to attend a ball at one of the other houses, among the "lesser sort". Aldridge's and McMaster's seem to have been more cooperative. Abby May a resident at Aldridge's in 1800 reported in her diary that balls at Aldridge's often suffered from a surfeit of males, requiring the importation of ladies from McMaster's as partners for the evening.

The McMaster House began life in 1792 when Nicholas Low (later the builder of the Sans Souci) started erecting a lodging house a few yards away from the main mineral spring. Low's house, however, was on the opposite side of the spring from Aldridge's. Completion came during the 1793 season and crowds really started to flock in from 1794. During the period through 1797 the manager of the hotel was James Merrill.

The brothers McMaster, James and David, were natives of Williamstown, Massachusetts. Their presence at Ballston is first documented in 1796, when they were in their early twenties. The brothers teamed with James Merrill in taking out a mortgage worth 152 pounds to buy a plot of land near the Mourning Kill in what today would be Malta. It seems that the brothers also got involved with Merrill's management of Low's lodging house. This evolved into their purchase of the hotel plus 3 adjacent lots in May 1799 for about \$2,400, courtesy of a mortgage supplied by Nicholas Low himself.

Within a year, both brothers were married to local women. James had already wed Elizabeth Watrous and David now espoused Eurette Ball, a granddaughter of the Rev. Eliphalet Ball, for whom the town is named. The McMasters expanded their holdings both within the Village and nearby, becoming ever more leveraged as they went. One of their expansions, completed prior to 1804, was a Ballroom extension, which was located south of the original lodging house, as shown on an 1805 survey map.

A double tragedy had struck in September 1803, when both James himself and David's wife Eurette died within days of each other. David had to buy the property from James' heirs, requiring a large mortgage from Henry Walton in doing so. He then tried to sell the entire property back to Nicholas Low for the impressive asking price of \$9,000. In the meantime, rather unusually, David had married his brother's widow Betsey. They had two children to add to three Betsey had borne with James. Nicholas Low eventually bought back about half of the McMaster property, not including the hotel, and David and Betsey continued to manage the McMaster House together until David died around 1816. Betsey ploughed on alone and was recorded as still in charge at McMaster's in the early 1830's. She continued to live in the Village, dying in 1868.

The end came for the McMaster House on June 21, 1855, when the main building was consumed by fire. However, the Ballroom extension may have survived, having been fortuitously moved a few yards to the south of the 1792 building. Old accounts say that this structure still exists on Court Street, now an apartment building like the ballroom wing of Brookside. In this case the last remnant of the McMaster House may have operated as the Benedict Memorial Hospital from 1928-1953.

More research is needed to prove or disprove this hypothesis, but it is curious to think that the grand ballroom of the Sans Souci suffered demolition with the rest of the hotel in the winter of 1887/88, whereas one of its "lesser" competitors of the halcyon days may live on.