

## This Week in Saratoga County History

### Four Fallen Sons – the Ballston Spa Mexican Monument

Submitted by Dave Waite September 27, 2023

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*War with Mexico Monument – Ballston Spa Village Cemetery*

When the call went out for volunteers in the winter of 1846 to fight in the Mexican War one of the first from Ballston Spa to respond was 20-year-old Ransom Pettit. Enlisting in Colonel Burnett's 1st Regiment of New York Volunteers, and was sent to Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, New York to begin their military service. Early in 1847, the regiment boarded ships in New York Harbor and on February 1<sup>st</sup> dropped anchor off Tampico on the eastern coast of Mexico. By the Spring of 1847, another two dozen men from Ballston Spa had volunteered and followed Pettit to fight in this war against Mexico.

The *Ballston Journal* of April 27, 1847, reported the departure of these young men with these words of praise:

We can say with truth that a braver set of young men are not to be found, and should they be called to meet the foe there will be no flinching on their part, but all will give a good account of themselves. In such hands, we are perfectly willing to trust the reputation of Old Saratoga for bravery and prowess in arms.

The Mexican-American War often called the Mexican War in our country, broke out in 1846 after the United States formally annexed Texas. When President Polk called for volunteers to aid in the fight, New York State responded by sending two regiments. Lasting less than two years, the war increased the size of the United States by adding one-half million square miles of territory including the present-day states of California, Nevada, Utah, and large parts of Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico. In terms of lives lost, of the 100,000 American servicemen who participated in the war, over 12,000 lost their lives. With diseases such as yellow fever and malaria plaguing the troops all through the war, only one death in eight was caused by enemy action.

When these battle-proven soldiers came back home sixteen months later, four of their comrades were missing from their ranks. As we will learn, the brave souls who gave their lives for their country would soon be memorialized by the citizens of Ballston Spa. For those who returned, the community came together and held a supper in their honor. This acknowledgment of their service, held at Ballston Spa's Village Hotel in August of 1848, was attended by 130 guests.

As the four young men who had fallen during the conflict were not brought home for burial, plans were already underway to remember their sacrifice with a monument. It was never revealed whose idea it was to establish a memorial for those who gave the ultimate sacrifice for their country, it is likely that the returning veterans were at the forefront. A subscription-based fundraiser was started, and the community responded with enthusiasm.

For the design and cutting of the memorial, the community turned to Ballston Spa stone and marble craftsman Orville D. Vaughn. The monument was a white marble obelisk inscribed with *"Erected by the citizens of Ballston Spa and vicinity October 19, 1848,"* as well as the individual commemoration of the fallen soldiers on each of its four sides.

On the side set facing east is an inscription for Sargent James Schermerhorn of Co. F, 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment United States Infantry. James was born in Ballston Spa on July 1, 1827, the son of Cornelius & Hannah Schermerhorn. James was the son of a war veteran, Cornelius who had served in the War of 1812 as a private in the New York Militia's Saratoga Battalion. During the Mexican War, James took part in battles in Contreras, Churubusco, San Antonio, Molino del Rey, and Chapultepec, as well as the capture of Mexico City. He died at Pachuca, Mexico on March 9, 1848, one month after the signing of The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which officially ended the war.

Facing West is the memorial to Ransom B. Pettit, of Company H, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment New York Volunteers. Ransom, born in Ballston Spa on June 25, 1827, was only nineteen when he enlisted in December of 1846. Under the command of Colonel Ward Burnett, the 2nd Regiment landed at Vera Cruz in March 1847 where they took part in the siege of that city. They then moved westward, fighting in the Battle of Cerro Gordo, where they were in the vanguard in pursuing and capturing Mexican General Santa Anna. Private Ransom Pettit died during what was known as the action of Atlixco on October 19, 1847.

The North side of the monument commemorated 38-year-old Private Alvin Luther. He was the son of Gideon & Mary Luther. His father Gideon was a Revolutionary War veteran who had served as a private with the Rhode Island Militia Regiment. Alvin had enlisted on May 24, 1847, in Whitehall and was assigned to Company A 1st Regiment US Army. During the war, he served as part of the garrison that occupied the city of Vera Cruz. They were next stationed along the Rio Grande where Alvin died on April 4, 1848, probably of yellow fever, malaria, or one of the numerous other diseases that were constantly plaguing the army during those years.

On the South side is Private Hiram Smith, who had served in Company E of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment United States Dragoons. Hiram was born in Ballston Spa on August 8, 1830, and having enlisted on April 21, 1847, at the age of sixteen, was likely the youngest volunteer from the village. So far, no records have been located to indicate which Smith family from Ballston Spa Hiram was related to. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment had been raised for one year of service in the Mexican-American War just two months before Hiram enlisted. Dragoons were a class of mounted infantry, who used horses for mobility but dismounted to fight on foot. Private Hiram Smith was likely involved in the Battle of Molino del Rey in September of that year and gave his life in service of his country at Perote, Mexico on October 23, 1847.

The monument to these four young men who gave their lives for their country still stands today in the Ballston Spa Village Cemetery.

In 2023, it will be 175 years since the dedication of this monument. A rededication event will be held with a parade and ceremony at the Cemetery on Sunday, October 22 preceded by a presented to be held at Brookside Museum on October 5<sup>th</sup>.

*Sources :Grose's Centennial History of the Village of Ballston Spa; internet resources museum.dmna.ny.gov; hudsonrivervalley.org; archives fultonsearch.org; nyshistoricnewspapers.org.*