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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

## Saratoga Springs (as a North American iteration of spa sociability)

WOOD Karl



### Keywords

Colonies

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### Abstract

Saratoga Springs and Ballston Spa are representative of the diffusion of spa culture and sociability to the former British colonies of North America. While Ballston, like many other attempts, faded into obscurity, by the early nineteenth century, Saratoga had grown into a thriving centre for fashion and sociability among elites from across the young United States. Sociability here was not simply an attempt to mimic the English model, but rather a reinterpretation of elements of transnational spa culture which shows both the transmission and adaptation of eighteenth-century British sociability on the periphery in the later part of the long eighteenth-century.

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The [spa](#) was an important location for eighteenth-century sociability, operating as a kind of open space where the ordinary rules regulating regional and class differences might be suspended, at least in part. A form of interaction grew up in which those social norms might be bent, although not expressly broken, allowing for a social scene in which to see and be seen was key, seeking out relationships and connections with one's peers or even 'social betters' if one might dare. This was a fundamental element of spa sociability in nearly all spas deserving of the name in the long eighteenth century and took place on a stage set with strikingly similar elements: a pump room where the salubrious mineral waters might be taken and bathing facilities, shared spaces for balls and social gatherings, as well as opportunities for excursions and activities in nature. These lay at the core of what might be called a transnational spa culture of the eighteenth century, and can be found from British spas, which are often seen as having given birth to this model of sociability, in a number of iterations across the continent, to the periphery of British North America in what would by the end of the century be the United States.

The eighteenth century witnessed a rash of 'discovery' of mineral springs by settlers in the young colonies of British North America and in time, efforts were made to render these waters useful in the eyes of British settlers through the construction of European-type improvements. This, naturally, was related to the appropriation of Indigenous lands and resources, as well as to an idea of 'civilizing' the waters, rendering them 'safe' for further use and development.<sup>1</sup> Soon small-scale watering places began to appear around mineral springs in many parts of the British colonies, in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York for example, some of which would never grow beyond much more than a single inn with a gazebo over a mineral spring. Most notably, Yellow Springs or Bristol in Pennsylvania, had a brief period of fairly rustic notoriety before fading into obscurity.<sup>2</sup> Others, which could offer both a combination of waters esteemed for their salubriousness (the importance of this element in the eighteenth century should not be underestimated) as well as at least a modicum of the expected pleasures and comforts. Those which could combine both had the greatest chances to thrive.

It is noteworthy, however, that colonization did not entail complete erasure of the Native past of these springs, but rather an appropriation and recasting of that past into an image of the Noble Savage, who had long known of the medicinal powers of the waters, only then beginning to be understood scientifically and rationally with the coming of Europeans. The knowledges and epistemologies of Indigenous people, their very existence and what may have happened to them was planted firmly in the past,<sup>3</sup> while the claim of use by Native peoples in times purportedly immemorial was turned into a cachet of authenticity and power, analogous to the way spas in Europe often sought continuity with or at least links to the Roman past.

As one might expect, the nascent spas of British North America sought to imitate models from across the Atlantic, most notably Bath, which was the premier and tone-setting English spa of its day. This imitation was transparent in the case of the Virginia spa town of Berkeley

Springs (in contemporary West Virginia), which was one of several watering places known as Bath in the late eighteenth century. Others sought to replicate what they saw as an ideal of curing in an environment of amusement and gentility amidst ‘Grecian’ or a type of Palladian surroundings, best associated in the cultural associations of British colonists and later, young Americans, with [Bath](#).

Ballston Spa and Saratoga Springs both had their origins in the 1790s, taking advantage of water transit from New York along the Hudson Valley as well as nearby scenic Lake George and the areas historical significance in the American War of Independence, and seeking to establish a genteel sociability at their respective springs. Each began with the construction of an inn or hotel near esteemed mineral springs, soon to be replaced by a grander hotel and several more modest establishments. It was here that both New York spas began to set themselves apart from rivals elsewhere. The Sans Souci hotel in Ballston, constructed in 1804 was among the finest of its kind at its time, boasting facilities for more than two hundred guests, equalled or surpassed by Saratoga and Putnam’s Union Hotel. Saratoga won that rivalry, in no small part due to troubles with the springs in Ballston. The association with [Bath](#) remained strong. In 1805, Elkanah Watson observed in his journal that ‘Saratoga is proving a formidable rival to Ballston, and it is probably will acquire the fashionable ascendancy, and eventually become the Bath of America’.<sup>4</sup> Others must have shared this sentiment. By 1820 at the latest, Saratoga has achieved primacy as the fashionable locale of choice for those seeking genteel sociability from New York, Boston and indeed, far beyond.<sup>5</sup>

Opinions regarding how well these efforts may have succeeded were somewhat divided. European travellers, it would seem, were not overly impressed. In September 1827, Basil Hall found them to be agreeable but empty and lacking in luxury,<sup>6</sup> while in 1818 Baron de Montlezun remarked rather dismissively about Saratoga that ‘Ce serait avoir une idée fausse de ces eaux, que d’y supposer les mêmes agréments qu’à Bath, à Bagnères ou à Spa. La vie y est monotone comme dans tout le reste des Etats-Unis.’<sup>7</sup> Tocqueville, eagerly and often cited by scholars of the early United States, had indeed planned to visit Saratoga on his travels, using a French translation of a contemporary popular American travel guide,<sup>8</sup> but these plans were thwarted and he was never able to observe life there.

It is quite reasonable to assert that American spas in this period did not live up to the expectations of Europeans familiar with the well-established spas of Britain, France, or elsewhere on the continent for that matter. This is not to say, however, that they had not built an environment in which spa sociability could take place. Local observers, less disappointed perhaps by the relative provinciality of these spas, offer a different perspective on the matter.

Philip Vickers Fithian, for example, recorded a vibrant environment with over four hundred visitors at Berkeley Springs during his visit in September 1775, including a ‘splendid ball’, card games, as well as rather amusements outdoors.<sup>9</sup> He also, as did other travellers such as Elizabeth Drinker<sup>10</sup> or Jeremiah Fitch,<sup>11</sup> rather meticulously recorded the people he met and interacted with, suggesting that social interaction was a very important part of the stay. Perhaps most well-known among the representations of life in Ballston was written by Washington Irving in his *Salmagundi* piece, ‘Style at Ballston’ from 1807, in which he

satirized the apparent obsession with appearances, fashion and poise, the ‘see and be seen’ element that was a key part of spa sociability.

Conspicuously absent, however, from the American iteration of spa sociability was the role of Master of Ceremonies. The role of a mediator in spa sociability pioneered by Beau Nash in Bath in the mid eighteenth-century,<sup>12</sup> was simply not to be found in American spas. Hotel proprietors organized balls and concerts and provided opportunities for a range of leisure activities for their patrons, while others endeavoured to open libraries and reading rooms. Some efforts were made to use place cards to arrange diners in an orderly fashion, or at least to avoid the kind of chaos in seeking the choicest seats often noted in many of the larger spas, but even this modest effort at regulation was not universal. Beyond the established, but not regulated, custom of taking the waters and the times when meals were served, there was no organized plan of the day or other means used in Bath to regulate sociability and mediate some of the potential tensions arising from differences in class or status. Instead, patrons formed their own groups which were largely self-regulated, creating a relatively easy affability in smaller and more remote spas, and tending to form cliques of like-minded individuals who were already acquainted with one another in larger ones like Saratoga. There, the stage on which this sociability took place was fragmented, with competing hotels seeking to outdo one another. Such establishments obviously required a large number of staff, often Black Americans or immigrant women in American spas, whose essential role in enabling the sociability of well-to-do spa patrons often remains either invisible or unappreciated.<sup>13</sup>

Saratoga Springs might in some respects be regarded as most successful in recreating an environment of spa sociability in North America. While spas in Virginia such as Berkeley perhaps aspired to offer more of a genteel model of particularly Southern sociability throughout the antebellum period and even beyond, in some ways these remained predominantly local or regional centres, with their own distinctive character. The larger role of spa sociability, providing opportunities for social interaction and opportunities for advancement through social networking or marriage crossing class and regional lines, was one which Saratoga played to a much greater degree, drawing a much larger range of guests from across the young United States and beyond. This very success, however, was also a harbinger of the coming shifts in society and sociability. By the end of the long eighteenth century ca. 1850, older Saratoga residents and patrons would mourn the loss of an earlier era of refinement and fine company that was brought to an end with the arrival of railroads and the nascent era of mass tourism. That era, too, came to an end by the early decades of the twentieth century, when the fashion of taking the waters had faded and other forms of leisure grew in prominence. A similar development can be traced in the Grand Spas of Continental Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Today, Ballston Spa, is a post-industrial town, the Sans Souci having operated as a law school and a boarding house in the mid-nineteenth century before being torn down in 1887. Most of the grand nineteenth-century hotels of Saratoga were demolished in the twentieth century. The town remains mainly a regional destination for visitors, and some of the nineteenth-century park infrastructure is preserved for public use.

1. For a discussion of this colonial ‘civilising’ of the waters, see Vaughn Scribner, ‘“The happy effects of these waters”, Colonial American Mineral Spas and the British Civilizing Mission’, *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (vol. 14, n° 3, July 25, 2016), p. 409–449.
2. See, for example Harry B. Weiss and Howard R. Kemble, *They Took the Waters. The Forgotten Mineral Spring Resorts of New Jersey and nearby Pennsylvania and Delaware* (Trenton, NJ: The Past Times Press, 1961); Carol Sheils Roark, ‘Historic Yellow Springs: The Restoration of an American Spa’, *Pennsylvania Folklife* (vol. 24, n° 1, Fall 1974).
3. For a discussion of the perspectives of early American guidebooks more generally, see Emma Newcombe, ‘Writing Whiteness: Antebellum Guidebooks and the Codification of the Landscape in Catskill Tourism and Print’, *Early American Literature* (vol. 54, n° 1, 2019), p. 189-216. This is part of a larger pattern of relegating the presence of Indigenous peoples to the distant past, which has been studied with great insight in *New England by Jean O’Brien in Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
4. Elkanah Watson, Winslow C Watson, and Joseph Meredith Toner Collection, *Men and times of the revolution; or, Memoirs of Elkanah Watson, including journals of travels in Europe and America, from 1812, with his correspondence with public men and reminiscences and incidents of the revolution* (New York: Dana and Company, Publishers, 1856), p. 350-351.
5. See Thomas A. Chambers, *Drinking the Waters: Creating a Nineteenth-Century American Leisure Class at Mineral Springs* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).
6. Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* (Edinburgh, 1829), vol. II, p. 7 ff.
7. Baron de Montlezun, *Souvenirs des Antilles, t. 1; voyages en 1815 et 1816 aux États-Unis et dans l'archipel Caraïbe...* (Paris: Gide Fils, 1818), vol. 1, p. 141. Gallica: [ark:/12148/bpt6k103185z](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k103185z)
8. See for example, G.M. Davison, *The Fashionable Tour or A Trip to the Springs (...) in the Summer of 1821* (Saratoga Springs, 1821, and subsequent editions, the 1825 edition is available at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044019971019>).
9. Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal, 1775-1776*, ed. Robert Greenhalgh Albion and Leonidas Dodson (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1934), vol. 2, p. 126.
10. Elizabeth Drinker, *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, ed. Elaine Forman Crane (Boston MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991) vol. 1, p. 159-166.
11. Jeremiah Fitch, 'Account and Memorandum of My Journey to Saratoga Springs (1820)', *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings* (vol. 50, February 1917).
12. Link to the DIGIT.ENS article on Beau Nash <https://www.digitens.org/en/notices/beau-nash.html>
13. See for example Theodore Corbett, *The Making of American Resorts: Saratoga Springs, Ballston Spa, Lake George* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).
14. For a broad overview, see David Clay Large, *The Grand Spas of Central Europe: a History of Intrigue, Politics, Art, and Healing* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015).

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## Further Reading

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[Saratoga Springs, 1798](#)