

John Morrissey's Club House Then & Now

By Kenneth Bridgham

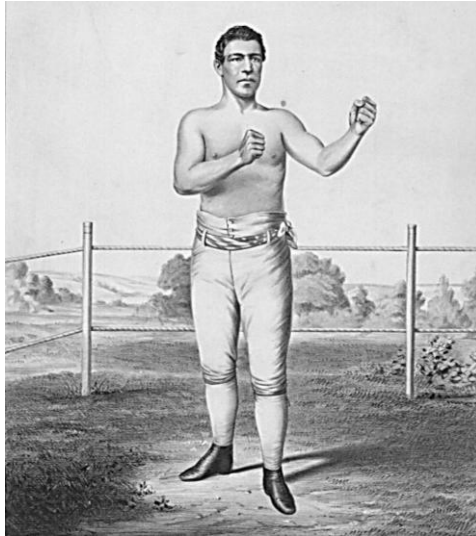
author of *The Life & Crimes of John Morrissey*



The author's photo of John Morrissey's casino in Saratoga Springs, NY as it appears today.

“John Morrissey’s new house... is far the most gorgeous house for play on the continent. The main floor is divided into three rooms, two of which are devoted to play and one for dining. The fitting up of the rooms is simply magnificent. The floors are covered with scarlet and white velvety tapestry. The furniture, sideboards, cornices, mantels and mirror frames are French cheval, inlaid with gold. The curtains are silk and damask. The monogram “J.M.” flames out on all sides. Over the massive mirrors are carved tigers’ heads, with mouths wide open to devour, an emblem of the tiger persons will fight within the walls. The chandeliers are gold gilt, and the brackets are burnished in the same style. On the saloon floor there are one hundred and twenty-five lights, and two hundred and seventy in all the house. Private staircases lead to rooms aloft, and these rooms, on the two-stories above the parlors, are gorgeously fitted up for guests. The lower floor is for the kitchen, wine cellar, laundry and for domestic uses.” It was in that kitchen that the “club sandwich” was invented.

Such were the impressions of a visitor from the *Boston Journal* upon his visit to John Morrissey’s Club House in Saratoga Springs, New York upon its opening in the Summer of 1870. Morrissey was the former bare-knuckle boxing champion of America and later a politician and gambling magnate in New York. Born in Ireland in 1831 but raised in the industrial town of Troy, New York from toddlerhood, Morrissey grew up despairingly poor and ran with street gangs almost from the time he could run at all. As a young man, he drifted down the Hudson River to New York City’s notorious Five Points slum, where he became a river pirate, faro dealer, and political thug. His reputation as a fearsome fist-fighter led to a series of boxing matches which found him claiming the heavyweight championship of America after besting both Yankee Sullivan (in 1853) and John Heenan (in 1858), though neither win was without its controversy.



John Morrissey, American boxing champion

Boxing was a largely marginalized and illicit, often illegal, enterprise in nineteenth century America, and the ambitious Morrissey wanted more from his life. He was illiterate until after his boxing career was over, when his wife helped him learn to read and write and encouraged his movement into politics as a means of gaining prestige. He would serve two terms in the U.S. Congress and would be elected to two terms in the New York State Senate.

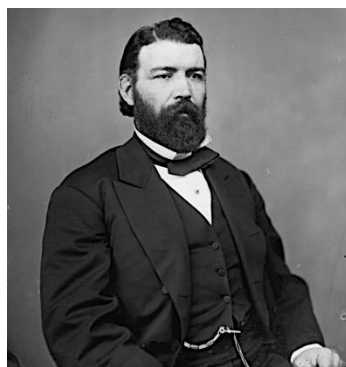
While his political career was getting under way, Morrissey invested heavily in New York City gambling, owning or co-owning multiple casinos and also operating an illegal lottery in the city. By 1864, he had a stake in no less than sixteen gambling dens in New York.

John Morrissey likely first came to Saratoga Springs in July of 1860. At that time, the town was the premier summer resort for New York's leading wealthy families. For centuries previous, Native Americans had valued this area and its many natural salt-water springs for various health-related purposes. The story goes that the natives introduced nearby colonists to the springs, and tales of their invigorating and healing properties later drew Revolutionary War officers stationed at nearby Fort Saratoga, including General George Washington. By the late 1880s, tourism to the springs was on the rise. The Union Hotel built in 1802 and the hotels that sprang up its wake (the Congress Hotel, the Gideon Putnam, and – most luxurious of all - the United States Hotel) pioneered a new trend in American leisure: the resort. These were more than simple room and board providing accommodations on a journey. More extravagant and luxurious than anything on American soil at the time and situated near the springs, these hotels became destinations unto themselves. Those who could afford it came there to heal wounds and ailments; still others came just for the pleasure of it as part of the first generation of a new type of American, the recreational tourist.

For tourists, relaxation can easily become boredom, and thus, over the next few decades, Saratoga Springs and the surrounding areas became known for opportunities to drink alcohol, eat fine food, dance in astonishingly vast ballrooms, play billiards, admire fine art, fish the nearby Lake Saratoga, stroll through the gorgeous Congress Park, or, should the whim arise, pray. These were the activities available to men like John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, and Joseph Bonaparte (brother to Napoleon) when they visited Saratoga during the 1820s. Horses, long a subject

of fascination for the aristocratic on both sides of the Atlantic, came to Saratoga too. The tourists brought their favorite horses with them, and they enjoyed racing them down the resort's thoroughfares for wagers, sometimes drawing large crowds of onlookers who openly ignored the local laws forbidding such activity. With wagers instituted in this manner, gambling had come to Saratoga in a big way by the early 1840s, when the village's first gambling houses opened. Shooting galleries, taverns, and high-class bordellos were not far behind.

John Morrissey was impressed with the business opportunities Saratoga Springs presented him, and he also saw many of the well-to-do families with which he wanted to ingratiate himself strolling the town streets and sitting at its gambling tables. He opened his first faro card joint there in August of 1860, but he had much bigger plans. He made friends with railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt, the richest man in America, and other upper-class men like August Belmont and William Travers. Together with these men and their associates, he invested in the rise of thoroughbred racing in Saratoga Springs.



***John Morrissey, politician
and gambling kingpin***

Horse trotting (or harnessed racing) had been a popular entertainment in Saratoga Springs for a time. However, trotting's allure had faded nationwide during the 1850s. Actual thoroughbred (non-harnessed) horse racing, as an organized sport, was virtually non-existent at Saratoga Springs and indeed the entire North. While the Civil War raged elsewhere, Morrissey personally oversaw the first thoroughbred races in Saratoga Springs in August 1863. Days later, he attended the founding meeting of the Saratoga Racing Association with his new well-to-do friends. Shortly after that, construction began on the Saratoga Race Course, which still exists today. John Morrissey was its main planner, investor, and operator at its start and would oversee the annual summer races there until his death. He also established the popular annual regattas held at nearby Saratoga Lake.

For people of his time and the generations that immediately followed, John Morrissey's true legacy would be his Saratoga Club House on Congress Street. With construction begun in 1867, the building was not opened for business until June 1870, a result of financial troubles Morrissey experienced in the stock market crash of 1869. Widely regarded as America's premier gambling resort for decades to come, "the Baden Baden of America," the large, red brick edifice featured a tastefully decorated salon, "Gorgeously furnished toilet rooms, Faro parlors, and drawing rooms carpeted with soft carpets and decorated with rich carvings and bronzes."

A visitor in 1871 was impressed by the “English and French cooks” and “attentive waiters,” and an overall opulence “on a scale of such lavish elegance as would cause profound wonderment in the minds of ordinary mortals.” This writer was equally impressed by Morrissey himself, whom he described as “a plain, honest looking fellow, with immense largeness of heart, as well as of size... [He] produced a favorable impression upon his visitors that evening, not only by the excellence of his liquors, but by the off-hand suavity of his manners.” An expansion, with even more resplendent features, including a library, was completed in 1871. Two separate buildings for more gaming and a third one to house the approximately fifty employees were part of this project. Morrissey agreed to pay a church \$1,000 a year to rent the adjacent land and keep it vacant to allow sunlight on the house and give the appearance of a larger estate.

John Morrissey slept very little. People who visited the Club House noted that he was usually the last person in bed and that, no matter how early they got up, they would find him already dressed and leisurely strolling the grounds or standing on the veranda in serene thought. Expecting the violent sinner of old, they were astonished at the proprietor’s self-discipline and manners. The man was normally quiet, and when he did speak, took care to avoid colorful language. A known alcoholic, he never drank in front of his customers, nor did he personally gamble.



Susannah Morrissey

John’s wife Susannah (He called her Susie) often joined her husband in Saratoga. In time, they would become permanent residents. Reveling in their newfound wealth, they were together at the center of the well-to-do sporting society there. John would hold court over his casino dressed in a “tall beaver hat, a swallow-tailed coat, striped trousers, patent leather boots, and white kid gloves with a \$5,000 diamond on his shirt and smaller diamonds in his cuff links.” A Boston reporter visiting one of Morrissey’s gambling halls during the 1865 horse racing season observed that, “Mr. Morrissey is looked upon here by many persons as a sort of Napoleon who, by suppressing, for his own advantage, the minor and meaner descriptions of ‘sporting men,’ is himself a benefactor of society.” Susan was described as “a beautiful woman with great sparkling black eyes, and queenly form, and a dashing manner” by one writer, and a “handsome woman, who attends the balls, but has no social passion” by another. She was so elegantly dressed that she was part of the allure for tourists, who, upon arrival in one of Morrissey’s establishments there, would often ask where they could find Mrs. Morrissey, for no other reason than to simply marvel at her attire and jewelry.

To ensure that the customers' spending at the roulette and poker tables would not be hampered by the watchful eyes of wives, and to avoid the potential scandal of having ladies present at all, Morrissey gave the order that no women were to be allowed in the gambling parlor, though they were allowed in any of the other public rooms of the house. 25,000 women visited the mansion in 1870 alone, a number which prompted indignation from Saratoga's most conservative citizens. Eventually, John closed women out altogether to avoid further controversy. The same rule applied for Saratoga residents, the proprietor not wanting to further raise the ire of local reformers by corrupting Saratoga's men.



The Club House as it appeared in the 1800s.

A visitor from the *Chicago Tribune* noted that actors, sporting men, Wall Street brokers, journalists, politicians, and speculators made up the main section of the Club House's gambling customers. "I have seen Senators of the United States inhabitants of his place, invited there as his guests," the writer gossiped, noting that Morrissey put on a different front for his more dignified guests. "He is always a master of the situation, somewhat modified and softened in his manners, but his rights he demands with as much ferocity and directness as in his former days." Among the many noteworthy figures who would visit the famed mansion during Morrissey's tenure as its manager would be President Grant, Samuel Clemens, John Rockefeller, and of course Cornelius Vanderbilt.

All told, the Club House and its expansions had cost an estimated \$200,000 to complete. In desperate need of ready cash after a stock market crash and the expenses of the Club House construction, he was forced to immediately sell half of its ownership to a man named Reed Spencer that Summer for a sum of between \$80,000 and \$100,000. It was also rumored that August Belmont and William Travers were brought in as silent partners as well. He did stay on as co-owner and manager, however, and he remained the visible face of the business. The Club House would go on to gross over \$250,000 in a year's time, doing much to help put its proprietor back on his financial feet. The next year, someone offered John half a million dollars to buy out his remaining interest in the enterprise. By then, he felt financially secure enough to turn them down.



The Canfield Casino, early 20th century

John Morrissey died on May 1, 1878 at age 47. Though he may have been the first Irish-born person to become a millionaire in the United States, by the time of his demise, his fortune and business interests were mostly gone due to poor Wall Street investments, a taste for high living, and expensive political campaigns. His investments in Saratoga Springs were all that remained of his once incomparable gambling empire. After his passing, the Club House eventually fell into the hands of his successor as the king of New York gambling, Richard Canfield, and it would thereafter be known as the Canfield Casino. Canfield also made extravagant renovations and additions to the house and grounds at a cost of one million dollars. He dominated New York gambling for decades before several costly raids in the early twentieth century forced him to withdraw and focus on his other passion, art collecting. During and after Canfield's time, the Casino was also a center of community life, where receptions were held for celebrities like Amelia Earhart and concerts for well-known bands were put on. Wedding receptions, lectures, balls, and fund-raisers were also commonplace. The Grand Union, Congress, and United States hotels are long gone, but the Club House survived. Today it is appropriately the Saratoga Springs History Museum, and is rumored to be haunted by the spirit of its original owner.



The Morrissey family plot in Troy, New York

In early June of 2022, I made my first journey from my home in Fredericksburg, Virginia to Canastota, New York for induction weekend at the International Boxing Hall of Fame. It was a special “trilogy” event to celebrate the inductions of three years’ worth of inductees due to Covid-19’s delay of the 2020 and 2021 ceremonies. I brought my father with me. He was a boxing fan too, and the trip was my Father’s Day gift to him. While there, we visited the Hall of Fame Museum, and I read through the plaque honoring John Morrissey, the man about whom I had written a biography published two years earlier. It read: “One of America’s greatest bare-knuckle fighters. Born in Ireland; came to U.S. as a child. Beat the celebrated Yankee Sullivan in 1853 and won the American heavyweight title by knocking out John C. Heenan in 1858. Retired from the ring and served two terms in Congress. INDUCTED 1996.”

There was nothing about his time as the gambling czar of New York, but that was to be expected, given the limited space on the plaque and the need to focus on his boxing accomplishments. But both Saratoga Springs and Troy were not far away, and my father and I decided to take a detour to both towns before our return home.

Our first stop was Saratoga Springs to see the Club House and the racetrack. Unfortunately, the track was closed at the time, but we did get to visit the Club House, now the Saratoga Springs History Museum. Following Google Maps, we arrived at E Congress Street and parked near a gorgeous public park that I had failed to yet recognize was Congress Park. Morrissey had constructed the Club House near it because he wanted his place to have a luxurious view. Walking just a few steps down a hill from my car, I immediately recognized the building from the photos and drawings I had seen in my research for the book and began excitedly taking photos. The exterior had changed very little since Morrissey’s day.

Looking at it with one’s own eyes, the fact that the building took three years to complete seems less outrageous than it once did. Its architecture and construction harken back to a time of ornate craftsmanship not found today. Glass letters above the wooden doors of the front entrance read THE CASINO in black-edged gold lettering, a sign that the museum embraces its own beginnings. To the right is a plaque commemorating the building as a national historic landmark. Inside, a maroon carpeted stairway rises on the right to take visitors up to the second and third stories. A short way inside and through a doorway on the left is the welcome desk, gift shop, and an exhibit which takes one on a quick walk-through of Saratoga Springs history from the pre-colonial days into the 20th century. General admission at the desk is \$10. This used to be the building’s library room. A guided tour was already under way, so we decided to explore on our own. I admired the gorgeous, large Tiffany stained-glass window (original cost \$10,000) that had been a trademark of the building since Morrissey’s time.



A portrait of the pugilist as a young man



Morrissey's Indian Clubs

The stairwells are lined with illustrations and photos of life in Saratoga Springs during times past, most interestingly paintings and blueprints of some of the palatial hotels of the 19th century. Displayed at the top of the first flight of stairs is the surprisingly small roll top desk from which John Morrissey conducted business. Covering the wall behind it is a bright red, floral curtain. Over the desk hangs an ornately framed painting of a youthful looking Morrissey supposedly at age 37. He looks much younger. His black hair, brows, and goatee are his most noticeable features. He is exceptionally well-dressed in a high collared white shirt, black tie, and black suit. Near the bottom of the frame, what appears to be a small, gold, horse-shaped charm hangs from a buttonhole in his coat. On the walls to the left and right of the desk are summaries of Morrissey's life, the one on the right being a plaque from the Racing Hall of Fame whose museum is also in Saratoga Springs and of which Morrissey is also an inductee. Discreetly placed on the floor to the left of the desk are seven oblong wooden objects that look like bowling pins. They aren't bowling pins. They are called "Indian Clubs," and they range in weight from 2.5 to 15 pounds. Morrissey used them as weights to keep in shape.

The rooms of the museum vary greatly in size. Some are small, others are large and rectangular, taking up an entire side of the main building. Each room is decorated to demonstrate a different aspect or era of life in Saratoga Springs, but one of the larger rooms replicates the gaming floor it clearly was to begin with. A wooden card table is at one end, a roulette table at the other, but it otherwise takes on the appearance of a lavish parlor with relaxing chairs placed around the room, an ornate carpet covering the floor from wall to wall, and two ornate chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Huge mirrors on both short walls make the room feel even more vast. Well-crafted, sturdy, and expensive wooden furniture lines three walls while large, wooden-framed sunken windows let in sunlight from the outermost wall. Congress Park looks idyllic through them. Between two of those windows, not far from the roulette table, is a framed illustration of a bearded John Morrissey over the heading "Founder of the Canfield Casino and the Saratoga Racecourse." Framed photos of Richard Canfield and Cornelius Vanderbilt face him from the opposite wall.



Gambling in style

Leaving the casino for the sunny outdoors, we took a walk around the building. We peeped through the windows of the room to the right of the front entrance, which was not open to the public, from what I could tell. It is another long one with large, curtained windows which likely served as the dining hall or grand parlor. Attached to the side and rear of the main building are the extensions. These were the servants' quarters, and extra gaming rooms put there by Morrissey and Canfield. We strolled around the walkways, ponds, gazebos, and fountains of the casino grounds and Congress Park. Families, students, lunch breaking workers, dogs and their owners surrounded us, all enjoying the splendidly maintained grounds. If John Morrissey truly haunts his old Club House, he has a great view.



As it did in Morrissey's day, lovely Congress Park surrounds the Museum

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