

The Entrance Gate at Avon Driving Park



DEDICATION
Avon Springs
Historical Marker

July 28, 2016

Welcome: Maureen Kingston
Holly Watson
Dedication: David LeFeber
John Marks
William Zhe

Special Thanks

Avon Village Park Commission Members

John Marks, Chairperson

Marnie Baker

Mary Rankin

Leonard Schantz

Gail Westfall

Avon Village Board

Thomas Freeman, Mayor

Tim Batzel

Robert Hayes

Mark McKeown

William Zhe, Liaison to Park Commission

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Jeannie Michalski

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Sharon Knight, Town Clerk

Summer Recreation Director

Suzanne Ruter

Avon Springs

“Stinking waters” refers to the name coined by the Seneca, *Ga-No-Wa-Gas*, to describe the sulphur water smell still pungent at the Avon Springs. Native Americans had for years used the healing powers of the water to cure various ailments. It is said that Red Jacket was among them, eager to cure a skin condition.

The spot where Avonites today enjoy youth baseball and softball games, playground, walking trails, volleyball and basketball courts, ice skating in winter, picnics in summer and a racetrack for trotters to practice has been known by several names: Congress Driving Park, Avon Springs Park, Avon Springs Downs and Avon Driving Park, or simply, “the Downs”.

An early description of the Lower Spring states that the springs flowed into a pond which covered several acres. The clear water of the small lake was surrounded by a dark cedar forest.

Captain Louis Thomas Joncaire and French missionaries are said to have visited the springs during the time when western New York was under French dominion.

It was in 1821 that Richard Wadsworth, son of Gad Wadsworth of Avon, built the first showering box at the Lower Spring. The development and use of the water for health reasons gained rapidly in popularity from this point.

The Avon Springs Downs (racetrack) at Avon Driving Park was first laid out by Captain Asa Nowlen around 1836. Nowlen, having purchased the land from Richard Wadsworth, wished to further develop the area as an entertainment for those coming to Avon to seek cure and relief from the mineral spring waters. Throughout the spa era,

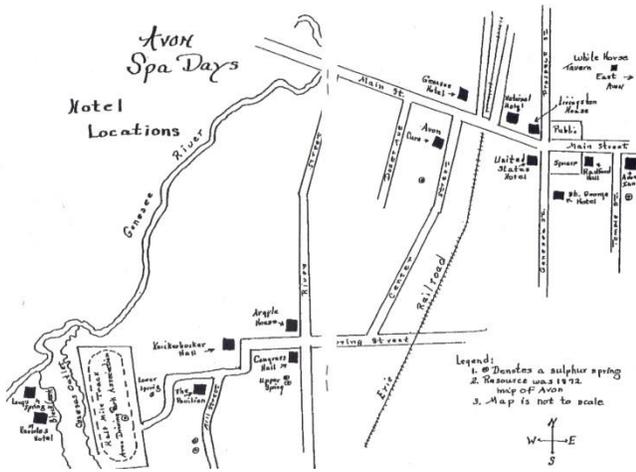
the racetrack was a major attraction. The famous trotter Dexter, model for many a weather vane, raced here before going to Buffalo where he set the world trotting record. Genesee River silt, deposited during years of river flooding, forms the base for the track and is reportedly less straining on horses' legs than some track surfaces. It remains today as a training track for Standardbreds.

A writer from Geneseo stated in the March 11, 1847 issue of the *Livingston Republican*,

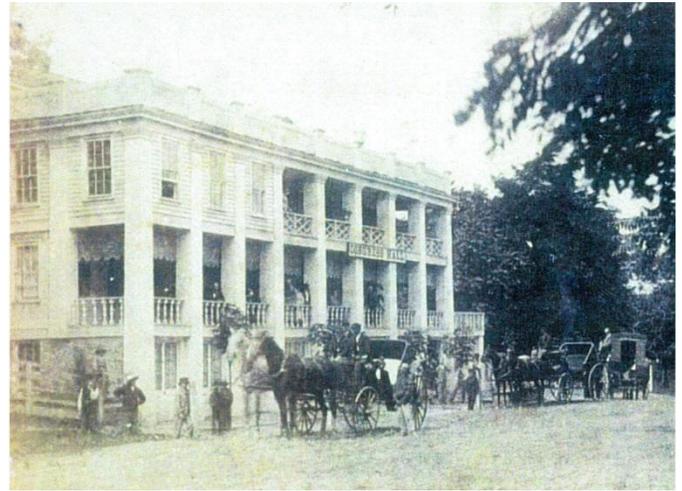
“Our friends at Avon appear at length to be awakening from their lethargy and to realize to some degree that a watering place like this, from which hundreds of invalids annually depart, relieved or cured of their maladies, should afford so meagre accommodations. We learn however, that for the ensuing season great improvements are in progress....”

An 1853 letter writer described Avon as “the New Haven of the West” and went on to state, “I have taken occasion to spend a number of summers here...and find at each return...the marks of much improvement....”

Water therapy continued in popularity through the Nineteenth and into the early Twentieth Century. The following map listing hotels at Avon Springs, though not drawn to scale, is based on the 1872 edition of Beers *Atlas of Livingston County*. Not all were in existence at the same time.



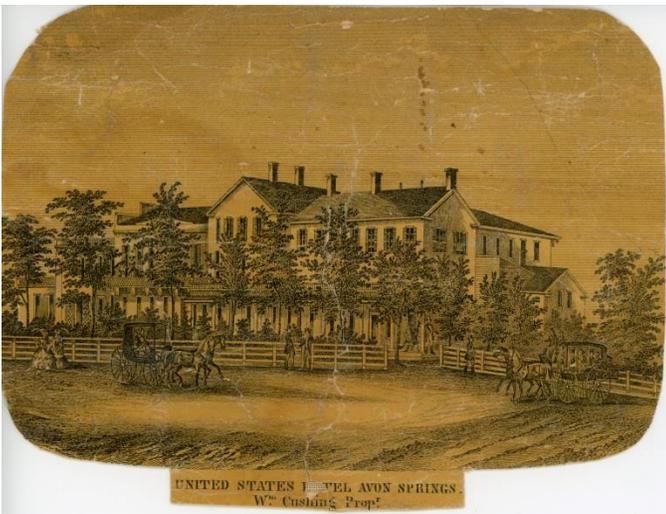
Congress Hall/American Hotel



This map shows the locations of many of the hotels, though they were not all there at the same time.

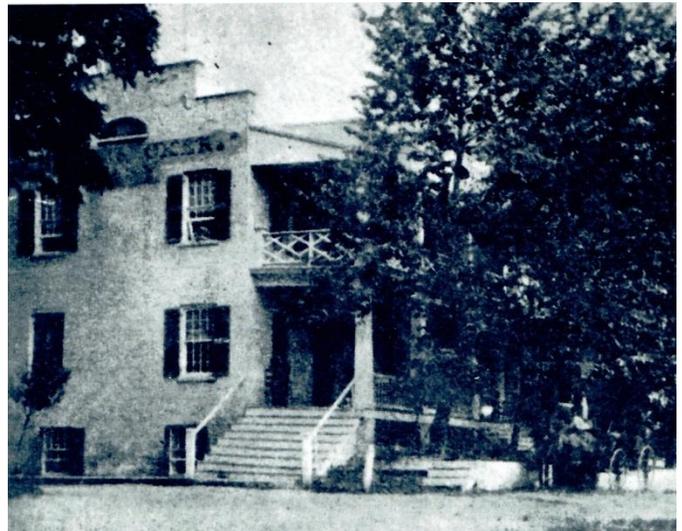
Hotels in chronological order:

Hosmer's Stand/United States Hotel



1827-1913, on Spring near River Street, site of Upper Spring.

Knickerbocker Hall



1806, 1836-1874, expanded, developed into United States Hotel. It stood on the corner of West Main and Genesee Street

White Horse Tavern

1812-1955, an early hotel in East Avon, on the corners of Rts. 15 and 5&20. Though not a part of the Spa hotels, it was an important stagecoach stop on the main trail across New York State.

1827-1886, especially catering to invalids, located on the knoll above the Park entrance.

Chadwick Tavern

1830-1923, on Geneseo Road at South Avon. No Sulphur spring here, but a popular stop for travelers, and an exchange location for horses on the Southern Stage Line (Rochester to Dansville).

Knowles Hotel/Long's Spring

1834, north of Fowlerville Road near Black Creek.

Argyle House

1859-1863, near the corner of River and Spring Streets.

National Hotel

1860-1913, on the corner of Rochester and West Main Streets.

Livingston House

1861, expansion 1878-1971, after the United States Hotel burned.

Avon Cure/Sanitarium

1866-1904, on Wadsworth Avenue between West Main and Isham Avenue.

St. George Hotel

1868-1874—1980, on Genesee Street where the Community Bank is now.

Pattee House/Genesee Hotel

1873-1925, west of the railroad tracks and depot.

Radford Hall

1877, the first "Avon Inn" —1930, on the corner of Park Place and East Main Street.

Pavilion/Nowlen House

1880-1913, on the corner of Mill Road and the Park entrance.

The New Sanitarium/Avon Inn

1820 Private home

1882 Dr. Allen and Mr. Carson

1911 Avon Inn to the present, the last remaining hotel from the fame Avon enjoyed during the popularity of hydrotherapy and adaption into the age of the automobile.

Despite the eventual decline of hotels catering to "the cure", Avon has not forgotten the influence of the industry and its role in shaping the town.

Railroads, bottling companies, livery services, farm goods, food processing, medical doctors, nurses and other caregivers, hotel workers, and a general attitude of hospitality all benefited from and contributed to the Avon Spa Era.

The Spring House before the present Gazebo



Avon Village Parks

It really began in the 1790s when Dr. Timothy Hosmer and his associates who were the original purchasers of the land that became Avon, set aside a common area in the center of the new settlement. That today is the “Park Circle” – still a place where the community meets to remember our veterans, commemorate past events, to greet Santa, to find a quiet place to sit in the little urban forest.

Jump now to the Twentieth Century when once again the area of the famous Avon Springs became available for purchase. In 1966, Mayor William Mulvaney and the Village Board bought thirty-five acres on this historic site to preserve a part of Avon’s heritage and to offer recreational opportunities. It was not an easy task to convince people that \$17,500 was a small price to pay for this space. In 1968, the Board appointed a three member commission to oversee the new park. The very active current Village Park Commission is now a five member group.

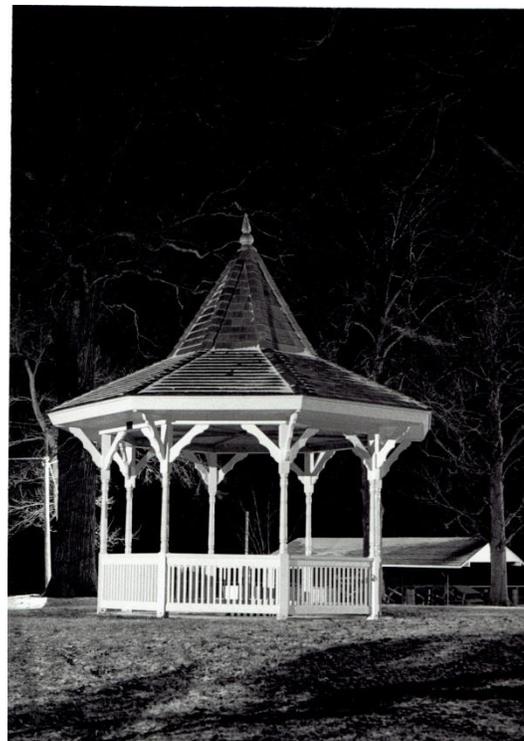
Little League baseball fields were moved from a busy East Main Street location; Avon Jaycees built the first picnic pavilion; The Lions Club constructed a pavilion, skate house, sheltered cooking pit and cooperated with the Village and Town to build a skating rink. The Village developed basketball, volleyball and pickleball courts and restrooms. In 1978, a gazebo designed by Larry Witherow and constructed by Arliss Merrell, replaced the spring house over the Lower Spring. The racetrack, laid out in 1836, has remained a Standardbred training track and is west of the dedicated park land.

Other land came to the Village through the generosity of various individuals who have recognized the value of our heritage and our need for green space. In 1971, George Stewart, a local attorney, gave the Five Arch Bridge and adjacent

land to the Village. James J. Wadsworth negotiated the gift of a 21 acre parcel south of Avon Driving Park and stretching to the town/village line. In 1972, Mrs. Charles Case and her Family gave the Village about four acres in the northeast quadrant at Reed Street, to become Case Park at its dedication in 1975. BirdsEye, Inc. granted a small parcel adjoining the Five Arch Bridge in 1974. Mrs. Reverdy Wadsworth donated 29 acres (Wadsworth Park South) connecting Driving Park, Wadsworth Park North and the Five Arch Bridge Park.

Walking trails and a state-of-the-art playground have been added through the efforts of Avon community members. Maintenance is provided by the Village Department of Public Works. Park users who value the opportunity to enjoy this unique area also serve by honoring the park rules.

Maureen Kingston 2016



Original photo by Matt Witherow

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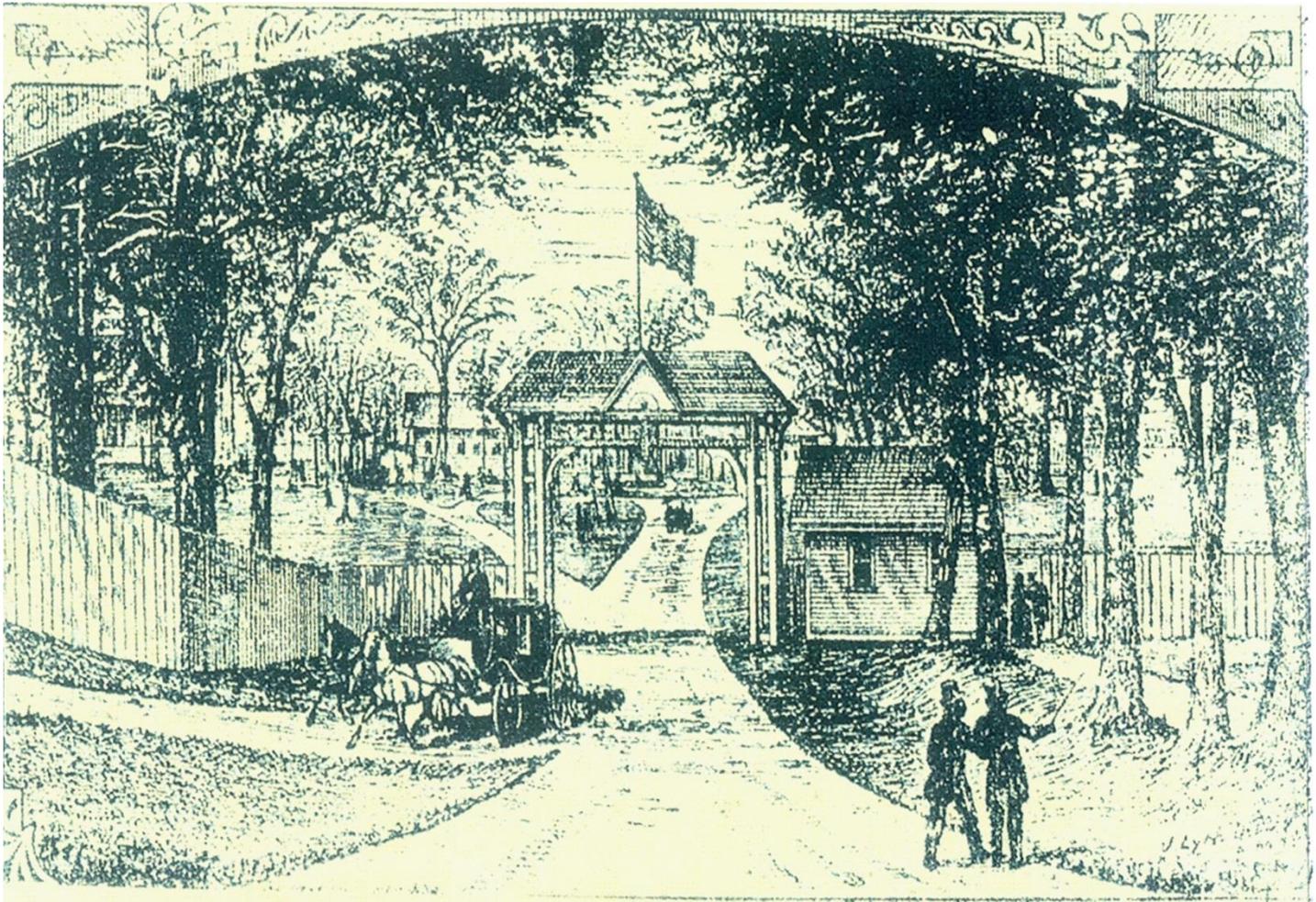
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Brochure prepared by the Avon Town Historians, 2016.

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