**WILLIAM MAPES RYSDYK**

1809-1870



William Mapes Rysdyk, pioneer horse breeder and owner of the famed stallion Hambletonian, was born on September 30, 1809 on a tenant farm in the town of Warwick, Orange County, New York. His parents were Geret Rysdyk and Catherine Mapes, daughter of David Mapes, a tavern owner in Sugar Loaf, New York. In the 1830's, Rysdyk married Mahala Hall and had four children, two of which, William T. and Elizabeth, reached maturity. At Mahala's death he married Elvira Sproull. Their four sons all died before adulthood.

As a family man with growing responsibilities, Rysdyk augmented his income by becoming a hired hand to Jonas Seely, a wealthy landowner and horse breeder in Sugar Loaf. In 1848 Seely's crippled mare known as the Charles Kent mare was bred to Abdallah who was descended from a long line of English race horses including Imported Messenger. The mare's illustrious heritage included Bellfounder and other noted English coach horses and natural trotters. Subsequently, on March 5, 1849, a bay colt was foaled in a secluded Orange County field. From the beginning Rysdyk was determined to own the colt and, before winter, asked Seely to sell him. Seely was agreeable to the sale but asked \$150 for the colt as well as his dam. Rysdyk had to think it over since he had planned to offer \$100 just for the colt. Compromise was agreeably reached and Rysdyk paid \$125 for both.

Rysdyk immediately named his horse Hambletonian and decided to put him to stud rather than racing. The colt became known as Hambletonian 10 to distinguish it from others with the popular name, or, more commonly, Rysdyk's Hambletonian. It has to be noted that Orange County at this pre-Civil War era was in a period of great development with a growing population and many new roads. Traveling by horseback was changing to carriages and farm

wagons and, therefore, a gait was needed that was both steady and speedy. Trotting was the answer and horsemen began developing a new breed of horses, the Standardbred.

Rysdyk drove Hambletonian as a yearly to the county fair in Goshen where he won his first ribbon. For the next twenty-seven years the horse continued to win countless honors at local fairs as well as in the city. It was a common belief among contemporary breeders that racing sapped the strength of stallions and Hambletonian spent his time only on the roads not race tracks. Once, however, a local horseman, Seely Roe, owned a speedy trotter often compared to Hambletonian. When both were at a fair in New York City, a challenge was made for a race. It was held at the famed Union Course on Long Island. With each horse drawing a wagon, he raced not against the other, but to the clock. Hambletonian's time was 2:48½, an unheard of time for an untrained two-year-old. The horse never again had to defend his record.

Among his contemporaries there was a dichotomy of opinion about William Rysdyk. Some accused him of being greedy and short-tempered, over-working his stallion. Others understood his devotion to the horse and respected his novel breeding methods, business acumen, and his willingness to allow visitors constantly to come to see the famed horse. His fortunes increased immensely as original stud fees climbed from \$15 to \$500 with horsemen all clamoring for a Hambletonian foal. By the time of Hambletonian's death, he had sired over 1,300 foals, many of which became champion trotters themselves. It is estimated that Rysdyk amassed a fortune in excess of \$200,000, a huge amount for that period.

Rysdyk was able to purchase the Tully farm in Chester, New York as well as several other sites. His last purchase was a large area on the crest of a hill, one side over-looking the town, and the other side, the Erie Railroad. In addition to the barns, he constructed a large, three-story house in the 1860's. It was on this property that the noted artist J.H. Wright in 1865 painted an oil portrait of William Mapes Rysdyk and his horse Hambletonian in the horse's stall. This portrait became widely known when it was the subject of a lithograph in 1865 and was again copied by Currier and Ives in 1870, 1876, and 1880. Other lithographs were also made of the horse on the farm, and Hambletonian and Rysdyk became household names. The stately house has been restored and is currently a Bed and Breakfast called Hambletonian House.

William Mapes Rysdyk died on April 3, 1870. He bestowed a farm to each of his surviving children and a neighboring house to his nephew George F. Andrews. In the appraisal of Rysdyk's holdings, Hambletonian was listed at a value of \$15,000. The horse, along with all his other property and goods, were left to his widow. Rysdyk died more than a wealthy man. He was a pioneer in the fledgling horse breeding industry which produced the new Standardbred from a mix of thoroughbred and farm animals. Today, Standardbred horses possess a swift trotting style which once had to be timed on a mile-long course. They possess long, low bodies, strong muscles in the upper front legs, and powerful hindquarters. Over 99% of all trotters can trace

their heritage to Hambletonian because of William M. Rysdyk. Rysdyk was buried in the family plot in Community Cemetery on Hambletonian Avenue along with all his family except for the two surviving children. Today a farm road leads to the site.

George F. Andrews, grandson of Catherine Mapes, became business manager for Hambletonian and an executor of his uncle's will. This was contested by Rysdyk's children who felt an earlier document more truly represented their father's wishes. The Surrogate's Office in Goshen ultimately accepted the latter will and a second appraisal was made. These events were recorded in a daily diary written by Andrews from September 27, 1873 - April 17, 1874. The original diary is in the possession of the Chester Historical Society.

On the morning of March 27, 1876, Harmon Showers, Hambletonian's African-American-Indian groom, entered his stall to discover the horse lying dead. Following Rysdyk's express wishes, Andrews placed the great stallion in a large crate along with all of his personal possessions such as bridle, halter, curry comb, brush, etc., placed him on stone dray, and buried him close-by under a wild cherry tree. Subsequently, a simple stone marker was placed over the grave reading simply "Rysdyk's Hambletonian, Foaled May 5, 1849, Died March 27, 1876." These events are all faithfully recorded in Andrews' ledger-sized diary dating from August 24 1875 - 1878 which is now in the collection of the Harness Racing Museum in Goshen, New York.

Hambletonian and William Rysdyk's fame did not end with death. In 1893 the National Association of Trotting Horse Breeders erected a large red granite obelisk near the horse's grave which could be seen for miles around. The inscription reads "Hambletonian, The Great Progenitor of Trotters, Born May 5, 1849, Died March 27, 1876." And, in the late 1800's, the American Museum of Natural History requested permission to exhume Hambletonian's body for an exhibit in New York City. The request was refused by one of Rysdyk's heirs. In addition, the horse and his owner became known far beyond Orange County. The pair was pictured on covers of cigar boxes and on collectible cards contained in packs of cigarettes. Rysdyk and Hambletonian appeared on the backs of rummy playing cards and on commemorative plates. They became familiar figures.

As harness racing increased in popularity and new tracks were built throughout the country, an annual race for three-year-olds, comparable to the Kentucky Derby, began in 1926 at the New York State Fair in Syracuse. Called the Hambletonian Stake, the race was moved around for several years. From 1930-1956, with the exception of one year, this highly popular Classic was held at the pear-shaped, mile-long track at Good Time Park in Goshen. Then, after changing locations several times, the annual race was finally moved to the Meadowlands, New Jersey in 1981 and is organized by The Hambletonian Society. The purse for the ninetieth running in 2015 was more than \$2,300,000. Good Time Park was abandoned due to changing habits, the building of tracks closer to New York City, and the demise of the Erie Railroad.

The large stables of William H. Cane next to the half-mile Historic Track in Goshen became the home of the Harness Racing Museum and Hall of Fame of the Trotter where William Mapes Rysdyk and his horse Hambletonian have been enshrined in the prestigious "The Immortals of the Harness Racing Hall of Fame". They are featured in numerous displays, pictures, and diorama, as well as countless lithographs. The museum currently possesses the world's largest collection of trotting prints. In the early 1950's the museum purchased the original W.H. Wright oil painting which had been in the possession of the Andrews family since the death of Rysdyk's widow, Elvira, in 1878. This treasured possession holds an honored position in the museum's collection.

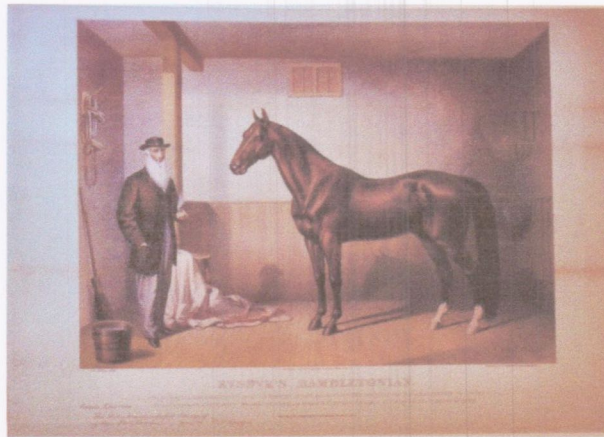
At Historic Track next door the infield still holds the storm-ravaged skeleton of the Hambletonian Tree which once sheltered the grazing Hambletonian and his sons and daughters. This mighty tree was biologically cloned in 2000 and 100 grafts were sold to raise money. Some of these are surely growing in Orange County today as a memorial to the birthplace of the Standardbred.

During the bicentennial years of the 1970's, a resurgence of interest in Rysdyk and Hambletonian developed. Marguerite Henry wrote her popular children's story "Born to Trot" which was followed by "One Man's Horse". The second book focused on the relationship between the horse and his owner and included numerous photographs. A copy may be examined in the rare-books collection at the Newburgh Library, New York. At the same time Archie Manina, a descendant of the Seely family, told the story in a manuscript "Rysdyk and Hambletonian". As a horseman, Manina added his additional understanding of the breeding business along with recollections of contemporaries. Introducing the manuscript is The Hambletonian Trail, a hand-drawn map locating the major sites of Hambletonian's life from foaling field in Sugar Loaf to enshrinement in the Hall of Fame in Goshen. More recently, in 2013, Dean A. Hoffman published a detailed book titled "Harness Racing in New York State" which traces the development of harness racing from the importation of Messenger in the late 1780's up to the present day. Included are countless photographs of horses, tracks, and owners.

For many years the Town of Chester reenacted the Rysdyk Hambletonian days with a celebration preceding the running of the Hambletonian Stake in nearby Goshen. While the tradition is no longer observed, the current generation of Chester youth is growing up familiar with this heritage. On the entry wall of their new high school are two drawings, one of Hambletonian and one of William Mapes Rysdyk driving his beloved stallion. The sports teams are nicknamed the Hambletonians!



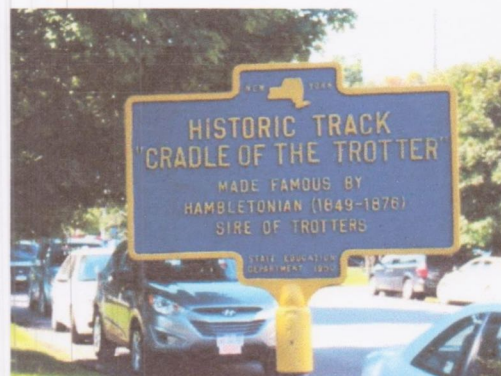
W.H.Wright's 1865 oil painting of William M. Rysdyk and his horse Hambletonian is on display at the Harness Racing Museum and Hall of Fame in Goshen, New York



Currier & Ives 1876 lithograph Rysdyk's Hambletonian contains Rysdyk's statement of authenticity



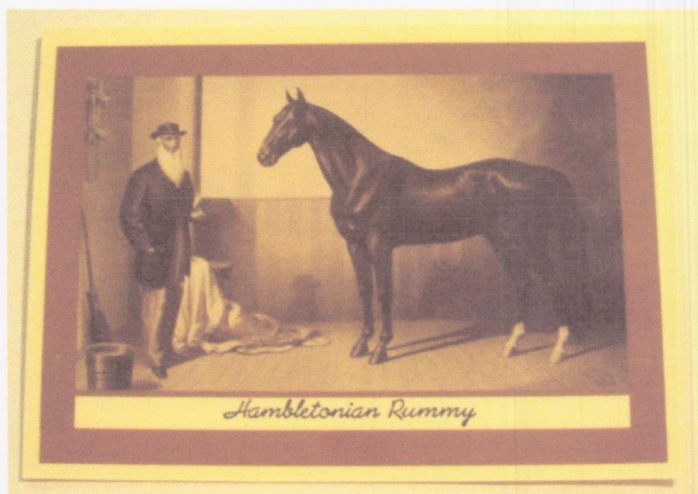
Hambletonian's foaling site May 5, 1849, in Sugar loaf, Orange County, New York



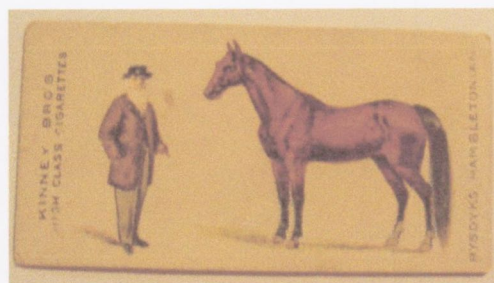
This National Landmark is the world's oldest harness track



Cigar box cover



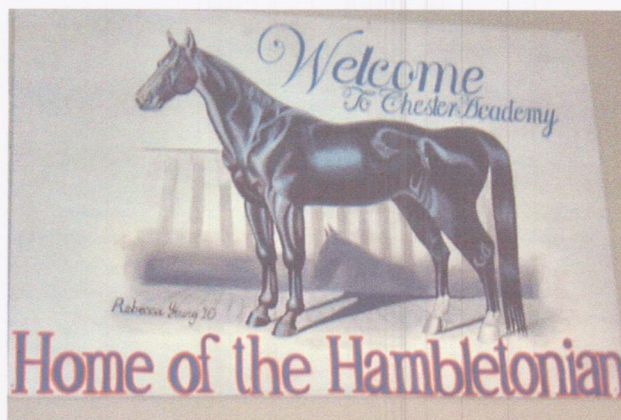
Deck of rummy cards



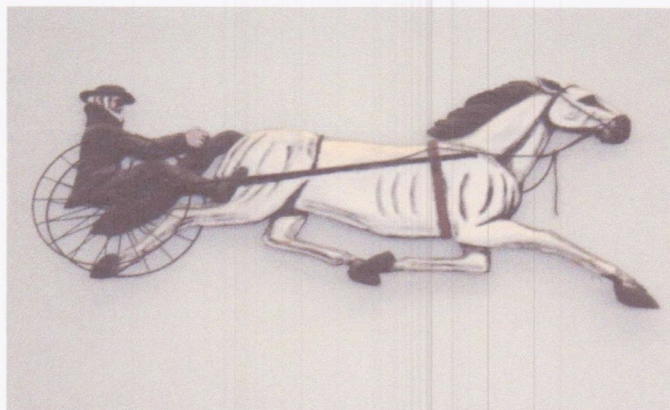
Cigarette pack card



"Hambletonian House" built by Rysdyk in the early 1860's is now a Bed and Breakfast owned by Alan and Rosemary Eckard



This large wall painting welcomes all visitors to Chester Academy on Hambletonian Avenue, Chester, New York



A sketch on the school entry wall is of William M. Rysdyle driving his famed trotter Hambletonian



The 27-foot granite obelisk honors the great trotter Hambletonian who sired over 1,300 foals and is the progenitor of the Standardbred Horse.



"This unique museum is dedicated to preserving the heritage of harness racing and the breed of horse known as Standardbred."

sources

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