

Roque on the Village Green

Angelica

Allegany County



Roque is the name of the game.

The sign on the outskirts of the village of Angelica refers to it as “A Town Where History Lives.” It is a beautiful little community of about a thousand residents, but as far as history goes, not much of it is visible.

However, if you do a little digging, Angelica has some great stories to tell. Some of the former residents here have tales that leap off the pages of early Western New York history.

Angelica Schuyler was the eldest of the fifteen children of General Philip Schuyler. She married a wealthy British businessman and politician, John Philip Church. They lived in London and Paris for a time and returned to America in 1797. For their efforts to finance the American Revolution, she and her husband were granted ownership of a hundred thousand acres in western New York. Their son, Philip, came to Allegany and Genesee Counties and mapped out the design of the village named in honor of his mother. Having spent several years in Paris, they designed this little community with Parisian nuances, such as wide boulevards and a circular village green in the center. Angelica’s younger sister, Elizabeth, was the wife of Alexander Hamilton. The pistols used in his duel with Aaron Burr on July 11, 1804, were kept for many years in Angelica.

Oliver Norton Smith was born in Angelica on December 17, 1839. Smith was Brig. Gen. Daniel Butterfield’s company bugler. The general wrote “Taps” at Harrison’s Landing, Virginia, in July, 1862, and Smith became the first bugler ever to play it in public.

Angelica resident Calvin Fairbank is a legend in the story of the Underground Railroad. He helped nearly fifty slaves escape to the North. He was captured several times and tried and convicted twice in Kentucky. He suffered unimaginable degradations while serving nineteen years in prison after his convictions. It is reported that he withstood his jailer’s lash like no other, having been on the receiving end of more than thirty-five thousand lashes.

These stories rank up with the greatest tales of Upstate New York.

Now, let’s talk about croquet. Well, actually let’s drop the “c” and the “t” and talk about “roque” (pronounced “roke”).

“Nobody knows where the idea of the game really came from well over a century ago,” David Haggstrom told me. He is a native Angelican and is also the library director at nearby Alfred University. “Yes, it has many similarities to the game of croquet, but the two most glaring differences are the mallets and the balls. Our mallets are short-handled and have large faces. Croquet

uses long handles, and mallets with smaller striking faces. They also use wooden balls. Ours are made out of rubber, very similar to a bowling ball.”

So what is the mystique of this little-known game?

“A couple of generations ago, when people lived in an unhurried time, some local men got together and established a roque court right here in the middle of our famous park. Roque was established already, although nobody knows from whence it began. In fact, it was an Olympic sport at the 1904 Summer Olympics in St. Louis. Only one nation submitted a team. The United States.

“When the sun went down in the old days, a lot of the senior men in Angelica would gather at the court in the park. Spirited games of roque would begin, and many times they lasted well past midnight. It is a beloved tradition in our town, and we believe we are the only place left in America that still plays it regularly. During the hype of the 1904 Olympics, roque was declared the ‘Game of the Century,’” he chuckled.

I asked him if there are set rules for the game.

“I’m sure somebody around here wrote them down a long time ago. You know, court size, dimensions, and such. It is pretty similar to croquet, really. But nobody ever seems to know where those rules ended up.”

“So, do you still play?” I asked.

“Yes. I use my father’s mallets. Some of my friends use their grandfathers’ equipment,” he told me.

Every year, in August, Angelica has a big community-wide festival called Heritage Days. One of the centerpieces of the event is the big roque tournament.

“That really draws a big crowd,” Haggstrom said. “Even *CBS Evening News* sent a crew here in 2013 to see this unknown game that was being played in a little Western New York village. That was pretty exciting. We try and get the younger boys interested, but times are a lot different now.”

I had to ask. “Do women play?”

“No. They never have. Historically and currently we can never find a woman who has played roque in Angelica.”

“Are they allowed to play?”

“Well, I asked a man that years ago, and he said women would certainly be welcome to play but they had to bring their own roque balls and mallets to the court. And they don’t make them anymore,” he chuckled. “Also, a 1936 article from our newspaper, the *Angelica Advocate*, suggested

that women shouldn't play because their big dresses and hoop skirts would inadvertently (or on purpose) move the ball around the court to a more favorable position for the player.”

Other Nearby Attractions or Sites

A leisurely stroll around Angelica will reveal many architectural surprises. Most of the buildings are original to the early and middle 19th-century. To evoke Paris, the planners laid out a village where a large circular park is the centerpiece. Around the park you will find many old homes, five churches (some with original Tiffany stain glass windows), a courthouse with a lighted cupola, and the village post office which has been in operation for over a century. In the center of the park is the village green where croquet (um, I mean roque) tournaments are still held.

Just on the edge of town is Angelica's historic Until the Day Dawn Cemetery at the end of East Main Street. Calvin Fairbank is buried here (lot 182.2) and a plaque on his gravestone tells of his heroics along the Underground Railroad.

More than a dozen New York State forests are located within 30 miles of Angelica. One of the best is Bald Mountain State Forest just two miles east of the village. Hiking, camping, hunting and snowmobiling are all very popular here.

Essentials

What: America's oldest roque court

Where: The Park, Angelica; Allegany County

Contact

Angelica history, tourism, and events: www.angelica-ny.net