

# The Grand Barbecue: New Year's Day in Syracuse, 1870

BY KELLIE COWAN FRIDAY, JANUARY 1ST 2016

The Grand Barbecue: New Year's Day in Syracuse, 1870



Decades before crowds began to gather in New York City's Time Square to celebrate the new year, tens of thousands gathered in Syracuse's Clinton Square on New Year's Day. This celebration, held 146 years ago, was no typical New Year's party. The 'Grand Barbecue', perhaps the largest celebration the city of Syracuse has ever seen, was all about giving back to those in need.

The year was 1869. The country was still healing from the ravages of the Civil War. Syracuse, a rising industrial city thanks to its salt and brewing industries, was in the midst of an economic downturn. With a new year approaching, John Greenway, one of the city's richest men and biggest philanthropists, decided to do something special for the city's poor.

Greenway, owner of the Greenway Brewing Company, the largest brewery in Syracuse and one of the biggest brewing companies in the country at the time, decided to host a January 1, 1870 feast for 10,000 of central New York's neediest residents. Notices advertising the free event were posted in every newspaper in the region. Select members of the city's upper crust received formal invitations. The Binghamton and Oswego railroads advertised half-price fares to bring people from throughout central New York to the unprecedented event.

While it was much-anticipated, and received plenty of media attention from the newspapers at the time, the Grand Barbecue was not without its protesters. In a December 18, 1869 letter to the editor of the Syracuse Journal, a member of the temperance movement is moved to "protest against laudations which are so freely bestowed upon the proposed barbecue." Temperance members objected to the feast put on and funded by a man whose "wealth has largely accrued from the manufacture of beer." The

letter goes on to state that Greenway's products have "acted in no insignificant part in producing the drunkenness and consequent poverty of our city, the victims of which he now proposes to feast."

Several newspaper articles leading up to New Year's Day call for help in making a number of arrangements. One asks "reckoners" to assist in figuring out the correct number of loaves needed for each tier of the 5,000 loaf bread pyramid that was to be constructed. Bakers were instructed to deliver their goods to Clinton Square by 8 a.m. the day of the feast, but preparation for the beef and pudding to be served began much earlier.

Three steers were butchered, two roasted whole in giant 9-foot tall, 14-foot wide ovens, the other portioned into steaks to be handed out or delivered to the needy after the feast. Just after midnight on January 1, 1870, the fires were lit and the beef placed in the spits on the north side of the canal in Clinton Square. A 100-foot serving table was brought in and 2,400 pounds of pudding began boiling in vats at Greenway's brewery the morning of New Year's Eve. The pudding, divided into 12 loaves, each weighing 200 pounds, was delivered by the brewery's sleigh to Clinton Square.

Thousands of people from throughout the area arrived for the New Year's Day feast. Estimates range from 20,000-40,000 people ascended on Clinton Square for the Grand Barbecue. Accounts say people traveled by train from Albany, Binghamton and Oswego just to see the roasting process and the spectacle of the Grand Barbecue. Photographs show people packed into the square, streets and bridges and even on the roofs of surrounding buildings.

Just after noon the feast for 10,000 began. By about 2 p.m., according to the the Syracuse Daily Courier, every last bit of beef and pudding had been served. Hundreds of loaves were left over after the feast and those in need were invited to take them home. More than 400 loaves were sent to area orphanages, St. Joseph's hospital, homes for the sick and to individual residences that requested aid.

"This event was just so unique," said Sarah Kozma, a research specialist at the Onondaga Historical Association. "It was something for the public to enjoy. I think it was a major milestone for philanthropy in Syracuse."