

Historian's Corner

Covered Mile Racetrack Torn Down 100 Years Ago

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A mile's worth of East Aurora history came down 100 years ago this month.

Crews tackled the monumental task of demolishing the world's only covered mile racetrack on the Jewett Farm just west of the village. A small article on page five of the July 19, 1917 issue of the *East Aurora Advertiser* announced the news under a simple, three-word headline: "Landmark to Disappear."

"It will cause regret not only to horsemen but also to residents of this vicinity, that the famous Jewett Covered Track has been sold to a wrecking company, which has started the work of tearing it down," the *Advertiser* reported. "The track is something altogether unique, for it is the only mile track in the world covered by a substantial building."

The covered racetrack had become the centerpiece of the Jewett Stock Farm, which encompassed nearly 500 acres along Grover Road, between Quaker and Jewett Holmwood roads.

Cicero Hamlin's Village Farm, started in the 1850s where Hamlin Avenue and North Willow Street are today, had already put East Aurora on the world stage of horse breeding by the time Henry Jewett purchased 138 acres off Grover Road in April 1878. By the end of 1878, Henry and his brother, Josiah, had purchased more than 300 additional acres. Within a relatively short period of time, they built a large home, fences, barns and outdoor tracks on the property. Within the next few years, the Jewetts purchased even more land, including 70 acres from future President Grover Cleveland, who was mayor of Buffalo at the time.

Although some sources indicate that the mile-long covered racetrack was constructed in 1885, the first mention of the project appears in the archives of the *East Aurora Advertiser* in October 1890, when, after Josiah had left the business, Henry built "an immense cover over the trotting course at their stock farm."

The project was completed in three stages over three years. At first, plans called for covering a quarter-mile of the mile-long track. "But they have since decided to put a half-mile under cover,"

the *Advertiser* noted, adding, “It will take about 300 windows to light it, and 650,000 shingles to cover the roof.”

Less than a year later, the Jewetts extended the cover to about two-thirds of a mile. The final third was covered in August and September 1892, when the *Advertiser* bragged that East Aurora would have “the only mile racetrack in the world wholly under cover.”

The covered track allowed for the training of horses during the winter months, and horse trainers from across the country quickly sought a place at the Jewett Farm to garner an advantage ahead of the spring racing season.

“The past two years have certainly given the Jewett Farm a great reputation for young trotters, and that the advantages of the covered track are being realized is shown by the strings of trotters being wintered and trained there for outside parties,” the *Advertiser* noted in February 1893.

In an interview with a Buffalo newspaper in 1917, Henry Jewett said he covered the track out of necessity.

“At the time that I began building the track,” he told the newspaper, “I had a large stable of horses, and during the winter season I used to fret because there was no way in which I could begin working them out to develop speed and racing form for the early summer races without shipping all of them south.”

A few years after he built the covered racetrack, Henry Jewett became disgusted with what he said were unethical activities within the horse-racing industry. He sold his horses at auction. “I found I was in a business that I couldn’t control,” he said in a later interview, “and so I got out of it.”

Jewett instead turned the track and stables into a for-rent training ground. “At some times of the year, the revenue from the stables amounted to \$4,000 and \$5,000 a month (about \$117,000 to \$146,000 per month in today’s dollars),” one article noted. “The stables were heated and lighted for winter use,” and there was a boarding house on premises for the trainers and their staff.

The outer covered mile track encircled a half-mile outdoor track that was used during nicer weather.

The covered racetrack was an immediate tourist attraction, particularly in the winter months.

“Last Saturday everyone who could get away went to the Jewett Covered Track to witness the race between Fred Peek’s Afton L. and Arthur DuBois’ Erie Direct,” the *Advertiser* reported in December 1912. “There was a purse of about \$1,000 and side bets of about as much more.”

The Roycroft Inn offered excursions to the famed track for out-of-town guests.

According to one published description of the track, it was 30 feet wide, 12 feet high at the eaves, with a peaked shingled roof. "Near the roof on both sides a row of windows extends clear around the oval building," the description noted.

When the track was in its prime, as many as 300 racing horses were stabled there.

Covered passageways connected the track with the two mammoth barns, one of which was destroyed by fire in 1911, and another that later became a restaurant and bar known as "the Old Barn Tavern" before it burned in 1980.

The 1911 fire greatly crippled the operations at the Jewett Farm, as the number of stalls was reduced by half.

The track was still in use in the winter of 1916-1917, but the 77-year-old Henry Jewett decided the time had come to tear the structure down. It had become dilapidated, and changes in the horse breeding and racing industry made it more difficult for firms such as the Jewett Farm to compete.

Jewett, who died a few years later, sold the track to a house-wrecking company for \$10,000. It had cost him about \$32,000 to build.

"More money changed hands in the dismantling of the track than in the building of it," Jewett later said.

The wrecking company offered the pine and hemlock wood, as well as the windows, for sale at a reduced price before taking the remaining materials to Buffalo. "Everything needed for barns, sheds, garages, fences, etc.," an advertisement in the Aug. 2, 1917 *East Aurora Advertiser* noted, adding, "Come now, get first choice."

As a result, wood and windows from the famous racetrack made their way into homes and buildings throughout the East Aurora area.

The dismantling of a major part of East Aurora and horseracing history was a somber event for many.

"Its wrecking will eliminate another of the landmarks of harness racing history," the *Advertiser* noted, "and there is little likelihood that another such track will ever be built."

According to one Buffalo newspaper report, one of the men on the wrecking crew in 1917 had been a stable boy back in the track's heyday.

"I don't know whether you feel the way I do, but if you had been a stable boy back in the old days, the way I was, you wouldn't feel especially happy over helping to tear down this little stretch of racetrack," he told a Buffalo newspaper reporter.

The Jewett track was gone but not forgotten more than 20 years later, when the internationally syndicated Ripley's "Believe It or Not?" newspaper column featured the unique structure. And a century later, the track is still one of the most frequently researched topics in the archives of the Aurora Town Historian's Office.

Signs of the old racetrack's path were evident until the early 1960s, when fill was removed from the area west of Grover Road for the reconstruction of Route 20A. However, on a Google Earth view of the area a century after the track was torn down, it's not too difficult to see where the massive structure once stood, in an open field directly behind the businesses and homes lining the southwest corner of Quaker and Grover roads.