

Larger than Life

*The Legacy of
Alfred Solomon
Lives on Through
His Charitable Trust*

Story by
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When Alfred Solomon—a cigar-chomping hat innovator and horse-racing enthusiast—died just before his 105th birthday in 2004, his friends held his birthday party anyway, at his request.

By all accounts, Solomon had “a million friends” during his lifetime, and his posthumous birthday bash at the Saratoga Golf and Polo Club on September 25, 2004 was attended by more than 130 of them. They came to celebrate the dapper entrepreneur’s hilarious wit, boundless energy and remarkable mental acuity that lasted into his centenarian years.

During his life, Solomon was often asked to divulge the secret to his vigor, as someone who played golf until he was past 100 and danced at summer galas when he was 103. His answer typically credited a daily health regimen involving Maker’s Mark bourbon, raisins soaked in gin, and a cigar or two.

But long-time friend and Saratoga artist Beverley Mastrianni says Solomon’s longevity was equally attributable to his love for people and the community. “He was fueled by people and parties and by loving his work,” she says. “He had such a love of life, and he was such a funny man.”

The Manhattan-born Solomon devoted his career to running his garment district hat company, Madcaps, in partnership with his sister Janet Sloane. In the 1940s and ’50s, Solomon revolutionized the world of hats, acquiring designs from fashion houses in Europe, adapting them to American tastes and selling them at “hat bars” in department stores.

In 1942, Solomon and his wife Nancy bought a 286-acre farm on West River Road in Northumberland, naming it Madcaps Farm, and he spent weekends and summer racing seasons in the area for the rest of his life.

Larger than life while alive, in death the colorful legacy of Alfred Solomon lives on. Solomon died with no heirs—wife Nancy and sister Janet predeceased him—but with millions made through his company and savvy stock investments. His will bequeathed significant gifts to several local institutions, including Yaddo, Skidmore College’s Tang Teaching Museum and the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame.

And much of Solomon’s fortune established the Alfred Z. Solomon Charitable Trust. Managed by co-trustees Harry Snyder and Robert Ingmire, the trust has had a profound impact on local causes and institutions in the years since Solomon’s death, funding everything from a new stage for the Saratoga Shakespeare Company to a dental clinic for backstretch workers at Saratoga Race Course run by the nonprofit Backstretch Employee Service Team (BEST).

Saratoga Hospital was one of the largest recipients of the trust's generosity. Although Solomon had uncommonly good health in his later years, age-related concerns inevitably brought him to the hospital, flight case filled with Maker's Mark in hand. There he struck up friendships with hospital personnel, including Terry Lee, executive director of the hospital's Saratoga Care Foundation.

"He was one of the most interesting men I'd ever met," Lee says. "He was just a Damon Runyon character," she adds, referencing the colorful rogues that inhabit the writer's tales of Prohibition-era New York City (adapted for the well-known musical *Guys and Dolls*). "Up until the day he died, he had the mind of a 20 year old. I don't know if it was the Maker's Mark, the golden raisins, the hamburgers or what, but it worked."

Friends describe Solomon as "close with his money" during his lifetime and not a natural philanthropist, someone who knew more about making money than giving it away. Prescient investments in companies like IBM and Pfizer—long before most investors were hip to the coming booms in personal computers and pharmaceuticals—sealed his fortune. "I can remember going into his room at the hospital. He had business prospectuses all over his bed," Lee says. "He was a phenomenal investor."

When the hospital needed funding to open a new state-of-the-art emergency department in 2009, they received a \$3.1 million gift from the trust. It was the largest gift in the history of the hospital, and the new emergency wing bears Solomon's name. In an outcome that Lee says would have made Solomon "thrilled," each of the four trauma rooms in the department bears a racing-related name, from the Backstretch to the Starting Gate.

"Alfred would have loved this place," Lee says of the much more private and high tech emergency center that has transformed the hospital's overall image and its ability to attract the best staff. "Certainly no one wants to be in the hospital, but he loved the doctors and the nurses. He's obviously made a huge impact on the care that's being given to the patients we see. If Alfred was here, we'd have a toast to success."



Another local institution to benefit greatly from Solomon's legacy is the National Museum of Racing, which received a \$1 million bequest to support the museum gift shop, which now bears the names of Solomon and his wife Nancy. An Anthony Alonzo portrait of Solomon—in blue striped blazer and blue checked driver's cap, cigar in hand—greet museum visitors as they walk in the front door.

His trust also helped to fund the museum's racing simulator. The first of its kind in America, the simulator replicates the feel of riding a thundering Thoroughbred, giving visitors a taste of how much strength and agility is needed to ride the rail at 40 miles an hour. Once it was installed, the museum immediately saw an increase in attendance, and the

simulator is helping get young people involved in racing.

That would have meant something special to Solomon, who never missed a Saratoga meet, sitting in Box E33 for decades. "I was with him in his box once and Hillary Clinton stopped by," says racing museum assistant director Catherine Maguire. "He was holding court the whole time. Everybody wanted to come by to say hello to him."

But despite all of his wealth and social status, Solomon was not a person who looked down on the less fortunate, says Lee. "He was not at all a snob. Everyone was on a level playing field with him. He was a man of the people." **SL**

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