

## OVERLOOKED ORLEANS



ORLEANS COUNTY HISTORY DEPARTMENT

Attempts to save the American Hotel in Knowlesville were unsuccessful after a fire broke out in 1913. People worked to evacuate goods from a nearby drugstore and post office as the flames spread. This photograph, made from a glass plate negative recently found in a collection of images within the Orleans County Department of History, was incorrectly identified in last week's "Overlooked Orleans" and information since that column's publication has helped identify the building as the hotel in Knowlesville.

# Devastating fire hit old hotel

OVERLOOKED ORLEANS: A bucket brigade couldn't save Knowlesville business

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I received two friendly phone calls from Bill Lattin and Betsy Hoffman (Town of Carlton historian) last week correcting the March 28 article ("Point Breeze hotel is long gone, but still remembered"). Although the information was correct, the photograph is of a hotel that once stood in Knowlesville.

So as a correction, I thought it would be worthwhile to write a short piece about the hotel in the photograph!

Isaac Signor's "Landmarks of Orleans County, New York" notes that the earliest hotel in this area was likely kept by William Knowles in the first framed house built at that location in 1825. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 created the need for a stopping point at this location, a much-needed place for rest. An 1860 map of Niagara and Orleans

counties shows the "American Hotel" situated on the property shown in this photograph. The building was situated on the southeast corner of Knowlesville and Presbyterian roads and a storefront was connected the hotel to the north, which is visible on the left-hand side of the image.

Similar to the hotel at Point Breeze, this hotel was destroyed by fire on July 21, 1913. The July 22, 1913 edition of the Medina Daily Journal ran the devastating conflagration as its headline story; "KNOWLESVILLE VISITED BY A \$27,000 FIRE LAST NIGHT." Caused by an overheated chimney in the hotel's kitchen, the fire spread quickly through the large frame structure. According to the paper, "...in a short space of time dense smoke was pouring from the windows, quickly followed by the licking, eager flames. With no immediate and adequate

fire protection, the situation quickly became a very serious one."

A bucket brigade was formed as the community eagerly awaited assistance from fire companies in Medina and Albion.

Despite the efforts of the firefighters, the flames spread to the building of Dr. Edward G. Hall, which was occupied by Fred Hall's drug store, Dr. Laverne Waters' office, Frank Higgins' barber shop, and Ross Achilles' electrical office.

While the fire raged in the hotel proper, nearby residents assisted in emptying the drug store, the attached post office, and removed several pool tables and other equipment from the hotel. The flames eventually spread to the transformers of the Swett Electric Company, forcing the shut-down of electricity to the community. This prevented the use of the lift bridge, bringing

traffic on the Erie Canal to a halt.

According to the Daily Journal, "Forty years ago this same section was devastated with a fire. Frame buildings were erected - a business block and hotel - and for over thirty years the little village has been left in peace."

The total loss included Harry Barnum's Knowlesville Hotel (\$15,000), the Hall Block (\$10,000), Frank Hall's Harness and Shoe Shop (\$400), and private residences owned by John Whitwell, George Ames, and stores owned by John Whitwell and M. W. Tilden. Fire insurance in the area cost about \$3.45 per hundred, which made adequate coverage cost prohibitive. The total value of the loss, not covered by insurance, was around \$20,000.

The hotel was eventually rebuilt as the structure that now sits on the same corner.