

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W. Lattin County Historian

Vol. XI

6-28-89

No. 26

THE J.G. PETERS HARNESS SHOP

During the late 1830s, Starr Chester, a young man of 24 came to the hamlet of Gaines from Connecticut. Mr. Chester was a cobbler, or shoemaker, and around 1838 he built a shop for his business just east of his home on the north side of Ridge Road, approximately 500 feet from the village intersection. He constructed his shop of plank out for the exterior he chose split lath and plaster, known as stucco. Even though stucco utilized the same ingredients as the mortar in cobblestone buildings of the period, - lime, sand and stone, it was uncommon in Gaines as well as in most of the Northern States until the end of the 19th century.

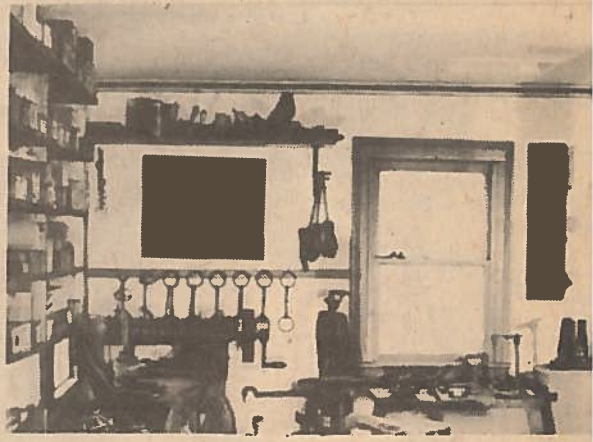
Mr. Chester used his shop until his death on September 23, 1880. On May 21, 1883 Gates Knickerbocker purchased a building lot 22'x36' for \$30.00 approximately 150' west of the intersection at Gaines on the north side of the Ridge. At the same time he purchased the Chester cobbler shop from Mr. Chester's widow and moved it to the lot. He had constructed a stone cellar on which to place the shop and the year of the move is confirmed by the date "1883" which was found written in the cement of the cellar wall. It is believed Mr. Knickerbocker modernized the building with a wooden western style facade and mounted a large wooden replica of a pocket watch on the porch roof to advertise his jewelry and clock repair business which occupied the building from 1883 until his death in 1914.

In 1921 Alfred Bentley purchased four lots at the corner including the Knickerbocker store, which he later sold to Clifton Nestle in 1922. Mr. Nestle used the building as his gun repair shop and possibly as a paint store until 1939 when he sold it to Floyd Berns. Since then the building has reportedly been used as a barbershop, for town court sessions held by Fred Berns, and as rental property including The Cycle Depot, a small business owned by Gary and Veronica Pahura during the early 1980s. This was the last business enterprise to occupy the space.

Frequently it was used as living quarters in connection with the Chatterbox Restaurant which was the case during the 1950s when Benkert owned it.

The Cobblestone Museum director, with the support of the Board of Directors, had pursued the acquisition of the building over several years with at least three owners. In the spring of 1987 Rose I. Welles, then the owner, notified C.W. Lattin that she would donate the building to the Cobblestone Museum Complex. However, it was not until August when all the necessary paper work had been completed that the museum was given the go ahead" to move it.

On Friday, August 28 the building was moved to the Cobblestone Complex through the generosity of Rice Homes of Barre Center. The Orleans County Sheriff's Department and the Town of Gaines also cooperated in this venture. The building is 12' x 16' in size having floor joists made of large logs 16 feet long, smoothed level on one side only to accept the flooring. At the museum it was placed on piers between the Print Shop and Farmers Hall on Route 98. The land it now stand on was donated to the museum by Mrs. Nellie Vagg in 1975 and Mrs. Neva Murray in 1978 (originally two



separate parcels.)

Upon its arrival at the museum, the first priority was to make the exterior appearance cosmetically pleasing. Two layers of "tacky" siding were removed, the first probably dating to the late 1930s, the latter to the 1950s. It was then that we discovered the building was intended to be stuccoed. The original stucco had been removed when the first layer of siding was applied. This presented a unique problem. Through research conducted by Delia Robinson of the Cobblestone Resource Center, we were able to determine the recipe for the stucco. It was at this point that William Nestle stepped forward and offered to pay for the restoration of the stucco in memory of his father, Clifton Nestle and his grandfather, William Briar. Bruce Midkiff, a local mason who has devoted much of his time to cobblestone masonry repair, took on the challenging job of stuccoing. His work was completed by early October 1987. When the building was moved it was announced in the newspaper that it would become the John G. Peters Harness Shop. This one single article so inspired members of the Peters family that together they donated close to \$2,000.00 for its restoration. In like manner, other individuals also contributed. The Cobblestone Society was able to get a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts and with this money hired William Schubert to restore the canopy and stoop and construct a board walk to the building. An Italianate style door was found to replace a more modern door thus making the entrance in keeping with the character of the facade. Painting both interior and exterior and papering was done with museum staff and volunteers.

Upon the completion of all restoration work in August 1988, the contents of the John G. Peters Harness Shop, formerly of Lyndonville, was moved into its own building. These artifacts had been on display in the Cobblestone Museum for around 20 years prior to this move. They are now in a setting which enhances the whole story of harness making - a setting they truly deserve and a tribute to John G. Peters, Harness Maker.

On Sunday, July 9 at 2:00 p.m. the Peters Harness Shop will be dedicated in a ceremony conducted by the Cobblestone Society Museum at Childs, N.Y. At that time a twelve page booklet will be released about Mr. Peters, the building being dedicated and the harness makers trade. The public is welcome.