

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XII

7-19-90

No. 29

## WILLIAM KNOWLES

On August 18 and 19 Knowlesville will celebrate 175th birthday. Therefore, it is appropriate to present an article on William Knowles, the first settler, for whom the community was named. The following excerpts are taken from Pioneer History of Orleans County by Arad Thomas in 1871.

"Mr. Knowles was born in Sandersfield, Berkshire county, Massachusetts, July 19, 1790. His ancestors for several generations had been residents of Cape Cod, and were of the true New England, Puritan stock...

"The school house and the church were prominent institutions in New England civilization, and Mr. Knowles had the advantages of both, as they were enjoyed seventy years ago. His schooling was restricted to the district school of that time.

"In December, 1813, Mr. Knowles collected his effects together, purchased a span of horses and wagon, and a quantity of iron and steel for loading, and started to go to the Genesee country, where three of his brothers had already located.

"On his way west he stopped at Schenectady and bought eight kegs of oysters to add to his load. He arrived safely at the house of his brother in Ridgeway, January 5, 1814.

"In January, 1815, he came to Ridgeway and stopped at the house of an old friend, Eleazer Slator. He took an article of lot three, township fifteen, range three, on which the village of Knowlesville, so named in his honor, now stands, on the Erie Canal, containing 341 acres.

"In March, 1815, he began to cut down the trees upon his land so purchased, to build a house, then more than a mile from any house, or highway or foot path... In due time his cabin was raised, with sides of logs, roof of staves, or shakes, as they were called, fastened to their places by poles pounded crosswise, with a floor of basswood logs roughly hewed on one side.

"Mr. John Canifee, having a wife and one child and no house, moved into the new house of Mr. Knowles before it was completed, while the floor was only half laid down and a blanket was used for a door, and lived in it in that condition for two weeks.

"Mr. Knowles hired two men to work for him, one of whom had a wife, who was their housekeeper. During the first summer this woman, Mrs. Hill, was taken sick and died.

"At that time there were no roads, no barns, no pastures, and none of the modern conveniences for living in the settlement. Mr. Knowles had obtained some cows which he kept two miles from his house. He would work hard in his clearing all day, then go two miles to milk his cows and bring the milk home in pails through the woods.

"The death of Mrs. Hill was a sad event in the wilderness. It rendered the log cabin desolate. The men Mr. Knowles had hired soon left him.

"In November, 1815, he went back to Massachusetts, and in January, 1816, was married to Miss Mary Baldwin. They came on to the house Mr. Knowles had built. Mrs. Knowles soon accustomed herself to the inconveniences and difficulties of her new situation, went cheerfully to work and became a model housekeeper.

"Mr. Knowles, on this way home with his wife, had purchased a set of chairs with splint seats. These were regarded at first by the neighbors as a great luxury, and frequent comments were made by them upon the extravagance, as they regarded it of the Knowles family. But if they did indulge a little in the matter of chairs, their other furniture of the house at first was sufficiently primitive to satisfy the most fastidious of their friends, for they had at first no table but a board put on the top of a barrel. Their first bedstead was made by boring holes in the logs in the side of the house, and putting in rods fastened to pole bedposts, with side pieces of like material.

"In the cold summer of 1816, frost in June killed the corn, rendering the prospect of gloomy and sad for the new settlers, but the wheat crop proved good in quality, though less than an average yield



*Wm Knowles*

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"In the summer of 1816, the engineers surveying for the Erie Canal, came along and pitched their tent on Mr. Knowles farm, stopping there a week, and finally established the line for the canal through the center of his farm.

"Mr. Knowles built one section of the canal a little east of Holley. In 1825 he built the first framed house in Knowlesville, on the south side of the canal, in which he kept a hotel for several years. Afterwards he built the brick house near the canal on the west side of the Main Street, in which he kept a temperance hotel for several years, until he finally closed the house as a tavern.

"Mr. Knowles built the first warehouse in Knowlesville in 1825.

"He bought and shipped the first boatload of wheat ever shipped from Orleans county.

"Mr. Knowles was always among the first engaged in all public enterprises for the benefit of the community in which he lived.

"He helped build the first schoolhouse in his district, which was made of logs. This served also as a place of public worship. Here ministers of various denominations preached the gospel, and the people flocked to hear them without regard to sectarian prejudice or partiality.

"In 1838 Mr. Knowles built his late place of residence on the beautiful eminence in the west part of the village....

"In 1830 the brick church in Knowlesville was erected, Mr. K. furnishing one-half or more of the funds for that purpose.

"Mr. and Mrs. Knowles united with the Presbyterian church in 1820, which was the first religious society organized in Ridgeway. For nearly forty years he has been a ruling elder in that church.

"He never had children of his own, yet he has taken into his family and brought up and educated seven or eight children of others. To one of these Rev. I.O. Fillmore, he gave a liberal education, sending him to college and theological schools to fit for the gospel ministry....

"Mr. Knowles has been twice married. His first wife died April 2, 1861. He married Mrs. Mary Crippen for his second wife.

"He has sold his large farm and other real estate, reserving only a house and a lot in Knowlesville, where he resides, relieved from the cares and perplexities of business, calmly awaiting the approach of death, enjoying the full assurance of the good man's hope.

"The foregoing is the substance of a sketch of Mr. Knowles, furnished for the Orleans County Pioneer Association by his adopted son, I.O. Fillmore."