

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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"EMPIRE BLOCK"



To my knowledge this is one of the oldest photos in existence of an Albion Street scene. The prominent building in the center, referred to as the old "Empire Block", burned December 18, 1868. Therefore, this photo had to be taken at least one hundred twenty-nine years ago. I estimate it could well be older than that by several years. Photography was only about thirty years old when this picture was taken. In my judgment, the photographer who took it, probably used a second floor window or roof at the Bank of Orleans which was situated on the south-west corner of the four corners in Albion business district at the time. Our photographer aimed his camera in a northeasterly direction, taking in all the buildings from the corner to the canal along the east side of Main Street. The northern end of the building to the far left known as the Burrows Block, remains today housing the Krantz Furniture Store. The building immediately adjacent to the "Empire Block" also remains and houses Fischers News Room and the Snell Real Estate Office. The ones in between were torn down many years ago and replaced with other structures. It is in this area we now find Waterman Park.

Although the photo is of very poor quality, we can faintly see many horses, wagons and carriages parked along Main Street.

Perhaps the thing which intrigues me the most are the number of chimneys on the buildings. By looking carefully, I can find 19 or 20. No "hi-tech" gas furnaces vented by PVC pipe in this picture. Rather, coal and wood stoves with same chimneys, no doubt built to accommodate two, three or more stove pipes.

The "Empire Block" was built in 1842 in the Greek Revival Style. Of special interest also are the gables of this building. The end walls of this building and others in the photo project up above the roof line in a Dutch Step gable configuration. Indeed, many, and I repeat, many masonry buildings built in the Federal or Greek Revival Styles

had this sort of gable. This kind of gable system leaked badly because each row of shingles had to be flashed into the end wall or gable end. It's a situation that in due time will probably cause problems. Consequently, by the 1870's most gable ends of this sort were removed and overhangs built in their place. There are any number of old residences in the county that were altered in this fashion over 100 years ago.

Now, as to the fire which destroyed this old "Empire Block". It seems the fire was caused by a faulty stove on the first floor in a clothing store occupied by Cole & Sheldon. Also on the first floor was a hat and fur store operated by John Bradshaw. The second floor was occupied by Dr. J. L. Northrup, a dentist and Fred Butler, a tailor. The third floor contained the newspaper office of the Orleans American. The sign between the chimneys on the gable states: Orleans American.

The fire was discovered about 3 a.m. When Engine Co. No. 3 arrived, they searched in vain for several minutes to find the opening to the fire cistern or reservoir under the west side of Main Street. The opening was covered with snow so hence, they had to go to the canal to pump water. In the delay the fire worsened, causing over \$35,000 in damage and wrecking the contents of the occupants.

By mid-1869 the owner of the old "Empire Block", Dennis Densmore had erected a new building on the site currently known as the Empire Block. Here we find today the law offices of Church & Church and the Albion Chamber of Commerce.

This goes to show you how many businesses were located in second and third floor rooms in old commercial blocks years ago. As we can see here, three out of the five businesses which were displaced because of the fire, were above first floor level.

Correction: The title of last weeks article Vol. XIX No. 49 should have been S.A.K. @ ROOTS.