

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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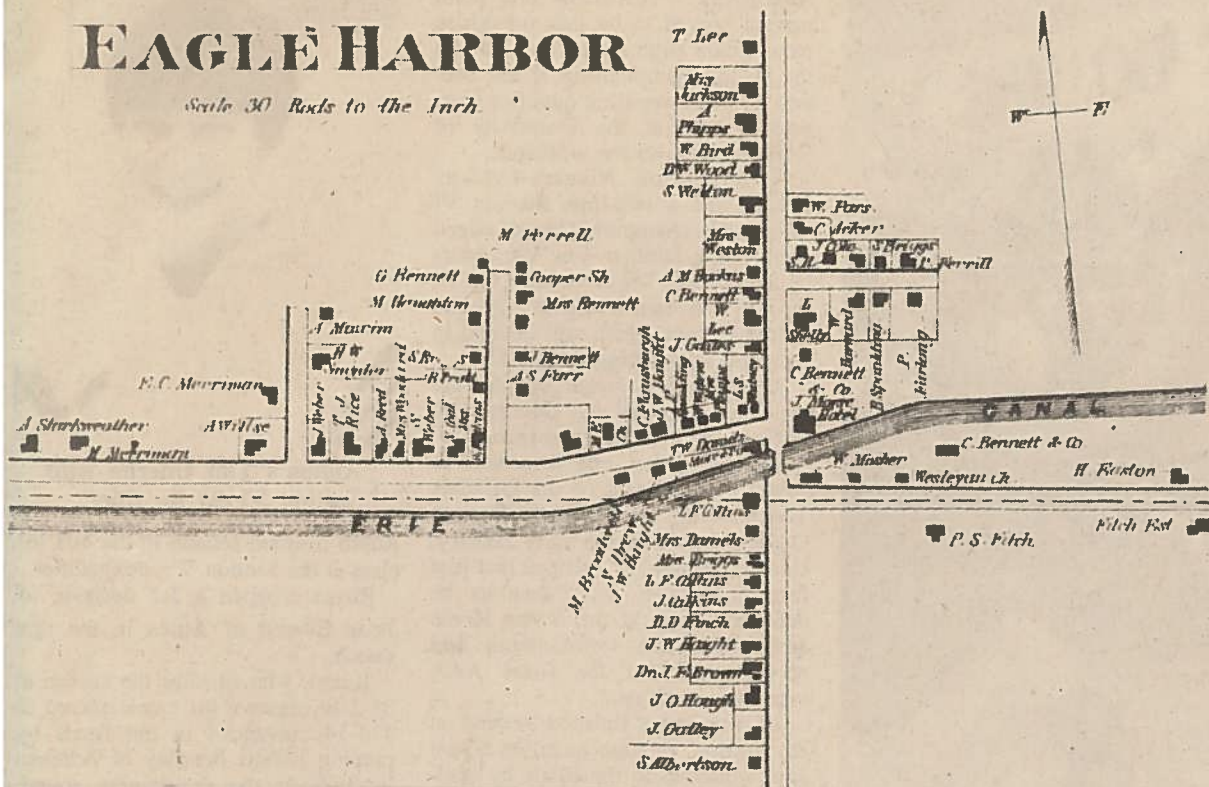
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No. 8

THE CHURCH PREVAILS

EAGLE HARBOR

Scale 30 Rods to the Inch



"Eagle Harbor and Barnegat against the world" was how old timers described these two places. Barnegat now being Shelby Center. Both hamlets were seen as tough places and Eagle Harbor in the days of rowdy canalers, had quite a reputation. The late Howard Pratt once told a story of how two men got into a fight at Eagle Harbor which lasted for several days. One guy bit an ear off the other but the opponent got back at him by biting off his nose. And some people think Ultimate Fighting is horrendous nowadays! Well folks, "there ain't nothin' new."

Eagle Harbor in the purest sense of the term is a "canal town." There was nothing much there before the completion of the Erie Canal except forest and farm land. Stephen Abbott commenced cutting down timber in the winter of 1812, thus making the first clearing in Eagle Harbor. When the canal route was being surveyed, a large bird's nest was discovered in a tree which was thought to be an eagle's. Hence, the name Eagle Harbor came about for the little community situated on a great inland waterway in both the towns of Gaines and Albion.

The first store was opened in the 1820's to accommodate workmen who were building a canal culvert and high embankment over Otter Creek. Soon a warehouse was built on the south side of the canal for the shipment of grain. By 1832 a dry-goods store had opened in Eagle Harbor. In 1825 N. Pratt, J. Delano and L. Northrop built a dam and sawmill on Otter Creek. The following year another sawmill was built up the creek south of the canal by James Mather. In 1837 W.P. Collins built a flour mill and when it burned in 1839 he immediately rebuilt. In 1847 a large flour mill was built on the south side of the canal by General E.S. Beach.

It was these ingredients of Flour, Crist and Lumber made possible by mills that created thriving communities in early times. If your community was located on the canal you had ready access to shipping and transportation.

Our map has been taken from the 1875 Niagara-Orleans County Atlas which shows Eagle Harbor. Looking carefully at it you'll notice several businesses including a hotel, store and post office, cooper shop and institutions such as school house, Wesleyan Church and Methodist Church. By 1894, Landmarks of Orleans County noted that there were three general stores, hotel and livery,

large barrel factory, two blacksmiths, a wagon shop, a churn and washing machine factory, a meat market, one grist mill, a ware house, two churches, school house and about 350 inhabitants. The present population is around 300. That is not to say little has changed. For over the years many changes have occurred, Our photo, circa 1900, looking west from the intersection of the Eagle Harbor Waterport Road and the Eagle Harbor Knowlesville Road. shows some changes. All the buildings to the left are gone, including the business of Charles Cutts, Blacksmith, Wagon Maker and Buggy Painter, plus a couple of dwellings which show on the map as M. Broadwell and N. Drew. These buildings were removed with the widening of the canal around eighty-five years ago.

To the right in the photo we notice a landmark in the distance It is the Eagle Harbor Methodist Church. It is the one thing which has remained constant in this community since early times and it has prevailed over everything else. Its roots go back as early as 1818 when Methodist circuit riders brought the Word to early settlers seeking spiritual needs. The present church ediface of red brick was built in 1845, having replaced an earlier meeting house dating back to 1827.

1997 marks the 170th anniversary of this church which will be noted in February with a remembrance Sunday, in March with the town of Gaines historian speaking, in April with an old-fashioned hymn-singing and in May with a special service, dinner and program with the Methodist District Superintendent as keynote speaker.

It is indeed interesting that little in this small community remains from the past except the Methodist Church. The stores, hotel, other congregations, mills, innumerable businesses, "Ultimate Fighting", and all the people listed on the map are gone. Even the public school dating back to 1822 was closed out in 1963 and more recently the closing of the U.S. Post Office on Jan. 16 ended an era of public mail service dating back to 1833.

Oh, there are a few houses which date back to early times but it is the Methodist Church, the only institution with roots in the past, which can claim continued and uninterrupted service to this old "canal town" and its people. Indeed, the church has prevailed.