

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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TOW PATH VIEW



With Governor Pataki's recent visit to Knowlesville, our attention is drawn to the revitalization of the Erie Canal. Pataki's presence was to break ground for a final segment of a 90-mile trail along the canal on what used to be the towpath. This great trail stretching across New York State, was once plied by mules, horses and as legend has it, a rowdy bunch of brawling canalers.

From Albany to Buffalo buildings for all kinds of business and houses too, were oriented to the canal. Many faced or even fronted directly on to the canal.

Our two photos of the same building show you what was typical of canal side (towpath) architecture. Both pictures were taken in 1911 of property which was to be appropriated by the state when the canal was last widened and deepened to its present dimensions.

Once known as the Babbitt Hotel, it catered to Erie Canal travelers. These buildings were located just north of the canal on the east side of Main Street in Albion. In the foreground of the one picture looking northeast you can see part of the old swing bridge on Main Street,

before the present lift bridge was installed. The other photo looking west clearly shows the towpath in the foreground with the hotel building in the distance. Attached to it is a shed or drive barn. The doors to this cart have been totally plastered with huge paper posters which have been pasted on. Two of them advertise "Sweet Capora Cigarettes". I might add, what a seemly unsightly eyesore of torn and tattered bills it appears to be. I think we tend to romanticise about the old canal days, but all was not pretty.

After the building's use as a hotel it was rented by Louis C. Briggs (1855-1930). His signage which is clearly evident, like the tattered posters, faces the towpath. The sign states: "L.C. Briggs, Coach Carriage and Auto Painting." In essence, this was a forerunner of what we call a body shop.

If a photo were taken from the same perspective today, you would no doubt, see the bridge tender's tower very near where we see the corner of the hotel's porch.