

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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WILLIAM V. N. BARLOW 1810-1909

"A Patriarch's Death", was the headline on his obituary as it appeared in a local paper. No other individual in the history of Albion did more to shape its visual character during the 19th Century than William V.N. Barlow.

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He was born in Madison County, N. Y. and moved to Monroe County at an early age. His mother died when he was seven years old and his school days were spent on a farm. At the age of 15 he began his life's work as a carpenter's apprentice in Brockport. In 1833 he moved to Albion and became one of "the ablest and most skillful architects and contractors in Western N. Y."

He first married Almada Townsend of Albion and they had two children. Upon her death he married her sister Emily Townsend Smith, who died in 1860. In his later years he lived with his daughter Mrs. Kate Beach on Washington Street. When he died he was the oldest member of the Orleans County Pioneer Association and oldest member of the First Presbyterian Church.

Although Mr. Barlow was in the contracting business over 50 years, and although he worked in a variety of styles during that time, his buildings are all very distinctive. In the 1860's he was in partnership with Charles Baker and when that dissolved he became associated with Orville Bates. His first major building was the Burrows Block in downtown Albion which was completed in 1835 and is now used by Mr. Henry Krantz for a furniture and antiques store. The Swan Library is also testimony to his skill and there in the second floor hall one can see three autographed elevation drawings of the house he designed and built for William G. Swan in 1877. The house which was later owned by the Hart Family was perhaps his greatest residential masterpiece. It was unfortunately razed in the 1940's and it is now the site of the Arco Station. If the Swan house was his masterpiece, surely the Orleans County Court House completed in 1858 is his greatest monument attesting to his skillful craftsmanship. The chapel and stone gate arch at Mt. Albion Cemetery are also known to have been designed and built by him in the early 1880's. From his obituary we also find the following: "It is impossible to travel in any street in town today without finding many buildings which he constructed." The children of Albion called him "High Rickety Barlow" because so many of his structures included high towers or cupolas. The brick house which he designed and built for himself after 1875 in the 2nd Empire Style on South Clinton Street is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. Gar Trusselle and exhibits a cupola and and many other characteristic details.

There are several buildings which I would attribute to him including: the 1879 Martillotta House - JHL Designs on East State St., St. Joseph's Rectory, the old American Legion building - 1882, the Hallock-Parsons house south of Albion, the Hart-Nassar house, South Main, the Hazard-Fernandez house, South Main, the Rogers-McKenna House, South Clinton and many other less obvious examples. Indeed, much of his work is unknown and some of it no longer stands. Yet what we see and understand about this man's work suggests he was a master in the old tradition of perfection.

The picture of him shown here is a real study in character as he with file in hand, sights the teeth of his saw. No doubt, the unknown photographer who snapped this moment in time under the natural lighting of a studio sky light recognized the true and timeless character of this patriarch.