



Bethinking of Old Orleans

4-10-85

C.W.Lattin
County
Historian

Vol. VII

No. 15

THE LEE DISTILLERY

The accompanying photograph which was taken in the mid 1920's shows the ruins of the Lee Distillery at Oak Orchard on the Ridge. These stone buildings were located on the west side of Oak Orchard Creek, north of Ridge Road on the flats. The distillery was built in 1838 by John B. Lee of Albion. Mr. Lee was engaged in canal warehousing as well as selling dry goods. He was also involved in buying and selling flour and grain and in the manufacturing of flour. He took a great interest in military affairs, held various offices in the State Militia and rose to the rank of Brigadier-General. He was also an investor in large holdings of land in the county.

During the first half of the 19th Century there were many distilleries located in Orleans County. The first distillery which was built in the Town of Ridgeway was constructed in 1811 a little west of Ridgeway Corners on the Ridge. Shortly thereafter another was built at Knowlesville. In 1844 Dunbar and Clark built a distillery at Oak Orchard on the Ridge up the creek from the Ridge Road. The first distillery in Gaines was built on Ridge Road one mile west of Gaines in 1815. In the 1880's A.J. Plamer of Gaines was operating a distillery which produced a product called Cider Brandy. These are only a few of many which were a vital

part of the local economy in the 19th Century.

Wheat and corn were raised in abundance and distillation made good sense. Believe it or not, the consumption of hard liquor was at its all time high in the 1830's in this county. Let me quote from "Saga of the Ridge" by J. Howard Pratt. "The settlers were heavy drinkers but they could not consume all the whiskey. Therefore, whiskey as well as corn found a slow market. One could buy whiskey at the distillery for 38¢ per gallon ... This led to barrel making. We had good oak lumber which, when sawed, made the best of containers." More money was made by distilling corn and wheat rather than shipping the grain as a raw product in those early years of Pioneer development.

Gen. Lee, at his distillery, boarded swine for local farmers at a small fee, feeding them on the distillery refuse grain. A legend in my own family goes like this. My great-great grandfather sold a crop of wheat to the Lee Distillery and Gen. Lee wanted to pay for part of the wheat with several barrels of whiskey. My great-great grandmother wasn't too pleased with this bargain with seven sons in her household. The Lee Distillery at Oak Orchard on the Ridge was only in operation for around three decades. The stone ruins shown here were leveled in the late 1920's.