

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

5-7-86



Knowlesville

Vol. VIII

No. 17

This photo, circa 1900, shows Main Street in Knowlesville looking north toward the canal. In the far distance we see the old high bridge which was removed in 1913 when the canal was widened. To the extreme right are several buildings which served as various business establishments all of which no longer exist.

During the 1930's the Orleans County Trust Company in Albion published a little periodical called the Albion Midlander. In the January 1934 issue an informative article appears on the history of Knowlesville. It is interesting to see how Knowlesville has changed during the past 52 years since this article was written. One would hardly call it a trading center today.

"Knowlesville, like many communities in Orleans County, owes its existence to the antecedents of the present Barge Canal, which placidly flows through the northern section of the village. Little did William Knowles imagine on that day in 1815 when he stopped his ox cart after the tedious journey from Monroe County and took possession of the 200 acres which he had purchased from the Holland Land Company that a thriving community bearing his name would be built on the site of his grant. Soon after Knowles settled, state surveyors plotting out the route of the canal, fixed their line through the center of his farm. Knowles built the first farm house in the settlement in 1825 south of the canal. In 1826 a post office was established and the village called Portville. It was later

changed to Knowlesville, however, as a lasting tribute to the man who by many philanthropic acts contributed greatly to the material upbuilding of the village and the intellectual enlightenment of its inhabitants.

"With the opening to traffic of the Erie Canal, Knowlesville assumed the aspect of a flourishing settlement. Besides the large freight boats three or four passenger boats run by various transportation companies maintained daily schedules through Knowlesville. These passenger carriers were small boats pulled by teams of horses or mules which were driven as fast as possible between two points where the boat companies maintained stables and supply houses. One of these so-called line barns was located at Knowlesville and passengers disembarked onto the shore to regale themselves at the Knowlesville taverns, while the animals were being exchanged.

"As the traffic on the canal grew so also did the business of the village increase. Frank Hibbard, Mr. and Mrs. Charles M. McAllister, Fred M. Hall, Frank Lansing and Scott Pringle recall what a lively village Knowlesville was in the days when they first remember it. The village contained numerous stores, blacksmith shops, a stave and heading factory, a cooperage, a steam saw and planing mill, two warehouses and two large grain elevators. Knowlesville was the shipping center for a large area and in the fall the main streets were full of teams from Oak Orchard on the north to Oakfield on the south bringing the produce of the surrounding countryside to the warehouses and grain elevators situated along the canal. Barrels of apples, 12 or 15 rows wide and three tiers high, stood along the bank for about a ¼ of a mile awaiting shipment.

"Many residents of Knowlesville recall the day in July 1896 when William Jennings Bryan held a large mass meeting on the Charles Axtell farm north of Knowlesville. It was the year that he was running for president on the platform of 16 to 1 silver. Over 10,000 people came by train, boat and carriage from all over the country to see and hear the silver-tongued orator. Another pleasant recollection is the celebration which took place in 1915 on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the village.

"At the present time Knowlesville is a trading center for a wide extent of surrounding countryside. The village numbers among its merchants J.F. Higgins, grocer; William F. Sutton, grocery and post office; Frank Hibbard, drug store; Russell L. Hill, meat market and greenhouse; Ross Archilles, hardware and farm machinery, and several others. The Knowlesville Hotel is managed by Leo Lynch. At the station is located the Knowlesville Storage Corporation and the evaporator of George W. Watts. On the Million Dollar Highway is situated Fairview Manor, operated by H.L. Hill, well known throughout this county for its delicious meals. The village contains many attractive homes, two fine churches, a school, and a Grange which is very active. Knowlesville lies midway between the two Marine Midland Banks of Orleans County — The Medina Trust Company and the Orleans County Trust Company."