

Remembering Old Parker Street

Fairport's Parker Street is a relatively quiet place, just a block east of Church and Main Streets. Only two tenths of a mile in length, with a 102 year old single lane canal bridge in the middle, barely a dozen properties are found there. But this sleepy avenue was once a busy, bustling business center, driven by its proximity to the Erie Canal.

Al Parker and his wife Abigale lived, naturally, on Parker Street, just across from where Pleasant Street intersects. An 1858 map shows the location, and also tells us that Al operated a warehouse at the edge of the canal. Before a proper bridge was built at the location, he recognized the need for a pedestrian crossing there, and operated a rickety span of his own across the canal. In 1934, at the age of 74, Herb Howard recalled the canal crossing of his youth: "The old swing bridge was a familiar sight for a number of years, and when young boys would cross it, and as the center approached, there would be a little extra carefulness, as there would be a little swing from east to west."

In the 1870s an iron bridge replaced Parker's more adventurous crossing. The small patch of land just north of the bridge on the street's east side was occupied by a blacksmith and a carriage shop. By 1881 these businesses gave way to a fruit and vegetable packing operation, run by Ananias Edgett, a Civil War veteran and brother of Ezra Edgett, a pioneer in early canning. The canning factory included a brick boiler house, which still stands today, and has served as a private residence for most of the last century.



View of the canning factory and workers on Parker Street

After the death of Ananias Edgett in 1885, the canning factory was run by the Burlingame family, and in the mid 1890s was purchased by Howard Thomas, of New Jersey. Each summer the Thomas family lived in the former home of Doctor Weare at 15 Pleasant Street, just around the corner from the factory. Thomas was a sharp businessman, and was quite successful. His products included labels such as Rochester Beauty, Pride of Rochester, and Fairport Brand, and were shipped via train and canal across the country and abroad.

In the late 1800s, preserving fruits and vegetables in cans was a hit-or-miss proposition. Fairport's Albert Hupp documented the process in an essay he wrote in 1944: "In the summer they canned and in the winter they made cans by hand. These were fashioned with tinsmith's tools by the muscle method. Energetic labor scissored out the cylindrical bodies with foot-actuated squaring shears and tops and bottoms with lever foot presses. A second and separate press cut a cap hole in the top, about an inch and a half in diameter. These pieces were more or less painfully soldered together. The fruit or vegetable was pushed through this hole, the cap soldered on and the filled cans immersed in boiling water, for as long as the processor thought necessary. If the cans did not swell up and burst they found their way to the public's table. If they burst, well, the canal was close by."

I think it's safe to say there was a lot of rotten canned fruit in the canal.

To Be Continued

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