

Cobb Preserving Company in Perinton

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

Perched on the south bank of the Erie Canal in Perinton just east of Turk Hill Road was once a thriving canning operation. There is ample evidence of its presence today, with a few of the early buildings still in existence, now home to a variety of businesses.



One of a few surviving late 19th century buildings from the Cobb Preserving Company.

Erza A. Edgett built the initial plant in 1872, and entrusted its operation to his brother, Ananias. Both had early experience in the art of canning, for in 1854 they planted the first acre of corn canned in New York State. In that adventure, they were joined by their cousin, 14-year-old Amos Hubbel Cobb. After Erza's brother failed to efficiently run the Fairport factory, he offered the operation to his cousin for a reasonable price. Cobb took charge in 1881, bringing his family to Fairport from New York City via the New York Central Railroad. The family's belongings arrived by packet boat, after a slight delay near Schenectady, where they accidentally fell in the drink.

In those days, the canning of fruits and vegetables was big business in the town of Perinton and village of Fairport, with several companies competing against each other. The canning process was primitive, as described long ago by Fairport's Albert Hupp (1875-1961):

"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 the 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 forced through this hole, the cap soldered on and the filled cans immersed in boiling water, as long as the processor felt necessary. If the cans did not swell up and burst, they found their way to the tables of the public. If they burst, well, the canal was handy."

After Amos Cobb died in 1891, his family continued to grow the business. Farmers from across the area brought their crops in horse drawn wagons, and more fruits and vegetables arrived by packet boat and train. During the canning season, the plant ran day and night, and many workers endured 18-hour shifts. An estimated two million cans of fruits and vegetables were packed in 1897. The factory also produced and delivered up to 80,000 cans per month for use at Fairport's Deland factory as well as the Monroe County Chemical Company. Most were filled with baking powder.



View looking south at the Cobb Preserving Company, approximately 1907. The company's housing barracks are in the center foreground, and a Rochester, Syracuse and Eastern trolley is visible at the far right. Many of the buildings are located on the bank of the canal, running horizontally across the photograph. Photo courtesy of the Perinton Historical Society

Large numbers of transient seasonal workers arrived each year in the summer months when the canning season ramped up. Many of these were Polish immigrants from the Buffalo area. Several long structures known as “the barracks” were built on a swampy patch of land bordered by Thomas Creek, the railroad tracks of the New York Central, and the trolley tracks of the Rochester, Syracuse and Eastern. It was a noisy and dangerous place for families with small children, who often lived in the cramped quarters for several months at a time.

With advances in can manufacturing technology driven by descendants of Amos Cobb, a former shoe factory on Fairport's Parce Avenue became the home of the Sanitary Can Company, and later, American Can Company. Eventually the old canning works on the bank of the Erie Canal became a memory.

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