

Searching For Clues in a Photograph

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Eight years into this most enjoyable of part-time occupations as Perinton Town Historian, I still find surprises around every corner. Take the corner of West Avenue and Main Street, for instance. Until Urban Renewal of the 1970s, Fairport's West Avenue terminated at a "T" intersection with South Main Street, at the very south end of the lift bridge. I came across a photo in the town archives that I had not noticed before, and it led to flurry of research.



A search for clues in this image of the business district of West Avenue helped to date the photo.

The photo is of the old commercial district of West Avenue, looking east toward the intersection with Main Street. An old handwritten note on the photo said it was taken in 1892. I quickly doubted the validity of the date for several reasons, and studied details in the image in an attempt to determine when it was actually taken.

First, a sign on the second building from the right advertises an early movie theater, the "Bijou Dream." The theater was located on the second floor of Shaw's Hall, prior to the addition of a brick facade. The Bijou Dream opened in May of 1907, which proves the photo was not taken before this date.

Second, in the upper left-hand corner of the image is a sign for “Dr. Welch, Dentist.” James Welch graduated from the Buffalo Dental University in 1913, and in August opened his office in the Schummer building, the one to which his sign is attached in this image. The opening of Dr. Welch’s office confirms that this photo was not taken prior to August of 1913.

Finally, it is what is not in the photo which provides a vital piece of information as to when the photographer snapped the image. What is clearly missing is the lift bridge. In the days when West Avenue extended to Main Street, the bridge, particularly the south end, loomed large at the intersection, but it is not visible in this photo. What is obvious is a large quantity of snow, which may in fact be what prompted the photographer to record this scene.



This photo from the 1940s is of approximately the same view as the earlier image. Note the presence of the lift bridge at the end of the street. The smokestack is part of the powerhouse, built in 1918, of the former Douglas Packing Company, now the home of BME Associates.

The assembly of the lift bridge was underway by the spring of 1914, and any photo taken then or later would have included the bridge. Since Dr. Welch’s sign on the Schummer building did not exist before August of 1913, this photo could only have been taken after that date, and before the spring of 1914. A check of Fairport’s weather that winter reveals the most significant snowstorm occurred on March 2nd, 1914. These clues lead to the conclusion that this great old view of Fairport was captured at that time, just five months before the opening of the iconic lift bridge.

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