

## SMITHVILLE'S NEW YORK STORE

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North of today's Smithville General Store in Smithville Flats, where Huttleston's garage stands, brothers Edward and Andrew N. Harrison opened a dry goods and grocery store in 1869. The brothers were part of Smithville's solid Scots-Irish population and had good reputations—"square dealers," the *Chenango American* newspaper called them.

Businessmen were optimistic in the years following the Civil War. The North's economy began to prosper, and in Smithville, people were convinced they could reap the benefits of that growth. A group of prominent men resolved to have a railroad. The Smithville railroad, named the Central Valley, filed its Articles of Incorporation in Albany in 1870.

Construction began in 1871. The new railroad, its route snaking over farmland along Genegantslet Road, met the D. L. & W. Railroad about five miles south of Greene. In May of 1872, the Central Valley began operating.

Talk of the railroad, followed by its construction, set off activity in Smithville. With a connection to new and larger markets, people expected tremendous growth for the community. Real estate speculators bought and sold land, and residents invested in new houses, stores, and commercial buildings. Charles D. Payne took down the old Post hotel and built a three-story Mansard-roofed structure in its place. C. W. Knickerbocker advertised his building-moving skills. The Sanford Manufacturing Company planned a factory to make hay forks and butcher knives. Two miles from the Flats, a stone quarry on James Harrison's property opened.

Edward and Andrew Harrison's new store wasn't the only dry goods and grocery store on Main Street, but it was the most imposing; the building stood three stories tall. Their enterprise was named the New York Store. Keeping with its name, Andrew Harrison bought much of the store's stock in New York City. The *Chenango American* reported on his buying trips. The excursions were as frequent as twice a month and sometimes only once a season.

The Harrisons wrapped several buildings into a complex they called the Harrison Block. This included not only the store, but attached workshops, a feed store, a billiard hall, and Edward Harrison's home. Even the harness shop next door that belonged to their brother, Arthur M. Harrison, was considered part of the block.

The Harrisons were heavy advertisers in the *Chenango American*. Their ad on page four every week stretched from the page's top to bottom. For a store in a small hamlet, the variety of merchandise was impressive. Along with ready-made clothing such as hats, gloves, and shawls, lengths of fabric were sold. There were bolts of the usual—wool, silk, and denim—and the unusual, doe skin and beaver. Among the ten exotic-sounding fabrics were alpaca, empress, and delaine.

For a customer's home interior, the Harrison brothers sold decorative items like lamps, mirrors, and clocks. The list of dry goods included napkins and tablecloths, curtains and bedspreads. Available for the kitchen and dining room were glassware, willow ware, cutlery, and crockery. And ponder, if you will: What were window hollands, and what were monocrat skirts? The store sold both.

The hardware department carried small tools and the supplies a farmer or homeowner might need, from axes to paint. A complete line of groceries was advertised. Tea, coffee, and molasses were

featured, along with the basic bins of flour, sugar, and salt. And fish—unbelievable fish! Mackerel, trout, cod, and pickled herring.

A year after opening, when the railroad seemed assured, the brothers enlarged their store. Smithville was proud of the New York Store, said to rival any other in this part of the state. The store's merchandise was displayed from its basement to its attic. In 1873, Edward Harrison purchased his brother's share of the business and became the store's sole owner.

The Central Valley Railroad, thought to be an economic savior, operated from 1872 until its demise two years later. When it defaulted on a payment, a mortgage holder foreclosed, seized the locomotive and railroad cars, and removed the rails. The railroad that was planned to bring prosperity never did. Instead of an asset, it became a liability. The Town of Smithville was held accountable for bonded indebtedness incurred for the railroad.

Despite the end of the railroad and the nation's financial depression from 1873-1879, the New York Store continued, possibly operating on a less-grand scale. Its 1880 winter ad announced that clothing was a specialty. "A good suit for \$5.00. The best English worsted suit for \$16.00. Overcoats from \$2.50 to \$12.00. Hats and caps at the lowest possible prices. Flour and salt, and meal and feed, as low as the lowest."

At 3:00 a.m. on the last day of March in 1881, people of Smithville Flats awoke to the shouts of "fire!" The Harrison Block was burning. With wooden buildings lining the streets, the fire threatened the whole business district. Firefighters arrived quickly, bringing the fire company's engine from the firehouse that stood directly behind Harrison's store. They struggled to prevent the fire's spread to nearby buildings. On that, they succeeded, but flames destroyed the Harrison Block. All that stood after the fire was one lone, charred wall, three stories tall.

The fire was thought to have started from a faulty stovepipe connection. When it was first discovered in one of the outer buildings, flames were creeping from where a stovepipe joined the chimney.

At first, much of the store's merchandise was saved from the fire and set outdoors. But as rescuers and firefighters rushed in and out of the building, almost everything was trampled. Fortunately, Mr. Harrison had significant insurance coverage. His entire loss was set at between ten and fifteen thousand dollars, with insurance policies covering between ten and twelve thousand.

After twelve years in business, Smithville's New York Store was gone. Its loss was a blow to the community and an inconvenience for the town's residents. Mr. Harrison, when asked about the store's future, said he didn't intend to rebuild "just at present."

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