

JAMES ANDERSON HARRISON, DRUGGIST

From Smithville Flats to Greene, New York

Christine E. Buck

James Anderson Harrison, son of James J. and Ann, left his home near Smithville Flats between 1870 and 1875 and moved to a larger community five miles away, the village of Greene. In 1875, Harrison, age 21, was a boarder with other young professionals at the Chenango House, a large brick hotel on the east side of Greene's business district that was the predecessor of the Sherwood Hotel. James' occupation that year was druggist clerk, a job that would lead to his lifetime career of druggist.

Only three years later, an advertisement headlined, "Drugs & Medicine!" appeared in the Greene *Chenango American* newspaper. James A. Harrison had purchased the "Drug Interest" of Dr. M. M. Wood. He would continue to keep and sell—for cash only and at greatly reduced prices—drugs, chemicals, dyes, and patent medicines. Also in the product line was the Jones-patented ventilated truss and supporter for hernia sufferers, along with a stock of hard rubber and steel trusses.

Not only did Harrison sell chemicals, medicines, and medical apparatus, but the advertisement listed the store's other products. This shop of 1878 appeared to be a combination drug, beauty, stationery, paint, tobacco, liquor, and grocery store, as well as a dispenser of flavored soda water.

A woman could buy perfume and essential oils, toilet articles, soap, sponges, chamois skins, combs, and brushes. Fine black writing ink was available for twenty cents a pint. For clothes-washing day, Victoria Cleaning Cream was guaranteed to remove dirt, grease, or tar from the most delicate fabrics without injuring them.

Harrison carried a large stock of paints, oils, varnishes, turpentine, and brushes for home improvement projects.

Sure to please the farmer, mowing machine oil was sold for sixty-five cents a gallon, while lard oil was ten cents more. The pesticide Paris Green could be had to eradicate potato bugs.

And then there were products to supply the community's vices: smoking and chewing tobacco and "the finest line of cigars in town." The advertisement's banner, "Pure Wines and Liquors" was followed in tiny print by, "for medicinal purposes."

A line of family groceries was stocked that was said to have been selected with great care.

A special feature of the drug store was its soda fountain, installed by Harrison's predecessor in 1864 and operated during warm weather: a celebrated Matthews King Soda Fountain. This was not a soda fountain like we might picture, a long counter where one could perch on a stool and order sundaes and milkshakes. The soda fountain of Harrison's day was a piece of equipment designed to manufacture and dispense carbonated water. Adding flavored syrup and ice resulted in a refreshing drink for the

temperance-minded public during warm summers—a sparkling cold soda. Flavors would include favorites such as orange, cherry, lemon, ginger, and root beer. A splash of cream might be added to the mixture.

Since a soda fountain was both ornamental and profitable, Jim Harrison upgraded the following year to a Tufts Soda Fountain which was, according to a *Chenango American* reporter, “the most elegant fountain we ever saw in the country.” It was most likely white marble with silver spigots.

In 1883, Harrison moved his drug store across Genesee Street from the south side to what we now know as the Butter Depot building. Perhaps this gave him more space to conduct his business.



Harrison's dispensing soda fountain in the Butter Depot building. Dr. George Williams, Elmer Johnson, Fred Cunningham.

Along with a series of tragic family deaths, Jim Harrison's health declined. In 1895, an employee began running the business and succeeded Harrison as druggist two years later. James Harrison had operated the drug store for nearly twenty years. He died in 1902 in his late forties and was buried at Sylvan Lawn Cemetery, Greene, New York.