

The Pettit Eye-Salve Business
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2012

James **Pettit** was born near Albany NY in April 1777. He became a physician specializing in optical surgery, according to **Dilley's** sketch of his grandson, William W. **Pettit** in his *Biographical and Portrait Cyclopaedia*. James **Pettit** settled in Fredonia in 1835. (He and his wife were received by letter into the Fredonia Baptist church on 5 September 1835.) He bought 25 acres in Cordova (a small settlement in northwest Fredonia, now part of the village) and his son Eber M. **Pettit** bought 15 acres there. [It was at this location that James **Pettit** served as a stationmaster for the Underground Railroad.]

Although there are no local advertisements for his medical practice, James **Pettit** did immediately begin advertising himself as the exclusive local agent for **Morison's** Pills. This was patent medicine created by an Englishman, James **Morison**, who sold his Vegetable Universal Medicines widely in the U.S. Its efficacy was attested to by the British College of Health, which **Morison** had also concocted.

It was not until 1843 that the first batch of **Pettit's** Eye Salve was made up, fifteen dozen tins. Eber **Pettit** acted as the firm's traveling salesman, putting them out on commission in Chautauqua and surrounding counties.

Darwin R. **Barker**, Leverett **Barker's** son and Hezekiah **Barker's** grandson, was born in Fredonia in 1820. He attended the Fredonia Academy from 1830 through 1839, as did Helen E. **Pettit** (1836-1844). When he left the Academy, he relocated to Versailles to run his father's tannery and leather store there. Eber **Pettit** and his family, (including Helen) had moved there in 1838. In 1846, Darwin **Barker** and Helen **Pettit** were married, and he began to work for the **Pettit** company. When James **Pettit** died in 1849, Eber **Pettit** took over the business, **Barker** became a full partner, and, in 1858, with business much increased, he handed over the traveling to Eber's son James and concentrated on the office work.

It was in Versailles that Eber **Pettit** served as a conductor and stationmaster for the Underground Railroad. The Versailles Botanic Mills, which began around 1859, prepared bark, roots and herbs to be used in patent medicines. They were sold to **Starr and Pettit** and later were owned by D. R. **Barker** under the management of James Pettit (grandson of the doctor).

In 1862 the **Barkers** bought a farm at 278 *Central Avenue* and moved back to Fredonia so their daughter Dora could attend the Fredonia Academy. The Eye Salve business relocated here as well, with Eber **Pettit** buying six acres adjoining the **Barkers** in 1868. The company continued to flourish, even during the depression of 1873. Finally, when Edward and Clarence **Howard** offered to buy them out in 1876, a deal was struck.

The **Howards** put up a new building in which to manufacture **Pettit's** Eye Salve. The lot was immediately behind the Baptist Church building on Temple Street, so that the manufactory was actually up against the rear wall of the church. It was an L-shaped structure. The short leg, 24 feet deep, ran 61 feet along Temple Street, in line with the church building. The long leg, also 24 feet wide, ran from Temple Street back 84 feet along the church's back wall. It had a basement and two stories above it. The construction was well under way by the beginning of December 1877.

The construction of the new facility must have taken most of 1878 since it was not until its 15 January 1879 issue that *The Fredonia Censor* announced that "the **Howard** Bros. Began making eye salve today," with Dr. E. M. **Pettit** in charge of the operation. In addition to the machinery for the **Howard's** watch production and for the medicine lines, Eye Salve, Cough

Cure and Blood Purifier, the **Howards** bought printing and binding equipment with which to make labels, fliers, pamphlets and other advertising material.

They succeeded so well that by March 1880 they had purchased a 2-acre lot (88-96 *East Main Street*) on which to build a new factory. The old building was moved, in parts, to the new site and was extensively added to. As part of the new arrangement, Darwin R. **Barker** bought out Eber M. **Pettit** on 19 June 1880, extinguishing the **Pettit & Barker** business name. New staff were hired and production increased in both lines, watches and medicines.

Howard Brothers continued to manufacture medicines on East Main Street and Railroad (Cleveland) Avenue until March 1888 when they moved it to Buffalo NY. Four years later they put up a new building to house the works on Washington Street near Mohawk.