

Wood Ashes and Whiskey
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2013

The first settlers here contracted with the Holland Land Co. for land that was relatively cheap but that could only be had at the price of a great amount of labor. For example, take Hezekiah **Barker**, who arrived on his 360-acre lot in the fall of 1806. He and his family moved into the small log house built on the flats off today's Water Street by the previous tenant, Thomas **McClintock**, who had built a log house in February 1804 and cleared a small amount of land by June, part of the requirements of contracting with the land company.

So what the **Barkers** had in 1806 was a 360-acre farm with at least 300 acres of it completely covered by a dense forest. The timber could have been valuable if there were any way to get it to market, but the roads were too primitive and lake shipping too lacking. The answer to this dilemma was compression. By burning the felled trees and turning the ashes into potash or pearl ash, a profit could be expected even when it was transported to a market as far off as Montreal.

The process was not one for the amateur, however. The ashes had to be processed at an ashery, of which there were, in time, several in the area. In an article in the *Fredonia Censor* of 28 January 1880 Levi **Risley** mentioned one which had been located at about 112 West Main Street. There was another one, run by James **Mark**, in whose honor the **Barker** Common fountains were donated. In operation by 1812-1813, it stood at the edge of Canadaway Creek on the north side of Main Street just west of the bridge.

The ashery process involved burning hardwood to make ashes. These were put into a wooden vat, water poured over them and the resulting "soup" taken off and put in a large, heavy iron kettle or pot and cooked over a steady open fire until it was entirely dry. This pot ash was called black salts, and they could be sold or put into a large oven or kiln, heated to a high temperature to further refine the black salts into pearl ash, a more valuable product.

This process of "compressing" acres of timber into a valuable, portable product was also true for another local commodity, grain or corn which could be harvested, fermented and distilled into whiskey. A large amount of grain resulted in a small but more valuable supply of alcohol. There was a correlation between the two efforts. As the original forest was cleared, more land lay open for planting and more grain was raised. **Risley** explained in an article in the *Fredonia Censor* of 9 April 1884, "It was impossible to transport it [grain] in wagons through the Cattaraugus swamp when it took three days of hard labor for a team to haul an empty wagon to Buffalo." In addition, "**Chadwick's** Bay (today's Dunkirk) had no landing place or wharf before 1816 or 1817, The Erie Canal was not finished until 1826 and no outlet was opened so that the surplus grain could be disposed of...."

The answer to this dilemma was the distillery. The first, according to **Risley**, in 1813 was on today's 112 West Main Street lot and another near today's Howard Street. All told, between 1813 and 1826 there were eight distilleries in Fredonia, plus one each in Laona, Milford (today's Lamberton) and Dunkirk.

The consequences **Risley** described were predictable. "Some persons took whisky in exchange (as no money could be had) and took it home to drink at their fireside. Others took it out in drinks at the distillery. Whisky was a panacea for every ill. It was used when they worked; it was used when they played. It was used to warm them in cold weather; it was used to cool them in hot weather. It was offered to a neighbor when he called. It was drunk as an appetizer

before breakfast. It was drunk to make a bed for their dinner. It was drunk at supper, and finally with all meals...It was drunk by most of the ministers of the gospel. It was drunk by the judges on the bench. . . .”

The inevitable outcome was a long series of temperance movements and groups such as the Pomfret Temperance Society (1829), the Chautauqua County Temperance Society (1831), the Fredonia Temperance Society (1833), the Friends of Temperance (1834), the Female Moral Reform Society (1838), the Fredonia Total Abstinence Society (1842), and the Good Templars (1868), all culminating in 1874 in the formation of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union.

It was the WCTU which opened a “public Parlor, Reading Room and Restaurant” as an alternative for young men to frequent instead of the hotel bars and taverns. And it was that effort which ultimately evolved into a public library, today’s Darwin R. **Barker** Library and Museum.

It is an interesting coincidence that attitudes about trees and about drinking began to alter at the same time. In 1808 Hezekiah **Barker** had the Common cleared of trees. All around, trees were taken down and burned to make room for homes, shops, and productive farm acreage. In 1818 the **Abells** paid to have the Common plowed and planted to wheat. However, by 1833 trees were being planted again on the Common, and by the 1840s residents were being encouraged to plant shade trees along their walkways. In April 1850 William **Risley** made a motion at the Village Board meeting that one day of each man’s required work on the roads be waived for each maple, elm, basswood and walnut tree set out on any street in the Village.

The end result of all these conflicting attitudes and movements is easy to see. There is our library and museum sitting companionably across the way from our beautiful, tree-shaded Common, the happy results of what had begun simply as wood ashes and whiskey.