

That Concrete Wall at 131 Water Street

Every day as I leave my apartment building at Birkett Landing, I look across Water St. and see an empty lot with a concrete wall about 9 feet tall, 8 inches thick and extending for over 150 feet across the back of the lot. When I told my second cousin once removed, Shirley Martha Windnagle Weinberg, that I was living in a building on Water Street that was once a warehouse for Birkett Mills, she responded that in the 1930s, she and her parents lived just across Water St. at 110 Wagener St. The house with that address is very close to the wall and between the wall and Wagener St. It was at this moment that I wanted to know more about that wall.



The wall at 131 Water Street in 2014

Shirley remembers the wall. *“So interesting about The Wall. I have distinct memory of it bordering our back yard where my mother valiantly hoped for grass to grow in the dark. There were a couple small trees there and an experimental grapevine of course, and our clothesline stretched the length of our property. I could see the wall continued off into the distance but I did not ever follow it because it was ‘other people’s property’. I can see it was a VERY large hitching barn, as was the Ford showroom and attached garage in its footprint. There were garages of some kind all up and down both Water and Wagener Streets. I was allowed to visit only the Ford showroom which was intimidating because it was very quiet, clean, and formal, and my father’s tiny filling station office which had a radio, of course, and lots of very greasy cans and tools and cloths and other messy stuff; also a gum ball machine.” “We probably moved to 110 Wagener Street in 1932 or 33. I remember going to kindergarten from there (age 5, born 1928).”*



The house at 110 Wagener St. from Water St. in 2014

The house at 110 Wagener St., where Shirley lived when she was less than ten years old, was built in 1844 or 1845 by John O’Brien. The house and property was then owned by Joel W. Crane a tanner and leather merchant. The house is labeled “E. Castner” (Ezekiel) on maps from 1857, 1865 and 1876. Dr. Byron B. Havens bought the house and property in 1897 for \$3000. After Dr. Havens acquired the property, he built a large hitching barn that faced Water St. To accommodate the large building he moved the house closer to the intersection of Wagener St. and Water St. He

also got permission from the village in 1899 to have a lunch wagon on his property. Dr. Havens had his medical practice in the home as well as residing there. He was at times Yates County coroner and medical director of the county poor house.

Dr. Havens continued to operate the hitching barn and, to meet changing transportation needs, in 1922 he built a gasoline station at the corner of Wagener and Water Streets. In 1924 he leased the

station to Guile & Windnagle. A year later, in February of 1925, Guile & Windnagle purchased the Havens' property for \$36,000 (\$500,000 in today's dollars); the gasoline station, hitching barn and dwelling were all included in the sale. Dr. Havens moved to a house next door that he had built 18 years earlier. Guile & Windnagle had the 110 Wagener St. house they purchased remodeled to allow two apartments downstairs and one upstairs.

Guile & Windnagle converted the hitch barn to an automobile storage and parking garage; an item in the August 25, 1927 issue of the Chronicle-Express reported that, *"Cars will be stored for 75 cents a week, and 25 cents for overnight. Parking in the barn or the yard will be but ten cents, excepting Saturday evenings when the price will be 20 cents."*

In July of 1928, Guile & Windnagle leased the hitch barn/parking garage to E. M. Scherer and Son, dealers in Ford cars. An item in the July 19, 1928 Chronicle-Express reports, *"The Guile & Windnagle hitch barn, for many years a land mark on Water street in Penn Yan, is to be completely remodeled this summer to provide a show room, stock room and repair shop for the E. C. Scherer and Son Garage, dealers in Ford cars of this village."* And then in the July 26, 1928 issue, *"Blue prints, which were completed and approved the first of this week, call for an entirely new building, **excepting one small section of the old wall which will be used.** ... Their six-year lease on this property of Guile & Windnagle includes the Triangle Gas Station which they will run, selling the Pendrake gas and oils."*



Gardner-Henderson Ford in the 1960s

In 1962 the Ford dealership in that building became Gardner-Henderson Ford; that firm continued in operation at that site until 1979 when Lake Country Ford-Mercury took over the business. How long Lake Country stayed there and the use of the building after them is unknown to me at this time.



The Hasson block on Water Street between the Chronicle building and Birkett Landina

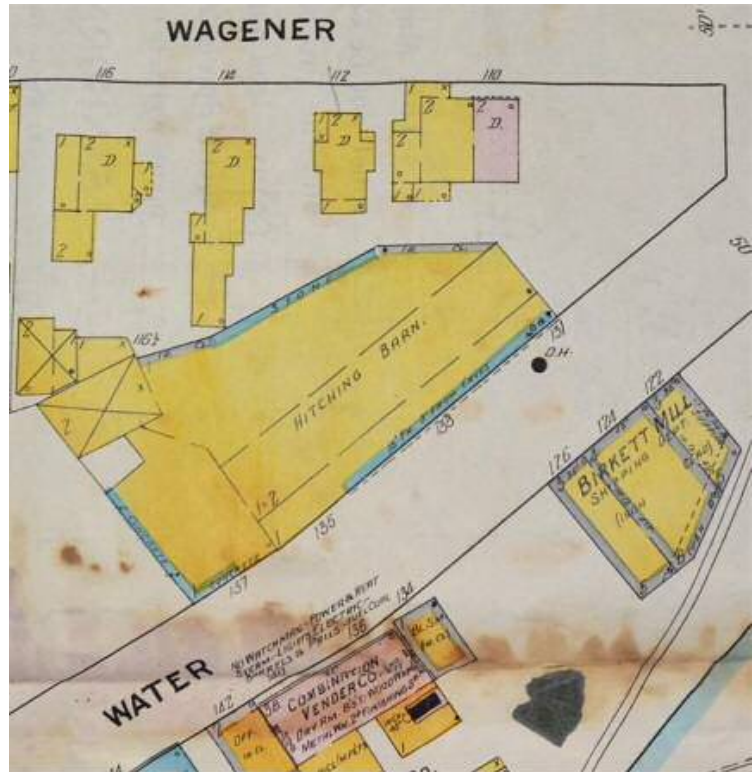
Shirley's father, D. Fenton Windnagle, was the son to T. Warner Windnagle co-owner of Guile & Windnagle. Fenton took over the management of the gasoline station in the early 1920s and in the operation of the parking garage in the mid-1920s. In the 1930s he concentrated on his interest and expertise in electronics and opened a radio repair shop. Shirley remembers that in the late 1930s his shop was on Water St. in the Hasson block, the building between the Chronicle building and the Birkett warehouse. Her mother, Alice Bailey Windnagle, worked in the Milla Beauty Shoppe in the same building; Fenton's radio business address was 108 Water St. and the beauty shop 110 Water St. Shirley

remembers the Hasson block. *"Milla's Beauty Parlor was the door to the right, my father's shop the door to the left, and the apartments above used the middle door. How convenient (and safe) for a kid coming home from elementary school. I remember Milla very well. She gave me my first paying job, washing combs and brushes after school, 25 cents a week, (probably to keep me from exploring around the RR tracks down behind your building!) There are about three layers of basement under those shops and I had very spooky Halloween parties down there!"*



Now back to that imposing 9 foot tall - 150 foot long wall. When the building was demolished in 2006 and 2008 the back wall was left standing. That wall is most certainly the back wall of the original hitch barn built in 1899 and the same wall that remained when Guile & Windnagle renovated the building in 1928 for use by Scherer and Son as a Ford dealership. To the left are two photos that were taken in September of 2006. One shows the west end of the building partially dismantled. Part of the wall can be clearly seen. The other photo, taken at the same time shows the east end of the building not yet touched by the dismantling process.

The images to the right compare the footprint of the hitch barn from a 1909 Sanborn Insurance map to a fairly recent Bing Maps bird's-eye-view of the area. Note that the curvature of the present wall matches the curvature of the back wall of the hitch barn on the old map.



One question remained: why was that old original wall built in 1899 saved from destruction in 2008? Mr. Paul Jayne, the present owner of the property, told me that he had the building torn down and the wall was spared to act as a buffer between his property on Water St. and the homes on Wagener St; the wall is on the property line. His response to code officials concerned about the old wall falling down was to tell them - go to the wall and just try pushing it over.



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