

The Original Wickham Avenue Middletown Station and the Construction of the New Depot

By Steven R Cohen

With the excitement over the Reconstruction work of the iconic Wickham Avenue O&W Station, I want honor its predecessor.

This article answers the question of “why is the O&W station setback so far from Wickham Avenue?”

The area that became a parking lot for automobiles was not designed for that use in 1893. So why the empty space? Read on to find the answer.

Also, there are varying accounts of what happened to the structure. This article provides the real story of what happened to the building and its surprising life serving the public.

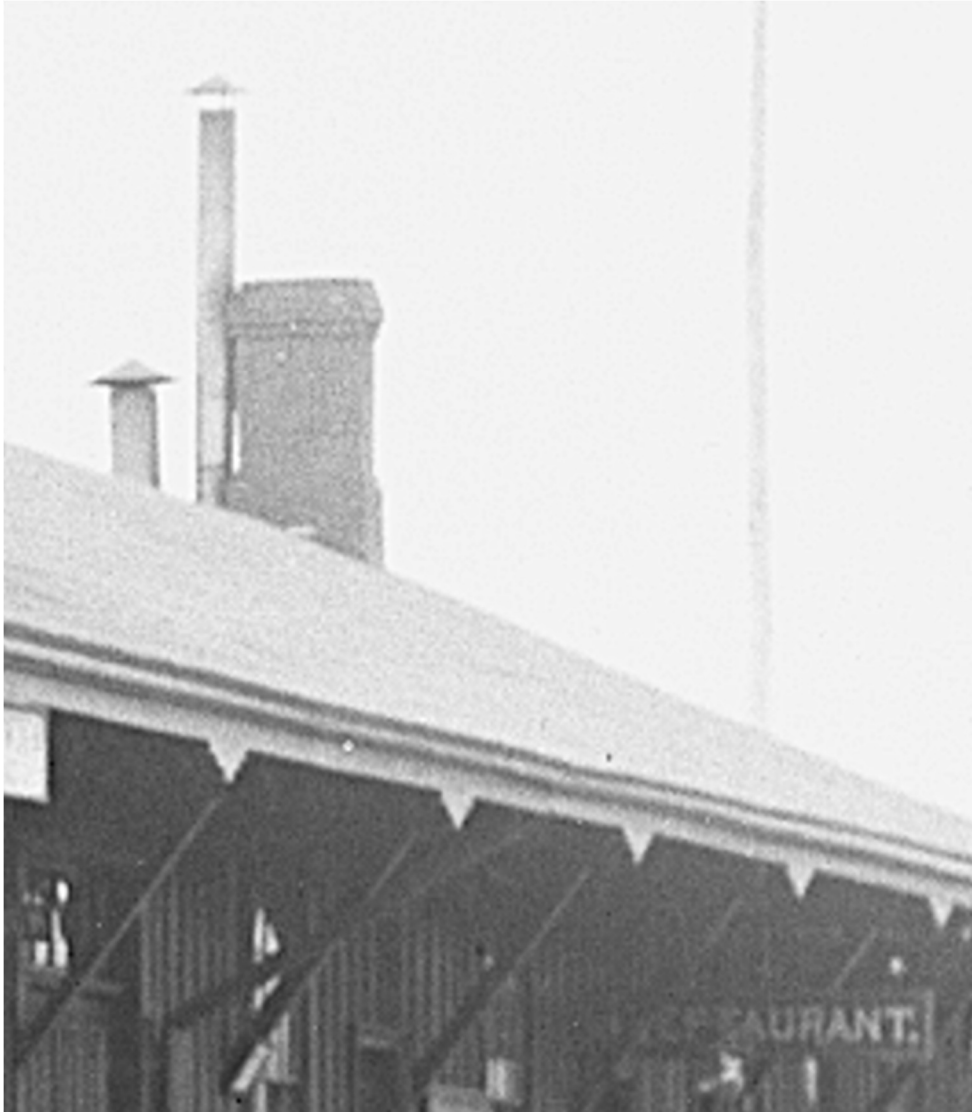
Here is the trackside view of the original Midland station. Note that Wickham Avenue is at the bottom of the photo showing how close it was to the street. The station was built in 1871 and the second floor added in 1880 for division offices. Note the wooden boards between the tracks on Wickham avenue and the line of men at the far end. This image is from a glass plate negative donated to the Historical Society of Middletown by D.D. “Pat” Diver, legendary engineer and photographer.



Since there were two Middletown stations on the Midland, “Wickham Avenue” was in large font

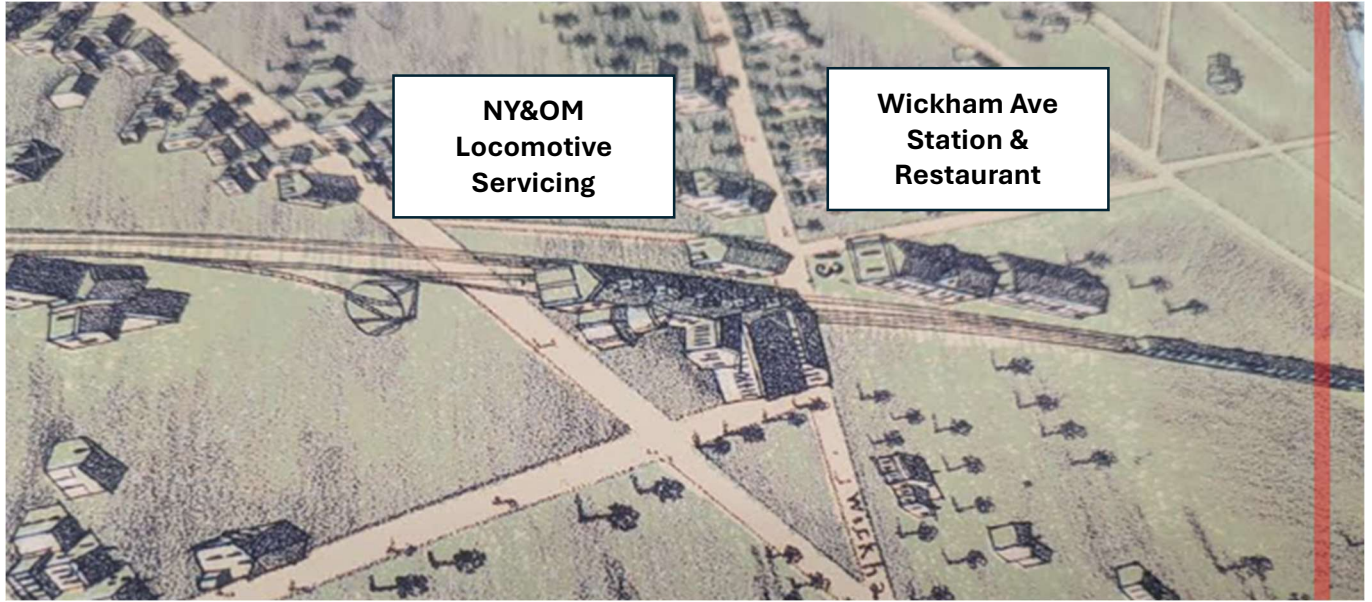


The one story building at the far end where the men are standing is the Station Restaurant which eventually was run by William Seeholzer. I assume that these stove pipes next to the brick chimney are for the kitchen stoves. The Restaurant sign was quite prominent.



Here is the 1874 Middletown map which shows the Midland Station and the Locomotive Service Facilities.

Wickham Avenue was at the very northern edge of Middletown in these early days. Note the small Gallows style turntable. The drawing looks like the O&W emblem years before the railroad existed!



A couple of years later, here is the map showing “RR Repair Shop” and “Wickham Ave Depot”. More buildings have now been built near the Depot. The area where the Freight House would be built has not yet been purchased. With no turntable present, the Wisner Avenue yard and roundhouse was likely being developed.



The rarely seen Low Avenue side of the Station. This great photo was donated to the Middletown Historical Society by O&W Society Hall of Famer, James Thorn. The two men in suits are likely surveying the site for the new Station. Love the detail of the baggage carts, wheelbarrow, barrel as well as the dirt and mud on Low Avenue



My favorite view with everyone posing for the photo. Almost everyone has a hat on because for hundreds of years, one never left their house without a hat on. This practice ended in the 1950s/60s. The Union Hat factory was at North and Low Avenue where Rowley Lumber had their showroom for many years. Note the people in the Division office windows as well as some of the Restaurant Staff on the platform. The horse-drawn taxi carriage would have been a regular sight at the Depot. I have read reports of taxi carriages racing wildly on Wickham Avenue and then making the hard turn into the Depot lot so that they would be first in line for their next fare. The horses had to go from full speed to a hard stop. Safety was pretty lax back then.



Here is a refresher on the original Wickham Avenue station along with corrected information on what happened to the structure. When the New York & Oswego Midland Railway was being constructed there were two factions advocating for the location of the Middletown station. The logical location in 1871 was East Main Street since that was adjacent to the Erie Railroad and was the end of the new broad-gauge Middletown, Unionville and Water Gap Railroad. The MU&WG would soon provide the connection to New York Harbor when the NY&OM paid for its conversion to standard gauge. The NY&OM paid for new trackage from the Main Street depot to Dolson Avenue to link up with the original MU&WG alignment. The bridge over the Erie was built at that time. It then was known as the New Jersey Midland. Henry Low,

attorney and one of the key founders of the Midland owned land at Wickham Avenue on what would soon be named Low Avenue. He wanted the station to be built there. The result was that both stations were built with trains stopping in Middletown twice, two minutes apart by train.

This same situation was true for the Erie with the station on Depot Street and eventually a covered platform station at East Main Street to provide interchange with the MU&WG & NY&OM railroads. As an aside, in 1843, the Erie had run out of funds after reaching Goshen from Piermont on the Hudson River. The civic leaders of the village of Middletown pooled funds and paid for the Erie to reach Middletown in May 1843. A key condition of this deal was that the Middletown leaders would choose the location of the depot. The Erie surveyors had wanted to build a direct route that turned west around the area where the M&NJ bridge over the Erie is now located. They would then build through the valley on what is now Fulton Street by the US Post Office. The line would go up the grade on what is now Monhagen Avenue and continue to Howells, Otisville and Port Jervis. The Main line would have passed in front of where the Middletown State Homeopathic Hospital would eventually be built. One of the business leaders owned land where the depot and Erie yard were located. The result was the long sweeping curves through Middletown that added mileage and numerous grade crossings.

In both cases, the greed of these individuals turned out to best for both railroads as well as propelling the fast growth of both downtown Middletown and the north end. The steep hills on both sides of Fulton Street would have limited the growth of a yard in Middletown. At the time, Monhagen Creek had not yet been covered and was used as the village's sewer which would have been adjacent to the Erie Station. The street was then named "Water Street" and renamed to Fulton Street after the steam was covered over. This area floods periodically even recently because this is a low point of the topography.

The sweeping curves allowed industry like Clemson's Hack Saws to grow alongside the Erie Mainline and to interchange freight with the Midland at East Main Street, Even when the Erie was broad gauge, there was an interchange platform to exchange freight between the railroads. After the O&W was born

out of the ashes of the New York & Oswego Midland, the Wickham Avenue site allowed room for expansion while East Main Street was limited in space.

For 22 years from 1871-1893, the first station served the public and watched the area around it grow and prosper. Reading the Middletown newspapers in 1892, the speculation was that the Erie would be replacing their original almost fifty year-old 1843 depot that was outmoded and unattractive. However, the O&W was first to act. On Sept 27, 1892, the NYO&W Board meeting in New York approved the construction of a new Wickham Avenue station with offices and the huge Seeholzer's restaurant. This included the current South tower as well as part of the horizontal section paralleling Low Avenue for the Restaurant. The architecture work by Gilbert must have been completed because the entire new structure opened for business on **July 31, 1893, just ten months after the Board approved the project.** Most of the structural and exterior work was done in Fall 1892 and the Winter months of 1893 which must have been difficult for the masons, roofers and carpenters. I salute their craftsmanship and work ethic. The building was not fully enclosed until Spring 1893. Seeholzer's restaurant opened on June 13th in time for the Summer vacation rush.

The answer to the question at the beginning of this article is: for a short period of time in Spring and early Summer 1893, the original Midland Station stood next to the new O&W Station under construction. In fact, on Monday July 31, 1893 passengers were confused when they were told that the original Station was closed and to walk a little further to the new Station that opened that very morning. The O&W Office Staff had moved into their new offices over the weekend. Likely due to the uncertainty on whether or not the new Station passenger facilities would be ready, they did what we now call a "soft opening" with no fanfare.

Here are the Middletown news articles about the project. Spelling and grammar were different 130 years ago as you will see in the numerous newspaper articles below.

**Sept 27, 1892: "A NEW O. AND W. DEPOT
The Matter of Erecting a New Depot and Office Building in this City is to be settled To-morrow**

For the past ten years, it has been rumored every year that the O. and W. Railroad Company was about to build a new depot and office building at Wickham avenue and

it is true that more than one set of plans have been drawn for such a building but the project has always fallen through for some reason or other.

The scheme has been revived again, and this time with a strong possibility that it will go through. Plans have been completed and will be submitted to the directors at the meeting of the company in New York to-morrow for a very fine building which will cost about \$40,000. Should the directors approve the plan of the officers to-morrow, a description of the proposed building will be published later.”

May 24, 1893: “THE O. AND W.’S NEW DEPOT

Work Going Forward Rapidly – The Restaurant Nearly Complete – It Will be a Handsome Structure

Work on the new O. and W. depot has progressed so far that an idea can now be had as to how the building will look when it is completed, the walls being up and the roof completed. A large force of carpenters is now at work putting up the counters and tables in the restaurant which, when finished will be one of the handsomest railroad restaurants in this part of the country. In addition to the large windows the room will be lighted by a skylight. It is celled throughout with Georgia Pine ceiling and the tops of the counters are of solid cherry wood. At the south end of the room is a fireplace with ornamental cherry mantel in which will be placed a large clock.

The arriving room and kitchen adjoining the restaurant are being fitted up with every modern improvement, and over the kitchen are four cozy sleeping rooms for the waiters.

Carpenters are also at work finishing the waiting room, the interior of which will be of solid oak. It is expected that the restaurant will be ready for occupancy in about two weeks, and the waiting room and offices will be finished in July. Then the old depot will be torn down and the arcade which is already erected on the north side of the Depot will be extended entirely around the building and about 50 feet to the east towards Wickham Avenue, and the composition sidewalk which is admired by everybody who has seen it, will be extended to the street. When the work is all done, which will be several months yet there will be few handsomer railroad depots than this one.”

June 13, 1893: “Wm Seeholzer, proprietor of the Wickham avenue restaurant, received a full set of solid silver ware for use in that place, this morning. Mr Seeholzer is also adding another large lunch counter which will be completed this week. The restaurant is undoubtedly the one of the finest in this part of the State.”

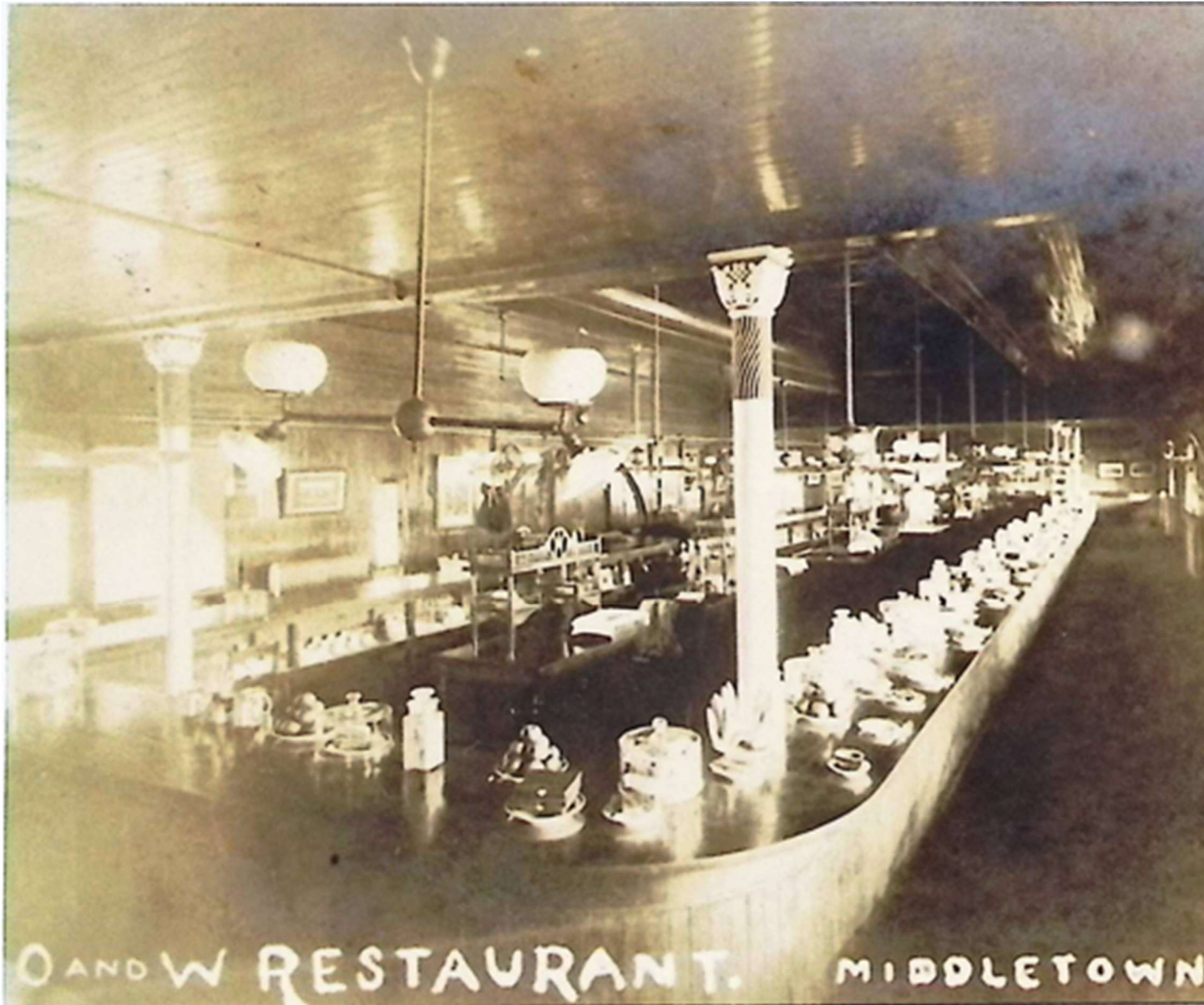
“Preparing to Receive Them

Will Seeholzer is decorating his restaurant with tropical plants and beautiful flowers for the excursion of the officials to-morrow. He will display an elegant line of new silver for the first. It was bought of B.F. Gordon, the jeweler.”

“President Thomas P. Fowler of the Ontario and Western, came to Middletown from Warwick Monday. He and his family occupied his private car attached to O. & W. No. 5 that night, enroute to the World’s Fair. The president inspected the new Seeholzer restaurant and complimented it highly.”

Note: he was on his way to Chicago to the Columbian Exposition celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ voyage albeit a year late. These were golden years for the O&W and Mr Fowler as must have been enjoying his position as President of a prosperous railroad.

An early photo of Seeholzer’s magnificent restaurant that served diners during the lunch stop on the way to or from the Mountains.



I love the curved lines near the top of the support column and the O&W emblem facing the diners.



William Seeholzer (upper left) at Mount Beacon Casino 1905 across the Hudson from Newburgh. He is with his friends taking a humorous souvenir photo. He was the only one who did not “ham it up”. At bottom right is J. Edwards, O&W car account clerk. Love the caption below the photo that reads: “A bunch of American Beauties” and the raised seal.



A bunch of
American Beauties
Mount Beacon
1905

- 1 Wm Beechler
2 - G. Taylor
Theodore Switzer (Walter
Hensert)
2
Melvin J. Edwards, OTC
dir. clerk
Caracc't

Celebrating the opening of the grand new Wickham Avenue Station



WICKHAM AVENUE STATION, NEW YORK, ONTARIO & WESTERN R. R.

The original building before the later additions. Photo above and 4th Ward Map below from
Jeff Otto's book: "Steel Rails and Brick Smokestacks"



So, what happened to the Midland Station that was located adjacent to Wickham Avenue? Some sources have it being torn down to provide land for the new South tower. I have also read of it being moved across the track to become a Freight house. One reporter seeing work being done on the building on August 2, 1893, just two days after the new Station opened wrote:

“Hurry Up, If You Want to See It

The chance for a last look at the old Wickham avenue depot is very slim. Workmen began to tear it down this morning and in a day or two not a vestige of it will remain.”

This station was built just 22 years earlier and already was considered “old” and useless. Chief Engineer Canfield did not think so.

The reporter should have read this article and advertisement:

“Will Sell the Old Depot

As will be seen by the advertisement elsewhere Chief Engineer E. Canfield of the O. and W., will receive proposals for the purchase of the old Wickham avenue depot, which is to be removed to make way for the handsome new structure just completed by the company.”

“FOR SALE – Proposals will be received until July 31st for the purchase of the old Wickham Avenue station. Possession of the building will be given to the successful bidder about July 31st, and the building must be removed within four days thereafter, and must not be moved across the railway company’s tracks.

Address proposals and for further information to EDWARD CANFIELD, Chief Engineer”

August 3, 1893

“A RAILROAD DEPOT ON ROLLERS

Moving the old Wickham Avenue Station Building to a New Site

John Watts, who purchased the old Wickham avenue depot building, gave John B. Dailey the contract to remove it to a vacant lot on the westerly side of Low avenue, nearly opposite the new station, and work has commenced, yesterday, in jacking up the building, preparatory to placing it upon the rollers and so transporting it to the new site, where it will be converted into dwellings. A force of 25 to 30 men is engaged in the work, and the new owner is allowed five days to get the building out of the O. and W.’s way. It is said that Mr. Dailey is to receive \$200 for the job.”

Here is a drawing of moving a Church using log rollers, block and tackle pulleys and a temporary post in the ground for leverage pulled by just one horse. A mechanical advantage system developed thousands of years ago. This is what Low Avenue behind the new Station would have looked one day in early August 1893. The unique sight must have attracted quite a crowd of onlookers as in this scene. I love the great detail by the artist including the dog joining the human onlookers.

Anyone know what the device with the small smokestack and possible radiator was at the bottom of the drawing?

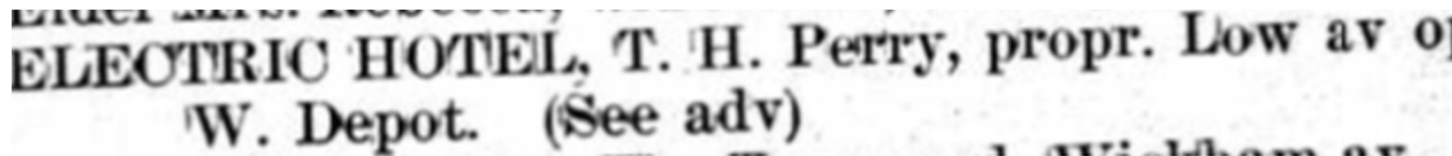


I saw in a brief article that the area that eventually became the New Station parking lot became a decorative garden gateway from Wickham Avenue along a new sidewalk from Wickham avenue to the Station entrance

A short while after the building was moved, Thomas Perry bought the Building. The previous owner likely had remodeled the second floor into separate bedroom with a shared bath at one end of the hallway. Interesting, that today, offices are being converted to living quarters. Thomas Perry named his new

hotel: THE ELECTRIC HOTEL. The name had nothing to do with electric power in the hotel but instead called attention to the fact that it was on the new Electric Trolley line that ran on Low Avenue.

The Power House which generated Electricity to run the cars and the car barns were right across the street. Trolleys were revolutionary new technology at the time.

A scan of a newspaper advertisement for the Electric Hotel. The text is in a bold, serif font and reads: "ELECTRIC HOTEL, T. H. Perry, propr. Low av o" on the first line, and "W. Depot. (See adv)" on the second line. The text is partially cut off on the right side.

ELECTRIC HOTEL, T. H. Perry, propr. Low av o
W. Depot. (See adv)

The former station restaurant was now named “THE ELECTRIC CAFÉ” and must have been a popular lunch place for the Trolley line employees across the street as well as O&W Trainmen. Note the two car barns and power house for the Trolley system. The O&W sold the land to the Middletown-Goshen Traction company and supplied coal for its first power house.



Sadly, Thomas Perry, Senior passed away at age 55 in March 1910 and his son also named Thomas inherited the business. He was born in Vernon, NJ. Here is an excerpt from his obituary: “After his school days were completed he entered the employ of the **Erie** for a time and as trainman worked between New York and Port Jervis. Then he went to Pennsylvania and became interested in the oil field development in McKean and Bradford counties. Before this, he had spent time in Middletown in the livery stables of John Brink, where the Tyndall livery stables are now located.

After his experiences in the oil field he remembered Middletown as a likely place to locate and came back here in 1882 (his son had just been born). At first, he conducted the café on Fulton Street now run by Louis Waizenegger.

going thence to the place on Roberts Street now conducted by Fred Vette. Then he went to the place on Wickham avenue under the Koch managership. In 1887-1888, he was at Stony Ford but returned to this city to a café on Union Street (near the Erie Station) which he conducted until seventeen years ago when he took control of the old O. and W. Railroad station which had been moved across the track to its present location and transformed into a hotel. There he remained until his death, known to almost all Middletown people as well as much of the traveling public. His place, the Electric Café was orderly and law abiding and he ever lived up to the law and was respected by it. He tried to run an orderly liquor business and few were the complaints against it." He was the "oldest liquor dealer in Middletown" and died after a long illness of cirrhosis of the liver. He seems to me that he was a restless guy who did not really settle down until buying the Electric Café. Had he lived another decade, he would be quite despondent over the start of Prohibition.

Opposite O. & W. Depot.

Trolley Passes Door.

Trains Stop from 10 to 15 Minutes.

Telephone Call No. 219.

The Electric,

THOS. PERRY, Proprietor.

THOS. PERRY, Manager.

Choice Wines, Liquors, Cigars, etc.

LOW AVENUE,

MIDDLETOWN, N. Y.

The 1906, 1907 and 1908 Middletown City Directories shows that Thomas Perry owned the hotel and his young adult son, Thomas Perry, Junior managed the business.

In 1908, the hotel closed and served as a boarding house and living quarters for the Perry family. The business was then named THE ELECTRIC CAFÉ. Note that the "Trolley Passes Door" and that they had Telephone No 219

Opposite O. & W. Depot.

Trolley Passes Door.

Trains Stop from 10 to 15 Minutes.

Telephone Call, No. 219.

The Electric Cafe

THOS. PERRY, Jr., Proprietor.

Choice Wines, Liquors, Cigars, Etc.

LOW AVENUE,

MIDDLETOWN, N. Y.

In 1910, his son inherited the business. Young Thomas had a major accident in 1907 at age 25 when he fell off a trolley car in New York City and was at Bellevue Hospital unconscious for days and was suspected of having blood clots. The family was despairing because no word was received from him. They were later upset with Bellevue hospital because his membership card of the Middletown chapter of the Fraternal Order of Eagles was in his pocket. He was a leader of the Eagles organization for several years.

April 29, 1912: "Thomas H. Perry, proprietor of the Electric Hotel at 27 Low avenue died at his home at 2:45, Sunday afternoon after a short and severe illness of acute indigestion, and which he was stricken at 8pm Saturday

evening. Mr Perry was stricken with an attack of the same illness about one year ago, of which time his life was despaired of, but with the aid of a strong constitution unable to withstand the strain. He was a wholesome, wholesouled young man with a faculty of making and retaining friends and will be sincerely missed by a large circle of acquaintances.” He passed away two weeks after the Titanic sank.



The Late Thomas H. Perry.

Life for Mabel got worse in October, 1912 when her mother-in-law, Frances Perry was walking up the stairs to bed and suddenly remembered that she had forgotten something downstairs. When she turned around on the top stair, her foot caught in the spindles, she lost her balance, fell and broke her neck which was witnessed by one of the boarders.

Mabel had a lot of fortitude and persevered even when faced with adversity after adversity. She came from a railroad family. She was raised in Port Jervis where her father was Erie Engineer Jacob Drake. Mabel now hired one of her boarders, James McManus, an O&W Machinist as the Café Manager. I am guessing that she was the chef.

The business survived until 1918 when the Café closed. Mabel and James McManus were married in 1919 and moved into an apartment building on Wickham avenue. In 1921, Mabel sold the building to John Griffin who opened a Confectionary. For the next few years, the building had multiple owners and served as a boarding house upstairs, confectionary downstairs and even as a warehouse for a stucco contractor. From 1926 thru 1928 the building was listed as a vacant store and was torn down in 1929.

Here is the City Directory ad followed by 1919 City Directory listing showing Mabel and James living upstairs (27 Low Avenue) before they got married.

Opposite O. & W. Depot. Trolley Passes Door
Trains Stop from 10 to 15 Minutes.
Telephone 819-J

The Electric Cafe

M. L. PERRY, Propr. J. P. McMANUS, Mgr.
Choice Wines, Liquors, Cigars, Etc.
27 LOW AVENUE, MIDDLETOWN, N. Y.

Perry Mrs. Georgiana, wid ...
Perry Mrs. Mabel L., wid Thomas H., Jr., h 27 Low av
McLane Miss Eliza, h 69 Montgomery
McManus James P., h 27 Low av
McManus Miss Mary, teacher h 21 ...

A year after Mabel married James McManus, he passed away. Now a widow yet again, she supported herself as a dressmaker and fitter at Demerest Dry Goods. In 1935, she married William Pohlmann, an O&W trainman. Mabel, raised in a railroad family no doubt had an affinity for railroaders. I would like to believe that she loved the O&W and Erie. She and William continued living in Middletown until she passed away on Sept 21, 1962. The two of them had witnessed the heyday of railroads, the demise of steam engines, dieselization and the sad end of the O&W in 1957. Perhaps she witnessed the rebirth of steam near her home on Montgomery street with the 103. I imagine she was pleased. William passed away in 1967. Hopefully, he rode behind the 103.

CONCLUSION

So, the first depot had a long productive life. Built in 1871 and demolished 58 years later having served the public as a railroad depot, railroad hotel and restaurant as well as Division offices, a boarding house, family home and finally a confectionary. During this time, the old Depot watched its younger sibling grow and grow. The North Tower and connecting first floor was built and then the upper office floors were constructed with their decorative awnings. Early on, the old Depot watched the completion of the NY & Oswego Midland to Middletown and the connection with the New Jersey Midland. It saw the birth of the New York Ontario & Western and its glory days of steam engines, many passenger trains to the Mountains and coal trains coming from the new Scranton Division. It watched the excitement of the birth of Trolley service in Middletown and its eventual demise.

My article series is called “**HONORING THE PAST.**” My articles will include stories celebrating and honoring some of the people who helped make the story happen. Most of them were ordinary people who would be shocked that you are reading about their lives a century after they were born.

On a personal note, I spent much of my youth helping and working at our family business (Barney’s Super Oil Service, later, Barney’s Blue Flame) located at North street and Low avenue. The rear of the property was on Smith street and Low avenue across the street from where the Electric Café had been located and the North Tower of the O&W Station. I have fond memories of walking on the station platform and helping my Dad save the O&W papers and maps from the fireproof safe on the third floor of the South Tower in 1972.

I look forward to visiting the restored building. I also spent many days with the 103 steam train since Dad (Marv Cohen) was Conductor wearing an original O&W uniform.

Most of the content for this article comes from the Archives of the Middletown & Wallkill Precinct Historical Society, 25 East Avenue, Middletown, NY.

I am a member of the organization and encourage you to join. The last two issues of their newsletter were dedicated to railroad station in Middletown.

They are open every Wednesday from 1pm to 4pm

Additional content came from [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) and [Newspaperarchive.com](https://www.newspaperarchive.com)