

If ever a city-enforced restriction on the alteration of the exterior of historic buildings was needed, it was back in 1907 when this structure at 140 West Front Street lost all resemblance to the original.

Up until then it was still recognizable as the famous old Exchange Hotel, dominated by a large, two-level porch in front of which travelers once hitched their carriages, and on which they once sat enjoying a view of the river. Today, newcomers, or those just not sensitive to Perrysburg's history, pass by without an inkling that this was once called "the best and most elegant place of public entertainment between Buffalo and Chicago."



Guests at the Hotel ca. 1880

Hyperbole it might have been, but then maybe not. There weren't a great many creature comforts in that spread of geography back when Perrysburg was surrounded on three sides by a swamp that sorely challenged travelers. And bear in mind that between 1832, when the hotel was built, and the mid-1800s, this town was a major

Great Lakes shipbuilding center and one of the most important commercial ports on the lakes. In any case, this stop-over house was a welcome haven for out-of-towners here to arrange shipment of goods by water, to transact business at the county court house, or to take part in political gatherings or such things as reunions of veterans of the War of 1812 and later the Civil War.

In 1832, just 16 years after Perrysburg had been laid out and named by Amos Spafford, his grandfather, Jarvis Spafford built the structure, calling it the Exchange Hotel. It was located next to the first Wood County court house, a two-story log structure near the northwest corner of Louisiana Avenue and Front Street.

The original version of the building was of Greek Revival style, built of walnut logs felled in nearby forests and later covered with clapboard and painted white. The structure had a fieldstone foundation without a basement, with matching chimneys on the east and west ends. It was dominated by a two-story front porch running the length of the building and supported by four Tuscan columns and pilasters reflecting the cover columns. A turned balustrade ran around the full second story porch, with partial ones at ground level at the two ends. Windows were double-hung 6/6, with the front door having sidelights and a transom. The interior featured a bar, a dining room, a reception room, and initially at least, eight bedrooms (although an 1876 ref-

erence is made to 25 rooms). Buildings toward the rear housed stables and other necessary utilities.

In 1834, Jarvis Spafford had a bell cast and hung in a tree in front of the establishment to summon his guests to their meals. The bell was cast in Michigan with Spafford rumored to have thrown 36 Spanish dollars into the molten metal to make the required casting quantity. The bell was considered a great novelty for this part of the wilderness, Indians and wild animals being still very much in existence.



The Exchange Hotel Bell now resides in a Way Library display case

Being hung in a tree in front of the establishment was not only a summons to the guests at mealtime, but a curiosity to the Indians. They intermingled around the strange contraption and were so fascinated by it that they even climbed the tree to ring it for themselves. Day and night the bell was rung to the annoyance of Mr. Spafford and

his guests. Eventually, force was used to drive them away.

One night the Indians sneaked in and carried the bell away to their headquarters in Upper Sandusky. It took some time and effort, but eventually the bell was returned to its rightful owner, Jarvis. To secure the bell to the premises, he had a blacksmith make a heavy inch-square framework to which the bell was mounted and hung in the belfry of the hotel. It remained in this location for many years, even after Mr. Spafford's death in the Great Cholera Epidemic of 1854.

For years the Exchange Hotel was the social center of the community, the scene of festivals, balls, concerts, even weddings, and for a time, lively lawn croquet games.

Attesting to Perrysburg's and the hotel's importance at the time is the fact that prominent people like Presidents William H. Harrison and James K. Polk, General Winfield Scott, Daniel Webster and assorted national and state congressmen, governors and judges signed the guest book.

The Exchange Hotel outlasted all of its later contemporaries (there were four other hotels in Perrysburg in 1839), remaining in the Spafford family through the terrible cholera epidemic in the 1850s. Shortly thereafter, the C. W. Norton family acquired and ran the place and it was known as the Norton Exchange during the latter part of the 19th century.

In 1907 the hotel, then owned by Frederick Hillabrand, suffered the worst

of several fires and the old establishment was converted into a two-family dwelling, the rear section and porch being torn down and new porches erected on the east and west sides. Subsequent alterations have removed all vestiges of this former hostelry whose skeleton was nailed together less than 50 years after the U. S. became a nation.

Way Library's Local History Room is now the repository of the Exchange Hotel's Guest Register beginning with the year 1865.



The Exchange Hotel ca. 2008

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