

Citizens – Capt. David Jones Foster

By Barbara Bedau Brow  
White Lake Area Historical Society



*C1876-1881 The Foster Block*



David Jones Foster was born in Dudley, Massachusetts on 14 March 1806 to Silas and Lucina Pickering Foster. He left home when he was young and established a button factory, store and hotel in Petersham, Massachusetts, besides running the largest freight and stage business from Worcester to Brattleboro.

Foster was active in keeping up and encouraging the three local militia companies, and introduced new and attractive uniforms for two of them, of which one of them chose him as Captain.

In 1842 all of his property was burned, as well as the business section of town. He was left with only \$25,000 with which to re-establish the manufacturing of buttons and importing tailors' trimmings. Along with his clerk Mr. Lyman Sibley, they established a new business in Boston. Sibley became a partner and they formed the D. J. Foster & Company.

In 1861 he came to White Lake and purchased 4000 acres of timberland on the White River from the Rogers' estate. In 1864 his youngest son Albert came to Whitehall and joined his father in establishing a large mercantile business, with branch stores in Hesperia and up the river in Denver Township in Newaygo County. Together they formed D. J. Foster & Son which also included lumbering and real estate transactions.

In 1866 he erected a building located in the block where the Opera House building was later built. On January 9, 1875, about 8:00 AM, when the thermometer indicated 12 degrees below zero, a fire consumed the two-story building on Colby Street occupied by Dr. J. A. Wheeler's drug store, the U.S. Post Office and Postmaster Hedges' family burned. The rear portion of the building was saved, and the fire was prevented from spreading to the adjoining wooden structures.

The building loss was about \$3,000, on which there was no insurance. Dr. Wheeler's loss of drug stock amounted to about \$4,500 and was covered. Postmaster Hedges sustained a loss of about \$300 in household goods, besides Mrs. Hedges' wardrobe.

By September 1875, the foundation was being laid for a new large three-story wooden block with a basement. Known as the Foster block was built at a cost of \$8,000. This block was located on Colby Street just East of the RR tracks. Unfortunately, the building was just one of several that would be destroyed in the Fire of 1881 (July 30). One of the largest and busiest areas of town, it contained many businesses such as K. F. Morse hardware, C. C. Thompson's real estate office, Riley's barbershop, Ruggles drug store, Phelan's clothing store, and a restaurant. On the second floor were Elworth's law offices, Cunningham's dental office, Dr. Adam's office and the apartment of the Foster family. On the third floor was the Opera Hall.

In late April 1879 the Foster's Boarding House caught fire and burned. This building was located in the vicinity of the jail on Mears near the fire station. The fire was determined to be the result of burning sawdust.

Foster spent portions of his time in the East as his family and half of his estates were there. D.J. Foster had married Charlotte Fowle in January 1835 in Petersham, MA. During their marriage they had six children: William (1836-37); Charlotte F. (1838-1884); George E. (1840-1881); Lucinia (1841-1910); Albert J. (1845-1933); and Julia A. (1847-1928). Capt. Foster died in Roxbury, Massachusetts 13 July 1881, at the age of 75 years. Mrs. Foster died in 1895. They are buried in Forest Hills Cemetery in Suffolk County, Massachusetts.

Foster was an enterprising man ready to do anything for the good of Whitehall. He built thirteen dwellings and improved numerous lots. He was also the Vice President and Director of the First National Bank. To be crushed or discouraged by ill luck was not part of his character and it only brought out his strength and perseverance.