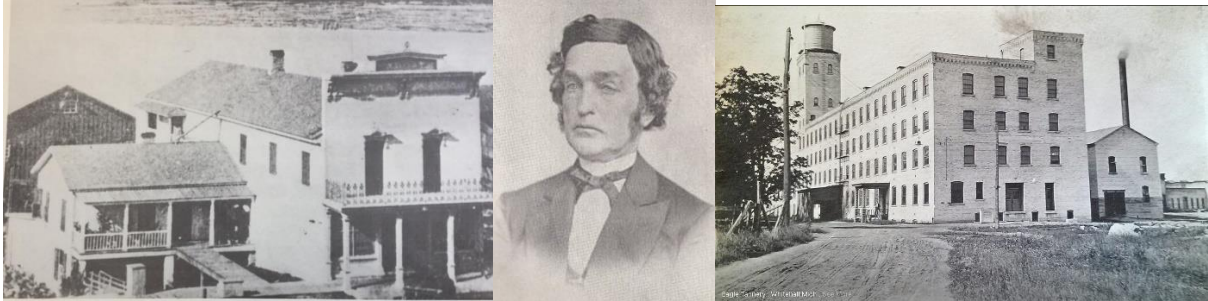


## The Early History of Whitehall

Submitted by Barbara Bedau Brow  
White Lake Area Historical Society



Union Hotel - Charles Mears – The Tannery

A suggestion by Ed. J. Smith, Editor and Publisher of The Whitehall Forum appeared in the newspaper on November 7, 1895, for the school teachers to act upon: It is the writing up by the pupils of the several district schools a history of each district, going back as far as it is possible to get data. The scholars in the several districts in one county of this state are taking hold of the matter earnestly, and all old settlers are being interviewed. The result could be a series of very interesting articles. This movement is the first of its kind ever attempted in Michigan. The Forum will gladly publish these articles if this suggestion is acted upon.

The following is the first of a series of essays written by the pupils of the seventh grade of the Whitehall School, on the subject of the early history of Whitehall. As the Forum had suggested the idea, they were not only glad to see that it had been adopted but was pleased to publish the efforts of the young historians. The article appeared in the Forum on January 9, 1896,

The village of Whitehall is very beautifully situated at the head of White Lake and is separated from Montague by White River. The village was incorporated in 1867 and I. E. Carleton was elected first president.

The first saw-mill was owned by Charles Mears and the first steam-mill was built by Capt. Dalton in 1867. The first store was owned by Charles Mears and was sold to Albert Mears in 1861 who is running it still. The first printing office was started by Benjamin Frank in 1869. The first doctor was J. A. Wheeler and then Dr. Mizner, Dr. Squires and Drs. Marvin, Gaylord, Johnson, Carr, etc.

The fire department was organized in 1864, of which H. E. Staples was chief. The first bridge across to Montague was built by W. H. Parks in 1864. The tannery was built in 1866. The first telegraph office and depot was opened in 1867; P. I. Hedges being manager. The post office was opened in 1862 and Albert Mears was the postmaster. At this time Whitehall had 1,000 inhabitants, ten saw-mills, six stores, three hotels and one tannery.

In 1881 there was a fire which burned most of the town. At two o'clock Saturday, July 30, the night watchman of Linderman's mill saw the flames and gave the alarm. In a little while the fire engines of Whitehall and Montague were at work. The fire burned away all the wooden buildings on both sides of Colby street, a space of about five acres in the central part of the town being entirely destroyed.

The loss was about \$150,000 and the insurance was about \$54,000. The next night the depot burned, which was not a very great loss as it was the worst looking depot in the world. The town was now rebuilt, however, with brick instead of wood.

The first schoolhouse was a log building also used for a church. In 1867 the second school house was built, called the "Brown School" and had room for 50 pupils. It has now been changed to Skeels' bakery. In 1870 the school was graded into Primary, Grammar and High School. In 1876 Prof. Slayton began to be Superintendent and through his hard labor came much of the success of our school.

Written by Irving Nelson, Age 11 years.

The following, which appeared on January 16, 1896, is the second of the series of essays by the pupils of the seventh grade of the Whitehall School.

In April 1837, Messrs. Charles and Albert Mears with two men, True and Herrick, made their memorable journey from Paw Paw to White Lake. Charles Mears in 1837 build the old water-mill, now removed, on White Lake near where the Wilcox company's mill stood. About 1859 Charles Mears built a store and the same year Whitehall was platted and all West of the railway was John Hanson's wheat field.

S. C. Hall, who was a wealthy lumberman of Muskegon, carried the first mail a-foot. On the following 4<sup>th</sup> of July there was a great celebration at the "Mouth". Mr. Hulbert, the hotel keeper, furnished a salt pork dinner, after which there was a swimming match. In 1853 White River Township was organized. The first schooner that entered the Piers at the Mouth was the "Telegraph." Miss Hazelton started the first (private) school in all White River, and about 1855 Whitehall had become a lively town. In 1881 the first great fire occurred in Whitehall on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July. The loss was about \$150,000.

The churches are chiefly on one street and are built of wood. They are the Congregational, Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal, Wesleyan, Baptist (without a pastor), Swedish Lutheran, Norwegian and Swedish Mission. The old Mears' House was built by John Gustavus.

The Eagle Tannery which is a large and prosperous institution, lies between Covell's and Alley & Co's. saw-mills. It has a capital of \$175,000. It makes a specialty of preparing leather for book-binding and pocket books., and it is the only works in the state that engages in such work. It was built in 1866, sold to Austin & Freeman in 1868; to Michigan Leather Co. in 1870, and to Eagle Tanning Works in 1871. Among those who have worked there for about 20 years or more are: H. Zellars, J. Samuelson, A. Shelander and Aug. Edlund.

The fire department was established in 1873. The fire engine which was bought in 1874 cost \$7,500. Hon. H. E. Staples was elected president and Fred Hinman, engineer. The engine is of great advantage and in 1881 it saved the whole east end of the town. Whitehall has now a splendid system of water works.

Whitehall has a very good school. The school house is situated in the central part of the town, and it contains twelve grades.

Some of the pioneers are: Charles Mears, born at Billerica, Mass. 1814; Albert Mears who came here in 1837. He was the first post-master, and afterwards a merchant. Mr. G. C. Slocum was born at Saratoga in 1808. He came here in 1859. His great grandfather Jonathan Slocum, who was a Quaker, was among the sufferers by the Wyoming Massacre, and was killed by Indians in 1778. Hon. E. T. Slocum was born in Trenton in 1839. Charles Johnson, who is a shingle mill owner, was born in Sweden in 1826 and came here in 1854. Col. W. Weston was born at Madison, Wis. in 1810, and came here in 1857. Hon. C. C. Thompson was born at Beckmantown, N.Y. He settled at Whitehall in 1857. There are a great many more who came a little later.

Written by Bessie Edlund, Age 12

The following is the third of a series of essays by the pupils of the seventh grade of the Whitehall School and appeared in The Whitehall Forum on June 23, 1896.

I will endeavor to tell some facts of the early history not mentioned by any of the pupils of my class. I will begin with the third store which was owned by Sturtevant and Sprigg occupying the old Union hotel barn in 1865 or 6.

D. J. Foster & Son opened a store in 1866 and closed it in 1869, when K. F. Morse & Co. took it for a hardware store. Thompson & Pemberton opened the first hardware store in '67 which they sold to P. Morse & Son. J. Mizner opened the first drug store in a barn owned by Wm. Weston.

In '62 the Union Hotel was built and burned Jan. 1, '70; in '66 the first lodge of Good Templars was organized; in '57 Whitehall had 1,000 inhabitants, ten saw-mills, six stores, three hotels and one tannery. Dicey & Girth owned an iron foundry. Gee, Sanders & Scully had a stage line. Although a town of 1,000 inhabitants there were but twenty votes cast at the first election held May 6, '67. The jail was built in 1868, and cost \$800.

Mr. Frank Blackmar established the Whitehall National bank in 1869. Sept, 5, '70 the Booming Company was organized. The first train steamed up to the depot Oct. 29, 1870. The 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1870 was lively, special policemen being necessary. Thirty-five dollars was raised to purchase a cannon. The most building was done in 1874. The first saloon was owned by Wm. Simmons. In 1875 Whitehall had twenty-two saloons and Montague 13.

The Cosmopolitan hotel burned in August 1881. The first lawyer was Duane Thompson. T. Bennett & Co. opened the first grocery store; Moog & Hill, the first furniture store. Gale Nichols ran the first stage line.

The first school was a private one taught by Miss Polly Allen having a 3 months' term and an enrollment of eight pupils.

Written by Merle Gee, Age Unknown

The following is the fourth (and final) of a series of essays by pupils of the seventh grade of the Whitehall School and appeared on January 30, 1896.

Whitehall was first settled by Mears and Slocum in 1859. It was then called Mears. In the year 1867 the name was changed to Whitehall and it grew faster than any Northern town at that time. It had an area of three square miles and a population of 1,000. Chas. Mears erected the first mill which was a water mill in 1843. In the year 1856 Staples & Covell's mill was built by Whittaker and Hall. The tannery was erected in 1866. They have added to it so that now it is a large one.

The post office was established in 1862 and Albert Mears was the first postmaster. Ben Frank was the first editor of the Whitehall Forum, the first copy of which was printed October 28, 1869.

Whitehall is on the shores of White Lake which is five miles long and averaging three-fourth of a mile wide. In the Winter of 1867 Congress appropriated \$75,000 which was expended on the piers in the Summer of 1868. In the next Spring, \$20,000 was added by the harbor company and \$45,000 more by Congress which made it the best harbor on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan.

In the year 1880 most of the main part of the town was destroyed by fire but it was rebuilt. It burned again in 1890. In the second fire they called on Muskegon for help and they sent a fire engine on a special train which brought it here in 20 minutes. One remarkable thing about the fire was that out of 12 safes only one was injured and that one was in the post office. This safe had a large keyhole. The loss by the fire of \$125,000 and the insurance was about \$50,000.

The railroad was put through Whitehall in 1867 and the depot was where the Water Works is now. It was not a very good one and a new depot was built almost a block straight south.

Written by Henry Paine, Age Unknown

As there are no known copies of the Montague Observer available for this time period, it is unknown what the students in the Montague area might have written.

It would be interesting to see what the results would be if the challenge was taken up by the students today.