

The House of Franklin

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Based upon stories passed from older generations to younger generations the following may or may not be historically accurate: Montague, Michigan 1873. The unmistakable odor of cigars wafted around the poorly lit saloon that evening where several local businessmen from Montague and Whitehall were enjoying each other's company. The refreshments provided by the establishment were enjoyed by these men while they engaged in the discussion of various topics. Most of the discussion related to the lumbering industry of the White Lake region as nearly all of these men were engaged somehow in that business.

Conversation migrated to the topic of hotels and the recent fire that had destroyed the Montague House. The Montague House was a spectacular hotel constructed by the lumbering firm of Ferry Dowling & Co. and had opened in 1871. Fire consumed the hotel after less than 2 years of operation and had left a negative mark on the fledgling town of Montague.

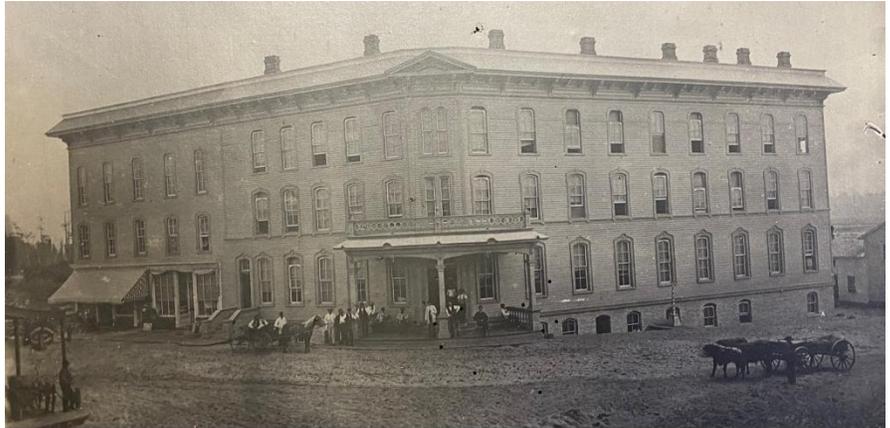


Figure 1. The Montague House circa 1871

One of the men from Whitehall made a ridiculing comment highlighting the fact that Montague did not have a suitable hotel. This comment stimulated a spirited conversation that became the spark that would change history. The Montague businessmen, competitive and prideful, and perhaps slightly under the influence, responded by claiming that they would build a classy hotel. To show commitment to this raucous discussion one of these men opened his wallet, pulled out a sizable note, slapped it down on the bar with authority and said, "That says Montague can have a hotel!" Others followed suit and within moments verbal and financial support for a new hotel was secured.

Accurate history tells us two men, George W. Franklin and Henry P. Dowling, were responsible for the construction of a fine hotel at the corner of Dowling and Ferry Street in Montague, named the Franklin House in honor George W. Franklin. It is probable that Ferry Dowling & Co. financed the construction of this hotel as a replacement of the Montague House. Evidence becomes available around 1901 that provides possible proof of this particular assumption and will be addressed later in this article.

Construction started in 1873 and finished in November 1874, with a grand opening party on December 10, 1874. Martin Dodge & Son were recruited to run the Franklin House as he had excellent credentials. Martin had leased and operated several high class hotels over the preceding three decades and was operating the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Whitehall when he switched to the Franklin House under a one year lease. The first activity undertaken by



Figure 2. The Franklin House circa 1876

Martin was to invite the entire staff of the Whitehall Forum newspaper for Thanksgiving dinner on November 26, 1874. A wise idea which he had probably utilized on more than one occasion in his career.

Several businessmen took up winter quarters at the hotel in 1874 since it was the highest quality lodging to be found, and for some, was the location of their business:

Henry P. Dowling – H.P. Dowling & Co. planing mill

William J. Mason – General store at the Franklin House

Dr. John A. Malcolm – Druggist at the Franklin House

Cassius D. Dowling – Insurance at the Franklin House

Ansel F. Temple – Temple and company curtain roll manufacturer

Harry C. Sholes – Proprietor of the Montague Lumberman newspaper

Isaac M. Weston – Lumber industry

Malcolm Hendrie – Montague Iron Works

Frank H. White – Lumber manufacturer

Charles Pelton – Builder and son-in-law of George W. Franklin

These men and some others became known as the Franklin House Club, commanded by Major George Green, and assisted with party hosting at the hotel. Members of this club served to keep parties in check and assist when parties needed to be broken up due to the late hours of celebration (sometimes 2 to 4 am). Periodically they had to escort out the door an overzealous lumber camp participant who had just been paid for his labor and was free from his winter lodging.

The hotel quickly became the social hotspot in the first year of operation. The first in a series of “Club dances” was held on January 8, 1875. The Franklin House Club hosted a party on January 29, 1875, in which approximately 40 couples participated, coming from Montague, Whitehall, Muskegon and Grand Rapids, and wrapping up at 2:15 am. Martin Dodge celebrated his 60th birthday with a social party on March 16, 1875. A necktie party funded by a few well known citizens of Montague, was held April 2, 1875, to celebrate the end of the logging season and welcome in the beginning of the lumber processing season. It was attended by approximately 50 couples who pronounced the occasion as the most agreeable gathering of the season. Other groups such as the Odd Fellows, Montague Fire Company #1, and the Masonic Fraternity used the Franklin House for meetings, parties, dances, and gatherings.

The Franklin House was not a big party all of the time as travelers would use it for lodging when needed. Two men, William B. Ransom and Stansbury Ogden took lodging on January 19, 1875, on their way home from a 3 week fishing excursion at Stony Lake in Oceana County, Michigan. During this time, they claimed to have caught about 1700 pounds of fish.

The Franklin House quickly developed a favorable reputation as one of the top hostelrys along the Eastern edge of Lake Michigan but did endure some negative experiences. Tuesday, January 4, 1876, 77 year old James Lowe passed away in his room at the hotel. His death was not unexpected as he had been generally confined to his room due to old age and debility. He would not be the only fatality at the hotel as time went by.

The social event of the season occurred at the Franklin House on Monday March 6, 1876, when a celebration of the silver wedding anniversary of George W. Franklin and his wife Phoebe transpired. It was an opportunity for Martin Dodge to show his capabilities, and he did so emphatically by providing the following bill of fare:

Oysters (raw, stewed, fried and fricasseed)

Boiled (ham, tongue, turkeys boned, turkeys plain, chicken)

Cold (beef a la mode, tongue cold, dried beef, cold corn beef, chicken cold, turkeys cold)

Relishes (celery, French mustard, tomato catsup, Leicestershire sauce, mixed pickles, gherkins, pickled cauliflower, coleslaw, tomato pickles, horse radish, Halford sauce)

Pastry (cold cake, sponge cake, jelly cake, marble cake, crullers, jelly tartlets, lemon pie, mince pie, apple pie)

Dessert (apples, oranges, raisins, filberts, almonds, Brazil nuts, figs, ice cream, Italian prunes, peach & strawberry jelly)

Teas (Japan tea, young hyssop, old java coffee)

Martin Dodge had exerted much effort to establish the Franklin House as one of the finest hotels east of Chicago. He did get opportunities to host family events such as the 21st birthday celebration of his son George, and the wedding reception of his daughter Mary when she wed Oliver Hedges on November 10, 1879. This reception was said to rival the silver wedding anniversary of George W. Franklin.

Unfortunately, his daughter Mary passed away on February 20, 1881, after only 15 months of married life, and Martin himself passed away less than 2 years later on December 31, 1882, leaving management of the Franklin House to his wife and son George. His other son, Edward, participated and the name was changed to Dodge Brothers. They continued to manage under this new name for a number of years.

The Dodge Brothers experienced what some may consider a harbinger on Sunday September 14, 1884, when someone attempted to set fire to the Franklin House. Access was gained to the basement where a kerosene barrel was tapped and a dish used to spread it around the room. Edward discovered the fire almost immediately and was successful in extinguishing the flames. The arsonist was not found.

The Dodge Brothers managed the Franklin House until September 1898, whereupon Theodore S. Watson took over the lease. Theodore was managing the Mears hotel in Whitehall at the time and was known to all as “Colonel Watson” due to his civil war service, even though his rank never went beyond “private.” He managed until September 1901, when the Franklin House was sold.

William Peck purchased the hotel from Annie W. Dowling, the widow of George E. Dowling, on September 16, 1901. Annie obtained ownership resulting from the settlement of her husband’s estate, and this information helps determine who originally financed the construction of the Franklin House.

George Dowling was a partner in the firm Ferry Dowling & Co. along with William Montague Ferry and his son Edward Payson Ferry. William passed away in 1867 leaving George and Edward as the remaining members of the firm. Ferry Dowling & Co. was dissolved circa 1882 and the assets split between George and Edward. No evidence has been found showing acquisition of the Franklin House by George Dowling, and although not conclusive, one could assume he received ownership via the firm dissolution.

George W. Franklin, the namesake of the hotel, passed away on July 18, 1894, and the July 26, 1894, issue of the Whitehall Forum newspaper made note of his passing. Part of the information provided stated “*The Franklin House at Montague was erected through his energetic efforts in conjunction with the Ferrys and received his name at the opening.*” This information is also not conclusive, but Ferry Dowling & Co. were associated with construction of the Montague House that burned in 1873 and likely financed the construction of the new hotel.

William Peck commenced activities by cleaning up the yard at the back of the hotel, which apparently had not been done once in the previous 25 years. He started making improvements to the hotel in preparation for a grand reopening ball/supper on Thanksgiving eve November 27, 1901, but his first engagement was on October 23, 1901, when he invited the entire Muskegon County board of supervisors to a reception and banquet. Most of the supervisors arrived on the evening train, enjoyed a fine meal and social interaction, slept soundly, and were roused early to catch the morning train back to Muskegon, Michigan.

William made improvements to the hotel over the next several years such as replacing the acetylene gas lamps with hollow wire system kerosene lamps, and building a concrete sidewalk in front of the hotel on top of the old boardwalk, which did not last. He then leased the hotel to John S. Rowland from Chicago who started on October 15, 1911. Rowland and his wife planned to operate a bakery in the empty store next to the hotel office

but apparently the plan failed as the lease terminated on September 12, 1912, and William took back possession of the hotel.

William's wife Jennie passed away at the hotel on June 7, 1914, and this prompted him to close the hotel and move to Muskegon to live with his son and family. This move was short lived as one month later William moved back to the hotel, bringing his son and family with him. William deeded the hotel to his son to operate and took up a room for himself, still serving as the landlord.

This arrangement did not last long as the son apparently did not hold the same enthusiasm as his father regarding hostelry management. The hotel was deeded back to William, and he continued until February 1918 when a 2 year lease was signed by M. M. Walker from Grand Rapids, Michigan. This lease was surrendered by Walker 6 months later on August 19, 1918, and William took charge of the hotel once again.

William continued to operate the hotel until September 22, 1929, when he closed it for an indefinite vacation claiming that it had become too commodious for his 87 year old body and that he was going to take it easy. His indefinite vacation came to an end when he reopened the hotel in May 1931. His daughter Edna Farrell and her husband James moved into the hotel with William to help him with operations.

William Peck passed away on July 28, 1935, and ownership of the hotel passed onto his daughter Edna Farrell. Edna closed the hotel and lived there for a few years neglecting to pay taxes on the property. The hotel was sold at tax auction in February 1940 to Clarence J. Sipple of Winchester, Kentucky and Gustave Kopp of Chicago, Illinois, with the intention of remodeling and reopening the hotel. Clarence J. Sipple was the father of Edna Farrell's son in law Len Sipple. It is unknown if Edna had some influence on his decision to acquire the hotel.

This information sparked great enthusiasm from the Montague community and a grand reopening of the newly renovated hotel occurred on July 31, 1940, with nearly 375 people in attendance. A banquet was held, and speeches were made by Montague mayor Carl Wilke and former school commissioner Nellie Chisholm. Dancing to the orchestra was enjoyed by many, and at one point the participants joined hands and commenced a snake dance throughout the hotel going up and down stairs. It was said that this opening celebration rivaled that of the original opening in 1874.

Clarence Sipple leased the hotel to Mrs. E.F. Peterson after it was opened. He also leased the tap room and dance floor to James and Clarence Ford for two years. Mrs. Peterson apparently did not find the situation to her liking and opted not to renew her lease, which expired on November 15, 1941, causing Sipple to arrange for the Ford brothers to take over management of the entire building. James Ford opted out in 1943 which left Clarence Ford and his wife the sole managers of the hotel.

The Ford brothers signed a contract with the Brunswick Company in November 1941 to construct and install four bowling alleys in the basement of the hotel for approximately \$8000. They also arranged with Tony Yokubonus to manage/operate the alleys, and on January 23, 1942, the alleys were opened. The success was immediate and Yokubonus signed a 5 year lease with Clarence Sipple on April 18, 1946, to install pool tables and 2 more bowling alleys.

Clarence Sipple continued ownership of the hotel, making improvements, and leasing when appropriate, until 1957 when he was involved in an automobile accident. He never fully recovered from the accident and was declared mentally incompetent which led to the sale of the Franklin House.

Harold Westbrook and his son Robert purchased the hotel in August 1960 and started making improvements. In the early morning hours of February 26, 1961, a fire was discovered, and the alarm sounded. The 9 people sleeping in their rooms were awakened and escaped, 3 of them rescued by ladders. The fire departments from Montague, Whitehall, Muskegon, and Blue Lake township responded to the alarm and appeared to be having success when the fire quickly became uncontrollable. It was believed that the fire got inside the walls and the

old, dry wood from the 1870's fueled the flames up to 100' of height. The focus of the fire departments then became protection of the adjacent buildings, which they accomplish with great professionalism.

The Westbrook's had some insurance but not enough to cover the total loss. Much of the new equipment they had installed was not insured and was a great loss to them. They rebuilt the Franklin House hotel in September 1961, but it had no resemblance to the original building and was deconstructed in October 2017. Currently, a parking lot exists at the former site of the historic Franklin House.



Figure 3. The Franklin House February 26, 1961