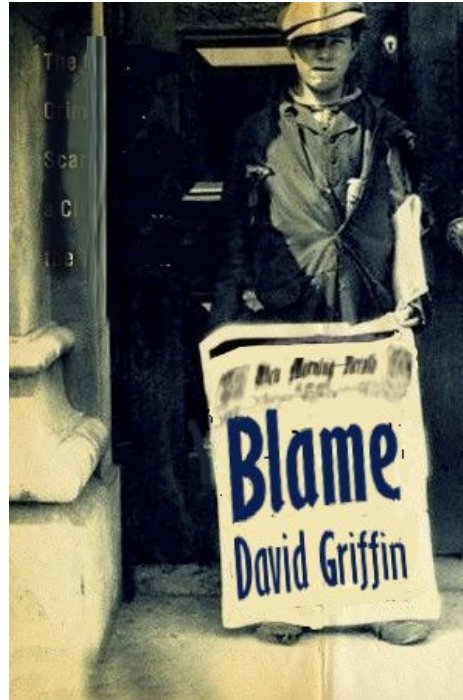


Blame

a revision and expansion of No. 97, "Billy Foley's Morning"

It was so long ago. I walked past City Hall all the way to the top of the hill to sell newspapers on the day I watched the Genesee Flats burn to ground. If Da (dah) hadn't dragged me out of my lumpy bed that morning, I can tell you for sure I would not have been out there slogging through the ice and snow, trying to keep the old newspaper in the bottom of my boot from jamming up under my toes. Da complained I didn't bring enough money home, that I could sell more papers the farther I trudged up the hill to Oneida Square and its neighborhood of homes and stores. But my feet almost froze on cold mornings and I was so tired. Just picking up my feet to clomp through a foot of new fallen snow some mornings wore me out.



And I'd be late at getting to school at the Assumption Academy. Jesus ... Brother Barnabas would give me a slap on the back of my head that'd sting all morning. He loved to kid around, until you did something wrong. Sometimes we could laugh with him, and at other times he was a holy terror. But we all liked him. He was a strong man who kept his word.

It wasn't my fault Da and I were short on money. After Ma died the old man spent more time up on Court Street in the taverns. I'd wait up for him to get home before I slept. Scared, I went to bed about ten at night, but I wouldn't sleep till I heard him stumble up the steps into the kitchen. In the winter, he loaded the stove up with coal for the night and then staggered to bed. I always got up and made sure the door was locked and checked that he closed the damper down on the

stove. A few times he left it wide open. I never forgot the night I fell asleep and didn't hear him come in. I woke up coughing. Da was retching in his bed and the house was filled with smoke. In the kitchen the stove had a cherry red ring around it and a chair he'd left too close was smoking as the varnish melted. After that I couldn't sleep at night until I got up and checked everything after he came home and fell in bed. I had dreams of trying to get out of our burning house. I never escaped, blocked by flames at the front door and the back. The fire came toward me and I couldn't bring myself to run headlong through the flames to where the door would have been.

Maybe that's what happened with the Reilly girl across the street. Her old man forgot to close the damper and burned the house down. She was killed in the fire. We were in the nuns' school together that year and I was about seven years old. I saw her playing with a doll on her front porch the afternoon before the fire. Not many hours later a team of horses came charging down the street. I woke up and looked out the window. Lanterns swung on the side of the steam pumper. Men in another wagon jumped to the ground and ran up to the Reilly house. They never got inside. The flames blasted out the doors and windows on the front wall as though Reilly's home was a huge furnace with the doors left open. By morning the place was leveled.

In class the Reilly girl had sat on the opposite side of the room from me. The next day she just wasn't there anymore, and I wouldn't go near her desk over in front of the radiator. When we made a big circle to pray the Angeles at noon, I wouldn't stand near where she used to sit. When Sister Amolia asked me to fetch the dictionary from the stand next to the radiator, I sat still at my desk with my head down and ignored her. When she stood up and came down the aisle to my desk and tried to pull my chin up to look at her, I ran from the room because my eyes were wet. She sent a note home to Da. He swore and threw it in the stove. He didn't like any of the priests or nuns. I watched the note burn on top of the coals and wondered if a person burned up like that in hell.

If Ma hadn't been at work that afternoon, she would've talked to me and then sent a note back to Sister. Ma was a nice lady and I was always proud of her. People said she kept a fine home and she was a great cook. When Ma was alive we weren't broke all the time. Until she passed away two years before, she worked down at the fish pole factory and tied the little eyelets on the rods that held the fishing line. She'd be proud to know I was turning thirteen in two months. She always called me her little man. I didn't mind helping Da and me pay for our rent and food, but if Ma was alive I wouldn't have had to get up at 4:30 in the morning to sell newspapers on the street. And survive the wrath of Brother Barnabas when I was late.

For all his slapping and hitting I liked Brother Barnabas. He was a brave man. I remember the time he took on a gang of a dozen bullies who came to our school yard one afternoon. He waded into the middle of them punching and kicking and throwing the smaller ones in the air. Twice he flipped boys off his shoulders and fought like a bear as the wolf pack tried to devour him. Finally, a few of us timid classmates joined in his defense and together we beat the thugs off. When it was over, Brother Barnabas lay on the ground bleeding and black and blue. And laughing. "We killed the little bastards," he said. That phrase endeared him to us more than anything else he ever said.

Before school began in the morning I ran down to the Herald and got a bag of newspapers. I signed a slip that promised to pay the next day and walked the whole shebang up Genesee Street, selling the news to whoever would give me a couple of pennies for the paper. I brought home the coins to Da. He counted them out and handed me the money to put in the old teapot on the window sill, ready to go to the man at the Herald the next day. When I leaned over the radiator to reach up on the sill I always thought of the little Reilly girl.

The Tuesday the Flats burned down, I wasn't thinking about fires as I walked up Genesee Street and wished more folks were out to buy my papers. But the few people I saw were all bundled up against the cold. They were in a hurry to get where they were going and wouldn't stop to fish a couple of coins out of their pockets for the newspaper. I began to think of my bed at home, lumpy as it was. How I wished I had been home in bed and never saw the lady on the balcony. When I thought of her I didn't feel so good.

Half way up the hill at City Hall that day I knew I wouldn't sell all my papers so I decided to keep going. Da wouldn't holler at me about the money if I tried. I walked on up to Oneida Square and the Civil War Monument on the west side of the circle. I was tired and my toes hurt, so I sat on the monument's cold stone bench between one of the soldier statues and a lady with hardly any clothes on. Her face looked like Ma's and I reached up and touched her arm. It was as cold and hard as the arm I touched at Mom's funeral when I reached into the casket before Da grabbed me and spun me away.

I was half asleep most days selling papers, but it was so peaceful in the early morning. Not many people were out and there was a low rumble from the factories that ran all night over on the west side, out Whitesboro Street. In the cold winter air a train whistle screeched from far down the valley and I'd hear the soft swish of tire rims when a weary horse pulled a hack through the snow.

I stood up from the stone bench quickly when I smelled smoke in the air. It was a sharp smell, not at all like wood or coal smoke. A bell clanged about a block away and horses neighed and in another minute all hell broke loose as the team of

horses and men from the fire department's Engine Company No.1 pounded through the square. The few people crossing the roadway scattered like pigeons and the rear wheels of the pumper wagon slid sideways when the driver hauled the reins sharply to the left and forced the beasts up Genesee Street. Holy Cripes, they were pulling the huge fire engine pumper, a Cole Brothers Steamer. The firemen's wrenches and hammers and spikes clanged against the copper sides of the big steam dome. It sounded like cannibals banging on a big pot as they waited for their dinner. Every dog in the neighborhood chased the two wagons and the steam pumper. A man ran by and shouted "The Flats is on fire!"

I'd be late for school if I chased after the fire engine, but The Genesee Flats was the new seven story apartment house, the tallest building in Utica. Brother Barnabas was always preaching about us growing to be men and we were to act like it. "Take responsibility and help those in need," he said. I wasn't very big for my age, but I wasn't a weakling kid. To be honest, Reilly's fire and their girl crossed my mind. I wasn't sure I wanted to be at a fire, you know? People lose things at a fire ... like their homes and ... each other. But I really wanted to see that engine build up a head of steam and watch it pump water from the hydrant through the hoses. I read in the paper it could shoot a stream of water out the nozzle a hundred feet.

Mothers in kerchiefs and kids just pulling on their coats stumbled out of the nearby houses and joined a group of young men running up the street to The Flats. I should have gone back down the hill to school, but I didn't. Instead I threw down the rest of my papers and ran like the dickens to catch up with all of them ... the pumper, the men and women and kids and the dogs.

I came up to the Flats at a run. Fireman pulled their hatchets and pike poles from the wagon and then just stood around waiting for orders. In the lantern lights I could barely see them. Their peaked hats and canvas coats were painted with black stuff to keep from getting soaked. It was too dark to see the building very well, but a few lamps shined out of the windows as shadows moved in front of them inside the apartments. The firemen didn't seem to know what to do. There was a fire right in front of them. A few of the men strolled up to the big fancy front door, as if they were about to politely tell the residents their building was on fire. Maybe they wanted to say please just get dressed and meet across the street for morning tea, while someone searches out the cause of the smoke.

Someone yelled, "It's just a smoker, probably rags in the cellar."

I asked a fireman why the ladder wagon was sent when I couldn't see any flames. There was a hose wagon, too.

"Second alarm," he said. The small sprayer rig had been sent an hour before when the night watchman smelled smoke, but no fire was found

"There's a lot of smoke now," I said.

He didn't answer me.

"Where are all the people from the Flats?" I said, looking around and seeing only the firemen and neighbors on their front porches.

"Inside," he said. "I guess they don't think the fire is serious."

Soon the smoke began to roll out from the The Flats to the road. It seeped around us and under the fire wagons. The horses became jittery and snorted. They didn't like smoke and they may have sensed what was coming. Men began to drag ladders toward the building.

"Out here, Millie," a man's voice shouted from somewhere above me. I heard a scream and then wailing, but no one came out the doorways. Voices in the dark seemed to come from up in the trees, cries and yells for help. I got a little rattled. And then lots of people came out of the doors on the front of The Flats and down into the road. They joined neighbors who now began to crowd around the wagons, but still there were voices up above.

About twenty feet in front of me a loud thud shook the ground as a trunk crashed down and split open. It dropped right out of the sky. Clothing spilled out. From the blackness above more shoes and coats and books rained down. A lady's dress floated toward me. It seemed so strange. They were trying to save their belongings.

The morning sky got lighter and I could finally see the front of The Flats towering seven stories above us. Except for all of the balconies, it looked like a castle built with large red stones. At one end of the building, a man dangled on a rope made of sheets and clothing. I laughed. It was funny and it wasn't. I wanted to shout out, "Go back inside. There aren't any flames." Only a smoker, I wanted to tell him, but the steam pump was starting up and he would not have heard me. I told myself only a couch was burning. The firemen probably would haul it out in the snow in a few minutes and everyone would have a good laugh and go back to bed.

I stayed near the firemen, hoping they would ask me to help out. Brother Barnabas would be proud if I told him I carried a hose or one end of a ladder. I was almost a man, after all. Just a few years away.

The men pulled the hoses toward the building without asking my help. I noticed their stern faces and I didn't ask them if they needed me.

The sun rose and more people on the first and second floors began to crawl down from the balconies like insects. They had waited too long and now the smoke was everywhere inside the Flats. They let themselves down on sheets and blankets to the tops of the ladders. On the higher floors people wailed and shouted for help. Firemen began to tie ladders together to make them longer.

I wondered if anyone was looking at me. Why wasn't I helping? It's not a real bad fire. They'll get out. I probably ought to get to school.

People who made it to the ground tried to find their families. A lady grabbed me and asked if I'd seen her brother. She asked a few times and finally I tried to calm her down instead of ignore her.

"It's not real fire, a bad fire," I said. "I'd go in and help people out, but I shouldn't get in the way."

She looked at me, silent.

"But there's no flames." I said, looking at the ground. "It'll be all right."

The smoke smelled awful, just like at the Reilly girl's house. And there was crackling and snapping and moaning. The moans seemed to come from the family without shoes standing in the road between the ladder and the hose wagon, but I soon discovered the sound came from the trees. They would bend in toward the fire as the shades on the apartment windows blew in and flapped into the rooms. A wind was sucking through the trees into the building. It made a noise worse than banshees.

The moans began to sound more often and my stomach started to turn. I didn't want to watch the people hanging from the windows and balconies any more. I knew I should go home. I needed to get to school. Somebody might get killed and I didn't want to be there. I was just a kid and I couldn't help. I had to get out of there and go back and get the papers I threw on the ground.

A younger man and a very large lady stood on a fourth floor balcony as smoke billowed out behind them from their apartment. She wore a hat like my mother's before she died, God rest her soul as she walks with all the saints in Paradise. The man was helping the woman climb on to the railing to get on a rope of sheets and blankets he must have tied. He coaxed her up on the railing, but she slid back on the balcony. She was so big. I wondered how he would ever get her down. I turned my eyes away.

Two firemen ran up to me and began yelling about fire engines. I thought they wanted to tell me something, but they only happened to stop in front of me. One man wanted to call for more engines. The other said there was no need. He said all they had to do was find the couch or chair someone had dropped a cigar into and all would be well. He ran off and the other man, a tall fellow who reminded me of my Uncle Jack, asked me if I knew how to use the alarm box up the street on the corner. He wanted more engines.

"I guess you just pull it," I said, and he told me how to break the glass and turn the crank.

I wasn't sure I wanted to and he knew it. I wanted to get out of there. The horses were really getting nervous, snorting and stamping. The men didn't seem to know what they were doing and as we stood there an old fellow jumped from a

first floor window and shouted out in pain when he hit the ground with a crack. The sound made my teeth hurt, but it wouldn't be the worst I would hear that day. The fireman said to not be afraid. He put his hand on my shoulder.

"Go crank the alarm," he said. "You'll be saving lives, son."

"But it's only a smoker, isn't it?" I said.

He turned and left.

I sat down on the low pipe fence surrounding the building. Firemen were trying to get as many men as possible to lift the new aerial ladder truck over the fence and up near the building so they could rescue those on the upper floors. People called from the balconies. Some looked like they were still trying to figure it all out. Others were just plain scared and shouted for help. Only a few came down on ropes made from blankets and drapes and even pants.

The old man who had jumped from his window and hit the frozen ground was still yelling for help. Smoke was rolling out the window above him along with red hot embers. I could feel the heat then. I should have gone over to help him away from the building. I wanted to, but it was like I was stuck where I sat on the low fence. I yelled at the old man to crawl away, but I guess he couldn't. Smoke began to push out the windows even faster.

A fireman came up the side of the building. He reached out his hand and the old man stuck out his arm. The fireman grabbed the old fellow by the wrist and dragged him across the snow to me. He said nothing and left. The old man was crying in pain. What could I do? I had no bandages or whiskey.

"You'll be all right," I said. "I'll go get you some help."

I stood and left him. Somebody would come along and tend to him. I was going home. I was just a kid. What could I do?

After a few steps, I knew I shouldn't leave. But the smoke from the building was getting thicker and blacker. I didn't feel so good. I knew I should help. Somehow. I didn't know what to do. I leaned up against the high wheel of the hose wagon and I did what only a Catholic or a Hottentot would do. I said a prayer to my mother.

If I went home and told Da about this, he'd say I should have never followed the fire engine. If I went to school and told Brother Barnabas, I knew what he would say. He'd want to know if I helped out with the injured. I couldn't lie to him. I turned and ran up the street to the alarm box. I was so worked up when I got there I couldn't break the glass with the mitten still on my hand. I found a stone and broke the little window and cut my finger. The tiny crank inside didn't want to move. I banged on it with the heel of my hand and tried it again. It twisted and I heard a clunk inside the box.

I walked back toward the apartment house. The sun was up and shining under a bright blue sky. Smoke billowed out the side windows of the Flats and

drifted up the street through the green Hemlocks rooted in the snow covered ground. Icicles glistened in the sun on homes across the wide street from The Flats. A perfect late winter day, except for the smoke and the cries for help.

The firemen were busy getting people down ladders from the lower balconies. Higher up, residents finally used blankets and drapes to work their way down as a few brave souls had tried earlier, tying and re-tying their rope, one floor at a time as they dropped from balcony to balcony. Neighbors had come out on their porches and into the road and some stood at the foot of the building, calling up to those still on the balconies to get a move on. But some of the residents stood as still as death on their balconies, fully dressed in their morning clothes, gripping the railings but doing nothing. One man sucked on a cigar as smoke billowed out from the balcony above him.

Unless they climbed down or found a route through the smoke filled hallways, nothing could be done for all these people who were so close I could have talked to them. It was as if I watched them on a sinking ship from a short distance across the water at sea and they couldn't get off and swim me.

If I lived to be 90 years old I'd never forget what happened next. The young trees near the building suddenly bent way over toward the fire. Louder and louder they moaned as a strong wind sucked through them and Woooooosh! One huge sheet of flame shot up from the roof of the building and out every window I could see on the seventh floor. At the same time showers of sparks curled out many of the lower windows scattering in the face of the incoming wind. Window shades ripped themselves into postage stamp pieces. I fell backward and plopped down in the snow on my butt.

Holy Mother Mary, I'd never heard or seen anything like it! All the voices on the balconies and down on the ground hushed for a moment. Then a loud groan went up, a sob from the crowd of neighbors and firemen and victims. Embers and pieces of shade and roofing fluttered to the ground as the blow-up wound down and flames began to lick out the windows and balcony doors behind the victims.

A man on one of the balconies collapsed, sinking to his knees but holding on to the railing with gloved hands. A woman jumped from the second floor screaming. I didn't hear her hit the ground. I heard myself mumbling, "oh, no ... oh, no." I fell all the way back flat on the snow and looked up at the sky. I didn't want to see any more of the burning building and the people. I had to get out of there. In a moment I took a deep breath and sat up, my eyes avoiding the scene. Brother Barnabas would think me a coward. Maybe I was. But this was a huge fire. The biggest building most of us had ever seen was now the biggest fire most of us would ever witness. People were going to die and I didn't want to watch it.

But I could not abide telling Brother Barnabas I didn't try to help. After a few more deep breaths, I got up and walked back toward the Flats. More fire wagons

began arriving, but they brought nothing that would help rescue those on the upper floors. On the lower floors fireman came on the balconies and began leading people back inside. They were wrapping their heads in towels and shirts. They must have found routes down the stairs, because I saw other firemen lead people out the first floor doors. Maybe I could help.

The big lady wearing the hat like my mother's was on the string of sheets high over the stone steps in front of the fancy main door. She was coming down real slow, crying all the way. The sheets ended about ten feet above the steps. The younger man in his shirtsleeves at the upper end of the rope shouted down to her. I ran up the steps to a spot below her and yelled up, "Hold on." I held out my arms.

"Just a little farther, old mother!" I shouted. She was a big woman with bare feet and wrapped in a robe. When the wind whipped around her, I saw far up her white heavy legs and I looked away, embarrassed.

She was down to the third floor balcony when the glass on that apartment's door exploded. Smoke and flames shot out toward her. She cried out and began to cough as the smoke danced around her. She held on for dear life. The man who had helped her over the railing disappeared above her in the smoke.

"C'mon! Slide! I'll catch ya!" I shouted. Over my shoulder I began to yell "Help, Help," hoping a fireman would come to our aid. I didn't know what he would have done except try to convince the lady to let go and slide down to us.

A fireman came out on the balcony next door to the woman and called to her to swing over to him. Maybe he had a plan to get her down the staircase, I don't know. But she'd never have the strength for it.

"C'mon, *c'mon*. I yelled.

All she had to do was slide down to me and she'd be safe. But her hands must have locked on the rope.

She glanced over at the fireman, and then down at me. She looked sick and tired. Her eyes were red and like about to pop out.

"Over here!" the fireman shouted.

"Down here, lady!" I cried

She looked again at the fireman and then down, shouting to me. I couldn't hear her.

"C'mon!" I yelled. "Let go. Let go and slide."

Maybe it was the hat, but I swear I saw my mother's face in hers. She pulled herself up by her arms as if she was going back up. How such a large woman was able to do that I'll never know. She kicked out her feet with probably the only strength she had left. I thought she was trying to shoot herself over to the fireman. I knew she couldn't make it there.

"NO!" I shouted. "Let go. *Let go.*"

She kicked again and she completely let go, falling free of the rope. The kick tumbled her over in the air and she came down head first like a battering ram. She came so fast! She hit the stone steps right next to me. On her head.

What an awful sound. I hear it when I wake in the morning and when I doze off at school. I hear it sometimes when I walk by a factory and the machines are banging out whatever they make.

Honest! I tried, I had my hands up. I thought I was right under her. She hit before I could move sideways to catch her. If she hadn't kicked she would not have missed me. I could have caught her.

I looked up and the fireman was gone. A man and a woman ran up the steps while I stood over the big lady. She didn't make a sound. She didn't move.

The man pulled me away and pushed me down the steps.

"That's enough, little man," he said. "You should have let the fireman help her."

"You could have been killed," said his companion, a lady with a pinched face.

She came so *fast*. I couldn't believe I missed her. The next day the Herald said she landed on her shoulder, not her head. Well, I've never before heard either break. But I have to tell you. If you ever hear a head bust open, you'll be sure to know it. It sounds like nothing else in the whole world.

I didn't go to school that day. I took my leftover papers back to the Herald and then I went to sit in Chancellor Park all day. A policeman asked me what school I attended and why I wasn't there. When I told him I was waiting for my father, he left, walking in the direction of the Academy. Late in the afternoon I looked up and saw a figure in black at a distance walking over Bleecker Street. The afternoon sun was quickly dropping and so was the temperature. Brother Barnabas walked briskly along between the old piles of snow with nothing more than a scarf around his neck to augment the cassock he always wore in the classroom.

The burly Irishman sat down on the bench next to me. He shook his head back and forth when I told him my story. I told him everything.

"I should not have gone," I said when I finished.

"Well, you did," he said, "and it's done."

"I can't get that sound out of my head."

"Stop trying," he said. "It'll leave when it wants to."

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

"But in fact, you should have come to school instead of going to the fire, Billy," he said.

"I wanted to see the pumper work," I said lamely.

“And then you should have come away and right back down the hill.”
“I wanted to help,” I said. “I was afraid to ... to say I hadn’t.”
Brother Barnabas looked directly at me and said nothing for a moment.
A cold wind began to blow as the sun dipped below the horizon.
In agony, I finally said, “I should have let the fireman help her.”
“But maybe you were right,” he said, “she could not have made it over to him.”
“But if I’d come back to school ...”
“Then it would not have been your fault,” he said. “No matter what happened to her, because you would not have been there.”
I didn’t say anything, just shook my head yes.
“Oh, is that it?” he said. “If you don’t show up, it’s not your fault. If you never offer to help or take responsibility, then it can never be your fault. How convenient. Is that what you think, Billy?”
“I don’t know ...”
“OK, Bill, let’s get this out. She’s dead. You made a stupid mistake and thought you could catch a 300 pound cow dropping down on you from the top of a building. Any idiot would have figured the odds differently and let the lady take her chances with the fireman. But not you. You knew better, right?”
Now I became angry. “I was only trying to help. I did the best I could!”
“You did?” said Brother Barnabas?
“Yes, goddammit,” I all but shouted. “I didn’t think she’d come so fast. I thought I’d bump her and break her fall when she got to me. I ... I don’t know what I thought. But she would have never, never made it up on to the balcony with the fireman.”
“Then you see ... you figured the odds, you made a decision and you acted.”
“I killed her,” I said.
“No, Billy. No, you didn’t. The fire killed her.”
“I was square below her,” I said. “I don’t know how I missed her.”
“Maybe she missed you,” he said.

Three weeks later I dreamed of the lady who fell next to me on the stone steps. We walked together to the firehouse across from St. John’s church. She pointed to a side door with a sign over it saying “Firemen Only.” I hesitated and then went inside and climbed the stairs to where the firemen slept. At the end of the room the fireman from the balcony sat on a bed. He glanced at me and motioned to the sliding pole. I stepped out over the hole in the floor and got on the pole they used at night to quickly get down to the wagons and horses. I was sliding fast when I looked down to see the little Reilly girl directly below me. I would have slammed into her and hurt her badly, maybe killed her. With a great lunge, I kicked my

legs with all my might and threw myself to the side, letting go of the pole. The kick tumbled me over in the air and I came down head first like a battering ram. And missed her. In the dream my head hit the floor and made that awful sound. I haven't heard it since. I didn't save the big lady's life. I still wonder if she saved mine.

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The Windswept Press

Murrells Inlet, SC www.windsweptpress.com

The March 3, 1896 tragic fire at the Genesee Flats really happened in Utica, NY. The above story is a fanciful and fictional work based on two historical characters who were not portrayed exactly as they were in life. I don't know William Foley's age and could not verify that Mrs. David B. Hughes, age 70, was a large woman. Three other people succumbed in the fire, a man in the shoe business and a mother and teenage daughter who were related to the Seymours, an old family in Utica. The Genesee flats was almost immediately replaced by the Olbiston Apartments, a building of the same architecture and finish but only 5 stories high in deference to the limits of fire equipment in the saving of lives in that era. The Olbiston was built with the higher safety standards then recommended at the end of the 1890's. It has withstood the test of time and a few fires, however, and remains open to this day providing apartments for rent.