

Brayley & Pitts Watercolor Provides Rare Look at Early Industry

COURTESY JIM BATTAGLIA



One of the great things about being part of Western New York Heritage is the fact that you never can predict what great story or other historical treasure is going to find you next. So it was a couple of years ago when we got a call from Jim Battaglia of Williamsville. Back in 2006, Jim had purchased a large watercolor from an online antique dealer in Illinois that depicts the canal-side complex of the Brayley & Pitts Company. It also contains a host of other tantalizing details, including the Erie Canal, with canal boat and mules on the towpath, the New York Central Railroad and a number of houses, people and horses.

Longtime readers of *Western New York Heritage* may remember the story on the Buffalo Pitts Company (as Brayley & Pitts would later become) that appeared

in the Fall 2004 issue ("Harvesting the Land, Reaching the Sky" – back issues are still available). The article chronicled the various endeavors of the firm, including their revolutionary threshing machine, steamrollers and eventually the prototype for an aircraft which was decades ahead of its time.

Sadly, little is known about the watercolor itself. When Jim purchased it, the dealer informed him that it had come through channels from "an old Buffalo family." Primitive in nature, yet showing signs that the artist had some formal training, there is no signature on the piece. Penciled on a mat board that was added to the painting later is the date "1865." Though hardly conclusive, this date is plausible given the details of the image and the history of the company.

Much of the Pitts facility was destroyed by fire in 1879, though incredibly it was rebuilt and back in operation the next year. By then, however, the new complex looked very different. Clearly this watercolor depicts the pre-fire facility and is perhaps the only existing image of this pioneering Buffalo industry from such an early date.

We would like to extend our deepest appreciation to Jim Battaglia for sharing this fascinating piece of Western New York's heritage with us and for allowing us the honor of being the vehicle for its public debut. Once again, you see it in *Western New York Heritage* first! If anyone has any additional information about this watercolor, we would love to hear from you. In the meantime, enjoy this unique and important artifact! ■