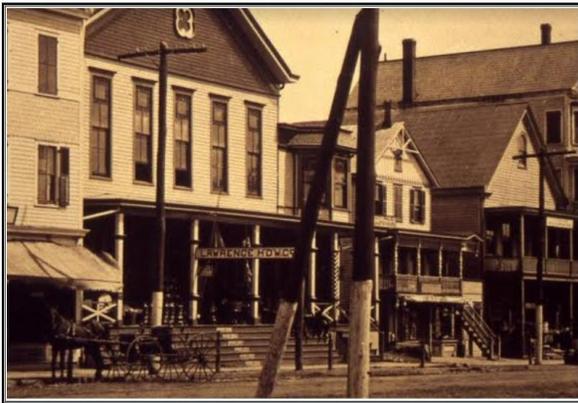


Butler Opera House

Lawrence / Whittle Hardware

Prior to December 18, 1906, the original Butler Opera House and Lawrence Hardware occupied the same building at 180 Main Street. The hardware store was located on the ground floor and the Opera House occupied the upper two floors. Being the largest interior space in town, the Opera House was the entertainment, social, and political center of the community. Lodge meetings and other social activities were held there; political speeches and social welfare lectures were presented there; traveling vaudeville shows and theatrical performances took place there. Interestingly, I couldn't find any record of operas being performed there.

On a fateful day in December, 1906, the Opera House and the complete inventory of Lawrence Hardware were destroyed by fire. Kingman's Grocery Store next door was also seriously damaged. Later, Butler will have more than its fair share of disastrous fires, but the Opera House was one of the town's biggest up until that time. Two later opera houses were located on Main Street, Butler. According to the 1920 Sanborn Insurance Map, the one at 226 Main Street had a basketball court and bowling alley.



Lawrence Hardware

George Lawrence came to Butler in early 1905 with the idea of opening a branch of his family's successful Sussex County hardware business. After only about a year and a half of operation, he watched his store go up in smoke. Failing to give up on his dream and perhaps with his family's capital behind him, he started planning a new store.

He purchased the property at 208 Main Street, but unfortunately, when a foundation for the building was attempted, it kept sinking into the ground. The site backed on a huge sand bank that once extended all the way from Manning Avenue to Cemetery Street. Originally, it sloped down almost to the railroad tracks, only leaving room for a wagon path. Over the years, the sand was carted away as the road was widened and the stores on Main Street grew in number. Large log pilings had to be sunk into the sand to provide a stable base for the new store.



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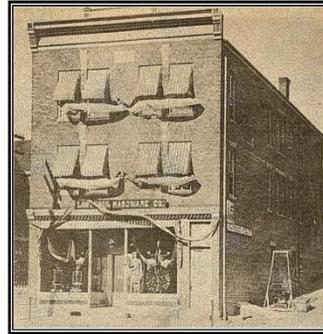
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Lawrence Hardware Co.
 Store Rooms under the Butler Opera
 House.
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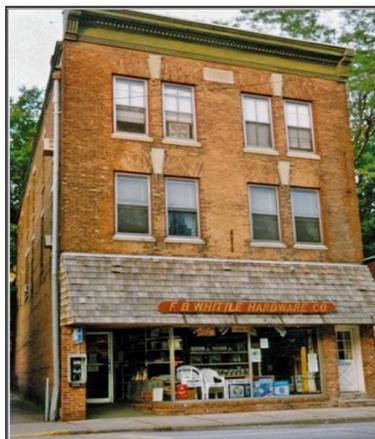
Whittle Hardware

Steam heat produced by a coal-fired boiler and radiators was becoming a common method of home heating and Lawrence Hardware provided installation and repair services. Fred Whittle was hired by George Lawrence as a heating engineer. Mr. Whittle was born in London, England and came to the United States in 1870. Whittle had worked for Tout's Hardware in Pompton Lakes and was a former mayor of that community. In 1923, he purchased Lawrence Hardware and changed its name to Whittle's.

Historian Bruyn Glann, who lived in Butler all his life, recalled what Lawrence / Whittle's Hardware was like when he was young. He was about twelve years old when the store was built. "They were the best supplied hardware store in town and just about everybody traded there. They had every type of tool you could ask for, every type of seed you could imagine, and enough plumbing and heating equipment to furnish a whole house; which they often did. They sold nails by the pound; it was a classic old time hardware store. It even smelled like one. Because of the rubber industry, Butler was growing and many homes were being built, so their business prospered."

When Frank B. Whittle died in 1928, the business was managed by various people until 1946 when Irvin Shorter, Mr. Whittle's son-in-law, took over the store. When Mr. Shorter died in 1949, his son, Donald, with his wife, Louise, and their son, Doug took charge of the business. The Shorters remodeled the building twice, but took pride in keeping as much of the old atmosphere as possible. In 1981, Whittle's Hardware celebrated 75 years of service to the community.

Vinod Patel bought the business in 1992 and continued selling hardware until he sold the building to Tony Morello in 2001. Mr. Morello operated a design and marketing firm. Following extensive renovations, the glory of the building's tin ceilings, brick walls, tongue-and-groove paneling and hardwood floors were restored. As of September 1, 2022 the building was for lease.



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Sources: *Butler in Story and Oictures 1901-2001*, *Downtown Butler Business Association Gazette* Sept. 13, 1981, *Suburban Trends* Sept. 13, 1981, *Suburban Trends* July 5, 1987, *The Iron Age* March 30, 1905, *Paterson Morning Call* May 12, 1928

