

The Franklin House Hotel
1873-1961

By Barbara Bedau Brow
White Lake Area Historical Society



A landmark in the town of Montague for 88 years, the Franklin House was the “In” place to go.

The Franklin House was named after George Franklin who, along with Henry Dowling, started construction in 1873 on what was then to become one of the finest hotels in west Michigan. It was built as a replacement for the four-story Montague House which burned in 1873, and was located where Lipka’s Drug Store is now.

The two men spent \$23,000 which was no small sum in the days of the lumbering era on White Lake. There were 100 cords of cut stone from the limestone quarries of Sturgeon Bay and several hundred thousand bricks from Milwaukee used in the construction of the 32-room hotel. However, there were no freight charges on this material because the two builders used their lumber boats to bring back materials on the return trips from across the Lake.

The finest white pine found in the region was bought at \$6.75 a thousand feet was also used in the building. Water for the hotel was provided from a spring on the hillside above the flour mill.

The hotel had fifty well-appointed rooms, wide winding stairways, a great ballroom, luxurious lobby with fountains and fine food in the dining room. In later years, bowling lanes were installed in the basement of the hotel.

In addition to the hotel rooms, the building also housed the first Ripley Drug Store on the ground level as well as the Mason Brothers store next door.

In the early days, it was also the headquarters for the White Lake Log and Booming Company, to which all area lumbermen belonged.

With the end of the lumbering industry, the hotel business suffered. For a period of years, White Lake became a center of the resort activity and business boomed again. Then the death blow came when the Goodrich Steamship Line stopped coming to White Lake in the early 1930s. Fewer and fewer of the rooms were put to use and the ballroom was only used on special occasions.

One of the earliest mentioned proprietors of the hotel were Martin Dodge and his son Edward. Together they managed the hotel until Martin's death in 1882. Then Charles Dodge and his younger brother George took over the business. They eventually passed the business on to T. S. Watson, who would later become the proprietor of the Mears Hotel in Whitehall.

In 1901, the Franklin House was sold by Henry Dowling's widow Anna to William Peck. In 1929 Peck announced his retirement and closed the hotel. He died in July 1935 and the hotel stood silent for about 4 years with the only occupant being his daughter Edna.



In 1940, C. J. Sipple of Kentucky and Gustave Kopp of Chicago bought the hotel at a scavenger sale for approximately \$1,200. The structure was raised, replacing the 65 year old center supports with more substantial pillars and rebuilding the basement quarters. The old heating plant was replaced and old plumbing removed throughout the building and new fixtures and lighting were added. A Colonial-style Veranda was built across the entire front of the building creating a second floor balcony for the rooms above. Mrs. E. R. Peterson, former owner and manager of the Colonial Inn in Whitehall became the Hotel Manager and brothers Clarence "Nick" and James "Biz" Ford became the operators of the cocktail lounge and bar. In 1941, they became Managers of the hotel and four Brunswick bowling alleys were installed in the basement of the hotel at a cost of \$8,000.

In 1942, Mrs. May O'Connell and her mother Mrs. Eva Quinlan of the former Maplehurst resort on Old Channel Trail were hired to manage the Franklin Coffee Shop located in the first floor corner of the hotel.

In 1945, two more lanes were added to the bowling alley and a billiard room was added in the basement as well.

In 1946, C. W. Ford signed a five-year lease with C. J. Sipple with a 30-day clause to purchase the building.

In 1947, steel fire escapes were added at the rear of the building.

In 1960, Harold Westerbrook and his son Robert became the new owners from C. J. Sipple who had been ill for some time and was confined to a sanitarium in his home state of Kentucky. Clarence "Nick" Ford had been running the hotel during the 20-year ownership of Sipple.

As we all know, and some may remember, the Franklin House was destroyed by fire in the early morning hours of February 26, 1961. There were nine people in the hotel rooms at the time; three had to be rescued by ladder. All of the occupants fled in their nightclothes and lost personal belongings.



Flames shot up 100 feet above the structure, as one by one the walls crashed down. Fortunately, no one was injured. There was no wind which saved the rest of the town. As the hotel was a social center for the town, many clubs held regular meetings there, and their meeting records were destroyed.

In August 1961, a new Franklin Hotel was constructed on a much smaller scale than the original. It was demolished in October 2017 and replaced by a parking lot.

