

Newell Blakely Was Here Before Shriner Funeral Home

In the previous three columns I mentioned that the Shriner name has continuously been a part of the name of the funeral home or undertaking business in Monroe since the 1870s. The business, in fact, goes back even further than when Ferdinand Shriner became involved. The earliest article I found about Newell Blakely, with whom Shriner became a partner, was in 1856. Even though there were different partners and different names, the business has continued to the present day and is now known as Shriner-Hager-Gohlke Funeral Home.

The 1856 Monroe Sentinel article was printed on April 2 and stated that the partnership of N. Blakely and W. Stair, of Blakely & Stair, were manufacturing coffins and were located in the rear portion of L. Rood's Drug Store. It also stated that they had a hearse for funerals at no extra charge. An advertisement for Mr. Blakely on September 14, 1858 stated that he was a sexton (probably of the Monroe Cemetery, now known as Greenwood Cemetery) and an undertaker. No partner was mentioned in this ad. His store was now located above L. Rood's Drug Store where he had on hand ready-made coffins of all sizes and models. The ad again mentioned "a free hearse for funeral occasions."

Blakely's occupation in the 1860 census was listed as undertaker. He had been born in Vermont and owned \$1,500 of real estate and \$2,000 of personal property. A short article in the June 5, 1861 Sentinel stated that he was located "in his old shop, over the store occupied by Banks & Son, on the east side of the square." He was able to furnish shrouds of all sizes cheaper than they could be made singly. Coffins of all sizes and a free hearse was always on hand.

The Sentinel announced on February 24, 1864 that Blakely and E. L. Ryan had formed a co-partnership in the cabinet and upholstery business. Blakely had built up "an extensive patronage in this line" within the previous two years. The editor asserted that the "patronage will not diminish on account of the new arrangement." An advertisement for the firm on July 13 confirmed that they were still on the east side of the square and were selling furniture consisting of bureaus, bookcases, sofas, settees, chairs, bedsteads, tables, stands, mirrors, marble top stands, and more. They also sold gilt molding for mirror and picture frames. Besides selling furniture that they manufactured, they carried the choicest furniture from the eastern markets. The bottom of the ad mentioned that they also "keep on hand all sizes of Coffins, which we will sell as low as can be obtained anywhere in the country." It was again mentioned that the hearse was furnished for free.

In the same issue of the Sentinel the editor said, "Their Furniture Store has become one of the institutions of the country, and not only receives but deserves a large share of public patronage. Any person who remembers the comparatively limited scale on which Mr. Blakely started two years ago, would be astonished to enter his rooms now and see the immense quantities of rich and elegant furniture with which they are crowded. The merchant prince who desires to furnish his palatial dwelling, or the humble laborer who seeks a set of chairs for his lowly cottage, each can be accommodated there and on as reasonable terms as any where in the State."

Unfortunately, Blakely and Ryan dissolved their partnership by mutual consent later that year on October 17. Blakely continued the business at the old stand where the notes and accounts needed to be paid.

This advertisement from the July 13, 1864 issue of the Monroe Sentinel shows that partners N. Blakely and F. L. Ryan carried coffins and furnished a hearse free of charge. Blakely & Ryan was a predecessor to the Shriner funeral establishments in Monroe.

The Sentinel editor shared on July 19, 1865 that his compositors had been startled by the noise on the south side of their office, which sounded like someone was trying to break into their office through the brick wall. A “committee of investigation was appointed” who found that it was only Blakely’s workmen who were “mortising holes in the wall to receive the ends of the floor timbers of his new building. The relief was instantaneous.”

It was reported on August 16 that “Blakely’s new building is fast approaching completion and will be a commodious one for his business. He expects to fill up soon with as fine a lot of furniture as ever was brought to this county.” He had moved in before the end of the month.

It was less than 17 months later, on January 1, 1867, that Mr. Blakely sold his furniture establishment to Young & Yarger. It was reported on February 27 that William McCracken and L. S. Smock purchased the Young & Yarger furniture establishment “near the northeast corner of the square.” In a strange turn of events, a new firm operated by N. Blakely and D. R. Davenport purchased the furniture establishment of McCracken & Smock in April 1868. This means that Blakely and his new partner now bought back the business that he had owned less than 16 months prior, taking possession on the 15th. One has to wonder what the young Newell Blakely was doing during those months that he was out of the furniture/undertaking business.

Blakely & Davenport received a new, elegant hearse in July 1869. The Sentinel was informed that it cost \$1,500 in Cincinnati. The editor added, “This is certainly quite an outlay for such an article, but the fact is, these gentlemen are bound to keep ahead in everything that pertains to their line of business.”

As we saw in the previous columns, Ferdinand Shriner became a partner of Newell Blakely in 1870. So the Shriner-Hager-Gohlke Funeral Home got its start when Blakely started in the business after coming to Monroe in 1855. [This date came from his obituary.] It is thought that this makes it the longest, continuously-operating funeral home in the state.