

# Eagle Hotel once stood on Post Office site

*Jury still out on whether or not historic property is haunted. YOU be the judge!*

By Maurice “Christopher” Morley  
*As told to Ann Hauprich in October 2010*

BALLSTON SPA – A bustling hotel once graced the lot where the Post Office now stands at the corner of Front Street and Milton Avenue. It was called the Eagle Hotel, and when it burned to the ground in 1932, the ashes included ghostly traces of evidence of a ghastly murder that had taken place a century earlier.

According to an account in *The Bench & Bar of Saratoga County*, which was published in 1876, Aaron Case – who was temporarily in charge of the Eagle Hotel while its proprietor was absent — was fatally stabbed on the night of November 9, 1833 after discovering an intruder in the hotel’s baggage room.

*The Bench & Bar* states that Case died inside of the Eagle Hotel of a stab wound to the throat that severed his jugular vein. The suspect in the case was described in the book as “a disreputable mulatto barber of the village” by the name of John Watkins. Details of the grisly murder are spelled out as follows by author Enos R. Mann inside of the pages of *The Bench & Bar*: “On the fatal day, Case discovered Watkins in the baggage room of the hotel and endeavored to capture him. The latter seizing a knife from behind the bar ran out into the street followed by Case. Reaching the middle of the street, he (Watkins) halted and plunged the knife into the throat of Case and then fled. Case walked back into the hotel, sat in a chair and fell dead.”

The stabbing was reportedly witnessed by Samuel R. Garrett, a farmer who had just come upon the street from the hotel’s shed. As soon as the alleged murderer fled the scene, Garrett reportedly “gave chase, sounding the alarm.”

Watkins was soon seized by Samuel S. Wakeman in front of what is now Village Hall – but was then the First National Bank – at the corner of Front and Bath Streets. *The Bench & Bar* goes on to credit Wakeman, aided by Stephen Fox, Abraham T. Davis and Moses Williams, with securely tying and delivering Watkins to Jailor Dunning.

During the trial that followed inside of the courthouse that once stood at the corner of Bath and West High Streets, Watkins was defended by attorney Oran G. Otis. However, the book states “the culprit having no witnesses to prove mitigating circumstances, counselor Otis had only to depend on cross examination (of witnesses sworn for the people) to furnish his defense.”

District Attorney Warren secured a conviction and Watkins “was sentenced to be hanged on Friday, January 17, 1834.” What happened next reads like a Fright Night thriller. It seems that Watkins gained “popular sympathy” while awaiting his execution “by professing great religious zeal and repentance for past misgivings.”

Indeed it was reportedly believed efforts by Otis to have the convicted barber’s sentence commuted “would have been effectual, doubtless, had not Watkins by another base and murderous act sealed his fate.”

This occurred during December 1833 when Jailor Dunning entered Watkins’ cell to read a chapter in the Bible to him. The passage continues: “While the good man was reading the sacred text, the culprit struck him with a billet of wood, seized his keys and escaped. He (Watkins) concealed himself for some days in S.S. Seaman’s barn in Ballston, and went from there to a barn in Malta, on the Merrill farm. While in (one of the barns), his feet were badly frozen. His hiding place was at last divulged by a colored man and he was taken back to his doom. On the appointed day, he was taken to the spot where (another convict) 13 years before had expiated his crime, and on the same gallows, he was hanged by the neck until he was dead by Sheriff John Vernam. He, too, was prepared for the fall by Sheriff Joseph Jennings, who yet retains the noose used on the occasion.”

The 1876 account goes on to say that prior to his public execution, Watkins confessed to having been a murderous pirate before settling in Ballston Spa. The confession — which was printed in sensational Police Gazette style — was allegedly made by Watkins in the hope of securing a reprieve, however, “on the gallows, he declared it was false.”

Not included in *The Bench & Bar* book are accounts I recall reading elsewhere that the location of the hanging was up on Lowell Street and that uniformed soldiers were called upon to keep the crowds back as Watkins was carried to the scaffold while secured to a chair. This method of transporting Watkins to the gallows was necessary because his feet were so badly frostbitten that he could no longer walk.

Other accounts stated that the so-called “colored man” mentioned in *The Bench & Bar* had promised the suspect, who was “part Negro and part Caucasian”, that he would take him to a safe destination if only he would hide his face and body beneath blankets in the back of a rig. Instead, he took him directly to the authorities in the village.

It seems that at least two promises made to Watkins were broken prior to his execution. So if you see a shadowy figure lurking between Post Office and Village Hall on Front Street on the night of the next full moon, you’ll have a pretty good idea of who he is and why his spirit may still be restless after nearly 200 years.



### THEN & NOW

Photographer W. Bronson Taylor captured the hustle and bustle of the Eagle Hotel for posterity on a glass plate negative in a bygone era while credit for the May 2018 digital camera image of the exterior of the Post Office that now occupies the historic corner lot in the heart of Ballston Spa, NY goes to USPS Clerk Tammy Biasini.



**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** While preparing these pages about the Post Office in Ballston Spa which occupies the corner of Front Street and Milton Avenue where The Eagle Hotel once stood, I recalled some of Chris Morley's tales about the landmark's basement being haunted. And indeed a few employees readily admitted to "getting chills" or "an eerie feeling" when they descended into the area that is now primarily used for storage. But the most vivid account was shared by clerk Tammy Biasini on (of all days!) Friday, the 13th of April, 2018. "I was downstairs getting my lunch ready and heard a locker close in the next room. I thought it might be a co-worker who sometimes has lunch at the same time I do. But when I looked, no one was there. When I returned to the lunch table, I heard someone snuffle. Again nobody was there." Upon returning to the main floor, Tammy found the maintenance man and asked if he or anybody else had just been in that part of the basement. The answer was no. (Unless, of course, you believe in ghosts!)