

Abraham Erb

After an arduous journey from Pennsylvania to Preston in 1806, Abraham Erb rested and looked north. Of the 4,000 acres he held in the area, Erb decided he would settle far to the north on land that was marshy.



Many people criticized him, but it was likely the fast-moving creek that inspired the entrepreneur in Erb. His decision to settle on Beaver Creek, now known as Laurel Creek, would prove to be a momentous one in the history of Waterloo.

After travelling a difficult trail from the south on what would later become King Street, the Mennonite farmer built a log cabin and then began work on a primitive saw mill.

The saw mill prospered and in 1816 Erb opened a grist mill. That same year the settlement Abraham Erb had founded was officially named Waterloo. Erb used the water from a beaver pond nearby to increase the flow of water needed to power an 18-foot mill wheel. This beaver pond is now known as Silver Lake.

Erb had the foresight to construct a mill large enough to accommodate the farmers who had travelled over poor trails with their grain and their oxen. He had a large fireplace built so that the men, some of whom would have travelled days to get there, would have a place to fraternize and warm themselves. What began as Erb's Road, and is now Erb Street, was being formed during those early years to help farmers bring their wheat to be ground.

An early account describes how the grist mill played a central role in the development of Waterloo as a community: "While waiting for his grist the farmer lounged about the basement where it was warm and comfortable, and where he met his friends, the other farmers, so that it became a social centre and a business mart as well . . . They warmed their victuals and made coffee at the fireplace, and at night wrapped themselves in their blankets and slept on the floor, or on the bags of bran, or anywhere so long as they received the warmth of the fireplace."

Erb, who died in 1830, sold the mills and the surrounding lands to Jacob C. Snider. The grist mill remained in operation for 111 years and was regarded as the "best mill site west of the Grand River." It is ironic that his brother John Erb, who had settled to the south in what became known as Preston, had discouraged Erb from building his business so far north because he predicted pioneers would be slow to settle the area.

The Erb brothers were just two of the 28 individuals from Pennsylvania who invested in the huge German Company Tract. The former Indian lands, which became known as Block 2 and later Waterloo Township, covered 60,000 acres.

However, Abraham Erb's decision to settle west of the Grand River on the creek, turned out to be a fortuitous one when a second group of Mennonites from Lancaster County in

Pennsylvania purchased 45,195 acres next to Block 2. The roads opened up in these new settlements all converged on Erb's mill.

Erb, who was born in 1772, had married Magdalena (nee Erb) in 1804 before coming to Upper Canada. The couple had one son named Benjamin who died when he was just seven years old. Abraham and "Mollie" Erb adopted and raised two children - Barnabas Devitt and Rachel Winson.

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