

Heritage Orangeville's aim: to preserve beauty, uniqueness

Written By LINDA ADDY

Heritage Orangeville is a committee of Town Council made up of volunteer stewards of Orangeville's built history.

Tasked with advising Council on the exercise of its role in the preservation of the unique place we know as Orangeville, members bring a wealth of hard-won knowledge and practical experience to the heritage conversation.

The committee represents the quiet majority who appreciate and care for the beauty and uniqueness of our historic downtown and neighbourhoods.

Bricks and mortar tell a story of community, craftsmanship, and the creation of home. They also lead us to wonder about the people and personalities behind the walls.

Who were they? Where were they from? How did they end up in Orangeville? These are questions that we can answer through newspapers, tax assessment records, photographs, church and cemetery records, and censuses.

These valuable resources can be accessed at the Orangeville Public Library, the Dufferin County Museum and Archives (DCMA) and on sites like Ancestry.ca.

In this article, these resources were used to bring to life the story of an immigrant family and what they built in Orangeville.

Making a home in Orangeville:

An immigrant family's story

An advertisement appeared in the The Orangeville Sun on 24 January 1861 in which a man named Sepha Donner thanked customers for their patronage since his arrival in Orangeville. He also promoted his growing business as the best choice for high quality and low price.

Just who was this Sepha Donner?

The story begins in Wittmond, Germany where Sepha Donner was born on 15 June 1822. Nothing is known about his early life in Germany, but he arrived in Canada in 1856.

Meanwhile, a young woman named Mary Elizabeth Herald was born in Manchester, Lancashire in England on 7 November 1818 to William Herald, a tailor and draper, and his wife, Nancy. Mary's parents were older when they had her; Nancy 40 and William 49 at the time of her birth.

Mary was baptized at the Lloyd Street Presbyterian Chapel-Non-Conformist in Manchester on 14 March 1819. Despite having an honourable trade, the family lived in humble circumstances. In 1841 they were lodging in a cellar on Thomas Street in Manchester. By 1851, Mary was living at 14 Lever Street in Manchester in the boarding house kept by Mary Turner. Her occupation was listed as a servant. One can surmise that by the age of 32, Mary may have been wondering if life as a servant was all she had to look forward to. Somehow, Mary found the courage to leave all that she knew behind and start a new adventure in Canada.

Part of the adventure involved meeting Sepha Donner. They married shortly after his arrival in Canada and by 1861 they were living in the village which was to become Orangeville with their twin daughters, Paulina and Clara, born on 23 June 1860. A third child, son Theodore, was born in 1866 when Nancy and Sepha were both well into their 40s.

On the 1861 Census, Andrew Mara, a local shoemaker, is listed as one of their neighbours. Mara and family lived in a small stone cottage on Wellington Street, so the Donners also lived somewhere in the Wellington and Front Street area at that time.

Sepha must have been an enterprising man as he quickly went into business as a tinsmith, a trade he likely learned in Germany.

Sepha branched out from tinsmithing into the merchandising of stoves and other metal products. He also trained apprentices ensuring his knowledge of the trade continued.

In 1886, Sepha bought 125 Broadway and operated his business out of those premises until 1906 while living with his family above the shop.

Mary died of heart failure on 2 May 1898 at the good age of 80, having seen both her twin girls and her son well married and grandchildren born. Sadly, Theodore only survived his mother by two years.

Sepha lived to be 94 years old, dying on 14 April 1917 in Toronto. At the time of his death he had been living in Toronto at 525 Sherbourne Street in the Aged Men's Home. Cause of death is listed as dementia. Sepha Donner was buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Orangeville alongside his wife, Mary.

If you would like to learn more about Orangeville's history or research the history of an heritage property, contact the Clerk's Department at the Town Hall, 519-941-0440. Also, DCMA Archivist Laura Camilleri will be at the Orangeville Public Library on March 15 and 22 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and March 29 from 1 to 8 p.m. to offer local history help.