

# Isaac Erb Bowman

As a politician, Isaac Erb Bowman embraced the values of the common good when he voted in favour of Confederation in 1867. Just one year later, as a businessman, he embraced these same values when he helped found the Ontario Mutual Life Assurance Company, the first of its kind in Canada.



Bowman voted for a federal union, in part because he felt it would protect the British colonies from any threats from the south. “Our proximity to the United States makes it necessary that the union should be maintained at any cost,” said the Liberal member for North Waterloo.

His push for a life insurance company that embraced the principles of mutual benefit and strength in community, exemplified the reigning beliefs among Waterloo leaders of the day.

Not surprisingly, Bowman’s reputation in both business and political circles reflected one another:

“In Parliament he was noted for his sound opinion, his courtesy toward opponents, and his dignified bearing.”

Bowman served as the president of the insurance company, now Sun Life, until his death in 1897. A 1906 newspaper account described him as “a man of sterling and unimpeachable character . . . he was a man of shrewd, sound business and good financial judgment, combined with a wide practical business experience and extensive personal connection throughout the country.”

Bowman was born on a farm in St. Jacobs in 1832, the eldest of ten children born to John Baumann and Lydia Erb. He attended public school and became a teacher after graduating from Rockwood Academy in 1850. He also served as the treasurer, clerk and postmaster for Woolwich Township while living in St. Jacobs.

His political aspirations grew and in 1864 he was elected as a Liberal member of the last Parliament before Confederation. He represented the north riding of Waterloo from 1864 to 1878, and again from 1887 until 1896.

While he was well-known for his leadership of the Ontario Mutual Life Assurance Company, he began his business career as a senior member of the firm of Bowman and Zinkan, which operated tanneries in St. Jacobs, Port Elgin and Southampton. He also served as the president of the Mutual Fire Insurance Company, which was established in 1863, and was involved in the beginnings of the Dominion Life Assurance Company in 1888.

In being named to the Waterloo County Hall of Fame, Bowman was called “one of the most prominent and competent politicians and businessmen in Waterloo County’s history.”

*Photo courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library.*