

John Hoffman



When John Hoffman moved to Waterloo County in the early 1830's it is said he arrived with "half a dollar to his name."

However, within little more than twenty years, the brash furniture maker became the largest landowner in the Berlin-Waterloo area when he purchased four hundred acres for \$37,500 in 1853.

Hoffman, who was born in Pennsylvania in 1808, was initially turned down by Elias Snider when he tried to purchase the large tract of swampy land between Kitchener Collegiate Institute and the Snider grist mill near the corner of King and Erb Streets.

After Hoffman left to investigate investment opportunities in the United States, he received a telegram saying that Snider had changed his mind. Hoffman, together with his son-in-law Isaac Weaver, quickly purchased the land, and in 1855 a land surveyor prepared a plan of lots for sale.

When it came time to sell the lots, Hoffman sold them off with a traveling auction block:

" . . . on the day of the sale, a large wagon, drawn by oxen, was loaded with refreshments, liquid and solid. The auctioneer used this wagon as a stand, and moved from lot to lot until all were sold, the people helping themselves to the refreshment they wished, free of course."

The population of Waterloo began to grow and by 1857 it officially became a village. Hoffman served as one of the first councillors and then became Waterloo's reeve between 1863 and 1867.

He also turned his business focus to the establishment of a grain and cattle market in Waterloo, a move that helped secure the area as an agricultural centre. He further helped establish the grist mill that would later become Seagram Distillery.

However, as time went on Hoffman saw opportunity in Berlin and moved back there to become mayor of that town in 1872. Indeed, Hoffman is the only person who has led both Berlin (now Kitchener) and Waterloo.

When he died six years later, flags were lowered to half mast and businesses closed for the day. While he was remembered for his political activities, he was also respected for his business acumen. Hoffman brought a steam-powered engine into his Berlin furniture factory in 1846. He had the engine hauled by three horses from Buffalo over clay roads. The new technology gave Hoffman an edge on his competitors and opened up opportunities for other local manufacturers.

John Hoffman had the reputation of an aggressive businessman who sparred with those who didn't share his vision. An early business partnership with Henry B. Bowman ultimately failed. "Both were young eagles and the store nest soon became too small to hold both of them."

Photo courtesy of the Waterloo Historical Society.