

Historically speaking

THE WAY IT WAS

The publication of
THE CASS CITY AREA HISTORICAL & GENEALOGY SOCIETY



There have been no public meetings of the Cass City Area Historical Society recently because the library has been closed due to the virus epidemic.

Cass City's Pioneer and Friend

John Laing was born in Sussex County, New Jersey. His father was born in Aberdeen, Scotland and came to America in 1685 with his parents when just a boy.



JOHN CHAPMAN LAING
1833-1906

The Laings were Quakers and they emigrated to America to escape persecution. John grew up in Plainsville in the Quaker traditions of personal self discipline and thoughtfulness. There was a Friends Meeting House near to the family farm.

He attended the public school and went on to graduate from The Newton Academy at the age of twenty.

**A true friend advises
justly, assists readily,
adventures boldly,
takes all patiently,
defends courageously,
and continues a friend
unchangeably.**

William Penn

John then became a school teacher himself and taught school for four years while working at various other jobs during the summers. He then moved to Michigan to the Flint area with his widowed mother. His father had died the year that John was born. While in the Flint area he and Sarah Wedyemeyer were married. Sarah also came from New Jersey. Shortly thereafter they bought 160 acres of land from the government. It was in Waterloo Township of Tuscola County. The township name was later changed to Elmwood.

John stated that there wasn't a stick of timber cut within miles of his place when he began clearing and cultivating his land. He pursued this occupation for about nine years during which he served as the first postmaster in Elmwood, and the post office was located at his house.

Life was not easy and there

were hardships that occurred. They had two sons, Arthur and Stanley, and a daughter, Minnie. Arther died at eight years of an accident, and Stanley died at five years of age of diphtheria.

They moved to Cass City in 1869, and with his two brothers-in-law purchased a general store from Jesse Fox which stood on the southeast corner of the main intersection where Veteran's Park is today. Nathaniel Clark's store sold lumberman supplies on the opposite corner and was the only other store in town. There were very few houses in town at that time. John eventually bought his partners out, and they went into another business.

Supplies had to come from as far away as Saginaw, and that could take up to five days round trip by horse and wagon because of the very poor road conditions. Farmers had to pool together to take their grain to market there using the same method.

Jesse Fox built a grist mill which stood across the street from the current



Laing & Wedyemeyer

Quaker Maid Store, but its capacity and quality of the flour were not the best.



Elkland Roller Mill

With a partner by the name of Nash, John bought the mill and upgraded it to a roller mill. This increased the mill's capacity, and the quality of the flour. This gave the farmers a local market for their grain and the finest flour for the customers in the area for homemade bread, which was a most important food staple at that time. The mill's inventory was extended to include a range of farming tools and supplies which included animal feeds, binder twine, baby chickens and coal from the Unionville mine. The mill lasted until 1951 when it was torn down.

In the later years John's son-in-law, Oren Janes partnered with him in the store business. The store stood until 1929 when it was torn down to make room for a new type of business in town - a gas station, the S T & H (Sanilac, Tuscola & Huron) Station.

Over his years in the community John made many important contributions in its foundation, growth and development.

He became the first Postmaster in town, and the town Treasurer for seven years. He was on the board committee to build the Episcopal Methodist Church in 1869, and later on the board to build the Presbyterian Church in 1877. He was on the committee to build the Township Hall in 1880. He was the township clerk for a while. He was a charter member of the Order of Odd Fellows. He even partnered with Rev. John Kelland as editors of the Cass City Enterprise News Paper for a while, which was located on the second floor of the Township Hall. All of this took place while he was also operating his business. During the 1890s he took eight years off to serve as the Tuscola County Judge of

Probate in Caro.

While he was active in all of these activities he also built himself a house on south Seeger Street which still stands tall today.

It seems to be a very large home for a small family, but in the early days with the lack of facilities and public transportation that we enjoy today, if you had

company such a family come from a distance to visit they would have to stay with you for often long periods of time. The Laing's daughter Minnie Janes and her family also lived in the house at the time.

November 26, 1906 was a sad day when John C. Laing passed away ending a career of service to the community he loved and helped to establish. The reason for his death was recorded as apoplexy, which means his heart gave out. He was laid to rest in the Elkland Township Cemetery.

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Over the years some former residents would write to the Editor of the Cass City Chronicle recalling the early days when they lived in Cass City.

Mrs. H.S. Gamble wrote, "I was nine years old when with the rest of our family I came to Cass City - not much of a city at that time. If I remember right there were two stores, one owned by Nathaniel Clark, and the other by Laing & Weydemeyer. There was (so I have heard my mother say) only one other dwelling in town when ours was built."

Another person wrote, "When in Cass City we missed a familiar townsman, one we have known for 24 years, John C. Laing, one of



The Mr. & Mrs. John C. Laing Home

most honest men we have ever met. He made no religious pretensions, but with profit many professors could emulate by his example."

Dr. Norman MacLachlan wrote, "The first time I was in Cass City there was a narrow strip of woods extending across Seeger Street at about Third Street, and there were only two stores, Laing and Weydemeyer and Tennant and Polly. I shall never forget the many favors done me by that good and noble man, John C. Laing. He was a prince among nature's noblemen. I will never forget his kindly and honest face. Shortly after going to Cass City to practice, by the aid of Eli Hunt I traded myself out of a horse. I had no money. Dr. Deming had a balky horse named Buckskin which he offered to me for fifty dollars cash. Like everybody else in those days, I went to Mr. Laing for help and he told me he would endorse my note for \$50.00 for sixty days, and I could cash it at the Montague Bank in Caro. The bank discounted my note for \$3.00. No wonder Charlie Montague got rich.

(Cass City had no bank at that time.)

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"I expect to pass through this life but once. Therefore, if there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being let me do it now, and not defer or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again."

William Penn

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