

A Brief History of Erin Village

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Dedicated to the fond memory of 'Hunk', who accompanied the author some thirteen years in the study of Erin's natural and architectural treasures, each of which was sniffed with equal enthusiasm.

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The Charles Street dam, pictured here in a staged portrait of village notables, is the key to understanding the early history of the village of Erin. It was on this site in 1826 that Henry Trout built a dam and sawmill on the west branch of the Credit River.

Three years later, after one destructive fire and indifferent ownership, the property changed hands for the not inconsiderable sum of \$700. The newly minted proprietor, eighteen-year-old Scottish emigrant Daniel McMillan, together with his two brothers Hugh and Charles, understood completely that control of water and milling rights was one sure business model for success in pioneer Upper Canada.

In an age long before modern machinery, the McMillans relied on their backs and hands to do the heavy work of rebuilding the sawmill and adding a new grist mill. Later they would construct a second dam and two additional mills further upstream near Church Street. The energy and enterprise of Daniel McMillan would soon distinguish Erin's leading citizen, destined for immortality as the subject of the poet Alexander McLachlan's eulogy 'A Backwoods Hero'. But there was genius in the man as well. A close inspection of the Charles Street dam reveals an iron grate across the entrance to a millrace headed east towards Main Street. Just what was Daniel's intent?

As we wander south along the course of the West Credit, notice its velocity as the river bends and crosses under Main Street. Just over the bridge we pass the Erin Cenotaph, a sober reminder of sacrifices made on distant battlefields. Almost certainly the two dozen lads whose names are inscribed on the monument waded, fished and swam in nearby waters. J. D. Gear was one. R. McLachlan, another.



Three Union Street. Devonshire House sits on a two-hundred-acre parcel of Crown land purchased by Daniel McMillan from Abraham Nelles of Grimsby in 1836. Daniel later sold half of it to his brother Charles who built this impressive brick residence in 1856 to underscore his elevated social standing in the village. Five years later Alfred Hood, owner of a local general store, bought the house and the one-acre lot it now occupies. Notice the beautifully proportioned front addition with its ornate fretwork. The property is currently owned by Audrey and Jim Devonshire who operate a bed and breakfast.

As we return to Main Street we pass 2 Union Street, another of Erin's earliest brick homes. Note the datestone, the lancet windows at the front of the medieval box-hall and the picket fence, which cleverly echoes design elements from the house. Cross Main Street and pause to read the Heritage Ministry plaque beside the bridge. Notice that the river drops sharply yet again and curls abruptly northward.



Mundell Lumber, 51 Main Street. Look back across Main Street to the Charles Street dam. The millrace we noticed earlier burrows under the street and hardware store towards a three-storey, grey frame building which was built, in 1838, by Daniel McMillan as an oat mill. The water in the flume develops an amazing thirty horsepower as it drops seven metres from the dam to the waterwheel. Few mills in Ontario were sited as cleverly to take advantage of local topography.

McMillan's oat mill passed through the hands of Wm. Cornock and Henry McNaughton before Benjamin Mundell bought it in 1896. Mundell converted the facility to a planing mill, which complemented perfectly his skills as both carpenter and contractor. Benjamin's son David took possession in 1918 on his return from service overseas. David's eldest son Bill joined the firm at the close of the Second World War, and Bill's younger brother Jim signed on in 1952.

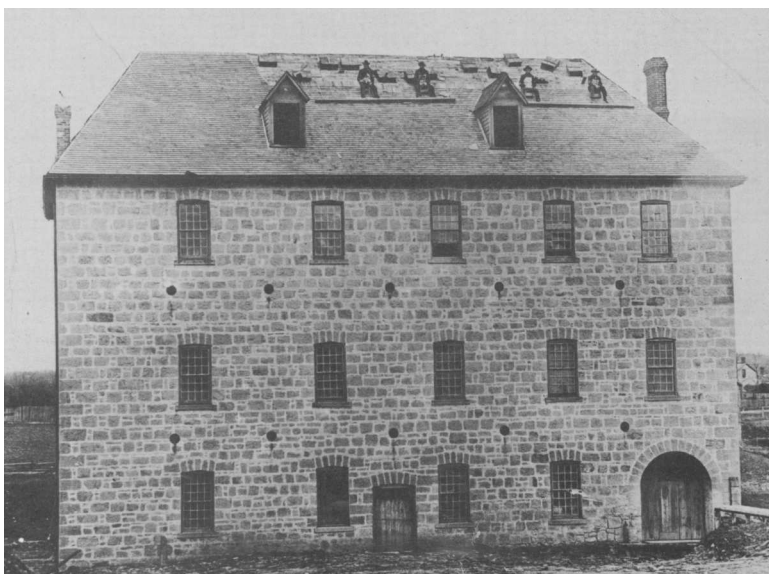
Inside the mill a horizontal waterwheel drives a line-shafting system of pulleys and belts to power a wealth of intricate woodworking machines. Only once in the mill's history was the flow of water halted, and that was to remove an enterprising beaver which had taken up residence in 1982. This classic nineteenth-century industrial system could still be seen in operation as recently as 1990. The business is currently owned by Benjamin Mundell's great-grandson, Dana.

Often the second industry to be established in a nineteenth-century mill town would be a distillery, and Erin was no exception to the norm. Wm Cornock built a distillery in 1838 at the back of what is now 57 Main Street (Mundell's Window, Door and Bath). Often the tailings from grain delivered for milling but unsuitable for flour could be used to produce the 'cheap whisky' common in southern Ontario until discriminating tastes changed drinking habits in the 1870s. A jug of Cornock's plonk retailed at twenty-five cents, and a keg for one dollar.



All Saints Anglican Church, 81 Main Street. After nearly twenty years of infrequent service from travelling missionaries, the Anglicans in Erin were finally able to construct a permanent building on this site in the year of Confederation, 1867. The aforementioned Wm Cornock, businessman, politician and devout Anglican, had closed his distillery in 1860. Cornock offered a piece of his land for use by the congregation in return for a nominal five shillings. The church is built in the Gothic Revival style, set appropriately back from the bustle of commerce on Main Street. The bell tower, added in 1910, was used not only to announce Sunday service but also to sound the village fire alarm.

The building to the right of the church (77 Main Street) was once the stable for the Queen's Hotel, directly opposite, which burned in 1913.



McMillan's Grist Mill, 93 Main Street (rear). The three-storey, dirt yellow stone building to be found behind Budson Farm & Feed embodies both triumph and tragedy. In 1849 the entrepreneurial Daniel McMillan began construction of his fifth, last and largest mill to service an increased demand for flour in Britain and to exploit a favourable tariff for wheat with the USA. He imported over a hundred stonemasons from his native Scotland to erect the walls. And he engaged another hundred labourers to dig a lengthy millrace from the upper, Church Street dam, south along the east bank of the river behind the present-day Valu-Mart, abruptly east where Deborah's Chocolates fills a space between two more substantial structures at 98 and 102 Main Street, thence under a bridge and on down to the mill.

The work was well and speedily completed and the mill appeared set to become Daniel's crowning business achievement. In the final days of construction, however, McMillan pierced his hand, accidentally, with a large splinter. Unattended, the wound quickly festered, gangrene took hold and within three days Erin's master builder of mills would die an agonizing death at the early age of thirty-eight. Two years later the original name of the village, MacMillan's Mills, was changed to Erinsville. Daniel McMillan is interred in Erin Pioneer Cemetery.



Scott's Main Street Station, 95 Main Street. Daniel McMillan built a lavish home for his family on this site in 1846. William Chisholm bought the property twenty years later and opened the Globe Hotel. J. P. Bush operated the hotel in partnership with William Willis at the turn of the century. A. J. Horton bought the building in 1915 and managed it for thirty years, even during the challenging business climate of the Temperance Act until the hotel finally burned in 1945.

Of the five grand public houses that once graced Erin's streets, only the Busholme Inn, currently owned by Bill Mundell's son Dana, remains. The Globe, the Queen's and the Station House, uptown on Lorne Street, all burned. The Clark House (41 Main Street) was demolished, and is now the site of the Liquor Control Board.

Erin Full Gospel Fellowship (103 Main Street), to the left of the Globe in the photograph, was built by Duncan McMillan in 1873 originally as a Christian church (Disciples of Christ). The congregation included many of the pioneers of the village who had met in a hall over the Clark House drive shed (40 Main Street) before the present church was completed. Annie Cook, a granddaughter of Daniel McMillan's sister Janet, was a life member of the Church of Christ Disciples.

The Wesleyan Methodists built this church in 1870 at 115 Main Street to replace an earlier octagonal concrete structure that had burned. The Wesleyans were one of fourteen divisions of Methodism active in Canada prior to the formation of the Methodist Church of Canada in 1874. Following church union in 1925 the Methodist Church became Erin United Church.



The Gear House, 119 Main Street. By 1900 many villages in Wellington County were large enough to attract their own doctors. In 1905 Dr. Harry Gear commissioned Ben Mundell and Wm. Graham to construct this handsome Edwardian-style mansion. Long a prominent Erin landmark, the Gear House features an octagonal tower, limestone sills, lintels and accents and also beautiful diamond-paned, stained-glass windows. The same two builders also collaborated on the Gear drugstore across the street at 116 Main Street the following year.

The two-storey carriage house at the rear of the Gear property sheltered the doctor's vehicles, both horse-drawn and later gasoline-powered, utilized for making his rounds of house calls. Patients seeking urgent assistance could communicate directly with the doctor with the aid of Erin's first private intercom – an audio tube running from the front porch to Dr. Gear's master bedroom above.



Continuing north, we cross Church Street and arrive at 155 Main Street. This impressive red-brick building is the largest church in the village. On the front wall, four spired buttresses topped with arrow finials point aggressively skyward while guarding three large lancet windows perhaps intended to create a sense of serenity. Inside, a high, vaulted cathedral ceiling reiterates the architectural theme of grandeur. Built in 1881 to replace an older (1848) Union Church, the new house of worship was named to honour the Reverend Dr. Robert Burns of Knox Church, Toronto, who had played an important part in securing a permanent Presbyterian church for Erin Village.

If you wander to the yard behind the church you will be surrounded by sturdy rubblestone walls. Old photographs reveal that sizeable drive sheds once stood there. In the present era we tend to forget that prior to 1920 horses were pretty much the main form of rural transportation and that the animals had constant need of food, water and shelter. Stand in the yard and imagine the many parishioners arriving by carriage on a Sunday and tethering their horses and conveyances under the vast roofs before attending at service. And Burns was just one of four churches on the Main Street, each with its own drive shed.

At the time of Church Union in 1925, the congregation of Burns Presbyterian chose to remain part of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.



The building at 157 Main Street, immediately to the north of Burns Presbyterian, is currently the home of the former reeve of the village Jim Mundell. At a glance the residence appears to be a basic storey-and-a-half, limestone block structure partially hidden behind by a large cobbles porch. But a close examination of old photographs reveals the separate boys' and girls' entrances featured in front of most early Ontario schools. And, in fact, the original one-storey Erin village school had been built on this site in 1856, at a time when there were potentially 159 school-age children living in the vicinity. One of their first teachers, a Mr George Leitch, was hired for £100 per annum, but would later agree to teach for £90 if he were provided with a small house and garden. Three-quarters of an acre were purchased forthwith from the estate of Daniel McMillan and severed from property behind the Union (Burns Presbyterian) Church.

A second storey (pictured here) was added later to accommodate Continuation students, but already by the early 1920s the school was deemed too small to service the growing enrollment, and a more modern building was opened north of Scotch Street in 1923, on the façade of which can still be seen the traditional roman majuscules designating BOYS and GIRLS separate entrances. David Mundell bought the 'old' schoolhouse, removed the second storey and turned it into a private home shortly thereafter.



The Busholme Inn, 156 Main Street. Set back from the street on a generous lot, the Busholme Inn is a stately example of village architecture with its red brick façade accented by sandstone quoins, lintels and sills. Built in 1886 as a hospital, though never used as such, the Busholme was owned by a succession of doctors then converted to a hotel in 1924 by A. J. Horton and named by Horton's successor, J. P. Bush. Prospective guests were invited to inhale the pure air of an 'invigorating climate, 1350 feet above sea level' while visiting this most 'homelike hotel in Ontario.'

Notice the stonework above the windows. The lintels are segmentally arched with a central keystone, all resting on two corner blocks. More than forty examples of this unusual window treatment have been discovered in Erin, Hillsburgh and the surrounding township, but none at all further afield. Research has established that all known examples date from the years 1886 to 1900, and that the stone used was sandstone from nearby Credit Forks quarry. So it would appear that Erin Village may have its own signature architectural feature!

The Busholme site concludes the walking portion of our tour, though some may also wish to have a look at Daniel McMillan's Church Street dam and the upper pond a short block to the west.



The Erin Agricultural Society was organized in 1850, and presented its first Fall Fair two years later. In 1865 a permanent site was fixed in Erin Village in return for a ten-year lease on four acres of land, a board fence surrounding the property and the construction of an agricultural hall and drill shed, which were completed in 1867.

Admission to the Fair was initially ten cents, but increased to twenty-five cents by 1896. In 1898 sufficient land to accommodate the horse ring, extending from the original lots 10 to 13 south to Centre Street, was purchased for \$300. In 1916 the Fair was held on Thanksgiving weekend for the first time. In 1919 the livestock exhibits were opened to all comers, though the Hall exhibits remained limited to residents of Erin Township exclusively.

In 1935 floodlights were installed in the horse ring. In 1939 pens for sheep and swine were added, and showcases introduced to the Hall. In 1942 a Regional Shorthorn Show was added. By 1954, the Agricultural Coliseum boasted a dance floor on the second floor but the Ice Palace was subsequently condemned and closed in 1976. A new arena and community centre opened two years later, at the considerable cost of \$725,000. The old Coliseum burned in the winter of 1994. The current Coliseum was rebuilt, on a more modest scale, and opened in time to welcome visitors to the 1995 Erin Fall Fair.



Stanley Park. In the northwest corner of the village, the West Credit was diverted not for the commerce of milling, but to deliver fresh water to two small man-made lakes for recreational purposes. James and Mary Long, original owners of the property, named it Stanley Park in memory of their infant son who had drowned in one of the lakes.

Early attractions included a merry-go-round powered by a team of heavy horses, which were also used in winter to haul blocks of ice cut from the lake for use by summer cottagers for refrigeration. The two-storey boathouse, the rowboats and, of course, the scullers have long since disappeared, yet the small lakes remain, though now shallow, silted and clogged with water-lilies. But in the 1890s and for many decades thereafter, Stanley Park was a recreational mecca for tourists who arrived by train at the nearby station and walked under the distinctive cobblestone and wooden archway to the park.

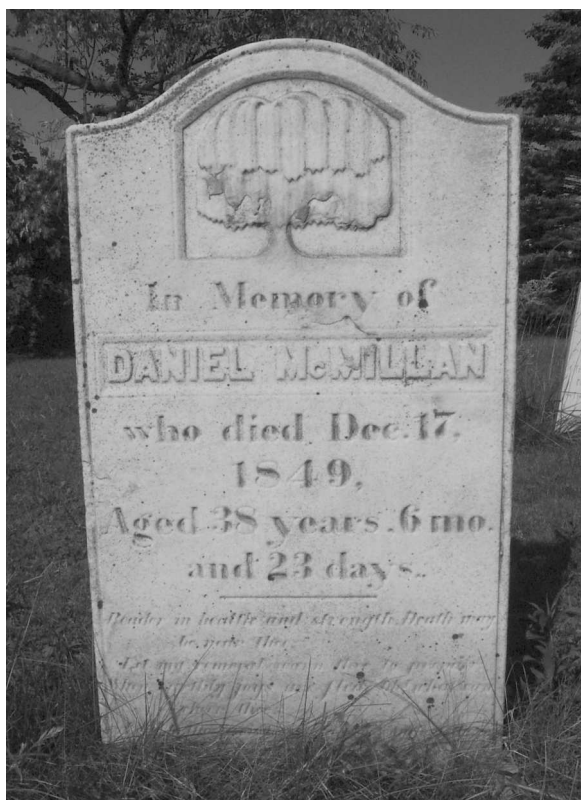
Five Methodist ministers collaborated in establishing an oval track for bicycle racing at the park in 1889. Later the same track was used for horse racing and once featured a foot race won by the famous runner Tom Longboat of the Six Nations Reserve. Harry Austin bought the Park in 1916 from his father-in-law, Isaac Teeter. Austin built a new ballroom in 1922, and was soon booking the inimitable 'Cornhuskers' Orchestra, as well as local musicians Bill Bush and Harry Gear. Through the 1920s and early 1930s the dances on the 24th of May weekend were popular, as were Fall Fair dances at Thanksgiving.



Canadian Pacific Railway Station. The Credit Valley Railway, the third of entrepreneur George Laidlaw's railway ventures, pushed west from Toronto to Streetsville then followed the Credit River Valley north to Orangeville. A secondary line branched at Cataract Junction towards a leisurely forty-seven-kilometre ramble through Erin, Hillsburgh, Orton and Fergus before terminating in Elora. The CVR was already in serious financial trouble by the time it reached Erin in 1879. By 1884 it had been absorbed into the Ontario and Quebec Railway, a holding company controlled by Canadian Pacific.

In the 1912 photo above, a section crew and supervisor pose in front of the station, a typical CVR wood-frame combination passenger and freight depot. Behind the station you can see a storage shed and a grain elevator beyond. Behind the elevator there was a retail coal dealership, one of whose sheds is still standing in 2007. The station site can be seen today by turning east from Main onto Ross Street, then north into the Elora-Cataract Trailway parking lot.

The arrival of the railway did facilitate travel to the outside world, but for the village itself the railway was more of a convenience than a stimulus for economic growth. Passenger service was limited after the Crash of 1929 and abandoned in 1958. The station was demolished in 1971, the last train left in 1987 and the rails were lifted in 1988.



Where yonder ancient willow weeps,
 The father of the village sleeps;
 Tho' but of humble birth,
 As rare a specimen was he,
 Of Nature's true nobility,
 As ever trod the earth.
 The busy head and hands are still;
 Quenched the unconquerable will
 Which fought and triumphed here;
 And tho' he's all unknown to fame,
 Yet grateful hearts still bless his name,
 And hold his memory dear.