

Naperville Nurseries

Naperville Heritage Society History Stories

One of the best indicators to gauge the success of suburban sprawl is the volume of business conducted by landscaping firms. As developers manipulate the ground to make way for new homes, streets and cul-de-sacs, they must replace the vegetation with attractive plantings. In the past, pioneers broke rich, fertile prairie ground, cleared trees and established gardens and orchards for survival. Nurseries played an important and vital role in the development of farmsteads, and communities.

Naperville's proximity to Chicago and its geologically rich soils allowed several nurserymen and – nurserywomen to flourish. In the Northern [Illinois] Counties Gazetteer and Directory, 1855-56, three men or firms operated nurseries in Naperville; Lewis Ellsworth & Co., R.M. & R.W. Hunt (DuPage Eclectic Nurseries), and Charles Musson.

The following is an excerpt from the DuPage County Observer, November 2, 1853:

Another interesting feature in Naperville . . . is the taste exhibited in the erection of private residences, and in ornamenting the ground attached to them. In this respect Naperville is not excelled by any town of its size . . . in the State . . . the gardens are filled with fruit and shade trees, adorned with beautiful flowers.

The nursery and farm of Messrs. Lewis Ellsworth & Co., extending almost into the town deserve particular attention . . . [the nursery is] filled with the choicest variety of fruit trees, selected with the greatest care . . . they are in receipt of large orders from the Northwest – from Minnesota, Iowa, &c. No one should visit Naperville without seeing this nursery and its famous spring.

Lewis Ellsworth founded his nursery in 1849 at the base of Fort Hill, now occupied by the athletic fields and dormitories of North Central College. By 1857, more than 20 men were employed to cultivate, water, and ship trees and plants across the country. At the January 4, 1860, meeting of the Executive Board of the State Agricultural Society, the Ellsworth Nursery was awarded the top prize, \$20 in the “Best Arranged and Cultivated Nursery of Fruit and Ornamental trees Shrubs and Plants.”

In order to meet the demand, “so essential to the comfort and beauty of newly made prairie homes,” two new nurseries were created in the 1860s. C.W. Richmond, mapmaker, school

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teacher at the Naperville Academy, and real estate developer, broke ground northwest of downtown along the CB&Q Railroad while Ernst Von Oven, a German immigrant started his nursery (the Naperville Nurseries) west of town between the roads to Aurora and Oswego in 1866. A birds-eye view of Naperville printed in 1869 shows all three neatly arranged nurseries. The Richmond nursery was subdivided and added to the plat of Naperville as Woodlawn Addition in 1870. In 1885, the former Ellsworth Estate and nursery was divided after the death of Lewis Ellsworth. The house and hill were occupied by Judge Batten and a portion of the old nurseries managed by Von Oven's Naperville Nurseries.

Despite the passing of Ernst in 1906, the Naperville Nurseries continued and flourished under the direction of his son, Frederick, and his two daughters, Emma and Helene. Frederick died in 1929, Helene in 1931, and Emma was alone to make business decisions. She stopped retail operations in 1950 and for the next 10 years managed a wholesale operation entirely. She died in 1960. The Naperville Nurseries were sold and only a solitary water tower near the Von Oven family home, which is now owned by St. John's Episcopal Church, remains as a reminder of the nursery business that once supplied Naperville and the country with fruit and ornamental trees, shrubs and plants.

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