

John Stenger

Naperville Heritage Society History Stories

John Stenger was born in Bavaria in 1825 the son of a respected farmer, Peter Stenger. It is most likely that John was an apprentice cabinet maker in Germany, for when he came to America in 1845, he was employed in New York City as a cabinet maker. Lured by the possibility of gold, he left for the California Gold Rush in 1849. He must have made his fair share rather quickly as he returned to New York in 1850, married Anna Maria Stenger (a distant relative) and joined his father, Peter, and brother, Nicholas, in Naperville.



John Stenger

Peter Stenger came to Naperville in 1848 and shortly thereafter bought a brewery managed by Jacob Englefriedt. It is unknown when Englefriedt started his brewery, but it must not have been long. Engelfreidt's shortlived venture (by the 1850 Census, he is listed as a grocer) is considered Naperville's first brewery. This brewery burnt to the ground around 1854. Peter and his son, Nicholas, then constructed a series of stone buildings on the northwest corner of Jackson Avenue and Eagle Street, which were closer to the tunnels used to lager the beer. These tunnels, some as long as 100 feet, were hand dug and lined with limestone blocks. It appears that these tunnels were shared between the Stenger Brewery on the west end of the tunnel and the Egermann Brewery on the east end of the tunnel (on the northeast corner of Jackson and Webster Street). It is possible that Xavier Egermann and his sons established their brewery at the same time the Stengers built their brewery.

John was listed as a "joiner" or cabinet maker in the 1850 Census, but by 1860, he was enumerated as a brewer. John joined his brother and father in the business shortly after the fire of 1854 when his carpentry skills were put to the test during the construction of the new brew house in 1854 and later a malt house in 1856. The partnership was called the "John & Nicholas Stenger Brewery," which presumes the father had retired. This partnership would last until the tragic death of Nicholas at age 35 in 1864.

At the time of Nicholas' death, the brewery was producing more than 500 barrels of beer. By the 1870s, the brewery was pumping out nearly 2,000 barrels. John Stenger used many methods of modern brewing techniques and skills except glass bottling. Although remnants of bottles embossed with the Stenger name have been found, records indicate that the majority of sales were made in "eighth" barrels, most likely sold to saloons and restaurants. John Stenger

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Both John and his brother served as trustees on the Village of Naperville board. John Stenger was also a Naperville School Board trustee and director. In 1877, he founded a cheese factory on the corner of Eagle and Jackson in the original Stenger Brewery of his father. The Stengers were German Catholic and helped secure funds and materials to build SS. Peter & Paul Catholic Church in Naperville.

The Stengers owned large tracts of timberland in Kane County where they would harvest wood to make their own barrels. The large pasture to the north of the brewery contained a spring



Stenger Brewery

that flowed through the brewery complex and Naperville, ending in the river just above Main Street. Workers lived on site and were mostly from the Old World. One young immigrant, Adolph Coors rose in the company to become head brewmaster. His salary in 1871 is recorded as \$741.25 quite a sum in those days. Two years later, Coors would head for the Rocky Mountains to start his own brewery, which is still flourishing today.

John and Anna had ten children: John Nicholas (1851-1851), Barbara (1852-1925), Caroline (1855-1893), Anna (1857-1932), Peter (1859-1915), John Michael (1862-1864), Mary Rose (1864-1906), Margaret (1866 – 1866), Theresa (1867-1922) and Carl (1870-1884). Despite the fact that two daughters married brewers, Barbara (Joseph Egermann) and Mary Rose (Joseph Schamberger), John was unable to convince his family to stay with the family business. For a short time, perhaps only a year (1897), the Schamberger Brewery operated in the old Stenger Brewery. Joseph would eventually pack up his family and some of the brewing equipment and leave for Oregon, where he helped establish a brewery.

John Stenger died in 1911 having sold his beloved brewery to Chicago trusts in 1893. In 1917, the windows of the massive stone brew and malt houses were boarded up and the building re-fitted by A.V. Jackson to grow mushrooms. Thousands of pounds of mushrooms were grown in the cool, dark interiors of the former brewery. In 1956, after years of neglect, the buildings were torn down. The only vestige of the once great buildings and industry is the large 72" x 36" x 6" naming stone of limestone on display in the exhibit, "Brushstrokes of the Past...Naperville's Story," located in Pre-Emption House at Naper Settlement.

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