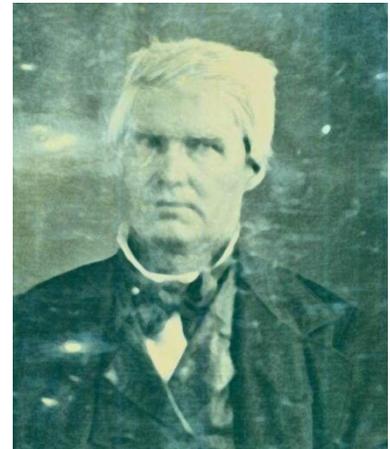


# Joseph Naper

Naperville Heritage Society History Stories

Joseph Naper was born in Shaftsbury, Bennington County, Vermont, around 1798 (there is no birth date on his gravestone, just the day he died and “Aged 64 years.” The Naper (Napier) family was originally from Scotland where they sailed merchant vessels. In America, a branch of the family settled along the coast of the Great Lakes where several sons of Robert Naper, Joseph’s father, engaged in Great Lakes ship building and sailing.



Joseph Naper married Almeda Landon of Salisbury, Connecticut, around 1824. They had five children: Robert 1825-1873, Elizabeth 1828-1868, William 1832-1890, Thomas 1835-1864, Mark 1837-1884, and Bertha 1842-1880. In 1828, Joseph and his brothers built a merchant vessel called the “Telegraph,” which would be the last ship that Captain Joseph Naper would build, sail and own. While on a routine trip to the fledgling Fort Dearborn (now Chicago), Joseph made some extra money as a surveyor for Cook County. Land surveys were necessary for the hundreds of settlers staking claims under the Pre-Emption Acts of the late 1820s and early 1830s. These acts or laws allowed large tracts of government land to be sold for as little as \$1.25 an acre providing the claimant improve the land within a year. It was while conducting such a survey that Joseph noticed not only the economic potential of the DuPage River as a power source, but also the rich fertile plains to the south of the DuPage River, the vast woods to the north, and the presence of friendly Native Americans.

In the summer of 1831, Joseph Naper sailed from Ashtabula, Ohio, with his family, his brother and 13 other families headed for Fort Dearborn, Cook County, Illinois. Upon arrival in July 1831, they sold their boat, the Telegraph, loaded up ox carts, and headed to a spot 30 miles west on the DuPage River. By September, Naper and other settlers had secured a contract with a schoolteacher and within a year had a horse-driven sawmill and trading post established. The Blackhawk War broke out in 1832 and all town building activities ceased temporarily. At that time, Fort Payne was built, but never used as actual protection against Native Americans.

The Naper brothers, Joseph and John, brought with them the iron used to establish a sawmill at the foot of what is now known as Mill Street. This sawmill was fed trees from the surrounding timber and from an area known as the Big Woods, just to the north and west of Naperville. The lumber from this mill was used to build such landmarks as the Pre-Emption House, Paw Paw

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Post Office, pioneer George Martin's home, and many others. Around 1842, Naper converted his mill to a grist mill, which was used to grind local grain up into the 1890s.

Naper was set on town-building. Not only did he bring the means to physically build the town, he also provided the means to strengthen the social, educational and cultural fiber of the young town. He helped fund the first one-room schoolhouse and a second tuition-based school known as Naper Academy. He was a member of the Naperville Lyceum, an early debate group that discussed issues of the day by which to build character and improve the mind.

Naper was elected three times to the Illinois State Assembly in 1836, 1838 and 1852. During the former two dates, Naper served with Lincoln during which time both men voted opposite their party to support the creation of DuPage County from Cook County and the removal of the state capitol from Vandalia to Springfield! Naper surveyed and platted the town, which bore the name Naperville in 1842, and was elected its first president after incorporation as a village in 1857. He was a charter member of the Euclid Masonic Lodge No. 65. Joseph Naper died in 1862, two years before the railroad came to Naperville. He is buried in Naperville Cemetery.

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