

HISTORY —

HISTORIC ST. MARYS: The Ingersoll Family in St. Marys

By Mary Smith

In 1839, the Canada Company surveyed and opened Blanshard Township for settlement. This part of the Huron Tract abutted the more settled Oxford County and two ambitious brothers, Thomas and James Ingersoll, whose family had established farms and businesses in Oxford, saw the opportunity for acquiring more land in nearby Perth County. By 1842, there was the start of a small village, St. Marys. Thomas Ingersoll and his family had a log house. There was an operating saw mill and a grist mill still under construction. The entire population of Blanshard Township at that time, including St. Marys, numbered 77 people.

It is well documented that James Ingersoll, born in 1801, negotiated with the Canada Company to acquire several hundred acres of land in what is today the core of St. Marys on the condition that he build mills to encourage settlement. But although he undoubtedly visited frequently, he never lived here. In 1832, he had been appointed Oxford County Registrar and he lived with his wife and children in Woodstock. However, some of his Ingersoll relatives did live in St. Marys and played their part in the development of the community. Thomas's family lived in St. Marys the longest.

Thomas Ingersoll was born in 1796 in the Niagara area. His father, also Thomas, originally a New England merchant, was a fifth generation member of the Ingersoll family that came from England in 1629 and settled in Massachusetts. Thomas Senior married three times. He and his first wife, Elizabeth Dewey, had four daughters. The oldest, born in 1775, was named Laura. Elizabeth died in 1784 and Thomas, left with four little girls, married a widow, Mercy Smith. She died a few years later and he married once more in 1889. His third wife, Sarah, was also a widow with one daughter. Thomas and Sarah had seven children, three of them born in Massachusetts.

Following the American Revolution, Thomas heard that tracts of land were being offered in Upper Canada to residents of the United States who were prepared to declare their loyalty to Britain. Believing that the post-revolutionary government was unstable, in 1793 Thomas decided to try for a better future in Canada. His tract of land was in Oxford County. This area, not surveyed and without roads, was not yet ready for settlement. Thomas bought a tavern in Queenston and in 1795, moved his family to that community. When baby



Thomas was born, he was Thomas and Sarah's second son and the first of all the Ingersoll children to be born in Canada. Three more followed – two sons, James and Samuel, and a daughter, Sarah. In Queenston, Thomas's oldest daughter, Laura, met James Secord. They were married ca 1798, just before Thomas Ingersoll decided at last to move his family into the Oxford County wilderness, Laura Secord stayed in Queenston but the Ingersolls were a close family and she always kept in touch with her younger brothers and sisters.

Laura Secord later became part of Canadian history when, during the War of 1812, she travelled through American-held territory to warn British Lieutenant Fitzgibbon of an enemy ambush. But two of her half-brothers also played a role in that conflict. Charles, born in 1791, was 21 when the war broke out in June 1812. He became a lieutenant in the Niagara Provincial Light Dragoons. Although Thomas was only 16, he served first in the southwestern part of the province and then with the 2nd Regiment of York Militia. Following the war, these two young veterans returned to pioneer life.

Thomas Ingersoll Senior had left Oxford County for a post in Port Credit. But just as the war began, he died in 1812, age 63. In 1817, Charles acquired his father's old property in Oxford County but before taking his family to the settlement, he sent ahead his younger brothers (22-year-old Thomas, 17-year-old James, and Samuel, just 14) to build mills and new farm buildings. By 1820, they

had accomplished all of this and also established a general store, a distillery and an ashery. Thus, when the Ingersolls went to St. Marys two decades later, they had a wealth of experience behind them.

Thomas had married Gertrude Carroll ca 1818 and in 1842 they brought a family of four sons and a daughter to St. Marys. By the mid-1840s, Thomas had moved his family from their log house to the beautiful limestone residence shown in this week's photograph – today 105 Queen Street West. (The Ingersoll family had the original house enlarged and modified ca 1914.) His son, John, owned the village's first general store, while another son, Charles, was a cooper. But after a lifetime of hard work, Thomas's health was not good. He and Gertrude had a life lease on their limestone house, built on property owned by Charles. Thomas died in 1847, at the age of 52. The census, taken five years later in 1852, shows Gertrude Ingersoll, a 52-year-old widow, living in this house with her son, Charles, his wife Catherine, their two very young children, and Gertrude's youngest son, Justus, age 16. John and his wife, Ann, and another son, Thomas, with his family, had houses of their own. Gertrude's daughter, Maria, had married in 1843 but died soon after.

As Charles' family continued to grow, the limestone house became crowded. By the 1861 census, Charles had built a cottage on other property he owned on the south side of Queen Street West. He and Catherine were parents of six children – they would

eventually have nine – and lived in that nearby location. Gertrude's son, Thomas, had died in 1860. His widow and two children had come to live temporarily with Gertrude. Justus was still unmarried. John had moved from his downtown store to a farm in Blanshard Township with his wife, Ann, and their young family. The census includes even more Ingersolls. Thomas Senior's youngest son, Samuel, had also purchased property in the northeast part of St. Marys where he lived with several members of his family. Altogether, there were some two dozen Ingersolls living in or very near St. Marys in 1861.

By the next census in 1871, some had moved on. However, in March 1862, Justus married Mary Jane Geary of London and brought her home to Gertrude's house in St. Marys. By 1871, they had four children ranging in age from seven months to eight years of age. Justus worked as a tanner. Charles and Catherine's oldest children were also working. One son was a printer, another was a blacksmith and yet another worked as a cooper with his father. The oldest daughter was a music teacher. The next three were at school and Catherine also had year-old twin boys to complete her family. John and family still lived on a nearby farm.

And so the Ingersolls led well-established lives in St. Marys, practicing their trades, sending their children to school, attending local churches, burying loved ones in the town cemetery. They supported their families as they grew older and encouraged them to set out on lives of their own. Eventually they dispersed. In the 1880s, Charles moved to Bad Axe, Michigan, to live with relatives. Justus died in 1898. By the 1911 census, only Justus' widow, Mary Jane, and one daughter, Lillian, a school teacher, remained in St. Marys. When her mother died in 1930, Lillian was alone in the house although her two brothers, pharmacists in Sarnia, visited regularly. Her sister, Helen, had married Calvin Mills, also a pharmacist. She lived in Toronto but spent summers in St. Marys. When Calvin died in 1944, Helen moved back permanently to live with Lillian. Lillian died in 1962, age 94, and Helen in 1976 in her 100th year. They were the last of the Ingersolls in St. Marys.

Catherine B. McEwen's meticulously researched book, *No Smiling Path*, 2004, was the source for much of the information in this column. It is available for reference at the St. Marys Museum.