

**Labatt Pioneer Brewery**  
**Replica**  
**Built 1967**

**Contributed by Bryan Andrachuk**

The history of Labatt's Breweries is unequivocally linked with the history of London. The two have shared a long and prosperous relationship that dates back to 1828, when John Balkwill first opened his London Brewery on Simcoe Street. The London Brewery, as it was called, produced 400 barrels of beer a year, and much of it was sold through Balkwill's own tavern. In 1847, Samuel Eccles purchased the operation from Balkwill and his brother-in-law, George Snell. Eccles later partnered with his friend John Kinder Labatt, an Irish immigrant who had returned to England to study the craft of the brewmaster.

The brewery did well under Labatt, and in 1853 he bought Eccles' shares and became the sole owner of the business. With production now at 4,000 barrels a year, and a new name – John Labatt's Brewery – the business was poised to exploit the arrival of the Great West Railway and expand into Toronto, Montreal, and other markets.

John Kinder Labatt died in 1866, and his youngest son, John II, took over. Under his direction, the company entered a period of prosperity and gained international recognition while taking advantage of various improvements in the brewing industry, such as the invention of the pasteurization process and the use of ice-making machines in brewing. At the Canadian Exposition in Ottawa in 1876, the Labatt Brewery became known across the country as it won a silver medal for its India Pale Ale. In subsequent years, the performance was repeated

at various competitions in Canada, the United States, Australia, France, and England.<sup>1</sup>

By 1900, a third generation of Labatts was helping to run the brewery. Imbibers in places as far away as the Northwest Territories, Manitoba, and the Maritimes were enjoying Labatt brews. The brewery became unionized in 1907, and incorporated as John Labatt Ltd. in 1911. Prohibition came to Ontario in 1916 and lasted until 1927, but John Labatt Ltd. was one of only a handful of breweries to come through the dry spell with the same ownership.<sup>2</sup>

To celebrate the 1967 Canadian Centennial, Labatt's decided to build as faithful a replica as possible of the original pioneer brewery that John Balkwill built in 1828. Historians, architects, and builders employed by Labatt's spent two years researching the building to ensure it properly represented the time period. They scoured Southwestern Ontario for vintage logs to use in building the brewery. An antique log cabin from the southeastern shore of Georgian Bay, a few miles from Collingwood, and an old barn made of square timbers and plank siding from the northwest of London were found to be suitable and construction began soon after.

In October of 1993, the Labatt replica Brewery was relocated from its downtown London location to Fanshawe Pioneer Village, with the help of students from fraternities and sororities at the University of Western Ontario. Upon arrival at the Village, the building underwent renovations and was opened to the public in October of 1994. The replica brewery building and display

remains a testament to one of the oldest London industries and is a favourite among Village visitors today.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Bowering, *The Art and Mystery of Brewing in Ontario* (1988), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Allen Winn Sneath, *Brewed in Canada: The Untold Story of Canada's 350-Year-Old Brewing Industry* (2001), 378-81.