

Denfield General Store
Original Building
Denfield, Middlesex County, 1877

Contributed by Molly MacDonald

General stores were the lifeblood of rural Canadian communities from the settlement period through the late 19th century,¹ and the Denfield General Store was no exception. The Denfield General Store was built in 1877 by J.T. Dinsmore, in a community then known as “Brecon”. However, because a town in Ontario already existed with the very similar name of “Brechin”, the name “Denfield”, an English approximation of “Penfilid,” the Welsh hometown of a prominent local family was adopted instead.² As the Denfield General Store and post office was the hub of social and economic activity in the community, the town soon became known as Denfield as well.³

At the time that the Denfield Store was built, Ontario was becoming increasingly settled. Sawmills proliferated, and standardized lumber was widely available for the first time. Instead of wrestling under the weight of unwieldy timbers, Dinsmore built his shop using a more modern method of construction, the “balloon-frame.” Balloon-frames were based on two-by-four inch studs, extending vertically from floor to ceiling. Pre-cut boards were then nailed across the studs to create light-weight, yet durable walls. This method was cheaper than timber frame construction, but more importantly, it required less labour.

The Denfield General Store’s façade extends the building’s height by half a storey, lending it an air of importance on the village streetscape. The first storey windows were designed on a large scale to light the shop’s deep interior, and to display new merchandise to full effect. The balcony above protected window displays from sun

damage, while providing shelter for goods as they were transferred to and from wagons on the street.⁴

George Freeborn, son of the store's longest-running proprietor, lived with his family upstairs in the rear part of the main structure. George's father, A.F. "Sam" Freeborn who was also the nephew of J.T. Dinsmore, took over the business in 1913, serving as Denfield's postmaster into the 1950s⁵. After the Second World War, competition from London stores put the merchandising side of Denfield out of business; however, the post office remained. In 1952 Sam sold the building to Frank and William Rosser for use as a workshop.⁶

The Denfield General Store received new life in 1979 when it was reopened as an antiques business by London "do-it-yourselfer," Willard Green.⁷ In 1987 the building was designated as a heritage property. It was relocated to Fanshawe Pioneer Village ten years later in 1997.⁸ Although the building originally had both a back addition (a kitchen that later served as a barbershop in the 1950s) and a two-storey side annex, only the main building structure was brought to Fanshawe Pioneer Village and restored. Current restoration efforts will see the annex rebuilt.

Today the store serves as a historical display and Village gift shop, featuring colourful candy sticks, local handmade crafts and late 19th and early 20th century themed merchandise. No trip to Fanshawe Pioneer Village is complete without a visit to the Denfield General Store.

¹ Douglas McCalla, "Retailing in the countryside: Upper Canadian general stores in the mid-nineteenth century" *Business and Economic History* (1997), 393.

²Jennie Raycroft Lewis, "Village of Denfield" *Birr and Beyond* (1958), 94.

³ "Denfield" *Historical Atlas of Middlesex County* (1886). In this atlas, the town is listed as Denfield, with the addendum, "Also known as Brecon."

⁴Carol Priamo, *The General Store* (1978), 15- 16.

⁵ Lewis, 96.

⁶ Fanshawe Pioneer Village Archives (Denfield Building Box #2) Unpublished article by Elizabeth Hall c. 1970. Source unknown.

⁷Fanshawe Pioneer Village Archives (Denfield Building Box #2) Article from *Times Advocate* (October 17, 1979), author unknown.

⁸Fanshawe Pioneer Village Archives (Denfield Building Box #3) "Fact Sheet," in file "Denfield General Store FPV Site History."