

Samuel Bear

The first permanent white settler in what is today the village of Waterloo was Samuel Bear. Samuel Bear had been born in 1770 of Pennsylvania Dutch descent in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. In 1792 he journeyed northward from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in search of a good place to locate and make a home and personal fortune. He liked the Seneca Outlet because there would be water power for a grist mill. He could not buy this land because an Indian treaty of 1789 had reserved to the Cayugas a one mile square piece of land on the south side of the Seneca River—an area known as Skoi-yase—a portion of Military Lot No.4. So, Bear simply made arrangements with the Cayugas to use the land and to settle upon it.

Bear returned to his home in Pennsylvania for the winter of 1792-3. In the spring he returned to Shoi-yase with three millers, Casper, John and George Yost, and with his cousins John and Ephraim Bear. They dug races with the help of Indians. The “Old Bear dam” was built across the south channel of the river, through which the larger part of the stream flowed, from Little Island, made by the digging, and Big Island. A race that became known as “Bear Race,” was dug, some four feet deep and twenty feet wide, from above the dam to the mill.

The first grist mill was of logs, with the gearing, cog-wheels and water-wheel made of wood. It stood a little east of the later Fayette Mills, on the east side of Washington Street adjoining the Tracy Development Co. race on the north. The ford across the river was east of the present Washington Street. The two mill stones had been found by the Yost brothers near what is today Ovid and had been floated down the lake to the Seneca Outlet and then to the mill site itself.

Prior to Bear’s mill, there was no grist mill in the territory of our present Seneca County. (In 1792 the area was the Romulus Township of Herkimer County.) Settlers could raise grain, but it had to be ground before it was of great use to them. The first roads were cut to the mills, which were few and distant from each other. Bear’s rude mill was soon replaced by a larger, more durable and more efficient mill at the same location. Grist was brought to this mill from distances up to thirty miles, by horseback over the old trails and by boats from the east and west. Every man had to wait his turn, whether a whole day or longer. Those bringing grists would come with provisions enough for any emergency, using stumps of trees for tables and lodging in the mill when there was no other room. Because of the numbers of people coming to use the grist mill, Bear started a general store and thus became the first merchant in town.

Some years after completing this grist mill, Samuel Bear dug a mill race from a point in the original mill race, about one hundred feet west of the present Washington Street, southeasterly along the west bounds of the present Huff Street to the north side of River Street, and then easterly along the north side of River Street to within about a hundred yards of Distillery Street, and from thence northerly to the river. This was done to gain advantage in the fall in the river for a greater head of water, with which to run a saw mill. This saw mill was located on the race at a point just south of the Lehigh Valley Railroad track near Distillery Street.

When the State of New York and the Cayuga Nation of Indians made a treaty at Cayuga Ferry in 1795, the State of New York became the possessor of the land on which Samuel Bear's mill and improvements were located. Bear was anxious to obtain title to the land and made petition to the NYS Legislature for its purchase. Following a second petition, on March 27, 1799 by Chapter 53 of the laws of that year, the NYS Legislature granted Samuel Bear one hundred acres of land with a mortgage of \$275 with interest at 6%.

Following this acquisition, Samuel Bear employed David Cook, a well-known surveyor of Geneva, to lay out for him a plot for a village on his lands. The resulting map refers to "Town Plot of the Village of Jefferson at the Scoyes in Seneca County." David Cook's map has been the basis upon which most of the lots in South Waterloo have been transferred from that day until now. The plan or survey provided for a Public Square, comprising a wide space on River Street between Washington and Fayette Streets.

There is confusion as to what name to use to refer to his settlement. Bear himself called it "Mount Jefferson" at times, although the David Cook map used "Jefferson." It was in the area called "Skoi-yase" or its variant spellings Scayau, Skoies, Scoyes, Schauyas, and Jefferson at the Scoyes. The 1806 *Field Book of the Unappropriated Lands in the Military Tract* refers to the place as "Beartown."

It is assumed that Samuel Bear married Miss Mary Snyder in 1796. The first birth in this new settlement was that of John S. Bear to Samuel and Mary Bear on September 3, 1797; this son died on September 4, 1797. A daughter Sophia was born September 9, 1798; she died on October 23, 1807. A second son named Launcelot S. was born July 9, 1800. A second daughter named Charlotte was born January 18, 1803. A third son named Samuel S. was born June 27, 1807.

Samuel Bear gave to his village land for a cemetery located on the south side of River Street, a short distance west of the Public Square. As the result of a severe cold contracted while digging a new mill race, he died at the age of 37 years on September 25, 1807. His burial was said to be the first in what became known as the Bear Cemetery. Bear left no will. Had he lived longer, Samuel Bear would have doubtless become a rich man.

[The information for this article comes from Becker's *A History of Waterloo*.]