

North Bay's Forefathers: The Life of John William Deegan

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The City of North Bay gained its popularity and became what it is today because of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Although John Ferguson is the most well-known forefather, it took the power of many men and women to create the city that we know today. Without businesses and councils, North Bay would not have many of its well-known attractions. One of these key citizens was John William Deegan, who is still well remembered today through his downtown shoe store known as Deegan's Shoe Store which ranks as one of the oldest businesses in Canada. [Appendix A]

John William Deegan was born in Belfast, Ireland about 1863 and immigrated to Canada at the age of seventeen. According to his will, a brother stayed behind in Ireland.¹ Apart from an immigration record of a John Deegan, about the age of John Deegan Sr.², coming from Ireland to Canada in 1880, the first indication of him is the 1891 census for North Bay. He is listed with his wife Mary-Ann, daughter Anne and his mother-in-law Judith Robitaille.³ When he first arrived in Canada, John Deegan worked for a shoe store in Halifax.⁴ Shortly after, he moved to St. John, New Brunswick, but there is no indication of what he did. Being an adventurer, he soon moved to Toronto and then to Pembroke where he again worked in the shoe industry.⁵ However, he had not yet found his home.

¹ Will of John William Deegan, Instrument #27914, accessed at North Bay Land Registry Office

² National Library of Canada, Ref. F5498 G84_14, Page 47, accessed at Ancestry.com

³ 1891 Census, Page 21, Roll #6355, accessed at North Bay Public Library on Microfilm

⁴ The North Bay Nugget, July 22, 1959, accessed at North Bay Public Library on Microfilm

⁵ Ibid

John Deegan soon took a job with the Canadian Pacific Railway which led him to the City of North Bay for the first time in 1883.⁶ He was quoted as describing the city on his first arrival as “a railway right-of-way boasting a couple of shacks”.⁷ However, these shacks were not enough to keep him in North Bay. He left the city and went back to Pembroke where he enlisted to fight in the Riel Rebellion in the West. He fought as a scout in the Rebellion under Colonel Sam Steele. In his obituary it was stated that John enjoyed remembering that after Louis Riel was hung, “suckers” purchased “supposed” pieces of the rope used to hang Louis Riel and they did stop to think that if all of these pieces had been put back together, it would have been longer than the rope actually used.⁸ Perhaps this shows a side of John Deegan’s keen retail sense that would later allow his own business to thrive. He was given a quarter section of land for fighting in the Riel Rebellion. He sold it for \$25.00 after deciding he did not want to live there.⁹

[Appendix B]

After a brief period of employment at the Canadian Pacific Railway he left and took a job with the Hudson’s Bay Company in Winnipeg.¹⁰ Although he had started working for the HBC in hopes that it would take him to Australia, which had always been his dream, this never happened and he was led instead to Tacoma, Washington. Again after a short period, he was on his way back to North Bay, Ontario.¹¹

⁶ The North Bay Nugget, Monday 7, 1941, accessed at North Bay Public Library on Microfilm. Information from employee records from the CPR mentions that: “Staff records are not held by CPR Archives and are not available for research purposes.”

⁷ The North Bay Nugget, Monday July 7, 1941, accessed at North Bay Public Library on Microfilm

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

His first major accomplishment in North Bay 1889 was the opening of his store Deegan's Shoe Store, which is still standing where it was started. Deegan's Shoe Store was one of the only stores located on Main Street at the time along side of Richardson's Hardware Store. [Appendix C]

Later that year, John Deegan, age 26, and Mary Ann Robitaille, age 28, married on the 7th of August, 1889 in Mattawa, Ontario. Mary Anne, daughter of Bozien and Judith Robitaille was born in Pontiac County, Quebec “. ¹² [Appendix D]

John and his new wife moved into their house located at 106 Main Street East. There are land records that state he did own property on Lot 106 on the North East side of Main Street ¹³ which is presumably where they were living as his business was located at 56-58 Main Street West.

In 1891 John and Mary Anne's first child, Annie Elizabeth Deegan ¹⁴ was born, their second child, George, was born on May 7, 1893 ¹⁵ and their third child, Judith Mary Deegan was born on January 2nd, 1895. ¹⁶ [Appendix D F G]

Unfortunately, the year of 1899 was a sad year for the Deegan family. Their first born child, Annie Elizabeth, passed away April 27, 1899 at the age of 8 from pleurisy. ¹⁷ [Appendix E] She was buried at the North Bay Union Cemetery ¹⁸ where later her mother and father would also be laid to rest. [Appendix H]

¹² Marriage record Register #001162, Page #45, accessed at North Bay Land Registry Office

¹³ Land Registry Office Instrument #27814, also referred to in Vernon's Directory from 1916, accessed at North Bay Public Library

¹⁴ Death of Annie Elizabeth Deegan, Instrument #025145, Roll #MS 935_313, accessed at Ancestry.com (unable to locate the birth record of Annie Elizabeth)

¹⁵ George Deegan's birth record, Roll #MS 929_122, accessed at Ancestry.com

¹⁶ Judith Deegan's birth record, Roll #MS 929_133, accessed at Ancestry.com

¹⁷ Death of Annie Elizabeth Deegan, Instrument #017551

¹⁸ North Bay Union Cemetery records, Plot c-82, accessed at Genealogy Room in North Bay Public Library

John and Marry Anne did have another child after the loss of Annie. Their fourth child, John Lambert Lloyd Deegan was born on February 1st, 1902.¹⁹ [Appendix H]

According to the 1911 census, John Deegan's total earnings in 1910 were \$20,000 which for this time frame was a very good income.²⁰ [Appendix I] This made him an important and fairly wealthy man considering the small size of North Bay. His success can also be seen by the advertisements he placed in the local papers. Although at this time the Nugget was not a daily newspaper, Deegan's Shoe Store had an advertisement in almost every paper. There are two examples of this from The North Bay Times, Col. II, April 8th, 1897 and one advertisement read: "Now is the time for school boots for boys and girls. Deegan's has the best in town."²¹

John Deegan was a very prominent person in his community. A member of Trinity Church, he was a member of the Rotarians and Rorab Shrine Club,²² a Mason and a member of the Odd Fellows Society Lodge #271.²³ He was a member of the Board of Health for eight different years between 1892 and 1932,²⁴ a member of the Board of Trade from 1894-95²⁵ and a member of the Public School Board from 1905-09.²⁶ Finally, he was a Trustee of the High School Board from 1900-1914, one of its longest serving members.²⁷

¹⁹ John Lambert Lloyd Deegan's birth record, Roll #MS 929_159, accessed at Ancestry.com

²⁰ 1911 Census, Ontario District #99, Sub District East Enumeration District #16 in North Bay, Page 29

²¹ *The North Bay Times*, Col II, April 8th, 1897, accessed at North Bay Public Library, Genealogy Room

²² The North Bay Nugget, Monday July 7, 1941, accessed at North Bay Public Library on Microfilm

²³ Ibid

²⁴ W>P>K> Kennedy, North Bay Past-Present-Prospective, (T>H> Best Printing Co. Ltd. 1961), Pages 25-27, 38, 41, 45, 46, 61

²⁵ Kennedy, 94

²⁶ Ibid, 110

²⁷ Ibid, 116

On the 20th of June 1923, George Deegan married Eva Josephine Darling, daughter of Thomas & Emma Darling, at the United Church in North Bay.²⁸

George and Eva only had one child Eva Mary. She was born in 1929. Unfortunately, she died at the age of three days on April 25th, 1929 of Asphyxia Neonatorum.²⁹

Perhaps this is why George felt the need to be very involved in hospitals and the health of people in North Bay. He was a member of the Methodist church hockey club in 1913-1914 [Appendix K] and a member on the Motors Committee in 1925.³⁰ In 1926 he was an Alderman on City Council,³¹ on the Board of Managers for the Civic Hospital in 1931³² and on the Board of Health in 1934.³³ He held a seat on the Hospital Commission from 1938-42³⁴, a Children's Aid Chairman in 1930 and a member of the Hydro Commission in 1946.³⁵ Like his father, he was a member of the Masons and in 1929 he was the Master at the Nipissing Lodge 352³⁶ as well as President of the Rorab Shrine Club in 1948.³⁷

.His sister, Judith Deegan 33, married Andrew Shields from Petawawa on June 18, 1929 at Trinity United Church, North Bay. Andrew Shields passed away in 1938 and was buried in Union Cemetery, North Bay.

²⁸ St. Andrew's United Church records, accessed at North Bay Public Library Genealogy Room

²⁹ Death of Annie Elizabeth Deegan, Instrument #025145, Roll #MS 935_313, accessed at Ancestry.com

³⁰ Kennedy, 14

³¹ Ibid 55

³² Ibid 60

³³ Ibid 63

³⁴ Ibid 66-69

³⁵ Ibid 96

³⁶ Ibid 221

³⁷ Ibid 243

Mary Anne {Robitaille} Deegan died of Broncho-Pneumonia on September 15th, 1940 at 79 years of age in the Civic Hospital in North Bay.³⁸ She was buried alongside her young daughter who had passed away in 1899. [Appendix H]

John Deegan died July 6th, 1941 of natural causes, age 79.³⁹ His obituary shows the impression he left on the City of North Bay. A complete biography of his life was located on the first page of the Nugget and was two pages long.⁴⁰ [Appendix B] His will shows that he was a very generous man. He donated to his own community and also to surrounding communities.⁴¹ His will was full of very generous donations to many different charities. He donated \$100.00 to the Protestant Orphans home in Ottawa, and \$100.00 to the Sick Children's Hospital as well as \$500.00 to the North Bay Civic Hospital. Interestingly, he states in his will that his monument cost no more than \$500.00.⁴²

When George took over the family business after his father's death he was just as committed to the store as was his father.⁴³ A woman who worked for the Canadian Shoe Retailers' Association stated about George: "He was committed to expanding his father's business by being conversant with current trends, even when there was only one shoe show (in Chicago) Mr. Deegan would attend, arriving early and leaving late, just to find out what the current trends were, his customers and his business benefited from this commitment."⁴⁴ [Appendix N, P]

³⁸ Martyn Funeral Home records, accessed at North Bay Public Library Genealogy Room

³⁹ Martyn Funeral Home records, accessed North Bay Public Library Genealogy Room

⁴⁰ The North Bay Nugget, Monday July 7, 1941, accessed at North Bay Public Library on Microfilm

⁴¹ Will of John William Deegan, Instrument #27914, accessed at North Bay Land Registry Office

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ The North Bay Nugget, Thursday, May 4, 1989, Special Advertising Section

⁴⁴ Ibid

In 1945 Deegan's Shoe Store burnt down. It took George a year to get the business back into its old original location and for that year the shoe store moved across the street.⁴⁵

Although there is not very much information on John Lambert Deegan some facts are available. He married Lorena Deegan and according to documentation of land granted to him, he was still living in North Bay in 1941.⁴⁶ After the death of his father and mother he was the one who paid to keep up the gravesites in Union Cemetery.⁴⁷ The last mention of John Lambert Deegan was in a Nugget article on Deegan's Shoe Store that stated, at that time (1951), he was living in Colborne.⁴⁸

After being ill, George Deegan died in 1963.⁴⁹ His wife, Eva Darling died in 1969. They are both buried at Terrace Lawn Cemetery. [Appendix Q]

With the success of his store, the legacy of John Deegan and his family in North Bay has lived for one hundred and eighteen year. The business is still being kept in the family although not now owned by a blood-line relative.

The current store owner Ralph Deigel began work at the store in 1946 after returning from serving in the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War. He married Gwen Darling in 1948 who was the niece of George Deegan. He took over the store in 1960 when George Deegan retired due to ill health. With the celebration of the City of North Bay turning 50, Ralph was one of 50 citizens to be given the honoured Citizen Award. Since taking over the ownership of Deegan's Shoe Store he has kept John Deegan and his legacy as one of the forefathers of North Bay alive and well.

⁴⁵ The North Bay Nugget, July 22, 1959, accessed at North Bay Public Library on Microfilm

⁴⁶ Will of John William Deegan, Instrument #27914, accessed at North Bay Land Registry Office

⁴⁷ This from Trinity United Church files

⁴⁸ North Bay Nugget, July 22, 1959, accessed at North Bay Public Library on Microfilm

⁴⁹ North Bay Nugget, Thursday May 4, 1989, Special Advertising Section