

## The Deserted Village A Black Horse Corner Mystery

By Rachel Morgan Redshaw, Historical Researcher  
of the North Dumfries Municipal Heritage Committee



One day as I was making my way down Waterloo Regional Road 50 approaching Highway 97, I glanced at the sign at the corner of the intersection. Familiar with its presence I had not put much thought towards it as many other passers by. As I continued down the street I began pondering about what it was all about. I could envision the thick black font in my mind Black Horse Corner.

Today not much is left but an open field, a make shift fence and an old stone building. As a historical researcher I became inclined to research it under the North Dumfries Municipal Heritage Committee. A brief check on the heritage website led me to sites claiming the area to be a 'historical ghost town' under listings of abandoned places in Ontario. Mysterious as it was I became determined to know why, as many others, a place such as this became abandoned. Was it a terrible catastrophe? A loss in fortune? A sudden disappearance? As I continued in my research I found that this deserted tract of land, Black Horse Corner, was once in fact a thriving village.

So, with further curiosity and admiration for the subject I tried to investigate why such a name was chosen. I found that the name itself had various explanations. One variation claims that it was only named so as the owner of the Black Horse Inn supposedly only owned black horses, others claim that the two storey hotel had a black horse either engraved or painted over the entranceway. The one I found most fascinating was said to have derived from an incident where a group of black horses seemingly vanished from the inn one dark and gloomy night.

The land itself was originally said to have been sold to the Honourable William Dickson who then sold the land to Benjamin Synder in 1820. However, it was a man by the name of David Shantz who became the founder of Black Horse Corner. Harley Stager, a past owner of the land that once situated the village, claimed that there "were twenty houses at one time. I counted the indentations in the field" said Mr. Stager in an interview with the Cambridge Reporter in 1990. It was speculated that there were approximately seven factories and at least ten houses. It was



even recorded that an Aboriginal family lived at the northeast corner of the village that were claimed to have 'spent most of their time hunting'. Apparent depressions in the ground present the evidence of what remains of a once prosperous village.

In the 1850's and 1860's business at Black Horse Corner was prosperous. Industries such as a pump shop, shingle mill, wagon maker, shoemaker and a blacksmith shop were some of its features. Eden Creek which flows into the Nith River at Greenfield was used to run the cooper shop that shipped barrels to surrounding communities. It eventually was destroyed by a flood. A tannery built by Mr. Egges as well as the fulling mill and later cabinet factory were other businesses in the community.

The blacksmith shop, which was run by a man by the name of Robert Montgomery, was located northeast of the corner where he, his wife and six children lived in a log home. It is said that "as many as ten thousand horses were shod at the smiddy".

Black Horse Inn itself was purchased in 1853 by the owner Nelson Newcombe and his wife Fanny. He and his wife and four children lived at the inn while offering room and board for travellers passing through. A man of local history, William Campbell, once told Harley about the inn. He described the building as two storeys with a large front porch and bedrooms upstairs which could be accessed by a stairway that entered into the centre of a long narrow hall. Records held from 1851 and 1861 show that the tavern was a frame building with "five spare bedrooms and stabling for eight horses". The foundations proves that the inn stood at a size of 70' x 40'.

The inn became a popular stop-over area between Galt and Plattsville and not only did it provide a room to rest but also a bar, dining room and sitting room. It was said that it was at the Black Horse Tavern where a group of notorious highway robbers directed under Lou Mudge worked out of. David Goldie, son of John Goldie founder of Greenfield Village, was advised to bring a gun with him as he traveled down the road past the tavern.

Apparently there was an additional livery that would have stood where Regional Road 50 now runs through. The owner of the inn, Nelson Newcombe, was an active man, not only running the inn but also had been a teacher at Whistlebare School. He passed away in 1864 and he was buried in Biehn Cemetery.

About ten years later after several changes in ownership in 1875 the inn was tragically burnt to the ground. The reason is not clarified. So it seems that the desertion of the town began with but a spark. It was said by Harley Stager that once the inn burned down after serving the community for twenty-two years "the heart and soul went out of the community".

Following the loss of the inn, unfortunately the clearing of trees led to a decrease in the stream's water level which was detrimental to the industries that depended on the water and therefore their closeness to their source of business destined them to their fate.

Soon the village became abandoned as villagers were left to search for industry elsewhere. That which remained was buried away in the construction of Highway 97 which not only widened the road as well as raised it but removed any fragment left from the buildings such as a wagon marker's shop and a barrel factory that were once standing on the south side of the road. Along other parts of the road the depressions in the earth show the confirmation of the once standing structures.

As I came to the end of my investigation escapade I began pondering about the inn. What was left of it? As curiosity became undeniable I began to search for any information if anything was found, items that were left in the forsaken rubble and ashes of a burnt down inn or perhaps tools left in the buildings of long abandoned businesses.

I came upon a report in 1991 with the name Archaeological Research Associates Ltd typed on the front brought to me by Jeff Stager, son of Harley Stager. A pipe line that had run through the vanished settlement required an archaeological excavation to be performed. During the excavation, led by Paul Racher, they uncovered an 1854 Upper Canada penny in mint condition, an effigy pipe, metal writing pen, antler handled fork, iron key, utensils, broken pottery and plates decorated with designs reminiscent of the styles of the mid 1800's. When foundations of the inn were dug up from the hotel they found horse shoes, harness buckles, bottles and other items which were given to the Doon Heritage Crossroads. In an interview with Jeff Stager he explains that it is common for him to find shards of glass and such in other parts of the area as only a section of the village was excavated.



The Foundation of the Black Horse Inn — The Inn was located on the north side of old 97 highway (which can be seen in the background) and just west of Northumberland Street at the traffic light at Black Horse Corner.

The empty terrain makes it hard for us to remember that once there was life here. All that remains is a former cheese factory built in 1835 "virtually the only remaining building standing in what was the once thriving hamlet of Black Horse Corner". The roof almost collapsing initiated a restoration of the factory. Jeff Stager recalls renovating the structure and rebuilding the roof as he glanced down at pictures documenting its progress. Due to its great historical and architectural significance it was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act on May 16th, 1990 and fortunately remains a protected structure as it is one of the last remnants of Black Horse Corner. The sign that is so familiar to us was one of an interesting circumstance as Jeff recalls. A man of what Jeff describes a random 'migrant worker' stopped by the Stager place one day and offered to paint a sign. After recognizing the man's talent at the finished product the Stagers offered him a sum of money and the man went on his way never to be seen or heard of again.

I look at the thick curling font and the giddy prancing black horse; the sign that Harley Stager proudly placed into the soft soil. It remains as an epigraph to a village that once lived quite an industrious and preserving life. If it wasn't for the Stager family the memory would have been long lost left for historical documents stacked in some dusty corner. They have made the memory live on, as Harley Stager once told the Cambridge Reporter, "The main thing is to keep the history of Black Horse Corner alive".

So I am left with a simple answer. The town was deserted to a mélange of unfortunate events, yet, deserted it may be its memory continues to live. And so the sign allows us to reminisce upon the bitter sweet memory of a village that once was and still is in our thoughts.



Southeast Corner of the Black Horse Inn, facing south.