



*The Joshua Bates family lived in this home on Elgin Street in Farmersville.*

# JOSHUA BATES

## Father of Farmersville

By: Sally Smid

Joshua Bates is often referred to as the "Founding Father of Farmersville" which later became Athens. He was born in 1801, the son of George and Patience Bates from New York. He was one of 14 children who grew up on the family homestead at Dickens, (Elbe Mills) which became Glen Elbe. Perhaps the nearby Bellamy Mill sparked Bates' interest in milling, for after marrying Tamson Bigelow in 1831 he lived near Dickson's Corners (Athens). He tried his hand at farming, but seemed more preoccupied with local development, eventually building grist, saw and carding mills on Wiltse Creek, east of what is now Sarah St. It was reported that at one time the community was even referred to as "Bates' Mills". He lived with his wife and four children, Ezra, Hannah, William and Sarah on Elgin St. To provide more accessibility to his mills he laid out the first road, Church St, which he named for the Methodist Episcopal Church (United), which he also built and established the cemetery behind it as well.

A real visionary, he bought early settler John Dickson's holdings and more, owning everything south and part of the north half of the village. He renamed the four corners "Farmersville", recognizing the importance of farming, the basis of his businesses, believing it to be the key to the community's future success.

In 1836 he became the first postmaster, carrying the mail on horseback to Beverly (Delta), in a leather satchel. The post office was located in the first frame building, the store he constructed, located on Athens Fresh Market's current location, which was later moved to 2 Wiltse St. Bates also served on every village board. He worked to further the accessibility of quality education for all and built a frame select school, now the Baptist parsonage, and also loaned the upstairs of his home for an all girls school.

He was a familiar figure at political meetings and became very active in supporting the Reformed politics of Governor General Lord Elgin, naming the street he lived on in his honour. Out of his concern for improving commerce, he worked to upgrade roads and was contracted to build a plank road to Forthton in 1849, which included toll booths and bridges.

He also became very interested in the formation of a railway, which he thought had further potential to improve the economy. Although the B & W Railway did come through Athens eventually, this failed to materialize in ways that would significantly benefit Farmersville.

Bates decided to move to Smiths Falls and begin a milling operation at Old Sly's Rapids, where unlike at his first mills, the water did not dry up in the summer. Eventually he built a large home on that property, now the Heritage House Museum. He found

that he did not receive true acceptance in his new home and for some years retained Farmersville properties. By 1855, after some complications, bridges were installed to provide public access and his mills drew acclaim from those visiting. He gave much financial support to the Brockville and Ottawa Railway, believing it to be a wise investment, but by 1856 it went bankrupt, due to various reasons, including historian Glenn Lockwood's observation that a vast amount of money had been squandered in "building a railway tunnel under Brockville". Bates desperately tried to raise funds through a lottery which offered his Farmersville properties as prizes despite conflicts with his Protestant, Reformed background. This plan was not as profitable as hoped and he continued to struggle with debt. He was being threatened with law suits when he died on New Year's Day in 1864.

Historian Edna Chant described Bates quite aptly as "perhaps being owed more recognition for his contributions to Athens than any other man." The Joshua Bates Centre in the Athens Town Hall was named in his honour and on Sunday October 22nd 2017 a new mural of Bates was unveiled on the west side of Athens Fresh Market to help commemorate an Athens Canada 150 event. [LH](#)



*(MC) Bruce Demitroff helps dedicate Athens' new mural depicting Joshua Bates who was considered to be a "founding father of Farmersville".*



*This is the gravestone of Joshua Bates at Hillcrest Cemetery in Smiths Falls where he died in debt.*