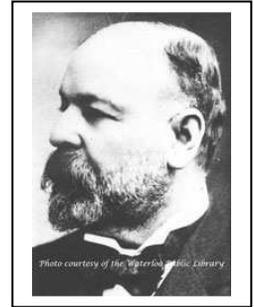


# Joseph E. Seagram

Joseph Emm Seagram had a taste for good pedigree in whiskey and racehorses. He was born in 1841 but his twin passions have made his one of the most recognizable names in Waterloo today.



The industrialist's name appears still on bottles of liquor sold in dozens of countries around the world. A remarkable feat, considering it all started in a flour mill on the corner of Erb and Caroline streets, with water from nearby Laurel Creek.

When Seagram began working at the Granite Mills and Waterloo Distillery in 1864, the distillery was a small part of the business, a way to use excess grain. However, Seagram saw its potential and by 1883 had bought out his two partners and was producing 3,000 barrels of whiskey a year. That same year, Seagram blended a whiskey called 83. In 1911, the distillery's name was changed to Joseph E. Seagram and Sons Ltd., for his sons Edward, Thomas, Joseph and Norman.

Once the business was up and running Seagram turned more of his attention to his passion for horse racing, establishing a 200-acre stud farm in 1888 on Bridgeport Road. The stables featured indoor and outdoor racetracks for one hundred horses in training. He imported yearlings, stallions and mares in foal from England. Seagram horses won fifteen Queen's and King's Plates, Canada's most prestigious races. After each victory the Union Jack was run up the distillery's flag pole.

In 1903 a New York journalist wrote: "Do you know Joseph Seagram? If you do not, this is the way to find him. Go out to the race track on any fine day and pick out the man who looks like King Edward VII. You cannot make any mistake! Only one man on all the tracks looks like His Majesty and that man is Seagram."

There is a famous story that shows how Seagram loved competition in business as well as sport. In 1905, the Grand Trunk railway had most of the business in Waterloo but Seagram wanted to see the Berlin-Preston electric rail gain a foothold. This posed a threat to the Grand Trunk which proceeded to build a line on Erb Street near the Seagram distillery. This move effectively edged out the electric rail's chances of expansion. Seagram responded by tearing down a part of his building to allow the electric line more access, but Grand Trunk built another line there. Seagram then ordered an additional part

destroyed to accommodate the new electric line, and had the fire department stand ready with hoses to use on the Grand Trunk employees if they interfered with the electric rail workers getting their track laid.

Joseph E. Seagram was also involved in the community, serving as councilor and later as a Conservative Member of Parliament from 1896 to 1908 for the riding of Waterloo North. He was described in the *Berlin News Record* as “a typical Englishman”. The article noted that Seagram, while insular and modest, could nevertheless greet a farmer who brought grain to his distillery by name and ask after their family.

His most enduring act of philanthropy happened in 1896 when he and his wife Stephanie donated a fourteen acre site for what is now the Grand River Hospital. They stipulated that the future hospital be made available to all people regardless of race, colour or creed.

Joseph Seagram died in 1919 and in 1928 his heirs sold the business to Montreal businessman Samuel Bronfman who brought Seagram products like V.O. Canadian Whiskey to fame around the world. The Seagram distillery in Uptown Waterloo closed its doors in 1992.

*Photo courtesy of the Waterloo Public Library.*