

Morsches Builders Mart

Founded: 1871

Location: Taylor's Station (1871–81); Columbia City address unknown (1881–); East End Market Street; 417 East Market Street; East Terminal Market Street

Morsches Builders Mart is descended from the lumber business of Simon Jack Peabody, a major benefactor of Columbia City. Simon was born in Noble County in 1851. His father, John L. Peabody, was a farmer and skilled machinist, specializing in surveyors' tools and other mathematical equipment. In the fall of 1851 John Peabody moved the family to Arcola and established a sawmill on Aboite Creek. In the 1860s, however, Simon's family was devastated by typhoid fever. His father and nine brothers and sisters died; the only survivors were Simon, his brother J. B., and his mother Hannah. Simon and John were always marked by the disease, having been forced to learn to walk again. After his father's death Simon began sawing wood for the Pennsylvania Railroad in order to help support his family. In 1868, when the railroad abandoned wood in favor of coal as a source of fuel, Simon purchased the sawing outfit for \$150. The following year, at the age of eighteen, he established a shingle mill in Arcola. At the same time he became head sawyer at a neighboring mill.

As the nation industrialized the demand for hardwood lumber took off, and Indiana, with its vast virgin forests, became a center of the hardwood lumber industry. Peabody established a small mill in Taylor's Station at just the right moment. Hearing of a supply of fine timber seven or eight miles west of Columbia City, the ambitious Peabody went to investigate. He discovered a magnificent stand of oak trees and, proposing to establish a mill, was able to convince the local landowner, Peter Taylor, to

provide him an acre of land and lend two teams of horses to haul logs. In 1871 Peabody and a partner from Arcola, Eli Meiser, with only a \$500 down payment obtained a mortgage for the mill from John H. Bass, a Fort Wayne foundry owner who had known Peabody's father. Peabody was also able to persuade the local railroad to build a switch to the mill in exchange for wood for the railroad ties. Times were difficult at first. Meiser's wife, after a short time living in the mostly male lumbering community known as "Hell's Half-Acre," insisted on leaving. Meiser sold out to Peabody, who was able only to supply a promissory note. Peabody, eager to leave himself, had no orders and no money to pay his workers by the fall of 1872. Again he managed to get a vital \$200 bank loan, paying his workers in checks made from chips of basswood when the bank's paper checks were exhausted. Peabody lived with Taylor and a handful of railroad construction workers before building a small office in the spring of 1873, in which he and the mill's foreman slept.

Peabody's fortunes reversed in the panic of 1873, when, out of desperation, he traveled to Chicago in an attempt to obtain railroad business. Peabody, clad in homespun shirt and coonskin hat, promised to deliver three carloads of lumber to a scornful and unbelieving agent of the Rock Island Railroad. He and his crew of four men and one teamster meticulously cut and loaded the lumber and shipped it off, much to the amazement of the Rock Island agent, who subsequently flooded Peabody's small mill with so many orders that Peabody was soon farming out work to neighboring mills. Peabody started selling lumber directly to a variety of railroads and was soon also filling orders from the Pullman Car Company, McCormick Reaper Company, Studebaker Wagon Company, and J. I. Case Farm Implement Company.

Peabody was selling millions of feet of timber from a network of twenty separate mills, essentially acting as a lumber wholesaler. He later claimed that he began to keep his books only after he had \$50,000 in the bank. He soon started to build other mills and gradually developed one of the most extensive lumber businesses in northern Indiana. In 1881 with his brother he built a mill in Columbia City, which operated as Peabody & Bro. He also owned mills in Pierceton, Roann, La Fontaine, Bourbon, Denver, Albion, Wabash, Rochester, Chili, Akron, Inwood, and Arcola, as well as Taylor's Station. He later acquired a mill in Portia, Alabama, which was the largest of all that he owned. Peabody had no direct descendants, his only child and first wife having died in the 1870s. In 1906 he created the S. J. Peabody Lumber Company, a joint stock company owned by himself and his oldest employees. In 1919 he built the Peabody Library in Columbia City at a cost of \$25,000. When funds were misappropriated at the First National Bank of Columbia City, Peabody saved the institution from disaster by supplying \$273,000 of his money.

In the late 1880s Ferdinand F. Morsches began working as a laborer at Peabody's company. The son of a German immigrant brewer and baker, he rose to become manager of the company's three mills, which by 1907 employed sixty-five men, including teamsters, timber cutters, and miscellaneous laborers. Morsches later became vice president under Peabody. After Peabody's death in 1933, the mill became the Morsches-Nowels Lumber Company. It continued to manufacture all types of northern Indiana hardwood, producing between seven and ten million feet annually and employing approximately 125 workers by 1940. Ferdinand Morsches was president of the firm, J. H. Morsches, vice president, and A. S. Nowels, secretary. The Morsches family later

gained full ownership of the company. The Morsches Lumber Company eventually became exclusively a retail lumberyard and in the late 1970s became the Morsches Builders Mart. Four generations of the Morsches family operated the plant; Paul Morsches, Sr., was followed as president by his son, Paul, Jr., and later by Franz.