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The Early History of Perth & District

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The first official reference found of the early settlement of the Town of Perth and adjoining townships is a communication from the adjutant-general's office dated Quebec, August 15, 1815, referring to the appointment of Staff-Sergeant Thom¹ to take medical charge of "the established forming on the Rideau", and by a supplementary order dated Quebec, October 3rd, 1815, Alex McDonald² and Major David McGregor Rogers³ were appointed superintendent and deputy-superintendent of the said establishment with salaries of £300 each, and field officers' allowances.

The government which culminated in this 'establishment' originated with some English and Scottish gentlemen who enlisted the sympathy of those in authority at the colonial office of the Imperial government, and provision was made under the superintendence of the military, to settle a number of Scotch families, chiefly from the Highlands⁴, on wild lands in the Province of Upper Canada. At that time the wilderness was absolutely controlled by the home government, from whom those comprising the immigrants received free passage from Scotland to Canada, and each male adult, a grant of 100 acres of land.

Under the arrangement respecting this new Canadian colony, over three hundred men, women and children set sail from Greenock on the Clyde, June 11th, 1815, and landed at Quebec, on September 4th. They at once ascended the river as far as Brockville where they spent the winter of 1815-1816 in temporary huts.

Settlers Explore District

During their stay there, late in the autumn of 1815, a party of explorers from this colony visited the present site of the Town of Perth to "spy out the land" for their kindred, before they could commit themselves to a position from which, once taken, it would be difficult to recede. The party

¹ Army Staff Surgeon Alexander Thom (1775-1848).

² Alexander McDonnell (1762-1842), former deputy paymaster general of the militia, Superintendent of the Perth Military Settlement 1815-1816.

³ David McGregor Rogers (1772-1824), member of the Upper Canada Legislative Assembly and in 1815 appointed Upper Canada Deputy Superintendent of Locations charged with settling ex-soldiers. He was briefly deputy-superintendent of the Perth Military Settlement in name only.

⁴ Among 231 Scots men, women and children from the first ships Atlas, Baltic Merchant, Dorothy and Eliza who reached Perth, only nine were from the Highlands. See *The Myth of the Perth 'Scots' Settlement* elsewhere on this website <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/neighbour/shaw-myth-scots-web.pdf>

camped the first night of their arrival in the locality on the right, or west, bank of the River Tay, very near the south end of the old stone bridge that stood so long on Gore Street. They made a bush camp almost in front of what is now Hodgkinson's service station⁵, which became the temporary headquarters of the prospectors till they decided upon the locality about them as the best procurable in the district.⁶

They returned to their comrades at Brockville, all of whom came in and settled in the townships of Bathurst, North Burgess, North Elmsley, a few in Drummond, and some within the present limits of the Town of Perth, though the greater number located in the immediate neighborhood on what is known as the 'Scotch Line'.

The date of the first land taken up was April 17th, 1816.

First Minister and Teacher

In considering the requirements of the colonists, the religious and education were not forgotten by the government, a clergyman and a schoolteacher having been specially selected and sent out to attend to the spiritual and intellectual needs of the area. The Rev. William Bell⁷, a Presbyterian clergyman of Edinburgh, sailed from his native country in the spring of 1817, arriving in Perth in June 1817, the government giving him a stipend of £100 per annum. Mr. James Bell⁸, former registrar of South Lanark, was one of his sons and was born in Perth in 1817, very shortly after his parents arrived here. He is said to have been the first white child born within the present limits of the town.

John Holliday⁹ was the teacher sent out with the emigrants. He was originally from Glasgow and sailed from Greenock on the Clyde in 1815. The schoolhouse in which he taught was on lot 21 con. 1, Bathurst, his salary was £50 pounds per annum, paid by the government.

Assessment Made in 1817

The first assessment showed there was but one cow in Bathurst at the time. The only yoke of oxen in the settlement for a few years belong to Mr. James Bryce¹⁰, lot 12, Scotch Line, Bathurst, and in the early days supplies were brought from Brockville, 40 miles distant, or from the early settlement on the St. Lawrence, 20 miles away, by the men, on their backs. Horses were not seen in the settlement for some years¹¹ to come and rough miry roads with a few bridges slowly succeeded the blazed paths or floats to cross the streams.

⁵ 110 Gore Street East, at the corner of Gore and Harvey Streets.

⁶ This account is inaccurate. In fact, the scouting party was so discouraged by what they found during their visit to the Tay, that on the basis of their report to the immigrants at Brockville a petitioned was sent to Upper Canada Lieutenant-Governor Francis Gore asking to be settled on the Bay of Quinte instead. Gore denied their request, however, and ordered them to move to the Perth Military Settlement in the spring.

⁷ Reverend William Bell (1780-1857).

⁸ James Bell (1817-1904), merchant in partnership with his brother Robert, later manager of the Merchants Bank Bank, Perth, and Lanark County Registrar.

⁹ John James Holliday/Haliday (1778-1879) was a native of Hutton Parish, Dumfriesshire.

¹⁰ James Bryce (1771-1866).

¹¹ In fact, Reverend William Bell arrived at the Perth Settlement on June 24, 1817, riding a borrowed horse, and he notes in his diary that, in 1817, "there were only two or three horses in the whole settlement" but that "hay for these had to be brought from the old settlement, from 20 to 30 miles distant".

When the Municipal Act came into force in 1850 the townships in the settlement had grown in 33 years into well developed and respectable farming communities, and the four municipalities around Perth and the town itself complied with the necessary conditions and selected their first reeves.

These were: Bathurst, Josiah Richey¹²; North Burgess, John Doran Jr.¹³; Drummond, Murdock Macdonell.¹⁴

The Council of Perth, incorporated as a village in 1850, consisted of: J. S. Nicol, M.D.¹⁵, mayor; George Cox¹⁶, John Doran¹⁷, Robert Douglas¹⁸, John McDougall¹⁹, and Murdock Macdonell²⁰, councillors.

The population of the above by the official census at that time was 10,838.

Court House and Town Hall

The first courthouse was built on its present location in 1821. Destroyed by fire, it was replaced by the present structure²¹ with cut stone front to which, as detached wings, have been added the registry office and jailer's residence. The jail at the rear, facing Beckwith Street, was erected in 1863.

The cannons in front of the Court House have a romantic and unique history. They were manufactured in Belgium about the year 1750, and were soon captured by the French, and later on were recaptured by the then Duke of York from the French in Flanders. They were part of the outfit of the army sent out to the rebellions "thirteen colonies" and were used throughout the revolutionary war till captured by the Americans when Gen. Burgoyne²² surrendered at the Battle of Saratoga. They were then used by the Americans and subsequently in the war of 1812-1815, being part of the outfit of the American forces at Crysler's Farm. They were captured by the Canadians in that famous battle and presented to the Town of Perth by the military authorities at the close of the war.²³

¹² Josias Richey (1795-1875), Government Deputy Surveyor.

¹³ John Doran Jr. (1826-1889), Bathurst Township Reeve, Warden of United Counties of Lanark & Renfrew, later judge of the Division Court of Nipissing District.

¹⁴ The author fails to mention the first Reeve of North Elmsley Township James Shaw (1801-1878), Lanark Settlement clerk, merchant (Shaw's of Perth), director of the Brockville and Ottawa Railway, member of Legislative Assembly of Canada, Canadian Senator.

¹⁵ Dr. James Stewart Nichol Sr. (1804-1864), practiced at Perth 1837-1864.

¹⁶ George Cox (1814-1884), wagon and carriage maker.

¹⁷ John Doran (1795-1850), merchant, property developer.

¹⁸ Robert Douglas (1812-1886), carpenter, building contractor, merchant.

¹⁹ John McDougall was a grocer.

²⁰ Murdoch McDonnell (1806-1852).

²¹ The original log courthouse was built on the site in 1822. It was replaced by a two-storey brick building in 1824 that burned in 1841.

²² British General John Burgoyne (1722-1792).

²³ Although oft repeated in accounts of the early history of the Perth Settlement, this story of the guns now on display in front of the Lanark County Courthouse is almost entirely fiction. For an accurate account see *Perth's Verbruggen Guns and the Legend of Crysler's Farm* elsewhere on this website <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/verbruggen-guns-narrative.pdf>

The town hall was built in 1863 at a cost of \$12,000 and at that period was the handsomest public building of its kind north of Brockville. Its lofty tower contains a town clock, which was placed there through the efforts of Mr. James M. Millar²⁴, mayor for 1873-1874.

The bright outlook that Perth had in its younger days is exemplified in the following summary:

“Old Perth has not gone back but progressed along all lines – that it has attained a heritage of beauty and the means of solid comfort, and at the same time has widened its built-up areas, and its many new streets and blocks now cover the green fields of years gone by”.

- *Transcription and notation by Ron W. Shaw (2024)*

²⁴ James Morton Millar (1842-1889) led the clock campaign, but the clock was paid for by public subscription. See *No Yankee Gingerbread Machine* elsewhere on this website <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/perth-town-clock.pdf>