
THE STORY OF DALHOUSIE SETTLEMENT

WRITTEN BY A PIONEER, THE LATE MR. WILLIAM PURDON

'The Story of Dalhousie Settlement' first appeared as a series of letters published by the Perth Courier between December 1892 and April 1893. It was subsequently republished in five parts between December 1901 and March 1902. Author William S. Purdon (1813-1896) was born at Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, and arrived in Dalhousie Township as an eight-year-old child in 1821. He was the son of Robert Purdon (1780-1852) and Jeanne Hunter Ferguson (1784-1872), members of the Glasgow Canadian Emigration Society. William Purdon married Isabella Chalmers (1816-1893) in 1835. In 1850, when the townships of Dalhousie, North Sherbrooke and Lavant were amalgamated for municipal purposes, he was elected to the first township council, later served as Reeve, was secretary-treasurer of the township for 20 years, and was a public-school trustee for two decades. This memoir, written in about 1890, when he was 77 years of age, represents a rare first-person account of the earliest years of the Society Settlers in what is now Lanark Highlands Township, Lanark County.

In the years 1816 and 1819 there was a great agitation, both in England and Scotland, amongst the working classes for reform. Thousands who had been living on the labors of generations then unborn, being cast on the labour market of the country caused quite a glut in the labour market of the country. Hundreds were groaning under it, and in order to improve the condition of the working classes the cry of vote by ballot, extension of the franchise and the repeal of the Corn Laws was the universal demand of the Reform party of that time, all of which has been conceded to the people long ago, but not until several noble men fell martyrs for the good of their country and their fellow men.¹

After the termination of the American and French wars, the Government of Great Britain, in order to colonize what was then called Upper Canada, entered into a plan of sending out emigrants to Canada, giving them 100 acres of land and rations for a year; but that plan did not work well. However, a few thinking individuals conceived the idea of emigrating to Canada, met and discussed the matter, and after a little, societies were organized in the city of Glasgow and several of the neighboring towns and villages in the County of Lanark in Scotland. After being duly organized by electing one of themselves president to do the business of the society, it was resolved to petition the Government to see what they would do in the matter.

¹ Reference to Andrew Hardie, John Baird and James Wilson who were convicted of treason, hanged, beheaded and quartered following the so-called Radical War of April 1820.

Accordingly, a petition was drawn up, and after being well recommended by members of Parliament and others as to the respectability of the petitioners, it was then duly laid before the Government. In reply, the Government made the following proposals:- They agreed to take them from the Clyde to their destination in Upper Canada, give each male emigrant, 21 years of age, 100 acres of land, a little stock of implements to begin with, and £10 per head; children half that amount, to be paid in two instalments; the first instalment and implements to be paid as soon as the parties were located on the land (I think the money was H.F. currency²); the money to be paid back after 10 years, the Government retaining the deed as security for same.

It was likewise stipulated that each passenger pay into a fund £3 per head for the purpose of provisioning the ship, children half that amount, and that each passenger be allowed a certain weight of luggage per head. The last clause caused a great many to abandon the society altogether, and go out by other ships, where they could get their goods and effects taken along with them; but the majority agreed to accept the Government proposals, and the presiding officer was authorized to notify the Government to that effect.

The British Government then had the Townships of Ramsay, Lanark, Dalhousie and North Sherbrooke surveyed and laid out for the emigrants, the Village of Lanark being the grand stopping place for the emigrants when they should arrive.

So early in the year 1820, a ship was fitted up, called the *Prompt*,³ and set sail from the Clyde in the month of April, and after a journey of about three months they landed at Lanark Village – or rather where Lanark was to be, as it was then an unbroken wilderness. They suffered much, and I have been told that the snow was on the ground before some of them got into their shanties. But as we did not come out till the following year, 1821, I will confine my remarks principally to what took place under my own knowledge and what I have been told by my parents and others I can rely upon.⁴

In the year 1821, two ships⁵ were fitted up, called the *Govan Cannon* and *Buchanan*⁶, each ship carrying 600 immigrants. We came out in the *Cannon* and left the city of Glasgow early in April and landed at Greenock, where the ship was waiting for us. After a day or two engaged in taking in supplies and being examined by the authorities and found to be sufficiently supplied, we were then granted liberty to sail. The order being given, the anchor was weighed, and we set sail on our wearisome journey to cross the Atlantic.

² Halifax Currency. In 1820, the British colonies in North America used the British system of pounds, shillings and pence but with variations in the rating system. The Halifax rating set values based upon the Spanish dollar, rating it at five shillings, value actually six pence higher than the value of the Spanish dollar at that time.

³ Three other ships carried Society Settlers to Canada in 1820, the *Commerce*, *Brock* and *David of London*.

⁴ In 1820 and 1821 a total of 2,850 of these 'Society Settlers' sailed for Upper Canada.

⁵ A third ship also sailed in 1821, the *Commerce*, making her second trip having also carried Society Settlers to Canada in 1820.

⁶ Purdon has mis-remembered the vessel names. The ships sailing in 1821 were the *George Canning*, *Earl of Buckinghamshire* and *Commerce*. The Purdon family sailed on the *George Canning*.

On the second day out, all hands took the last lingering look of the blue mountains of Auld Scotland, and on the third day, a little gale sprang up, the ship rolled badly, and sea sickness set in when vomiting was the order of the day. There was much grumbling amongst the women, but after a few days the sickness began to wear off, although there were some who got sick every little gale that blew.



With regard to our fare, it consisted of oatmeal porridge morning and evening. A man stood over it with a large hand-spike to stir the mess, while another man shoveled in the meal. After being duly cooked, the order was given, "*Come on, boys*", and each got their allowance according to the number of their ticket. They likewise got their allowance of black strap (West Indian molasses) for the porridge and six biscuits for the day. They also got their allowance of water, but as each family had little private stores of their own, by getting a little water warmed at the galley they could make things a little more palatable.

Our beds were arranged all round the ship, each passenger being allowed so much space. They were two tiers deep and all luggage was piled in the center; so, you can easily see we were very much crowded.

Our Captain⁷ was a man of very sound judgement; he gave every encouragement to all harmless amusement, but no rowdyism was allowed, and the greatest harmony prevailed.

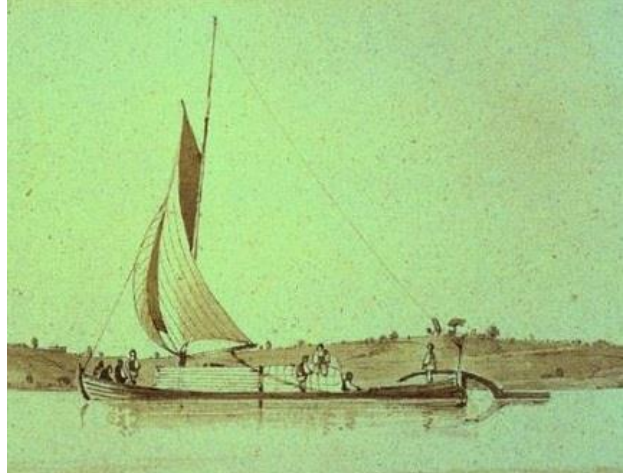
The weather was generally good. Only on one or two occasions when a sea broke over the ship was the order to shut down the hatches given, which caused great alarm between decks, as we were then in darkness, but as soon as the water was swept away the light of day was admitted again.

By this time, we were near the Banks of Newfoundland, and we passed two large icebergs that had broken loose from the northern shores and were drifting south to destruction. A few days after that, one night one of the sailors called out, "*Land in sight*". There was a big rush to see America, but they were all disappointed, as it was only visible from the mast head; but in a day or two it was visible on both sides.

Shortly a little boat was seen approaching us. This brought a pilot who came on board, and he was given charge of the ship by the captain. After a pleasant sail up the river St. Lawrence, we cast anchor opposite the city of Quebec, after being blown by the winds of heaven and the craft of man for seven weeks and three days. Boats were lowered and a big rush was made for the city to get some fresh supplies.

⁷ Captain Thomas Porter.

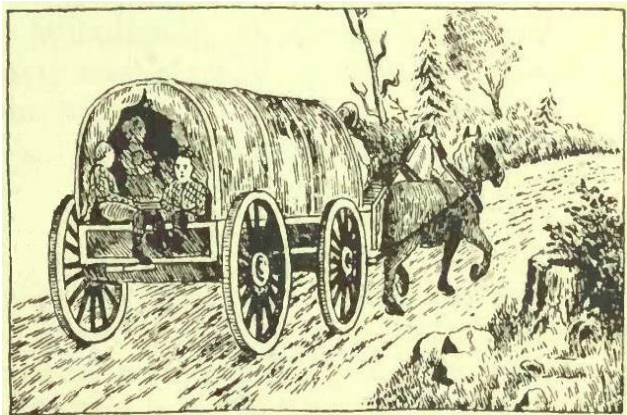
On the day following, a large river steamer came alongside, and after being all transferred, bag and baggage, we set sail for Montreal, the head of ship navigation at that time. It was a splendid boat; everything was bright and clean and looked like a palace in comparison with the old, dingy *Cannon* we had been so long confined in.



Durham Boat of the type that carried the Society Settlers from Montreal to Prescott

In due time we arrived at Montreal, where a fleet of boats were collected to take us to Prescott. Each boat was manned by two Frenchmen, one in the bow and the other in the stern, the [immigrant] men plying the oars; and when we came to the rapids long ropes were attached to the boat, and the men going ahead hauled up the boat, while the two Frenchmen guided it through among the boulders. At night we landed, did a little cooking, and slept as best we could, some on the bank and more under the tarpaulin on the boats.

After several day of such navigation, we at length arrived at Prescott, when we were all huddled into sheds and old barns, and every place that could offer a little shelter. Here we had to remain until a sufficient number of carts and wagons, horses and oxen could be collected to take us to Lanark, and when ready we started on our long paddle through mud to our destination.



Nothing particular took place on the route; only heavy rains made the roads most miserable. One little anecdote I have been told – A witty teamster with a yoke of oxen and wagon got stuck in the mud. He was standing on the bank indulging in a volley of oaths at his miserable condition, when the minister came along. “*What! What’s that you’re about?!*” He quickly replied, “*Preaching the gospel in the wilderness by God*”. The minister only laughed and went to work and helped them out of the mud.

I think we were three or four days getting through to Lanark, where we found some old acquaintances, who gave us a hearty welcome.

=====

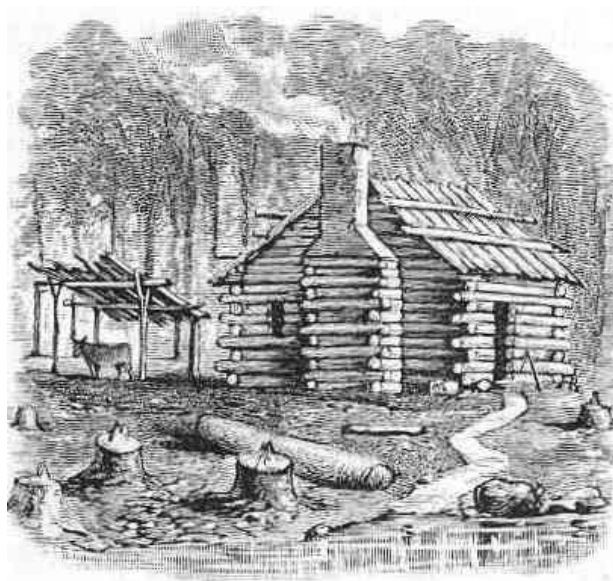
Having arrived at Lanark, the British Government having fulfilled their engagement, we were not left to the freedom of our own will. The first thing we had to attend to was the erection of wigwams, Indian fashion, to shelter the women and children, and likewise to get the luggage into a place of safety. We then had to call at the King’s Store or land-office and get our names

recorded. I may here mention that the land-office was conducted by a Colonel Marshall⁸, assisted by two clerks⁹. Their duty was to direct the settlers, give them their share of the Government employment and pay them their first instalment of the money grant, as soon as they were located on land. The three gentlemen who were appointed to do the business in the land-office were men of the right stamp and transacted the business to the great satisfaction of all parties, as I never heard a complaint against them.

One of the clerks told a witty story about a son of Old Erin¹⁰. He was wanting to go to a certain place; the clerk told him to go along a certain road where he would find blazes on the trees, to follow the blazes and that would take him to where he wanted, "*By jabbers*", says he, "*the blazes may be all out before I get there*".

The men now formed into parties, got a list of the land from the agency that was open for location in the several townships where they wanted to go, engaged a guide, and then started out to the woods to select a farm. As soon as they had made their selections they returned and reported the same to the land-officer. They were then duly located, got a location ticket, and were then entitled to the share of the Government articles, and the first installment of the Government grant.

Now began the tug-o-war. The settlers in North Sherbrooke and on the south of the Mississippi in Dalhousie made scows and boats and took their luggage and supplies by what was called the Mississippi route to the head of the Dalhousie Lake, on the eastern side. It had all to be carried from Lanark on their backs till winter, when oxen and sleighs were engaged to bring in our luggage and provisions. Having selected our lots, and obtained a location ticket, we had then to go to work to build a shanty. Both men and women had now to go to work and carry out some provisions and cooking utensils to the farm, while the men again formed into parties, hired a boss, and commenced operations.



I need not here describe what they were like, as the same sort of building is still to be seen in the back country. I will only add that they were very inferior to the shanties nowadays. As there were no cattle to draw the logs, they had all to be carried on the men's shoulders or drawn with ropes; and no sawn lumber was to be had. They were very miserable structures to pass a Canadian winter in. After two or three weeks we got a small window and door put in, but plenty

⁸ William Marshall (1774-1864), Captain in the Regular Army and Lieutenant Colonel of Lanark Militia, served on the staff of the Perth Military Settling Department from late 1815 and was appointed by Dalhousie as Superintendent of the Lanark Settlement in 1820.

⁹ One of the clerks was James Shaw (1798-1878) who later established Shaw's mercantile store at Perth and was appointed to the Canadian Senate in 1867.

¹⁰ Ireland.

had nothing but a blanket hung up to break the wind; but there was no help for us; it was a case of 'root hog or die',¹¹ and although there was a large hole in the roof to let out the smoke, when the wind blew we had often to run outside to save being suffocated.

As our party¹² had got our shanty built, we had all to go to work and carry out our blankets and clothing and provisions, a distance of 12 miles in our case, as no teams could get in till the swamps were frozen up; when not on the road the men were busy closing up the shanty with clay and moss and under-brushing – that is cutting down the small trees, preparatory for the winter chopping. Now Mr. Editor, I assure you that everything had a dark aspect at that time. Some got quite disappointed, and left, but the greater part stuck to it and were buoyed up with hope of better times in the near future.



Painting by William Harvey Sadd

Hard frost having now set in, the men had to go to work to tramp down the snow in the swamp to let it freeze so that sleighs could get through with our luggage and provisions. A team was then engaged, and after great difficulty, as we were about a mile from the main track, they got through at last, which was a great relief to us at the time. Our provisions consisted of cornmeal, flour, and peas; some bought a barrel of pork and some only half – just as they could afford it, and now 'man's inhumanity to man' began to appear, and the poor emigrant must be robbed.

The flour was generally half cornmeal bolted, and the pork was just young shoots of pigs, with the hair half scratched off and contained generally three half heads and sometimes two heads in each barrel; but as it was not inspected, of course, we had no redress.

At length welcome spring began to appear, and the maple began to yield its delicious sweets. Buckets were made, and every dish that could hold a drop was utilized. The sugar making was a most laborious job, as the sap had all to be carried into the shanty and boiled down in small pots and pans, and attended to both night and day, but notwithstanding the difficulty, there was quite an amount made, which in the absence of flesh meat was quite an addition to our humble fare.

Sugar making being over, all hands had to go to work to burn off the brush, roll the logs into a little piles by hand, and rake the leaves into heaps, and then burn all off, and then spread the ashes over the ground. Having thus prepared our little fallow of two or three acres, we began to plant our corn and pumpkins, potatoes and turnips, among the roots with the hoe and spade.

¹¹ A catchphrase dating at least to the early 1800s, coming from the early colonial practice of turning pigs loose in the woods to fend for themselves, the term is an idiomatic expression for self-reliance.

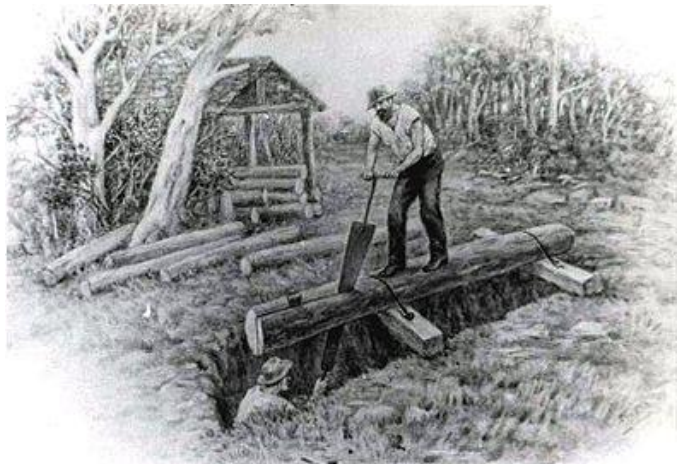
¹² When they arrived in the settlement in 1821 the Purdon family consisted of Robert Purdon (1780-1852, his wife Jean Hunter Ferguson (1787-1872), and their children William (1813-1896), author of the memoir, Jeanne (c1817-1887), and Robert Jr. (1820-1906). Three more children were born in Dalhousie Township – Margaret (1822-1906), James (1825-1883) and John (1828-1910).

About this time there was quite a rush to the old settlements¹³ to purchase cows. They were generally successful; and this added very materially to our living as you know a Scotchman can easily live if you give him plenty of milk and meal. Planting being done, nearly all the men and girls had to start to look for work wherever they could find it¹⁴, as it was quite evident their little crop would not be sufficient to carry them through another winter. They generally found employment, but wages were very small, men getting from \$10 to \$12 per month, and girls, \$3 – and that often in trade of some kind.

In the meantime, provisions were getting very scarce, and could not be had, even though you had the money, and before the potatoes were ready to dig, several families in our neighborhood were entirely out. One of our neighbors had to live on fish and a little cannell¹⁵ for over three weeks, and another neighbor, with a family of five or six children, was entirely out of food. They had a cow and had milk, and they boiled basswood leaves, and beat them up with a little butter. The husband away working, the mother went to the foot of Dalhousie Lake, gathered the mussels out of the lake, carried them home and boiled them, and in this way managed to live for several weeks. This was no doubt an extreme case, but there were very few that were much better. The first relief was the potato, and they were soft when we had to begin on them. By and by the corn began to get plump; it was extensively boiled and formed quite an addition to our humble fare.

=====

By this time those who were away working began to come home to gather their little crops and to prepare for the winter. The crop was generally good, and along with the little earning was about sufficient to supply our natural wants for another year. In the meantime, our carpenters began to erect sawpits and with the government pitsaw which was given to us we were supplied with sawn lumber, which enabled us to improve our floors and make beds, which was quite an improvement on the brush and forest leaves that we had to lie on the first winter.



Pit Saw

We likewise had a little frame erected on each side of our fireplace, which was covered with rough lath and extended a little above the roof, and it was all plastered over with clay mortar to keep it from burning. This relieved us of the smoke to a great extent, which was a great comfort.

¹³ The cattle came from the 'old settlements' along 'the front' (St. Lawrence River) around Prescott and Brockville that had been established (primarily by United Empire Loyalists) in the late 1780s.

¹⁴ Employment was found in the Perth Military Settlement (Bathurst, Drummond, Beckwith and North Elmsley Townships), in the 'old settlements' along 'the front', and as far away as digging the Erie Canal in New York State.

¹⁵ Cinnamon.

Nothing particular took place during the winter. The men busied themselves cutting down the forest and carrying to the mill the corn to be ground, and preparing for the sugar-making in the spring. The season was good, and there was quite a quantity made, but it would scarcely pay to carry to market, as you could not get more than three or four pence for the pound of it.



Threshing with a flail
Image by C. W. Jeffreys

chaff; and as soon as we got about a bushel it was gladly carried to the mill, and just as gladly received at home. Scones were baked, and I assure you I thought it the sweetest bread I had ever tasted.¹⁶

The crops were generally good, and I may just say that the settlement had enough to supply the real necessities of life, and in some cases a little to sell; and although the settlers were very cheerful, still we were far from being in a position to live comfortably.

The want of anything like flesh meat, unless that of any wild animals we could kill, caused the people (like the Israelites of old) to long for the flesh pots of auld Scotland. However, we were not very particular in that line. Squirrels and muskrats, which we got from the Indians, and even mud turtles, were all quite acceptable. I recollect of a neighbor of ours who lived at the side of mud lake making the present of one to us. It was very large and required our largest pot to contain it. After being well boiled it was served up for dinner and we all partook of it, and thought it splendid, with the exception of my good mother who could not take it on account of its uncouth appearance.

¹⁶ Scottish scones are closer to a biscuit and are made with buttermilk.

By this time fowls and pigs were introduced, and as the means of making a living were apparent, the people began to think of starting schools for the children.

At this time the Government of Upper Canada gave a grant of \$20 or \$25 to any section that could get 20 children on the roll, and keep a school open nine months in the year, appoint a board of trustees, engage a teacher (who had to go to Perth to pass the board, which sat at Perth where he got a certificate to teach); and upon the report of trustees to the board that the law had been complied with, the Government grant was paid.

As there were no properly qualified teachers amongst us in those days, a resident of the section was just selected, and any individual that could read and write and teach the common rules of arithmetic was all that was required. As wages were very low at that time all the teachers got in our settlement was from \$60 to \$80 in the year, and, apart from the Government grant, was paid in grain and sometimes in work. So, in this humble way schools were started all through the settlement in little log shanties in the summer of 1824. I may just remark that although the means of obtaining education were very small, still quite a number of those who started in this humble way, who happened to possess a spark of nature's fire, came to be good practical scholars, and to fill offices of trust in a judicious and satisfactory manner.



The food and educational problems being now to some extent settled, the next difficulty that presented itself was that of clothing, for although the settlers, when they came out, were well supplied with clothes, they were now beginning to get more than threadbare. Shoes had already disappeared, and every person was barefoot. When winter came, they manage to get beefskin moccasins, but the women and children had nothing but shoes made of old rags. About this time, I recollect of being at a social meeting, when each one was reciting their tale of woe in a lively manner. One of our local poets had composed a few verses, which come to my recollection, so I think I must let you have them:

Scotia's sons, what brought you here
So muckle could an' heat to bear
Where winter reigns twa thirds the year,
And scorching heat the have it.
I've seen the son of Caledone¹⁷
Under a heavy burden groan,
With neither shoes nor stockings on,
An' tattered duds the lave it.

¹⁷ 'Caledonia' was the Roman name for what is now Scotland.

But in order to improve this state of things, some of our weavers went over to the state of New York where they got employment weaving bedticking¹⁸. As money was scarce there, they took part of their wages in cloth, which they brought over to Dalhousie and sold on reasonable terms to the settlers so that bedticking pants and shirts were all the go in our location. Others went out to Kingston to work, and after having earned a little money, they went over to the military authorities at Fort Henry¹⁹ where they got good bargains of old military clothing, which they brought home. So, you see His Majesty's coats of arms was compelled to do duty over again.

But as the supply was not equal to the demand, some of our people knew how lint used to be manufactured in Scotland before flax mills were started, and they resolved to try the experiment, and flax was sown. It grew well and was put through all the different processes by hand to bring it into a workable fibre. As the women could generally spin on the little wheel, the rack²⁰ and wee picket tow²¹ was started, and yarn provided, which our weavers wove into good substantial linen, and I assure you your correspondent thought he was all right when he had a shirt and pants grown and manufactured in our own township. Still, I must confess they were a little cool on a winter morning, especially when you had no drawers. But as the linen trade was a very slow and laborious business, as soon as a little land could be set apart for pasture, sheep were introduced. Their wool was likewise all manufactured by hand labor, and drugget²² became the general dress for both men and women, at both kirk and market.

=====

About the year 1825 or 1826, all calves were kept, steers from two to three years old were yoked up and trained to work. Our farm implements, however, were of a very rude construction. Our harrow was just a forked tree, the two limbs cut off about six feet from the crotch; eight or ten two-inch holes were bored in the legs, and good hardwood pins driven into them leaving them about six inches long on the down side. The steers drew them back and forward with a chain hitched around the point, and in this way, with the help of the hoe, a very good job was made. Our sleighs were altogether made of wood, and likewise our carts; the wheels were just two blocks cut off a large tree, with a hole made in the center for the axel. But although our implements were of a very inferior kind, still they were a great improvement on the old way when we had to carry everything on our backs.



Homemade Harrow

Image Courtesy of Toronto Archives

¹⁸ A thick, tightly woven fabric used to cover mattresses and bed pillows.

¹⁹ The discarded uniforms probably came from troops manning fortifications and Point Frederick, Kingston. Construction of Fort Henry was not completed until 1836.

²⁰ A warp-knitting measure consisting of 480 courses. Fabric quality is judged by the number of inches per rack.

²¹ A tow (or hards) is a coarse, broken fibre, removed during processing flax.

²² A fabric material, very thin and narrow, usually made of wool, or half wool and linen, usually considered a floor covering.



Boiling Potash
C. W. Jeffreys

Having now got the means of moving things a little with the oxen, the idea was started of making potash, four or five neighbors joining together for the purchase of kettles and coolers and the erection of the works. The merchants were willing to furnish the same on condition that they got the potash until the indebtedness was paid. In this way potash making became the order of the day all round. This was a great relief to the settlers, as it brought in a little money, which enabled the men to stay home and clear off the farm, for although the profits were very small, -- a barrel of 500 lbs. long weight seldom brought more than \$20 after paying all costs and charges, which at the time amounted to \$8 per barrel to take it to Montreal -- still it was quite a relief.

About this time the idea was started to build a hall for the purpose of celebration of St. Andrew's Day -- the patron saint of Scotland -- in order to keep in remembrance our land and the land of our fathers.

After it was finished, a grand gathering of sons and daughters of auld Scotland met on the day appointed, had a grand dinner, and after dinner speeches were made, songs were sung, and at last it wound up with a dance in true Scottish fashion, to the great satisfaction of all present. The meeting was very large; quite a number came from Perth and from the townships all around and all were well pleased with the night's entertainment.

The meetings were kept up for two or three years, but upon more sober reflection it was resolved to start a public library. A meeting was arranged, and a committee was elected. Subscription papers were handed around, each subscriber to pay \$1 entry money, and to donate to the use of the library any book that he might be willing to give so as to make a start. It was also suggested that, as the township was called after the Earl of Dalhousie's estate in Scotland, he being kindly requested to act as patron for the library in Dalhousie²³. The Earl was very proud of the honor conferred on him and at once sent a very large consignment of splendid books for the library, which together with other donations and what the committee were able to purchase, made quite respectable collection. It was well patronized for many a year, and was the means of diffusing much general information, but for various causes it has of late years been allowed to go into decay, the chief being the removal by death and emigration²⁴ of nearly all those who took an active part in the first formation.

²³ George Ramsay, 9th Earl of Dalhousie, Governor General of the Canadas 1820-1828, patron and major donor to the Dalhousie Township Library.

²⁴ In the 1840s & 1850s there was an exodus from the Dalhousie settlement to Western Ontario and the American Midwest.

The only minister of the Gospel in those early days was the late Rev. Dr. Gemmill²⁵ of Lanark, he having studied in both the medical and divinity departments, was both doctor and preacher in Dalhousie for many years. As there were no roads or conveyance in Dalhousie at the that time, the gentleman had just to travel on foot to meet his appointments, over very bad roads, sometimes preaching in private houses, and sometimes in schoolhouses, after they were erected. At length, after St. Andrew's Hall was built, that became his principal preaching station. He was a man possessed of fine moral qualities and gave good sound moral instructions to people and prayed most fervently for the King and all the Royal Family, and likewise for the speedy downfall of Turk and Antichrist. However, the Turk still lives, with the help of Great Britain, especially when the Russian bear begins to growl.²⁶ He was likewise very moderate in the charges, and as far as I know had no definite salary, but a subscription was taken up for him every winter, some giving a bushel of wheat, and everyone giving him a little of what they could spare, which was thankfully received. I have been told he received a small annual grant from a fund in the Old County for the propagation of the Gospel in foreign parts²⁷. Altogether, on account of his joint profession of doctor and preacher, he was well respected and was the means of doing much good in those days.

About the year 1827, as the time for the payment of our indebtedness to the British Government was drawing nigh, and as the people were anxious to obtain the franchise, which at that time was only conferred on freeholders, the idea was started of calling meetings in the different townships to discuss the matter, and at these meetings it was resolved to draw up a petition and have it signed by all interested, setting forth our true condition, and requesting the British Government to cancel our indebtedness and grants us our deed. The petition was duly signed and forwarded to the British Government, the receipt of which was formally acknowledged, and the statement made that they would take the matter into serious consideration. After a long delay a commission was appointed by the Imperial Government to examine the land and upon their report the substance of which was that it was altogether a mistake to send so many emigrants into such a rough and backward country without roads, and with very little money, and they recommended that the debt be cancelled, and the settlers be given their deeds.²⁸

There was no further action taken in the matter by the settlers, and about two years before the great Cameron and Powell election, the deeds were issued to the settlers. It was a terrible fight. The Tories took possession of the poll booths and would not let the Reformers poll a vote, by the third or fourth day they became exhausted and as the Reformers continued to push in from the north and record their votes for Cameron, the fight was soon decided, and Cameron was elected by a handsome majority.²⁹

²⁵ Reverend Dr. John Gemmill (1760–1844) arrived with the Glasgow Trongate Emigration Society on the *David of London* in 1820. Educated at the University of Glasgow he was ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1786 and earned his MD in 1818.

²⁶ A reference to the Crimean War of 1853-1856 when Britain allied with the Ottoman Empire (Turkey), France and Sardinia to fight Russia.

²⁷ The 'Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts' (S.P.G), founded in 1701 as an overseas missionary organisation of the Church of England. In various manifestations the society operated for over 300 years.

²⁸ Land Surveyor Charles Rankin (1797-1886) was sent to investigate and concluded that "... *it appears a matter of surprise how the people managed to obtain a livelihood here. Lands occupied by these people Lanark, Dalhousie ... should never have been attempted to be settled. The people are barely managing to live*".

²⁹ In fact, Malcolm Cameron (1808-1878) won by a margin of only seven votes. He polled 559 votes while John Ambrose Hume Powell (c1802-1843) received 552, Dr. Alexander Thom (1775-1845) counted 515, and Thomas Mabon Radenhurst (1808-1854) garnered 384.

This was the first vote that our correspondent ever gave, and I assure you, that if there was ever any doubt in my mind as to which party I should belong it was for ever dispelled on that occasion. If the Reformers had not kept back, and just let the drunken savages fight it out amongst themselves, I have no doubt there would have been bloodshed.

=====

Having given you a brief account of our progress in the pioneer state, I will now give you a few more items without regard to the time of their occurrences. As necessity is the mother of invention, a good opportunity was now afforded in our case for its development. A neighbor of ours having no coat to wear, went to a tailor with a piece of cloth to get one made. He asked the tailor what he would make it for. The tailor said he would make him the cost for \$4. He felt mad and told him he neither could nor would give him any such money – that he would rather take it home and wrap it around him and wear it in plaid fashion; but after thinking over the matter, he thought he might make it himself. He had an old black coat, so he went to work and ripped it down as far as allowed him tot take a pattern, cut it out, adding a few modern improvements. In place of the swallow tail, he brought it right round in front, sewed both coats neatly together again and then he boasted of his independence.

Another of my acquaintance was badly off for pants. He had a blanket he thought he could spare. He spread the blanket on the floor, lay down on top of it and spread his legs to the proper angle. He then brought it around his body and around his legs; then caused another party to cut a piece out between the legs, commencing at his feet in the shape of the letter V, terminating at the body. The pattern now being taken, all he had to do was to sew them up the inside of this legs, and thus with a few buttons up the front, and a broad hem around the waist, the pants were completed. You may think this a little exaggerated, but as I have seen the old gentleman in the pants many a time, I think it is about correct.



He had another experiment which I think I may mention. As big back-logs³⁰ were a necessity in our shanties in those days, he though it might be superseded by one made of clay which would not require to be replaced in the morning. So, he got to work, made a clay back-log, and after drying in the sun got it into position, put on a good fire; but alas it began to crack badly. Not being willing to be beat, he made some iron hoops and driving them on to tighten it up, but it went all to pieces. My informant was an eyewitness. He told me the gentleman looked very sad over his failure, while he could scarcely suppress laughing; so, you see it is true what Burns says, *“The best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft a-gee”*.

³⁰ With the objective of keeping a fire burning through a long, cold night, a large 'back-log', usually green, measuring one to two feet in diameter, was placed at the back of an open wood-burning fire. A smaller 'back-stick' was then placed on top and then a 'fore-stick', with the small wood laid in front on stones (or andirons if they had them).

In the early days of the settlement as great crops of corn were grown the husking bee was all the go. Coming into the house in the evening, the first thing that attracted your attention was the great pile of corn in the middle of the floor, almost covered with young lads and lassies to do the work and enjoy the fun; the song and story went round, and the joy was almost boundless. In the meantime the good wife of the house was busy along with an assistant or two, preparing the evening supper, which consisted of a pailful or two of well pared potatoes, which after being well boiled and pulverized with the beetle³¹, a quart of two of milk and a big chunk of butter were thrown in, the spurtle³² was then applied to thoroughly incorporate the mess. Corn being finished, the pot was then placed on a table in the middle of the floor and as many as could stand round it were furnished with spoon and bowl of milk, then after all were satisfied with the potatoes, they were served round with a well buttered scone, which finished up the rustic feed.



Supper being over, everything was turned round to make room for the dance. As there was no artificial music in those days the natural organ had just to supply the want; so those that had the best-toned instrument were pressed into the service. As there was nothing very systematic in that day, but all being willing to do their best, it was a case of the more blunders the more fun.

After enjoying the dance for a couple of hours or so, according to the Scottish custom, they all formed into a ring, at the same time singing a lively chorus, while each one kissed the partner of his choice. This was called the parting kiss. Then great torches were kindled to light them through the woods, when, like Burns' two dogs –

*Each took off their several way,
Resolved to meet some ither day*³³

Pope says: "*Lo! The poor Indian, whose untutored mind, Sees God in clouds and hears Him in the wind*".³⁴

I endorse the sentiment, as we are, no doubt, trespassing on their soil. When we first came to Dalhousie the Indians were quite numerous. As many as 15 or 20 families went up the river every fall to their different hunting grounds. When they first made their appearance, we were a little afraid, but as they were remarkably civil, we soon were all right. They only wanted to trade

³¹ Potato masher.

³² A wooden Scottish kitchen tool, dating from the 15th century, that is used to stir porridge, soups, stews, and broths.

³³ '*The Twa Dogs: A Dog's Tale*' (1786), by Robert Burns (1759-1756).

³⁴ From '*Essay on Man*' (1733). By Alexander Pope (1688-1744).

with us, offering us mitts, venison and skins on reasonable terms for potatoes, corn and flour, all of which was quite acceptable to us, and quite a trade was carried on for a number of years, quite satisfactorily to both.

I am happy to inform you that the settlers always treated them honestly, and justly, with only one exception, and I am quite satisfied that if the Indians had been treated by the Whites on this continent on sound Christian principles as the great William Penn³⁵ treated them, there need not have been a drop of blood shed on their account, but as they were ever dealt with on the principle that might was right, nothing else could be expected. But, alas, the familiar bark canoe has long since ceased to float on the placid waters of Dalhousie Lake, and nothing remains but the relics of pottery, arrowheads, &c. to tell of what had once been.

About the year 1833, as the young families had grown up to men and women, emigration became a necessity. Some went over to the State of New York, but the most part went to what was then called Western Canada³⁶, where good land could be got at 60 cents an acre. But this great number of years the larger part of our emigrants have gone to the States. I have been through the Western States and found great numbers of the old Society Settlers wherever I went. They all told me they had no desire to return to old Canada, only to see their friends.

Since the introduction of municipal government³⁷, we have been fairly prosperous, our schools and roads and bridges being all made and maintained by our own money by direct taxation, excepting the school and agricultural grants, and \$80 we got from the government when we first built the bridge at the foot of Dalhousie Lake about 50 years ago. So, you see if Dalton McCarthy's³⁸ estimate is correct, that for every \$10 of dutiable goods we purchase we have to pay \$20, we must be a very profitable stock.

But I must draw to a close, and will only add that the descendants of the Society Settlers are now scattered all over the continent of North American and I don't think it will be too much to say that they have been as intelligent and persevering a class as ever left the British Isles, and if I have been the means of causing a tear of gratitude to drop to the memory of the departed fathers and mothers, I am pleased.

PIONEER

(Transcribed and notated by Ron W. Shaw 2025)

³⁵ William Penn (1644-1718) was founder of the Province of Pennsylvania during the British colonial era. In 1683, he signed the Treaty of Shackamaxon with the Lenape Nation, a treaty that established a peace that lasted more than 70 years. Voltaire called the treaty "*the only treaty never sworn to and never broken*".

³⁶ To the counties of Lambton, Kent, Essex, etc. in what is now Western Ontario.

³⁷ When Upper and Lower Canada were joined in 1840 as the United Province of Canada its First Parliament enacted legislation in 1841 establishing municipal government for townships, districts, counties, towns and cities.

³⁸ Dalton McCarthy (1836-1898), MP 1876-1898.