

NO ONE KNEW WHERE HE HAD GONE

Sailor-Settler Robert Pottie

Not all of the earliest settlers to draw land at the Perth Military settlement were successful in establishing homes and farms. In fact, between 1816 and 1820, about half of the soldier-settlers and a third of the civilian settlers abandoned the attempt. In the settlement records 'success' is usually indicated by the notation 'SDP', for 'Settlement Duties Performed'; which generally meant a cabin built, some land cleared, a crop raised, residence of three years and a 'Patent' (Deed of Ownership) issued. 'Failure' was indicated by the recording of a 'Re-grant'; meaning the lot had been abandoned by the original Location Ticket holder and a new ticket issued to another. Some lots were 'Re-granted' several times before a settler secured an 'SDP'.

Of those who left, many went to the United States, others to more established settlements like Glengarry or the Niagara, some found employment in urban centers like Montreal or Quebec City, and a few even returned home to England, Scotland and Ireland. The reasons for failure were many. Above all was the lack of necessary skills and experience with axe and hoe; but also sickness, death from accident or disease, and the depression symptomatic of back woods isolation. One such was Robert Pottie¹, formerly of the Royal Navy, who appears in the Location Ticket record as;

Robert Potty, emigrant, 1 adult male, country Scotland, ship 'Fame', Sept. 17, 1816, located Dec. 9, 1816, Drummond, C-4/-11(SW). Re-granted to [William] Harvey, Sergt., R. Ay. [Sergeant Royal Artillery] Improvements valued at £3.

In the stern Calvinist view of Reverend William Bell, many would-be settlers were simply loafers and ne'er-do-wells, living on government largess as long as it lasted. In his diaries Bell recounts the tale of military settler Robert Pottie;

A Mrs. Ruthven in Kirkcaldy wrote me several letters respecting her son Robert Pottie, who had got land in this settlement. Robert had in his younger years been very much indulged, and had not learned any useful employment. So, like many of his class, he ran away from his parents and went to sea. What he had learned there I do not know, but assuredly cleanliness and industry were not amongst his accomplishments.

He had not been long at sea, when his love of change and dislike of labour greatly lessened his enjoyment, and he would have gladly run away a second time, had it been in his power. But when it was too late Robert found that on the ocean, this was no easy matter. To make evil worse, he was pressed², and carried aboard a King's ship. Here Robert spent many a

¹ The register of Location Tickets uses the spelling 'Potty', while Reverend William Bell uses the spelling 'Pottie'.

² Abducted from a merchant ship or on the street by a Royal Navy press gang and compelled to serve.

sorrowful day, not only on account of present services, which were far from voluntary, but from the regret he felt for his former folly.

The longest and darkest night will come to an end, so Robert's emancipation at last drew near. Peace came, and he like many others obtained land, rations and implements from the government in Perth Settlement.

When he considered the liberty he now enjoyed, and the farm he could call his own, he thought it great folly to labour hard, or stint himself in grog. For this reason he took things easy, and after all his ready cash was gone for the necessaries of life, he sold his clothes, of which he had a good stock, and lived on the proceeds. When this source of income dried up, he recollected that he had a kind mother at home in easy circumstances who could supply his wants.

He therefore sits down and writes a very sensible letter, for he had got a very good education, in which after describing his farm, the fertility of its soil, and the various other advantages it possessed. He hinted, that, on account of getting his house burnt, and the want of oxen to assist him with his labour, he was prevented from turning his otherwise good fortune to advantage. But that if his mother would send him £20 in cash, and a few clothes, he would be provided for, for life. He even proposed that his mother, who was a widow, should come to Canada, and share his good fortune. Knowing his mother's pious disposition he had introduced several quotations from Scripture which he knew would be all in his favour.

All this time he had made little improvement on his land, and his hut was little better than a pigsty. But he was not mistaken respecting his mother. She read his letter with joy, and wrote another one requesting me to furnish him what he wanted to the amount of £20, which she would repay.

I did not furnish him much, for I did not know how far I could depend on her promise. In this I was right, for she never sent any money, but pestered me with letters till I was sick of her, for letters from Britain to this country were then no trifle for postage [the receiver paid the postage]. At last she sent a box of clothing for Robert, in care of a merchant in Montreal.

But Robert, tired of waiting, had by this time left the settlement, and no one here knew where he had gone. His mother next wanted me to advertise him in the papers, but as she omitted sending the money, I declined this commission.