

AN AUTHORITY ON BOUNDS & LIMITS

Joseph Miller Oliver Cromwell (1819-1897)

Born at Rode, Somersetshire, England, on January 1, 1819, Joseph Miller Oliver Cromwell was the son of “*respected and prosperous citizens*”¹ Joseph Cromwell (1794-1826), a carpenter, and Sarah Cockell (1795-1824). Before he turned eight years of age, however, both of Joseph’s parents were dead and he and an elder sister, Ann (1817-1882), were left in the care of an uncle².

The uncle emigrated to Upper Canada in about 1828³ and brought his young charges with him. They settled near Perth, perhaps at Port Elmsley⁴, but the uncle, allegedly, “*appropriated their inheritance ... indentured Joseph to a local farmer ... and left for the United States*”⁵ Ann Cromwell married (c1834) James Glien (1807-1877) of Drummond Township⁶ and, the story goes, “*young Cromwell, who was a frail boy physically, was so brutally treated by the rough pioneer farmer that he ran away, taking refuge with his married sister*”⁷.

The identity of the “*rough pioneer farmer*” is uncertain, but one might speculate that it was Ebenezer Wilson (1790-1848) of North Sherbrooke Township⁸, father of John Wilson (1807-1869) who, in 1833, killed Robert Lyon (1812-1833) in Upper Canada’s last fatal duel. At some date in the late years of the 19th century an individual identified only as a ‘Mr. Cromwell’ provided an account⁹ of some events surrounding the famous duel to the Perth Historical and Antiquarian Society. That account was written from the author’s recall and perspective as a youth living in the Ebenezer Wilson home in that fateful year.¹⁰

There is no suggestion in that narrative of Cromwell being “*brutally treated*” by Wilson, but the writer does describe Wilson as “*... a man of very strong opinions and intolerant of any who differed from him ... superior to the men of the settlement [he] asserted his superiority in a way the neighbors resented*”¹¹. That Cromwell was indentured to Wilson, or to anyone, is doubtful. Indenture was unknown in North Sherbrooke Township in the 1830s. It is more likely he was living

¹ *Proceedings of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors (1898)*.

² Probably William Tanner Cromwell, born 1812, Rode, Somerset, England.

³ Cromwell’s Perth *Courier* obituary says that he came to Canada “*when three years old*”, i.e. c1823, but as his parents did not die until 1824 and 1826, so a later arrival date seems more likely.

⁴ Cromwell’s Perth *Courier* obituary says that he “*... resided when a youth at Pike Falls*”.

⁵ *Proceedings of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors (1898)*.

⁶ Drummond Township C-3/L-3(W).

⁷ *Proceedings of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors (1898)*.

⁸ North Sherbrook C-1/L-12(W).

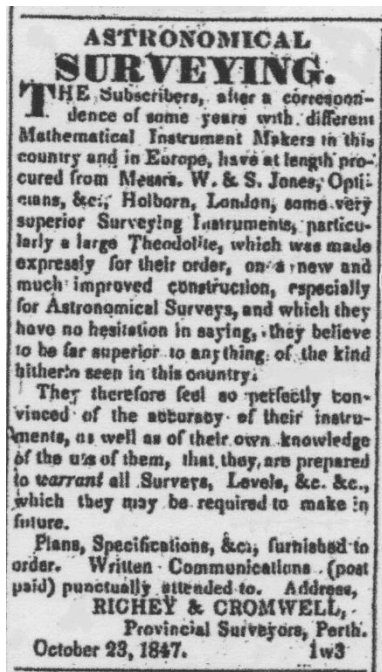
⁹ *The Duel as Recalled by Mr. Cromwell*, probably written for the Perth Historical and Antiquarian Society. Algonquin College Library. Quoted by Judge William Renwick Riddell in his *Duels in Early Upper Canada*, published in the *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, Vol-6/Issue-22, 1915.

¹⁰ That memoir writer ‘Mr. Cromwell’ was Surveyor Joseph M. O. Cromwell is, however, supported only by the fact that he seems to be the only individual with the surname Cromwell living in the local area through most of the 19th century and that the key dates fit the narrative.

¹¹ *Proceedings of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors (1898)*.

with Wilson, “a well-educated man - a reader and a thinker [with] some knowledge of medicine”¹², under an informal agreement to exchange labor for room, board and tutoring. Also, that Cromwell “ran away” from the Wilson household, “taking refuge with his married sister”, is probably a distortion of a simple move to live at the Glien farm on the outskirts of Perth while he attended Perth Grammar School.¹³

At Grammar School Cromwell showed such a capacity for mathematics that a teacher suggested he study for the Provincial land surveyors’ exam. He articulated himself to Perth based Surveyor Josias Richey (1796-1875) and later boasted that he “worked and studied eighteen hours per day” until he could “demonstrate the six books of Euclid when standing on one foot”.¹⁴ When he presented himself before the Board of Examiners for the oral examination he passed with flying colors and, on October 1, 1846, qualified as a Provincial Surveyor. On November 10th that year Richey and Cromwell placed an advertisement in the local newspaper announcing the formation of a professional partnership.



When Joseph Cromwell began work in 1846 it had been three decades since Surveyor Ruben Sherwood directed the original survey of townships comprising the Perth Military Settlement. Nevertheless, resolving the many shortcomings of that first survey remained the order of the day. The original surveys had been performed by contract, one surveyor employing several unqualified assistants, and seemingly endless disputes were the result. As more and more land was cleared, and farms became larger, more prosperous and more valuable, there were many claims that more acreage was occupied and fenced than a deed might specify. It had become imperative that boundaries be correctly determined.

The dockets of Session Courts were jammed with overlapping boundary dispute cases generating a bountiful income for the lawyers and surveyors required to untangle the lawsuits. It was not uncommon for litigants to beggar themselves with the costs. Cromwell was acknowledged as one of the prominent surveyors in the eastern part of the province and so noted for the accuracy

of his field work that disputants frequently agreed to abide by his survey instead of appealing to the courts.

... he was an authority on the bounds and limits, having worked on nearly every concession line in Lanark and Carleton, fixing up old lines that had been first surveyed only by compass, and which were therefore, as a general thing, inaccurate.¹⁵

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A few years earlier Ebenezer Wilson’s son, John Wilson, survivor of the duel, had taught at the Perth Grammar School.

¹⁴ *Proceedings of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors (1898).*

¹⁵ Obituary, *Perth Courier* October 22, 1897.

Joseph Cromwell quickly built a prosperous practice that employed and trained a generation of other Provincial Surveyors. *“He drilled the articulated apprentices in the intricacies of triangulation as a mental stimulant, and then made them carry tripods and other field apparatus as a physical conditioning.”* Among graduates of the ‘Cromwell School of Surveyors’ were John A. Snow (1847), John McLatchie (1874), Robert Sparks (1875), A. W. Kippen (1877)¹⁶, W. R. Burke (1878), Donald Kennedy and others.

In 1856 Joseph Cromwell married Mary Watson (1831-1898), daughter and eldest child of Drummond Township¹⁷ farmer Henry Watson (1806-1893) and his wife Rosetta Goodall (1808-1888). They would become the parents of six children.¹⁸

For nearly a decade Cromwell maintained his residence and office at McCallum’s Boarding House but following his marriage he moved to live with his in-laws. Beginning in the fall of 1857 he published the following weekly notice in the *Perth Courier*.

*The subscriber will, during the present winter, reside at Mr. Henry Watson’s at [the] west end of Perth, near Greenly’s Corners. All orders for every kind of Land Surveying left there or written in a book kept at Mr. James McCallum’s Hotel, or sent through the Post Office to Perth, will, without delay, be attended to and upon the most reasonable terms. Parties writing are particularly requested to state exactly what lots are to be surveyed, and whether by Meridian or by Compass – Joseph M. O. Cromwell, P. L. Surveyor.*¹⁹

Cromwell’s stay at the Watson home at Greenly’s Corners²⁰ extended beyond the winter of 1857-1858 until early 1862 when he advertised his residence and office in the *“stone house adjoining the music hall near the Free Church”*²¹. From 1865 he lived at and worked from a home he purchased or built at the corner of Wilson and Mary Streets.

In 1860 Joseph M. O. Cromwell was a founding member of the ‘Association of Provincial Land Surveyors and Institute of Civil Engineers and Architects’, and in 1864 he was appointed as a Magistrate for the County of Lanark. In 1866, however, *“a motion to appoint Joseph M. O. Cromwell County Engineer in place of Mr. Berford”* for the United Counties of Lanark and Renfrew *“was lost on division”*²². When evolving provincial regulations in 1868 demanded each municipality develop a comprehensive planning map, Cromwell was contracted by the town of Perth and, in June the following year, delivered a map costing \$291 ...

¹⁶ See *Death at Batoche* elsewhere on this website.

¹⁷ Probably born Drummond Township C-3/L-2.

¹⁸ Mary W. Cromwell (1859-1881), Anne Cromwell (1861-1883), Rosetta Cromwell (1863-1863), Rosetta Cromwell (1866-1881), Elizabeth Cromwell-Riddell (1869-1942) and Joseph M. Cromwell (1871-1926). One still born, and three others died of tuberculosis within a two-year period in 1881-1883.

¹⁹ *Perth Courier*, November 20, 1857.

²⁰ Drummond Township C-3/L-2, near neighbor to the home of his sister Anna Cromwell-Glien living at C-3/L-3 where he had lived while attending Grammar School.

²¹ *Perth Courier*, April 4, 1862.

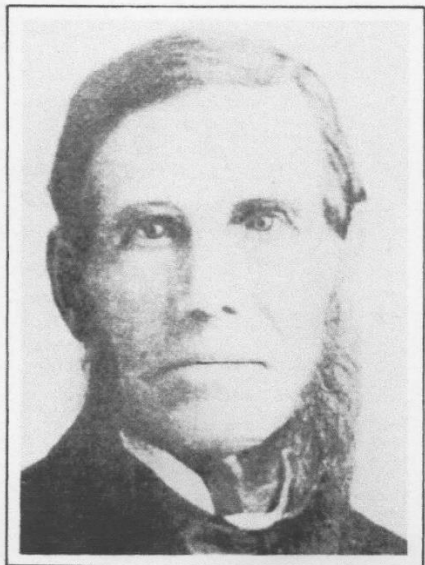
²² *Perth Courier*, February 9, 1866.

... that for correctness, completeness, or as a beautiful piece of workmanship, cannot be surpassed, and adds a great deal to Mr. Cromwell's reputation as a surveyor and draughtsman.²³

Through 1871-1873 Cromwell served two terms as a Perth Town Councillor. In 1872 he sold 51 acres of property he owned on the northern edge of town for development as Elmwood Cemetery.

Mr. Cromwell carried on a general practice throughout the Counties of Lanark and Carleton retracing old lines, running side lines, making subdivisions, etc., in winter as well as summer, until 1890. It is reported that his evidence in respect to boundaries was never controverted, also that his surveyed lines were not disputed. He had in an unusual degree the confidence, not only of the public, but of the judges.²⁴

His testimony on boundaries was called for in numberless courts in these counties; and few lawyers had the temerity to impute his evidence or knowledge in such cases".²⁵



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PLAN OF THE TOWN.—Agreeable to a notice given by James Bell, Esq., County Registrar, to our Town Fathers, that they must furnish a plan of the Town of Perth, for registration purposes, according to the requirements of the statute, the Council have taken steps to provide one by employing J M O Cromwell, Esq., P. L. S., to draw one up, for the consideration of \$20 per week. The plan will be a very complete and comprehensive affair, and will cost about \$250.

THE NEW MAP.—Mr. Cromwell has at length completely finished the Map which the Council employed him to get up for the Town, and we can say without hesitation, that for correctness, completeness, or as a beautiful piece of workmanship, it cannot be surpassed, and adds a great deal to Mr. Cromwell's reputation as a surveyor and draughtsman. For the amount of work done, the price—\$251.00—is generally considered very low. A duplicate, which, with the exception of a few minor details, is a fac simile of the above, accompanies it. The Council will therefore have one each for the Registry Office and the Town Clerk's Office.

In a sketch of Cromwell's career, the 1898 *Proceedings of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors* stated that Alexander Morris (1826-1889), Member of Parliament for Lanark South 1867-1872 and Minister of Inland Revenue 1869-1872, offered Cromwell the position of Surveyor-General of Canada but that he declined saying that "he never asked for a position or favour in his life, nor did he ever hold a salaried position". His decision not to accept the appointment may also have had something to do with a reluctance to accept a civil servant's salary. Through his land survey practice, combined with real estate dealing, Cromwell "acquired a handsome competence by his many years of labor" and when he retired in 1890, at the age 71 years, "... was enabled to live at ease for the remainder of his days, and to provide well for his family".²⁶ When his will was probated, his estate was valued at \$55,000, or more than \$1 million in 2018 purchasing power.

²³ Perth Courier, June 12, 1868.

²⁴ *Proceedings of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors* (1898).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Obituary, Perth Courier October 22, 1897.

Across the Province of Ontario, Joseph Miller Oliver Cromwell was regarded as “a citizen of credit and renown”²⁷ and when he died at Perth on October 19, 1897, he was described as “... a man of strong and positive convictions ... always ready to make them known ... an uncompromising temperance advocate ... a staunch Liberal from conviction ... a Presbyterian in religion and an elder in Knox Church”.²⁸ His wife, Mary, died six months later and they are buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Perth, Ontario.

A survey transit, manufactured c1890 by Hearn & Harrison of Montreal, once owned by Provincial Surveyor Joseph M. O. Cromwell, has been preserved in the collection of the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors (O.L.S.); “scope 25 cm long, has hollow axis for night observations, 13 cm diameter horizontal circle, 13.5 cm diameter vertical circle, 8 cm diameter compass, mahogany case equipped with all accessories including 3 eyepieces”.²⁹

- Ron W. Shaw (2018)

²⁷ *Ottawa Journal*, August 7, 1954.

²⁸ Obituary, *Perth Courier* October 22, 1897.

²⁹ *Surveying Instrument Makers of Central Canada*, by Randall C. Brooks, National Museum of Science and Technology and William J. Daniels, published in the *Canadian Journal of Civil Engineering*.