

Social History of Buck Lake and its Community

It is generally agreed that First Nations peoples began to occupy Southern Ontario, including the area north of Kingston, after the retreat of the last ice age (11,000 BCE). Unfortunately, according to Ron Vastokas¹, the very earliest inhabitants of Frontenac County have left few remains. We know that the first inhabitants came from the Great Plains (the area between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains in the United States) and it is thought that the large game animals that had colonized the area around the Great Lakes attracted them. Around 9,000 years ago, the climate in the area began to warm, bringing more species of plants and animals and the human population increased. A population that was predominantly reliant on hunting now began to trap, fish, and gather seeds, berries, and tubers. The period from seven thousand years ago until three thousand years ago is known as the Archaic period and two cultures existed in Ontario at the time – the Laurentian culture of southern Ontario and the Shield culture, coinciding with the geography of the shield.

By the late Archaic period, “we find evidence of increased population growth, noticeable adaptations to regional resources, widespread trade, and the appearance of several technological innovations – namely the making of clay pots”². The Woodland period of prehistory begins around three thousand years ago. At this time, the Shield cultures were still very much dependent on hunting and fishing, but in the Laurentian cultures we see a “greater variety and richness in material goods and ceremonial life”³. Another important arrival made its way from the Mississippi and Ohio Valleys in this period – the growing of maize (corn). By about a thousand years ago, the “hunting and gathering communities of southern Ontario were settling down into villages and were beginning to raise corn, beans, squash, and tobacco”⁴. These communities evolved into the Iroquoian tribes that we read about as described by the French explorers and missionaries. First contact between the First Nations and European explorers occurred in the 1600s and the land north of Kingston was acquired in 1783 through a series of agreements. The lands were under the control of the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy) and were shared hunting grounds of the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinaabe (Ojibway, Mississauga, and Algonquin) peoples. It must be acknowledged at this point that the legitimacy of these treaties has been questioned in recent years.

Upper Canada was established in 1791 and John Graves Simcoe was appointed the first Lieutenant Governor. He arrived in Kingston in the spring of 1792 and instructed Alexander Aitken to commence surveying Loughborough Township. The initial surveyors all expressed serious doubts about the quality of the land that they were working on and were convinced that the value in timber was the only reason to continue

¹Ron Vastokas, “Before Written History,” in *County of a Thousand Lakes*, ed. Bryan Rollason (Kingston: Frontenac County Council, 1982), 10.

the surveys. Samuel Wilmot, after taking over from Aitken declared that the land “cannot be settle (sic), being either rocks or swamps.”⁵ Indeed, the survey of Loughborough took 30 years to finish. The Second Parliament of Canada proclaimed new political boundaries in Upper Canada in 1798 and many of these are still with us today. The establishment of these new political boundaries meant that further survey was required. Samuel Benson was charged with surveying Bedford Township in 1821 and three years into the project he gave up, explaining that the “land is so bad that there can never be settlement affected (sic) on it.”⁶ The Bedford survey wasn’t completed until 1876, over 50 years later. The land in the area surrounding Buck Lake was pristine wilderness when the original surveyors started their painstaking work. Many have compared the remoteness of their work to surveying the Canadian Arctic today.

Field notes from the original surveyors indicate that people were living in the area at the turn of the 19th century, but it is likely that they were squatting on land that was not owned by them. As Fuchs and Barber note, “driven by reasons of their own – desire, poverty, sheer lack of alternatives, curiosity, single-mindedness, antisocial tendencies, wanderlust, ambition – they had followed a mere shadow of a trail”⁷ into the wilderness. Rankin’s field notes from 1832 confirm that settlers must have frequented the area before then because he makes reference to the names Buck, Bear, and Draper having already been given to the aforementioned lakes. It is unclear who named the lakes originally or precisely when people started to settle the area. Although the area was still very remote, we do know that Chaffey’s Mill was already established on the Massassauga Creek in 1826 and Benjamin Tett was operating a mill, a store, and a distillery at Bedford Mills as early as 1829, according to his own personal notes.

It wasn’t until the passing of the Baldwin Act (formally known as the Municipal Corporations Act) in 1849 that official communities were formed. For the Buck Lake area, the most important by-product of the Baldwin Act was that road construction began in earnest. In the early 1850s the Kingston Hinterland was virtually without road transport. Thanks to the efforts of the Sir John A. Macdonald and the Mayor of Kingston at the time, John Counter, a company was established in 1850 to build a legitimate road to Perth, Ontario. Progress was slow, but it was reported in the *British Whig* that in 1855 James Campbell had sold some 30 lots on the new Perth Road in what would become New Inverary⁸ (Inverary today). Inverary was as far as the stagecoach travelled at the time so people had to either drive by horse or walk to Inverary to get to Kingston. The Perth Road was winterized in 1856 and it is clear that the road improvement was the catalyst in opening up the backcountry. Perth Road Village was first settled in the mid-1800s but grew substantially in 1870 when Christopher Roushorne discovered lead in the area. At the time, the village was known as Stoness Corners, after founders James and Jabez Stoness. The second major factor in the settling of the backcountry was the Great

Famine in Ireland. Between 1845 and 1852 a million people emigrated from Ireland, some of whom arrived in Kingston and sought cheap property in the hinterland

¹Christian Barber and Terry Fuchs, *Their Enduring Spirit: The History of Frontenac Provincial Park 1783-1990* (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1997), 25.

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