

SURVEYORS BEGAN TAMING THE LAND

By Orland French

Surveyors began to impose order on the wilderness of eastern Ontario and Hastings County in the late 1700s. The arrival of the Loyalists after the American Revolutionary war pressed the colonial government into signing treaties with natives and sending in surveyors to prepare the land for settlement.

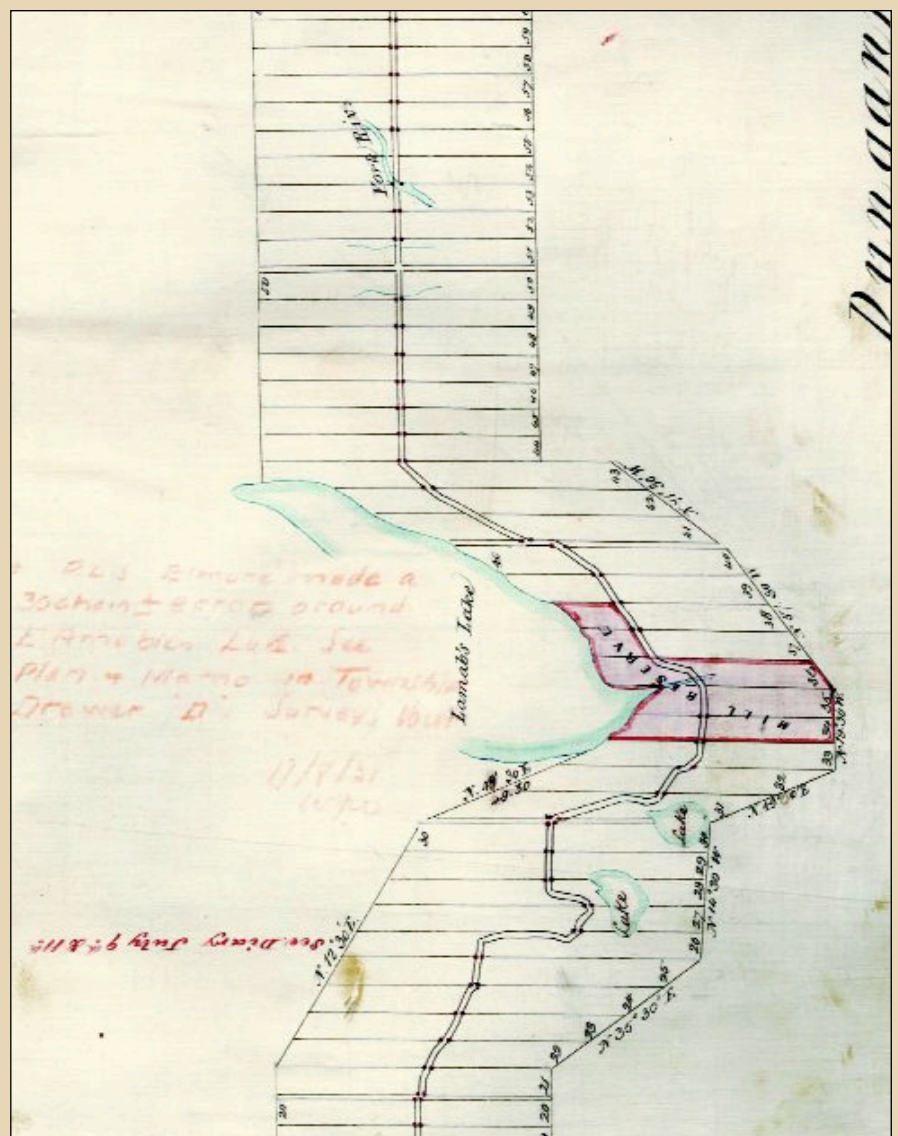
Surveyors divided land along “The Front”, the north shore of the Bay of Quinte, into neat townships with concession lines and lots. The first townships included today’s Kingston and six townships to the west, stretching through Lennox and Addington County into Prince Edward County. Surveyors were hard-pressed to create the lots for Loyalists, who had arrived at Adolphustown in 1784 and were waiting for surveyed land. Shortly after, the gentle farmland townships of Thurlow, Sidney and Tyendinaga of Hastings County appeared on maps, followed by Rawdon, Huntingdon and Hungerford.

Surveying was never easy work and it became even tougher as the survey crews entered the Precambrian Shield country north of Madoc. Marmora, Madoc and Elzivir townships were followed by Lake, Tudor and Grimsthorpe. The colonization road scheme of 1854 dictated the surveying of reasonably straight roads on a wildly undulating landscape, forcing through the Hastings Road north to meet the Monck and Peterson roads. For some reason the government of Canada West believed that the grid system applied to the flatlands of western Ontario could be superimposed on the rocky hills of the east.

Until the roads were surveyed and opened, northern Hastings was accessible only by trails and by rivers. Surveyors with colourful names such as Publius V. Elmore became associated with the opening of the north. Another member of a survey crew in northern Hastings was Thomas Scott, the Ontario Orangeman whose execution by Louis Riel precipitated the Northwest Rebellion. He had been working with the Snow survey party, which had worked in Hastings before moving to western Canada.

Where the lands in the south were closely inhabited agricultural plains, the north was sparsely settled by isolated mining and lumbering communities. Here and there farmers scratched out an existence on patches of arable land among the rocky hills. Along the colonization roads, surveyors divided the land into smaller 50-acre lots for settlers who were required to build houses and cultivate the land.

Land agents whose livelihood depended on promoting



Surveying the Old Hastings Road

Surveyors on the Old Hastings Road were instructed to stick to a straight line as much as possible. However, in places some deviation was required. Here the road detours around L'Amable Lake and descends into a deep gorge to cross L'Amable Creek. The shaded area marks a mill reserve. Near the top of the map, the “York River” crossing marks the location of today’s Bancroft. Credit: Ministry of Natural Resources

land were invariably optimistic about the potential of eastern Ontario. Ebenezer Perry declared in 1858 that “...in ten years the rich valley of the Madawaska and the no less rich tuffs of valleys that lie scattered among the granite range between here and there, will teem with life and the bustle of commerce. The strike of the axe, the noise of the shuttle, and the ring of the anvil will co-mingle with the bellowing of the herds and the bleating of the flocks – villages will rise, having churches whose tinned steeples reflect the rays of the morning sun.”

Settlers gave it their best shot but

many left in disgust and disappointment. More than a half century after Perry’s glowing promise, another observer offered a more pessimistic analysis. C.F. Aylsworth wrote in 1925, “In driving along the Hastings Road it is one long trail of abandoned farms, adversity, blasted hopes, broken hearts and exhausted ambition. And the mute evidence of all is empty, dilapidated and abandoned houses and barns, orchards, wells, old broken down stone and wooden fences, root cellars and many other similar evidence of having given up the ghost.”


Poet Al Purdy described “The Country North of Belleville” in these words:

*“Yet this is the
country of defeat
where Sisyphus
rolls a big stone
year after year up
the ancient hills
picknicking glaciers
have left strewn
with centuries
rubble
backbreaking days
in the sun and rain
when realizations
seeps slow in the
mind
without grandeur
or self deception in
noble struggle of
being a fool”*



The Monck Road, an east-west colonization road, (the deviated road in the top half of the map) winds its way through the hills west of Bancroft. Today, Highway 28 passes the southern tip of Bow Lake (centre of map).

Credit: Ministry of Natural Resources

Of course, you can’t blame the surveyors for the failure of the rocky Shield to support settlers. They only divided up the land, as rough and unsuitable for farming as it might be, according to their  instructions.

This article was adapted from the Heritage Atlas of Hastings County, produced in 2006 by Orland French of Wallbridge House Publishing for the County of Hastings.

Copies of the book may be ordered through www.hastingscountyatlas.com. Inquiries about creating a new heritage atlas for other areas should be directed by email to: ofrench@littlebrickbookhouse.com.