

Watch Your Step: Where was Tinawatawa?

By Bob Henderson and James B. Badow

In the Late 17th Century, Huronia, what we now think of today as Southern Ontario, was in a rare state of tentative peace. For the French this was a window of opportunity to re-establish their links with those aboriginal nations located north and west of the Lower Great Lakes. For the Iroquoian and Algonquian speaking groups of the time, this was hiatus in the continuous “Beaver Wars” that plagued the area, a conflict caused by the intrusion of French, English, and Dutch; not to mention competition for trade alliances and guns. It was a messy time.

On September 24, 1669, René-Robert Cavelier de la Salle (later famous for his trip down the Mississippi) and the deacon Bréhant de Galinée under the guide of Sulpician Dollier de Casson met Adrian Jolliet, brother of the better-known Lois Jolliet at the Seneca town of Tinawatawa. Jolliet, returning to Ville Marie (Montreal) from the west, had been sent by French authorities to re-open native alliances following the 1640 – 50 wars. La Salle with Galinée and Dollier were heading west with nine canoes. Their mission was the same: To map the unexplored regions of the Lower Great Lakes and convert ‘the savages’ to Christianity.

A remarkable coincidence, it must have been a “Dr. Livingstone, I presume” encounter. Jolliet and the LaSalle party met because they were both on a portage, or more likely on a side trip from the direct portage route that would connect Lake Ontario at the head of the lake (Cootes Paradise) with the Grand River and Lake Erie to the south and the Thames River to the west. (*See Ontario Professional Surveyor, Summer 2008*). Remarkable yes, if you consider the breadth of terrain they had travelled and planned still to travel. But not so remarkable given that they were being guided on the major artery heading west from the distinctive head of Lake Ontario and Tinawatawa, which was then a Seneca village that likely served as the human hub in the region. The Ottawa (Algonquian) guides understood the tension in travelling to the Seneca (Iroquoian) village. One can assume that the French would understand this tension. The visit was likely a mandatory act with the feeling hanging over their heads that it was time to “get the hell out of Dodge”. Indeed they were one day by foot from Tinawatawa to the Grand River. Perhaps they knew that they had “dodged a bullet” ... literally. Soon after 1669 the peace collapsed and thirty more years of skirmishes followed, keeping the head of the lake a buffer zone between warring factions.

Historical references to Tinawatawa (also spelt

Tintonwan and Tinaouatoua) are found in the writings of Samuel de Champlain (1610) and the Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents. Lay priest Joseph de la Roche Daillon visited the earlier Neutral Confederacy in 1626 describing 28 communities consisting of towns, villages and hamlets – the latter defined by Daillon as comprising of eight lodges or longhouses. Daillon travelled between western New York State and southwestern Ontario and northward to the forks of the Grand River. French activity in this area halted with the intensity of the Indian wars between the Five Nations Confederacy and the Huron and Neutral Confederations. Tinawatawa in the 1660’s has been described as the victors’ (Iroquois) western hold on the Upper Great Lakes. The Five Nations range at this time stretched east to the present day Kingston area. But in reality, the region was a multicultural landscape composed of conquerors, refugees and dispersed peoples. Instability reigned supreme as peoples of varied groups travelled through the area. These years, when Tinawatawa was a hub village (1660 – 1690) represents an odd gap in the history. Historical records still remain sketchy.

French cartographers were also active. Nicolas Sanson (1656) likely documenting localities described by des Groseillier and Radisson (1654 and 1656) and Galinée’s 1670 and 1673 maps make early notation of a village north and west of Burlington Bay – Cootes Paradise. Later Baptiste-Louis Franquelin (1688) and Pierre Rafféix (1688) both clearly show Burlington Bay – The Fond du Lac – and a trail from this head of the lake connecting to the Grand River. Charlevoix Belins 1744 map shows a village Quinaouotuan and a trail emanating from the lake west to the Grand.



Tinawatawa hunting west of Hamilton

Elizabeth Simcoe (1790) drew a sketch map similarly linking Lake Ontario to the river though via a southwesterly route. We can make from all of this, particularly with the Galinée source as the most cogent, that there was a portage and a town worthy of a side trip, perhaps even on the portage trail. Given the lengthy time period 1610 – 1790, perhaps these villages are not one and the same. Still the September 24, 1669 meeting at Tinawatawa confounds the imagination.

Perhaps archaeological work can shed some light on this curious site. We know a “Linear” pattern of proto-historic (1500 - 1640) Neutral villages and historic Neutral and later Seneca towns, villages, and hamlets (1650- 1710) exist just north of Hamilton. Many of these villages have an underlying Neutral group component in their archaeological nomenclature (ie. Crawford Lake on Guelph Line south of Hwy. 401). These sites are located along a narrow postglacial landform (drumlin or moraine), perhaps once a choice high ground trail location, now Regional Road 97 in West Flamborough between Freelton to Cambridge on the Grand River. One of these sites could indeed be the historic site of Tinawatawa. One should note the Beverly Swamp was a significant feature in the landscape then (and now) serving as a choice location as winter hunting grounds. The distance cited by Galinée of 25 leagues is close enough to support Freelton (if it is even an accurate estimate) and the artefacts of the linear cluster of sites match up to the time period. This is key and the main reason other sites do not receive consideration. The Regional Road 97 idea ensures that a side trip was made from any direct portage. This could well make sense. Such auspicious French travellers would be “re-routed” or would happily visit a prominent town along the way. Again perhaps it was a must interaction. Remember, the French explorers were being lead by Ottawa (Algonquian) guides, traders soon to be at war again.

Other clusters of villages noted in the archaeological literature are observed between present day Hamilton/Dundas and Brantford and north into West Flamborough. Several of these sites could meet the criteria for Tinawatawa. Historic sites deemed ‘Iroquoian’ would be the Hamilton Site, the Late 17th Century Freelton Site, the Hood Site, the Smith Haley Site, and the Synder Site. All of these sites overlap both chronologically and geographically when considering the location of historic Tinawatawa. Even the Lake Medad Site, now underlying a golf and country club in Burlington, Ontario could fit into this period but its location closer to Burlington Bay makes it least probable based on the historic narratives.

Why does all this matter? A group of curious trail snoopers have been pondering the portage route and Tinawatawa site for years now under the banner of the Ancient Pathways Project. It matters to us because, in the words of geographer Yi Fu Tuan; “undifferentiated SPACE becomes PLACE as we get to know it and endow it with values”. We are not necessarily specialists in all areas of this research but we find joy

in the act of “place making” and “place learning”. A good mystery on the land has us engaged in exploring a place in ways that encourage us to see in new ways. Our guess, we will keep learning and looking, conferring with the specialists and other trail/site snoopers.

For surveyors, being aware of these early settlements adds an imaginative richness to the landscape. Today’s farmland will be tomorrow’s housing development, green space or new roadway. Awareness of the past and attention to artefacts found and reported goes a long way towards mitigating a loss of this knowledge of a past story on the land. A conservation



Wayne Terryberry near Westover, Ontario. Initially thought to be a possible site of Tinawatawa.

ethic is in part about an obligation to blend inquiry of the past with the new evolving stories on the land. These new stories are wiser and richer when informed by past narratives. That September 24, 1669 meeting of French Ambassadors at Tinawatawa, the routes (walking trails and canoe portage routes between water) and village locations can be a part of our understandings on the land today. So watch your step!

James B. Bandow is a Staff Archaeologist with the Museum of Ontario Archaeology at the University of Western Ontario, Senior Archaeologist and Consultant with the Hamilton based Fossil Hill Group, and Hamilton Region Director for the Ontario Archaeological Society. Contact him at hamiltonOAS@hwcn.org.

Bob Henderson teaches Outdoor Education at McMaster University. He is author of *Every Trail has a Story: Heritage Travel in Canada*. This is his third contribution to the Ontario Professional Surveyor. Contact him at bhender@mcmaster.ca.

Further Reading

Historical Atlas of Canada. Vol. 1 From the Beginning to 1800. R. Cole Harris, ed., Geoffrey J. Mathews, Cartographer/ Designer. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987.

LaSalle and the Discovery of the Great West. Francis Parkman, New York: Random House, 1995.

Aboriginal Ontario: Historical Perspectives on First Nations. Edward Rogers & Donald B. Smith, ed., Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1994.