5.6 The History of the Upper Canada Side of the Ottawa River Between Shirley's Bay to the East and the Madawaska River to the West

Bob Sherrif

This section outlines local history by township, including the March, Torbolton and Fitzroy Townships.

March Township

This township was named after the Earl of March, son of the ill-fated Duke of Richmond.

The end of the War of 1812 found many military men more or less at loose ends here in Canada. Whitehall found it more expedient to encourage the Officers to remain here in Canada by offering land grants upon which they could retire and, at the same time, further the settlement of this new land. There were already many military men settled in and around Perth and Richmond, so Sir John Colborne promoted the settlement in what became March Township.

The first person to settle here was Captain John Benning Monk, late of the 97th Regiment, and a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars. Captain Monk was born in Windsor, Nova Scotia. His beautiful stone residence situated on the Ottawa shore was called "Beechmont".

The second settler on the March township shoreline was Hamnet Kirkes Pinhey, born in Plymouth, England, in 1784. He became a wealthy businessman in England with his own ships trading on the European continent. These connections made him an excellent candidate to become an agent for the British Government. He served as a blockade runner and, due to his proficiency in both French and German, he was able to move about and carry dispatches to England's Prussian allies. For his service, he was publicly thanked by King George III and awarded a land grant of 1000 acres in March Township. He arrived in 1820 and by 1827 his homestead was well established. His home, named "Horaceville" after his son, still stands today as a beautiful example of our heritage. This stretch along the river became known as the "March Colony", a settlement of the 'Officers and Gentlemen'.

Torbolton Township

Long before this land was surveyed settled, colonial administrators were aware of its timber potential. A trail through the forest, in what is now Torbolton Township, was dubbed the "Mast Road" because of the exceptional pine that was hauled out of the woods to supply the Royal Navy with masts and spars. The harvesting of these virgin woods would continue to be an economic resource for this area for many years.

This township's name is also connected to the Duke of Richmond. One of his titles was Baron Methuen of Torbolton. It is also the name of a quaint village in Ayrshire, Scotland. This is very appropriate as most of the early settlers were Scots. The township was surveyed in the winter of 1822-23. The granting of land ceased in 1824 which no doubt contributed to the slow settlement of the area.

Lt. Daniel Baird is recognized as the first settler in Torbolton Township. Lt. Baird had a distinguished career in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, spending some time as a prisoner of war. It is

recorded that he took possession of Baird's Grant May 26, 1824. His fine stone home is still in use today overlooking Buckham's Bay of the Ottawa River.

Fitzroy Township

Charles Shirreff, and his four children, Robert, Charles Jr., Mary and Alexander, arrived in Fitzroy Township in 1819, just before it was surveyed. Charles' brother, John, was also with them. Their original grant of 3000 acres was later increased to 4500 acres. Charles Shirreff had a large impact on the early settlement of Fitzroy, which the Shirreffs founded. They went on the establish mills on the Carp River which flows into the Ottawa at this point. Settlement did not begin until 1823.

In March 1825, John Marshall and his wife, in-laws to the Shirreffs, built a foundry at Marshall's Bay on the Ottawa above the Chats. Here he made boom chains, axes, sleigh runners, etc. to the river trade.

The youngest Shirreff son, Alexander, who worked for Col. By in Ottawa, took a leave of absence to explore and map the Upper Ottawa through Lake Nipissing into Georgian Bay. This exploration was to further Charles Shirreff's plans for an Ottawa River waterway. While this concept was not new, Charles Shirreff seized the idea as an excellent means of spurring settlement to the west. He undertook to promote the scheme widely. He succeeded in enlisting the support of many influential people at Whitehall and at Court; he produced an extensive paper on the virtues and benefits to Canada, which was widely circulated within England; a company was incorporated; and a personal fortune spent – all to no avail - the Government could not be persuaded of the value of such a project. Thus Fitzroy Harbour was destined to remain the quiet village it is today and not the bustling commercial centre on a busy waterway, envisioned by Charles Shirreff.

The Great Fire of 1870

The exploitation of the vast timber stands in this area was dealt a devastating blow by the Great Fire of 1870. Starting in Lanark County in the west, the fire swept through the southern portion of Fitzroy, much of Torbolton, the northern half of Huntley, and practically all of March Township. It destroyed thousands of acres of virgin forest and sadly wiped out the old "March Colony" along the riverfront. The only home of these Officers and Gentlemen that survived the fire storm was Horaceville at Pinhey's Point.

River Steamers

The *Lady Colborne* appears to be the first of the paddleboats to provide service between Aylmer and Pontiac. She was probably named after the wife of Sir John Colborne, Governor of Upper Canada. She was launched at Aylmer, October 29, 1832. Her journey up the Ottawa saw her stopping at March, Constant Creek, Grierson's Landing, Buckham's Bay, Mohr's Clearing, Richard's Stopping Place, Horaceville and Fitzroy Harbour. The *Lady Colborne* was destroyed by fire in August 1846 at her berth in Aylmer.

The *Jessie Cassels* traveled between Aylmer and Pontiac. At Pontiac, freight and passengers were transferred to the Horse Railway for a 60-minute journey, by-passing the Falls. *The Emerald*, built at Aylmer in 1845, traveled the same route as the *Jessie Cassels* and carried freight and passengers. She was later used to tow timber rafts, then converted to a barge and eventually junked in 1880. The *Ann Sissons*

was another paddleboat built in Aylmer in 1857. In 1868 she was sold for towing purposes and finally dismantled in 1871.

In 1896 the *Queen of the River*, as she was affectionately called, was built at Quyon by early settlers in the March colony. This steamboat was designed to tow log booms, and was soon refitted for excursions between Aylmer and the Chats Falls, which had become an important tourist attraction. Moonlight cruises to Fitzroy Harbour became very popular. On July 27, 1916, she caught fire and burned to the water line with the loss of four lives. She was rebuilt and put back into service in early summer 1917. Excursions resumed, but only for that year. The *G. B. Greene* continued service as a towboat until 1929. She was sold for scrap in 1942.