

Looking back... with Alun Hughes

THE EARLY HISTORY OF MERRITTON

An article in *The Globe* (Toronto) dated August 23, 1849 describes what became Merritton as, "About two miles down the canal towards St. Catharine's is Slabtown, or as it is now called Centreville.... It is certainly a most uninteresting spot, a few scattered log huts in the midst of a watery marsh being all that constitute the *ville*." Lest my readers take this assessment at face value and decide to read no further, let me say that Merritton is actually a fascinating place.

Much confusion surrounds names such as Slabtown or Centreville. Research has revealed a multiplicity of former names of Merritton. Tracing the sequence of names provides an interesting outline of the history of Merritton prior to its incorporation as a Village in 1874.

The map below shows the maximum extent of Merritton prior to its amalgamation with St. Catharines in 1961. Note the concession lines of the Grantham survey, and in particular concession line 8, which divides two important early phases of settlement. The very earliest settlement, however, was nowhere near this line.

Merritton in 1961

The Thorold Site

This was a Neutral Native village dating from the early 17th century. It was located on top of the Niagara Escarpment in what is now the Barbican Heights subdivision on St. Davids Road. The original name is unknown, but it was called the Thorold Site by archaeologists, though it was actually in Merritton. Artifacts were found as early as 1895, but it was not

formally excavated until 1979, before the building of the subdivision. The work was done by Professor William Noble of McMaster University.

Noble's team unearthed a major ten-acre settlement, once home to 1500 people, and possibly a regional capital. It occupied a commanding position on the Escarpment edge, alongside a spring-fed tributary of Dick's Creek and not far from the Mohawk Trail, an important Native route across the Niagara Peninsula. The town was heavily fortified with palisades, especially along the southern boundary. Five longhouses were found, but it probably contained over 25 originally, each housing several families.

The Natives abandoned the site in about 1630, possibly moving to St. Davids, the location of a large Neutral ossuary or communal burying ground. Just 20 years later the Neutral Indians ceased to exist, having been wiped out by the Iroquois from the Finger Lakes area. Merritton and the rest of the Niagara Peninsula remained basically uninhabited until the arrival of Loyalists after the American Revolutionary War in the 1780s.

Note the concession lines of the Grantham **Grantham Township**

At war's end in 1783 there was an urgent need to provide land for Loyalist refugees, disbanded troops, former Rangers, and Natives. An area of almost three million acres extending to the Thames River was purchased from the Mississauga in 1784. A crash program of surveys began in June 1787. The land was divided into 100-acre lots, arranged in rows or concessions. The first township surveyed was No. 1 (later named Newark, then Niagara), followed by No. 2 (Stamford). No. 3 (Grantham) was surveyed by Daniel Hazen in 1788. What became Merritton lay in concessions 8, 9 and 10 of Grantham.

The method of survey was the "front and rear system," whereby the surveyor ran up and down lot lines like a shuttle in a loom. Markers were left every 50 chains (1100 yards) to indicate the crossing of concession lines. Settlers were meant to occupy land after the surveys, but a four-year delay before surveys began resulted in extensive squatting. A large area in the south of Grantham was not surveyed by Hazen because the squatters wanted land divided differently; this included Merritton east of Hartzell Road.

Land Board certificates and township maps from the 1790s indicate who these early settlers were. The Balls (Jacob, Peter and George) were in concession 10, John Hainer, Philip Shaver and John Newkirk in concession 9, and Jacob Dittrick and Robert Bessey in concession 8. The latter sold his 200 acres to George Hartzell in 1797.

Little of note transpired in the Merritton area of Grantham for the next 30 years (even during the War of 1812). The story resumes with the construction of the First Welland Canal in the 1820s.

Centreville

The First Canal was begun in 1824 and completed to the Welland River in 1829 (the extension to Port Colborne followed in 1833). The route ran in the valley of the Twelve Mile Creek from Lake Ontario to St. Catharines, and then followed Dick's Creek into Merritton, and up the Escarpment into Thorold. The Second Canal was constructed along essentially the same line, and was completed in 1845.

The prime mover behind the First Canal was William Hamilton Merritt, who is both famous and celebrated. Less well known is the person who actually built most of the canal and who played a key role in the early history of Merritton — Oliver Phelps.

Oliver Phelps was born in Simsbury, Connecticut in 1779, and lived in New York State from 1800. There he worked as a farmer, distiller and merchant, built bridges and steamboats, ran a stagecoach line carrying US mail, built locks and excavated the rock cut on the Erie Canal at Lockport, and was a superintendent of a canal shipping company. He came to Canada in September 1824, as a subcontractor on lock construction. He later assumed the lock contract himself, and went on to excavate the Deep Cut, dig the Feeder Canal, build the Welland River aqueduct and construct the Grand River dam.

During this period the Merritton area was sometimes referred to as the Foot of the Mountain. But this name was soon superseded by Centreville. It was first mentioned in a Phelps' advertisement for sawyers in 1826 (the First Canal locks were made of wood). The ad also explains the origins of the name Centreville.

But where exactly was Centreville? In 1825 Phelps had bought 300 acres in concession 8 from Jacob Dittrick and George Hartzell. It had to be somewhere on his land, and presumably on the canal. Evidence indicates that Centreville proper, where Phelps had a log farm house, was just north of Abbot Street, which divides concessions 8 and 9. Centreville Mills were established across Thorold Road (now Oakdale Avenue) alongside the canal. As settlement expanded along Thorold Road and Canal Street (now Moffat Street), the name Centreville was applied to the whole. It was recognized as a distinct community within Grantham, but it never had official status.

The Phelps name became very significant in the area. Oliver himself, apart from his farm, had a saw mill (possibly two) and (before discovering temperance) a distillery. In 1829 he moved to St. Catharines, though he retained his farm in Centreville; indeed, it may have remained in the possession of the Phelps family into the 20th century. He became a leading member of the St. Catharines community, built and paid for the Presbyterian Church, helped establish Grantham Academy, and built a grist mill at the foot of Geneva Street (together with Merritt).

His sons became important also, especially Orson, Calvin and Oliver Seymour. Calvin took over his father's mill, and had a splendid estate where the Jack Gatecliff Arena is located. Oliver Seymour took the nom-de-plume 'Junius,' and was the author of "St. Catharines A to Z," published on a weekly basis in the *St. Catharines Journal* in 1856. (For more information about Junius, see my previous article in the 'Looking Back' series entitled "Who was Junius?," published in September, 2006.)

Another branch of the Phelps family stayed in Centreville. This was the family of Oliver's nephew, Samuel Green Phelps, who arrived from the United States in 1827. Samuel's sons Noah, Orson James, Philander, Judson and Elijah Hollister all became prominent in Centreville. Several Phelps houses are known to have existed in the Phelps Street/Turner Crescent area and across the canal on Moffat Street. Only three survive.

Oliver Phelps' mill on Geneva Street was located on the canal, but it was too high up to be powered by canal water. In 1831 a water supply was provided by means of a hydraulic raceway cut from the First Canal half way up the Escarpment. It ran through Centreville to St. Catharines; remnants of it are still visible in Merritton. With the building of the Second Canal the raceway source was moved from the Escarpment to Lock 11 just north of the GWR (now CN) tracks.

Throughout this time virtually nothing is known to have existed south of concession line 8 in what is now downtown Merritton. The one exception was the Welland Valley Inn established by John Vanderburgh at the intersection of Hartzel Road (now Merritt Street) and an unnamed road allowance (now Glendale Avenue), possibly as early as 1829. The inn took its name from the First Welland Canal, which ran just yards away. The surrounding area may also have been called Welland Valley, though which was named first — the inn or the area — is unknown. Later the inn was renamed Vanderburgh's Tavern.

Slabtown

Slabtown was the name given to a collection of shanties erected by labourers (canallers) during the construction of the Second Welland Canal in the 1840s. They occupied government land immediately alongside the canal, mainly in the Merritton area. The name, as explained by Hamilton Killaly (engineer for the Welland Canal Company) comes from the slabs of wood left over from trimming tree trunks in saw mills, and these were used to build the shanties. Other Slabtowns existed elsewhere in North America.

The name Slabtown may have been used as early as 1842 when canal construction began, but the first reference found is dated 1845. (Regardless, the quote from *The Globe* that began this article, which implied that Slabtown preceded Centreville is wrong.) It is evident from a list of grog houses (122 in all, of which 115 were unlicensed) that the focus of Slabtown was along Thorold Road. The list also mentions Westport and Queen's Bush, which were probably along Lock Street (now Bradley Street).

Later references to Slabtown, in 1847 and 1849, occur in Jacob Keefer's diary; Keefer was the owner of the Welland Mills in Thorold, built in 1846. The 1849 entries are about the Battle of Slabtown, fought between Irish Catholics and Protestants at Duffin's Inn in Centreville. The inn was located on the west side of Thorold Road just north of the Centreville Mills (now

Oakdale, at about Smythe Street). This is what Keefer wrote:

January 15, 1847: Sent James to Slab Town for some tiles
April 10, 1847: Walked to St. Catharines with my gun in my hand. Shot a Grey Gull at SlabTown
July 12, 1849 [in margin]: Slab Town fight
July 13, 1849: drove Wife to St. Catharines, saw the dead bodies of 2 men killed at Slabtown yesterday

The majority of canallers were Irish Catholics, who had long history of violence: against non-Irish, against Protestants, and against each other (men of Cork against men of Connaught). Some of this violence was understandable, for there was a severe shortage of jobs, wages were minimal, families were starving, the work was hard and living conditions were appalling; when the Catholics rioted in 1842 they were justified in doing so. At other times, however, violence was not justified, and that includes the Battle of Slabtown on July 12, 1849, though it has to be said that the Protestants were even more to blame.

This was the "Glorious Twelfth," the date when Irish Protestants celebrated the defeat of the Catholics at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Having heard rumours that local Protestants planned a march, 300 Catholics came from as far away as Port Colborne and assembled in St. Catharines on July 11. When told the following day that the rumour was false, they started off home; a number of Catholics went south along Thorold Road. Meanwhile William Duffin, a member of Centreville Loyal Orange Lodge No. 77 (formed two years previously), was hosting a dinner for fellow brethren at his inn.

Fearing a Catholic attack, they had armed themselves and cut loopholes for guns in the walls of the inn and the adjoining barn. The Catholics had decided to limit their protest to calling out taunts as they passed by the inn, but the Orangemen opened fire, leaving two Catholics killed and six or seven injured. Nineteen Orangemen were indicted, including five Bradleys, but a grand jury returned a verdict of "no bill."

The Battle of Slabtown soon acquired a mythical status among Orangemen. Annual celebrations were held, history was rewritten, and Catholics were branded as aggressors. In 1852 commemorative medals were presented to surviving combatants at a dinner attended by 200 people. The inscription on the medals reads: "Presented to ... X ... for valiant conduct at Centreville Mills."

In 1899 more than 30 Orange Lodges paraded through Merritton in celebration of the Boyne and

Slabtown victories. The Battle of Slabtown was regularly commemorated in the “Lest We Forget” section in *The Toronto Star*. The last major celebration was in 1949, but it was being mentioned as late as 1960.

Though the battle took place in Centreville, it is significant that it was labelled Slabtown; possibly this was to distance respectable people from the unruly Irish. Had there been no battle Slabtown might have faded into history (like Stumptown, a supposed early name for the Village of Thorold). Instead it came to be used as a nickname for Centreville. There are many references to these names being used interchangeably, e.g. the 1849 *Globe* quote which began this article. An editorial appeared in the *St. Catharines Journal* in 1849 which stated, “Centreville (commonly called Slabtown),” and a letter written to the *Christian Guardian* in 1859 which said, “services in the village of Centreville (Slabtown).” However most formal references to events and organizations were to Centreville. Not all references were to this Centreville, however; for example, there was another Centreville in Thorold Township.

Other names that emerged during this period were:

1. Glory Hill, on Canal Street (Moffat), where the Wesleyan Methodist Church was located.
2. Centre Lock, the name of a branch of the Abstinence Society, possibly located at Glory Hill; a member, Hamilton Merritt Collier, has the only grave marker in Victoria Lawn Cemetery that mentions Centreville.
3. Protestant Hill, location uncertain, possibly Moffat or Oakdale, or both.

Thorold Station, Welland City and Merritton

In 1850 development was still concentrated in the Centreville area. Little existed south of concession line 8 apart from the Welland Valley Inn. But this was about to change, for two reasons: the building of the Great Western and Welland Railways and the incorporation of the Welland Canal Loan Company.

The construction of the Great Western Railway, linking London and the Suspension Bridge (Clifton), began in 1847. The line was officially opened on November 1, 1853. Unfortunately, the inaugural train carrying 300 dignitaries from Hamilton derailed when climbing the Escarpment near St. Davids, and the passengers had to walk six miles to the Suspension

Bridge where thousands were waiting. The Welland Railway ran alongside the Second Welland Canal from Port Dalhousie to Port Colborne; it was proposed in 1853 and completed in 1859.

The GWR line (later the Canadian National) crossed the Second Welland Canal just below Lock 12. A station was built on Beech Street (now Wedsworth). Surprisingly perhaps, it was called Thorold Station. The naming indicates that there was no settlement in that location and that Centreville was smaller than Thorold and had no legal status. (Thorold was incorporated as a Village in 1850; compare with Vineland Station and Jordan Station.)

In 1851, in anticipation of completion of the GWR, the Welland Canal Loan Company was incorporated. The aim was to promote industry and settlement in the vicinity of the canal/railway crossing. Five hundred acres were purchased and subdivided (at least on paper), and given the name Welland City. This was the origin of Merritton’s tree-named streets and distinctive pattern of streets and lanes: for example, Elm, Birch, Walnut, Chestnut, Almond and Hazel. The exact date of Welland City’s inception is unknown, but it was possibly 1855, which is when Ellis’ map of Welland City was produced. (For details of this map, which is little more than a promotional document, see my previous article in the ‘Looking Back’ series entitled “The 1855 Map of Welland City,” published in March 2006.)

The northern boundary of Welland City coincided with concession line 8, so it did not overlap Centreville. However, the names came to be used indiscriminately. A Second Canal map from the 1850s shows an arrow pointing to Centreville (actually Welland City) in the middle of Centreville. Junius in 1856 speaks of, “Centreville, now Welland City,” and an 1868 letter by ‘Cranky’ refers to “Slabtown alias Centreville alias Welland.”

Confusion was compounded in 1862 by the establishment of a post office at Thorold Station. Letters to inhabitants of Centreville/Slabtown and Welland City were now sent to Thorold Station, and this became the alternative name for the whole area. Inevitably many of these letters ended up at the Thorold Post Office by mistake.

Something had to be done, and on January 1, 1869 the Thorold Station post office was officially renamed Merritton. At the same time Merritton became the name for the entire area, needless to say in honour of William Hamilton Merritt. In 1874 Merritton was

incorporated as a Village, giving it legal status for the first time.

The Name Exchange

It is a curious fact of local toponymic history that Merritton used to be called Welland City while Welland used to be called Merrittsville. It is often claimed that they arranged a name swap. However, this is not true, for Welland received its name in 1858, nine years before Merritton got its name.

The question arises, why did the people of Welland choose that name when it was already in use for Welland City? The answer lies in the relative status of the two places. In 1858 Welland City (little more than a plan on paper) had no official status and was very small. Contemporary maps either do not show it or just show the street layout, and directories reveal a tiny population. However, in 1858 Welland was a place of

appreciable size and was incorporated as a Village. It was the county town for the County of Welland, established in 1856. The authorities probably considered Welland City of no consequence, and saw no problem appropriating the name Welland.

Merritton remained small into the 20th century, despite the impression given by Ellis' map of 1855 (and especially after an updated version was published in H. R. Page's *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the Counties of Lincoln & Welland* in 1876). However, it never attained the stature that Oliver Phelps anticipated when he founded Centreville in 1826.

Principal Sources: (in addition to those cited in the text):

Credits: maps and layout (Loris Gasparotto); editing (John Burtniak).

Copyright © 2013 by Alun Hughes (ahughes@brocku.ca)