Looking back… with Alun Hughes

THE NAMING OF NIAGARA'S TOWNSHIPS

When Upper Canada was established in 1791, John Graves Simcoe was appointed the first Lieutenant-Governor. He was born in 1752 in Northamptonshire, raised in Devon, and educated at Eton and Merton College, Oxford. He left university early to pursue a military career, and in 1775 accompanied the 35th Foot to Boston. He saw extensive action in the American Revolutionary War, and assumed command of the Queen's Rangers, a Loyalist corps. He was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel by Sir Henry Clinton, Commander of the British forces. He had the misfortune to be captured, but was released in a prisoner exchange. Simcoe was wounded three times, and was invalided home in 1781.

He convalesced at the Devon home of his godfather, and in 1782 married the latter's ward, Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim, who inherited a fortune at birth. Afterwards he led the life of a country gentleman, poet and author. He was elected to the House of Commons in 1790, and in 1791 spoke in support of the Quebec/Canada Bill that led to the Constitutional Act and the creation of Upper Canada. He was appointed Lieutenant-Governor in August 1791 (though he had been promised the position a year earlier). He sailed for Canada in September, wintered in Quebec and reached Kingston on July 1, 1792. He finally arrived at Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake) on July 26.

Between his arrival in Upper Canada and departure in 1796 Simcoe was responsible for many initiatives, including the introduction of numerous place names. He seems to have acquired a somewhat dubious reputation in the process, especially for his supposed dislike of Native names. He is said to have replaced them with English ones whenever possible. Thus Niagara became Newark, and Toronto became York. As Ernest Green wrote in 1932, "In this year [1792] Simcoe arrived and set up the government of Upper Canada. The Governor soon signalized his assumption of control by bestowing English names on every county, township, town-site, river and lake within his jurisdiction. 'Niagara' became 'Newark,' 'Chippawa' gave place to 'Welland,' 'Grand' was abolished for 'Ouse'…."

But how much of this is correct? How many names did he actually introduce? What were his motives in doing so? Did he really abhor Native names? These questions, within the context of the naming of the early townships in the Niagara Peninsula, provide some interesting answers.

The British defeat in the Revolutionary War, which ended in 1783, created an urgent need to provide land for Loyalist refugees, disbanded troops, former Rangers and Natives. In June 1787 there began a crash program of surveys to subdivide land into townships and 100-acre lots. By early 1789, 14 townships had been laid out, at least in part, in the Niagara Peninsula. Orginally most of these townships were numbered, basically in the order of their survey, and they were given names after Simcoe's arrival. Another six townships were added and given names in the early 1790s.

The Naming of York

Some of what has been written about the origins of place names in early Upper Canada is incorrect or at least of questionable authority. Simcoe's renaming of Toronto as York is a good illustration.

Simcoe was based at Newark, and planned to develop Toronto as a naval arsenal. He visited there in May 1793, and again (with Lady Simcoe) in July. In August, while still at Toronto, he received news of the defeat of the French by Prince Frederick, Duke of York, the second son of George III, at the Siege of Famars in Flanders on May 23. Many sources say Simcoe changed the name from Toronto to York to commemorate this victory. Three of these follow:

"The village … had theretofore been known by the name of Toronto …. Discarding this 'outlandish' name, as he considered it, he [Simcoe] christened the spot York, in honour of the King's son, Frederick, Duke of York."

John Charles Dent
The Canadian Portrait Gallery, v. 1, 1880

"[On August 26] … Simcoe christened his town site York. This was after the Duke of York … in keeping with Simcoe's policy of substituting English for Indian place names."

Edith G. Firth, ed.,
The Town of York, 1793-1815,
A Collecton of Documents of Early Toronto, 1962

Simcoe, who disliked aboriginal names, introduced several English names in Upper Canada …. On learning of a victory by the Duke of York in Flanders, Simcoe changed Toronto's name to York.

Alan Rayburn
*Place Names of Canada,*1994

Three contemporary statements, in 1793, seem to confirm the foregoing quotes: first, a reference in Lady Simcoe's diary on August 24; second, a proclamation by Major Littlehales, Simcoe's military secretary, on August 26; and third, a statement by Simcoe himself on September 20.

The explanation has a dramatic ring to it (Frederick was the "Grand Old Duke" of nursery rhyme renown), but it is wrong. Ernest Cruikshank's five-volume *The Correspondence of Lieut. Governor John Graves Simcoe* reveals many references to "Toronto (now York)" or "York (late Toronto)," that preceded the news of the Duke's victory. The earliest, in a letter to Henry Dundas, is dated November 4 1792, six months before the battle was fought.

The decision to rename Toronto had obviously been made long before August 1793; the Duke's victory was used as an excuse for a celebration. The statements of Lady Simcoe, Littlehales and Simcoe can all be interpreted this way. The true explanation of the renaming is much more prosaic, and will be considered later.

Creating the Counties

When Simcoe arrived in Kingston, Upper Canada in 1792 the first order of business was to divide the province into counties. The primary reason for this division was to provide the basis for ridings for elections to the Legislative Assembly, but they were also to act as militia and land board units. The existing subdivisions of the province would not serve this purpose — the townships were too small and scattered, while the districts (established by Lord Dorchester in 1788) were too large.

The work was done by Simcoe and his Executive Council, meeting in Kingston for six days, starting on July 10. Maps and militia returns were used to make county populations as equal as possible. On the seventh day a *Proclamation* was issued defining the county and riding boundaries and stating county names.

The counties were named according to two principles. Counties east of the Trent River were named after statesmen and other significant persons in Britain, i.e. Addington, Dundas, Grenville, Hastings, Leeds, Lenox, Prince Edward and Stormont. The exceptions were Glengary (Glengarry Highlanders), Frontenac (Governor of New France) and Ontario (islands in Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River).

The remaining counties west of the Trent River were named for counties in England, this in a very systematic manner. The easternmost counties were called Northumberland and Durham, after the north-easternmost counties in England. The naming then proceeded west and south in Upper Canada, selecting all the county names along the eastern coast of England, until Essex and Kent were reached.

Nineteen counties were created, but only 16 representatives were to be elected to the Legislative Assembly. Some counties (e.g. Stormont) had one member each, some shared (e.g. Leeds and Frontenac), while others were split into ridings with one member for each (e.g. two ridings of Glengary [sic]). York was split into two by the Mississauga Tract (which belonged to the Natives); the eastern portion contained Toronto. The entire Niagara Peninsula and beyond fell in Lincoln County. It was divided into four ridings, two in the east returning one member each, while the others shared a representative with adjacent counties.

The Lincolnshire Link

The naming of the counties is clear-cut, but what about the townships? Many townships had already been named before Simcoe's arrival, and these names were usually retained, e.g. the Royal Townships along the St. Lawrence. Some named townships were renamed, e.g. Dublin, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Norwich and Bristol (named by Dorchester in 1791) became York, Scarborough, Pickering, Whitby and Darlington respectively. Note that the first four of these were townships in York County, and were given names derived from Yorkshire in England. This policy of adopting township names from the "parent" county in England was used elsewhere in Upper Canada, e.g. Darlington in Durham, Alnwick in Northumberland,*[overhead* Norwich in Norfolk, Orford in Suffolk, Colchester in Essex and Maidstone in Kent.

Nowhere was the county-based naming policy applied more consistently than in Lincoln, where every township but one received a Lincolnshire name. Most were named for places in Lincolnshire, e.g. Grantham, Grimsby and Stamford (among the earliest surveyed

townships), and Caistor, Humberstone and Wainfleet (later townships). Others were named for families with a Lincolnshire connection, e.g. Bertie, Clinton, Pelham and Thorold. Willoughby was probably named for a family also, though a village of this name existed in Lincolnshire. The renaming of rivers also accords to the county-based policy, e.g. Welland and Ouse (in Lincoln County), and Humber (in York County), though it should be noted that it was not long before the Ouse reverted to the Grand.

But there was one conspicuous exception: Township No. 1 became Newark, which, though it is close to the Lincolnshire border, is actually in Nottinghamshire. The explanation is related to the fact that there were two Newarks, Town and Township. The Town was originally called Lenox by Lord Dorchester in 1791. Simcoe renamed it Newark in 1792, before the county-based naming policy came into effect. Later when townships were named, the name Newark, as that of Simcoe's capital, was simply extended to the Township.

As for the choice of Newark in the first place, various explanations have been suggested. The most likely is Newark (the full name is Newark-on-Trent), the Royal capital in the English Civil War. But that doesn't explain why Simcoe decided to rename Newark only a year after Dorchester named it Lenox. That may be related to Simcoe's relationship with Dorchester, who was Governor-General of British North America and his superior. Their relationship could have been better.

Precisely when the other townships were named is uncertain, but it may not have been until 1793, or even 1794. The first reference to any township name that can be accurately dated is Newark, in the *Minutes* of the Executive Council for June 7, 1794. Names and numbers were both used for a period after that.

The Question of Why

The question now arises as to why townships were named after particular places or persons. It is reasonable to assume that larger places would be chosen before smaller ones, but evidence from contemporary maps and directories does not always confirm this (e.g. the choice of Saltfleet, but not Sleaford or Spalding). One of the biggest towns of all, Boston, could not be used anyway, for obvious reasons; but why Lincoln itself was not used is not clear.

The problem is even more acute in the case of people, where there are sometimes several possible namesakes. I will examine three cases: Thorold, Pelham/Clinton, and Willoughby/Bertie.

The origin of Thorold Township's name seems clear-cut. All sources say the township was named in the early 1790s for Sir John Thorold of Lincolnshire, 9th Baronet and a Member of Parliament. But the question arises as to why Simcoe chose him. Though an MP, he was a very undistinguished one, and is said to have opposed policies supported by Simcoe, including the establishment of Upper Canada. Besides, there is no evidence of a personal friendship. Sir John's main claim to fame is a magnificent book collection at his home in Syston Park, near Grantham.

Sources agree that both Pelham and Clinton Townships were named after members of the Pelham and Clinton families, but differ widely as to who they were. Three possibilities mentioned by various sources follow. Henry Fiennes Pelham-Clinton was nephew to two prime ministers and exerted considerable power and influence. Sir Henry Clinton led the British forces in the Revolutionary War, and promoted Simcoe to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel of the Rangers. Charles Anderson Pelham was a very quiet MP, speaking only once in a 26-year career in the House of Commons.

There are two possibilities in the case of Bertie and Willoughby, Peregrine Bertie and Willoughby Bertie, plus a village named Willoughby. The claimants are related through a common great-great-grandfather, Montagu Bertie, who married twice. Peregrine is descended from one wife, and Willoughby from the other.

Of course, the aim might have been to honour historic Lincolshire families rather than individuals. The Clintons and Pelhams were both noble families (indeed, the Clintons went back to the 13th century), and so too were the Berties. But the Thorold family tops them all, and can trace its roots back to Saxon times. Believe it or not, the Thorold family ancestors include Sheriff Thorold listed in the *Domesday Book*, and Lady Godiva!

Vindicating Simcoe

Many place names were changed and many introduced under Simcoe, though it is uncertain to what extent he had a direct hand in this. It seems highly likely, however, that he had a major say in naming counties and in establishing the county-based

naming policy. His choice of English names was consistent with his desire to create a "Little England" in Upper Canada.

But what about the claim that Simcoe deliberately got rid of Native names because he didn't like them? Condemning Simcoe for this has fashionable post-colonial allure, but hard evidence is lacking. An early reference to his dislike for Native names appears in Dent, quoted above. The only known contemporary source is an ambiguous remark attributed to Joseph Brant by Lord Selkirk in 1803, "Gen. S. Has done a great deal for this province, he has changed the name of every place in it."

Three points should be noted at this stage:

(i)   Many English names preceded Simcoe's arrival, e.g. Kingston, and creek names,
(ii) Most of the names introduced during his administration were for places that did not exist before the British arrived, e.g. counties, numbered townships and new townships,
(iii) Though he did change existing names, relatively few of them were Native; many more were French, German, and even English, e.g. Dublin Township became York.

Thus Simcoe's replacement of Toronto by York may have had nothing to do with any anti-Native sentiment. Indeed it is entirely consistent with his county-based naming policy (the town, township and county were all called York).

Similar misinformation surrounds Simcoe's supposed replacement of Niagara (a Native name) by Newark. Several sources, including Green and Rayburn, make this claim, but they are wrong. It was Lenox, a new town surveyed by Augustus Jones in 1791-92, that became the Town of Newark. Similarly, it was Township No. 1, surveyed by Philip Frey and Augustus Jones in 1787, that became Newark Township, as has already been explained.

The name Niagara preceded both of these, and in fact never went away. It was used in a non-specific sense for the whole frontier area below the Niagara Escarpment, and sometimes for the land further south on top of the Escarpment as well. Simcoe certainly had nothing against the name, and headed many letters Niagara (he wrote them from Navy Hall, which lay outside of the Town of Newark). Indeed, in a letter to the Duke of Portland in 1794 he proposed the incorporation of Newark and Queenston as a City to be named Niagara, lest the name be lost to the Americans.

In 1798 the name Niagara was officially reclaimed for the Town and Township by a redistricting act. Some say this was in response to public agitation for the return of a more euphonious Native name. But it could equally well be the result of the recommendation by Simcoe himself four years previously.