

Loyalists and the changing face of Oakville

Back in the early sixties when I moved south from Milton to Oakville, it was easy to note the rural characteristics as I drove down Third Line from the Dundas Highway. Now, instead of the Lawrence farm, the multi-lane thoroughfare cuts through rows of housing reminiscent of cornfields that once lined the road. It is harder still to visualize the area as covered by dense forests in the period when United Empire Loyalists took possession of the newly surveyed grants along the road from York to Dundas at the beginning of the 19th century. While much has been written about this early group of refugees, there is still little documentation of the lives of the first settlers.

Donated to the city of Hamilton by Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Mills in 1929 is a monument designed by Sydney March to represent a United Empire Loyalist family as they faced a life in the wilderness, north of the country from which they had been uprooted. The figures convey different images to students in classroom presentations. Some note the fancy dress of the mother, the low neckline and the covered elbows. Others comment on the tricorne and the 18th century attire of the father as he holds out the ticket bearing the lot number for their new home. They interpret the clothing as being very fancy especially if they are supposed to be in the woods. Few notice the tools being held by the young boy - the hoe and an axe - so essential to the family in building a new home in the wilderness. As refugees, forced to abandon everything in the

colonies, each Loyalist family had to rely on the few years of subsidy by the Crown and the communal support of their new neighbours to settle in the newly surveyed territory which spread from the Atlantic to the Great Lakes.

Our history books record that 225 years ago, on 3 September 1783, the Treaty of Paris of 1783 was signed ending eight years of the American Revolution. Among many of the articles of agreement was the promise that the United States would not persecute loyalists still in America and would allow those that left America to return. Few of the estimated 70,000 colonists would chance life back in their old communities. While some sailed to Great Britain or the Caribbean colonies, approximately 30,000 would settle in Nova Scotia causing the creation of New Brunswick in 1784. Another 10,000 would head for Quebec until the area west of the Ottawa River had been purchased from the First Nations and surveyed for settlement. In 1791, Quebec would be divided into Lower and Upper Canada. As the Treaty of Paris did not recognize the Six Nations, allies of the British, the Crown reserved two large tracts of land, one stretching six miles on either side of the Grand River from Lake Erie to its headwaters and the other near present day Deseronto in the Quinte region.

In many cases, settlements were made by families whose men had fought side by side throughout the war. Knowing the name of the fighting unit often helps family historians locate the area where the ini-

tial land grant was made. For instance, someone who fought with Delancey's brigade could be found near Woodstock, south of Fredericton or around Saint John in New Brunswick; Butler's Rangers settled in the Niagara peninsula or in Essex county; soldiers of the King's Royal Regiment of New York took up land along the St. Lawrence River.

In time, more land grants were distributed as new territories were surveyed and as children of Loyalists came of age. Some families who had settled in New Brunswick, finding the land would not support their farms, moved west to settle along Lake Erie and around Lake Ontario. Many of the names of the early settlers in Halton appear in the histories of those earlier settlements and reflect the movements and intermarriages of these Loyalist families over the generations. Biggar, Kaiting, Smith, Lampman and Aikman appear in Grimsby's Annals of the Forty. Ryerson, Chisholm and Williams reflect the Maritime grants. Jarvis and Post were prominent names in the early development of York.

Today there are few original Loyalist land grants still in the hands of the same family here in Oakville. However, the names are still evident in the many cemeteries in the area especially near sites of former villages such as Merton or Munn's Corners. As a result of the entrepreneurs, much of the work of some of the Loyalists is still evident in the accounts of industries or heritage homes throughout the town as reflected by the Smith-Triller Bridge on

Upper Middle Road or Erchless on Oakville's harbour.

Other connections to the Loyalist period are less evident. While some have been fortunate in having a family historian who has collected pictures, stories and genealogical data, others have had to make the connections only after they discovered that an ancestor was born in "Canada" before 1812. Finding those Loyalist roots in the archives of our local historical societies links the family to the community. Sometimes the search begins in the Directory of Loyalists maintained by the United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada (www.uelac.org). Whatever the route taken, the research into the past family history emphasizes the interconnection with Canada's history. It becomes easier to visualize the daily lives of ancestors during the War of 1812, 1837 Rebellion, Fenian Raids and the early development of Canada.

Here in Oakville, our knowledge of the arrival of the United Empire Loyalists is more limited to a "paper trail" than found in the presence of similar heritage buildings. Presently, the Biggar/Cork House stands out as one of the last connections we have to the very early development of our area. At least the establishment of the greenbelt in our northern community will help the next generation to connect to the land as experienced by those early Loyalist settlers. Their heritage is in our care.

by Fred H. Hayward

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