THE HISTORY OF COBOURG HARBOUR

EARLY SETTLEMENT AND GROWTH (1779–1828)

Cobourg's harbour area, with its sandy beach, shady trees and freshwater stream outlets, attracted the settlers of early times. Even before settlements were begun, parties travelling in open boats camped by the creek mouths to catch and enjoy fresh fish.

While travelling from Niagara to Kingston along the northern shore of Lake Ontario, Walter Butler noted in his journal on March 11, 1779

set off at Daylight, rowed till twelve, the swell increasing with the wind ahead at East put into a creek called by the Indians 'Pamiliescotiyank' (the fat fire) the distance from our encampment 15 miles, at this creek and two others nearly of the same name, the Indians in the fishing season reside, all those three creeks head near a lake of about 30 miles long, distant from this 50 miles, where the Messessaugoes have two villages and where the Canadians in Winter send traders…

This is believed to be a description of Cobourg's shoreline with its three creeks that drain from the north.
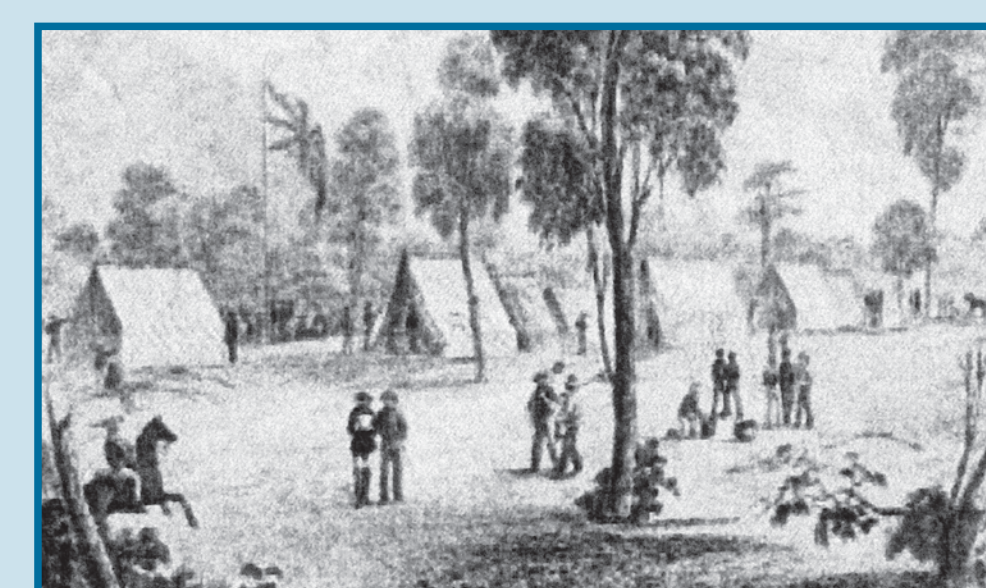

When the first settlers came to Cobourg, there was no harbour or shelter for vessels and no wharf. The only means of landing passengers and cargo was by 'Jolly Boat' which was sent to the shore from an anchored schooner.

Much of the area south of what is now King Street, between George and Division Streets, was a cedar swamp with the creek that still runs through the centre of the town supplying it with water and forming an estuary at the sandy beach.

The first inhabitant of Cobourg appears to have been Eliud Nickerson, who built a crude log hut near the present King-Division business section in 1798. During the early 1800s settlers became established in what is now the downtown area. James G. Bethune, a prominent early inhabitant, wrote in 1833 that it was 1817-18 when settlers began to arrive in considerable numbers, and that the many respectable English, Irish and Scottish families soon made the society of Cobourg *'equal to any in the Province.'*

Frances Stewart, a pioneer inhabitant of Peterborough County, describes her 1822 visit to Cobourg in her book *Our Forest Home*. She mentions that a small landing wharf existed at the time. This was located at the foot of Third Street.

The Reverend Anson Green, the first clergyman of the Wesleyan Methodist congregation in Cobourg, was here in the summer of 1825 when roughly 2,000 Irish immigrants landed at Cobourg:

I saw the beach west of Division Street covered with small white tents filled with Irish immigrants. There was no pier in Cobourg then and the landing was somewhat difficult. Those tents provided a beautiful and attractive appearance.

In the year 1827, Cobourg consisted of:

Forty houses, two churches, two inns, four stores, several distilleries, extensive grist mill… population 350.

With business in Cobourg increasing rapidly, more through the spirit and enterprise of its merchants than its natural advantages, there was increasing pressure to build and form a harbour.