

Renfrew once part of Horton

by Harry Hinchley

In 1850 when this map was produced by Major Baron de Rottenburg, Assistant Quartermaster-General, Renfrew was merely a little settlement near the Second Chute of the Bonnechere. It was still a part of the Township of Horton. There was little business done because the population was small and much of the land of the surrounding townships had not yet been settled.

The only industries were operated by John (Tanner) Smith near the falls on the creek which now bears his name. There he had a small sawmill that he had bought from Sampson Coumb about 1848 and a tannery which he had built near by. Both of these establishments were driven by water power from the creek.

There were 2 stores. One had been established by John Lorn McDougall near the foot of Main Street and the other was being built by Robert McIntyre where the Chown Building now stands. Remains of the stone wall of this may still be seen at the rear of the building.

As shown on the map there were roads running to Burnstown, up into Admaston and down to the Ottawa River. These main roads were joined by branch roads, which for the most part, were little better than blazed trails through the bush. They were little travelled except on foot, as few settlers as yet owned horses. Moreover, they were often impassable from snow in winter and mud in spring and fall.

The settlers to a great extent were self-supporting. They did not have to depend on the stores to supply their needs. They had their own meat and potatoes, their flour was ground from their own grain and for a luxury they had maple sugar.

Trade was done by barter. The miller would accept wheat in payment for his services and the merchant would trade his goods for butter, eggs or pork. Potash prepared from hardwood ashes was another important article of produce.

Money was scarce. The only Canadian coins were copper bank tokens of 1 penny and 1/2 penny denominations. Larger transactions were handled by all sorts of gold and silver coins from many countries as there was still no standard Canadian currency. Business was done by the British system of pounds, shillings and pence. Despite the urgings of Francis Hincks, in the legislature, the country had not yet adopted the decimal system of coinage.

Although there were post offices at Renfrew and other area points, there was little mail. Postage stamps had not yet been introduced in Canada and letters were obtained on payment of a fee to the postmaster. Sometimes letters had to be left at the post office because the settler did not have enough money to pay the postage.

Churches were in the process of being established in Renfrew on land donated by that public-spirited citizen, Xavier Plaunt. The Presbyterians were served by Rev Alexander Mann from Pakenham, the Roman Catholics by Rev John McNulty from Mount St Patrick and the Methodists by a succession of pastors who had followed the pioneer missionary, Mr Maitland.

The clergy kept a watchful eye over the members of their flocks to hold them to the straight and narrow. Other transgressors of the law could be made to appear before John Lorn Mc-

Dougall or Henry Airth who had been appointed magistrates.

Soon after 1850, there was a great boom in Renfrew. During the next decade, there were many changes and improvements. Francis Hincks secured the land along the Bonnechere and had mills built at the power

sites. The Opeongo Road was put through and it gave communication to the inland settlements and to the lumber camps up the Bonnechere and Madawaska.

Settlers came to take up land in the townships and the whole country began to open

up and develop. More businesses were established in Renfrew and more and more tradesmen moved in.

By 1858 Renfrew had grown to the point where it was able to separate from Horton and become incorporated as a village in its own right.

John Tanner Renfrew's first reeve

by Harry Hinchley

This sketch from Belden's Atlas of 1881 shows John Smith as he would look at that time. Around this period he was Warden of Renfrew County, Reeve of the Village of Renfrew, a leading industrialist and merchant, and the largest taxpayer of the village.

He was also a pioneer mill owner and the first man to start any work of importance in Renfrew. It was after him that Smith's Creek was named.

Around the turn of the century when the town wanted his photograph to hang in the Municipal Offices a special portrait was made. But by that time John Smith was an old man and had lost much of the vigor and energy which was so characteristic of him in his younger days. This may explain why the photo is not like the earlier sketch.

John Smith came to Renfrew from Lanark County in 1848 and bought a small sawmill and brewery which Sampson Coumb had established on the creek near the present Mercury Office. The brewery did not fit into the plans of a man who became a Charter Member of the villages' first Temperance Society so he changed it to a grist and oatmeal mill. The stones of the foundation of this mill may still be seen in Stewart Park.

He soon set up a tannery to make leather. To use the

leather he established a shop where he employed several tradesmen making boots, shoes and harness which he sold from a store that he opened on Raglan Street.

He was a good business man and as he prospered he bought property in and around Renfrew. He built a brick block on Raglan Street. To fill the need for economical housing he built row tenements on Argyle and Lochiel Streets. He also owned farms outside the village.

At Renfrew's first election in 1858 he was elected to Council and he became the first Reeve, an office which he held off and on for 17 years, usually by acclamation. As representative to County Council he was chosen Warden three times, a record that has never been equalled in Renfrew County.

John Smith gave valuable assistance in bringing the first railway to Renfrew and along with Xavier Plaunt had the honor of driving the last spikes. He was later made a Director of the Canada Central Railway. He had much to do with bringing the K and P to Renfrew and when the Ottawa, Arnprior and Parry Sound (now the CNR) was formed he sold the company right-of-way over his land.

In many, many ways John Smith was one of Renfrew's most outstanding citizens and few have made as many contributions to our town.

It was not until 1896 that concrete came into use for this purpose. Hitching posts were provided in front of the stores because horses had to be tied while their drivers shopped.

In those days the streets were usually either muddy or dusty and the ladies' skirts were long. To protect these skirts from the hazards of alighting from a buggy stepping stones were often provided for the benefit of the ladies. Such a stone may be seen in front of the Barr and Wright store. But other stores generally had no place for such frills.

John Smith
Warden of Renfrew Co.

