

An Outline of the Early Happenings in and Around Balmer Island

Transcribed by James Austin, May 2005

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Going back through the years as to the first white people in the vicinity of Balmer Island – this information was given to me thirty-one years ago by the late Mr. Andrew Wilson, grandfather of Mrs. John Watt of Balmer Island. This intelligent and observant old gentleman gave a very vivid description of the wild and desolate forests of McNab Township of that distant period, Living with his parents as a snail boy in a shanty on the lot now occupied by John Wright (the location may be seen to this day - this honorable old gentleman described the location to me while on a visit to his daughter, the late Mrs. James Arnott, I had no trouble in locating the exact spot where the shanty stood, so accurate was the description he gave me. There were no white people in that part of the township except themselves. There was an Indian encampment where John Wright's outbuildings now stand. He gave me an outline of the various trails which ran through the forest to the trapping grounds, The beaver meadows now belonging to the late James Wilson and John Watt were a wonderful trapping ground for beaver, mink, otter and muskrat, and other fur-bearing animals. The meadows at that time were small lakes or ponds caused by the beavers building done on the creeks.

The first Council meeting was held at the home of the late John McIntyre on the Flat Rapid road, about 2 1/2 miles east of Balmer Island, In 1860, with John Paris, James Morris, John Fisher, Allan Stewart and William Storie as Councilors and E. Billings as Township Clerk. The town hall was built in the 50's by the late David Mackie of New Glasgow. The earliest data which I have regarding a school was one in 1854 when the late Mrs. Andrew Murphy (Mary Sutherland, mother of our esteemed Township Clerk) taught school in a shanty on the lot owned by Dannie McIntyre and afterwards in the town hall. Her term of teaching in those two places was 12 years. Dougald C. McNab also taught school in the town hall in the '60s. Later a schoolhouse was built by David Mackie alongside the river road and near the town hall, Daniel Fyfe succeeded Dougald C. McNab, then T.W. Shipman, John Burton, the latter two for sheer cruelty were ringmasters of the first degree. Any of the boys, whose opinions differed, at times went to the floor for the count by a punch to the head, or by having their feet knocked from under then. However, the trustee's children usually fared well.