

The Town of Kearney, 1908-1958

A History of the Town and Area

During the years 1878-79 the provincial government had the Townships of Perry, Bethune and Proudfoot opened up for settlement by prospective agriculturists. The wisdom of this action has often been questioned, but as it has no particular bearing on the history of Kearney, we will pass it over without comment. It must be remembered however, that all through the 70s Canada as a whole was suffering from a depression, and the cities were anxious to relieve themselves of the unemployed. There are still some copies of the notices that were printed, describing in glowing terms the benefits of this new area. So good in fact that people sold good farms and travelled many weary miles to carve a new home in the wilderness.

- No one seems to know who was the first person to settle in what is now known as Kearney. It seems the O'Neils, the Kearneys and the Murphy's arrived about the same time, with the McGill's soon afterwards. Since the real old settlers still living are not here now, it is hard to get an accurate date. It is certain that these were the first families. The oldest house still standing is what is still known as the McConkey house, on the corner opposite the school. It was built by a man named Weir, and was first intended for and used as a hotel. The second house still standing is the old LaHay house, now occupied by Ralph Bice. This was first used as a boarding house, and was larger than the present structure.

A.J. O'Neil and Wm. Kearney settled first on the 12th concession, and to the real old timers, that spot is still known as Old Kearney. They had been stone cutters on the Welland Canal construction. When the road from Emsdale, which was then and still is known as the Perry-Monteith Colonization Road was opened, they moved to that road and opened a store on the corner where the public school stands. Their first building was of logs, with a scoop roof. The first Post Office was there. This in 1880. Mr. O'Neil was the first Post Master. Three years later the frame store was erected on the south west corner of the present school grounds. It was operated in turn by A.J. O'Neil, J.A. McDonald, R.Y. Fish, R.R. Rankin and Rankin and Beverage. Early in the century Rankin and Beverage built a brick store, and the old building was burned in 1904. The new store they built in 1904 burned in April of this year.

No one knows who picked the name of Kearney. Like many other small towns the first or one of the early settlers supplied the name. Since Mr. O'Neil was the first post master, and on its incorporation as a town, the first Mayor, it might have been more appropriate to have called it O'Neil.

The first settlers could come only as far as Gravenhurst by train. From there, there was a boat to Bracebridge, road to Port Sydney, and boat again to Huntsville, and then road to Kearney. Later the railroad was built further north, and settlers could come as far as Emsdale.