

HOW OXFORD COUNTY PLACES FIRST RECEIVED THEIR NAMES

By M. McIntyre Hood.

How often, in going from place to place in Ontario it is found that the names of counties, of cities and towns, of villages and townships, of streams and creeks tell a great deal of the history of the places to which they are given. Places are found with names which were borne by men great in the early days of Canada's history, others with names which show the origin of the settlers who founded them, and others which remind the ancestors of the present generation of the country or the town from which their forefathers came in the pioneer days. So much is this true that the Ontario Historical Society has for some time been making a special study of the origin and history of place names, and through one named W. J. Wintemberg, records are being compiled by degrees, and are finding their way into the archives of Canada.

Few counties of Ontario contain so many names which are of real interest as does Oxford county. Founded by settlers from old Scotland, by the naval and military aristocracy of England and by United Empire Loyalists and others, the names of the various communities of this county show a diversity of origins which is interesting not only to the student of local history, but to all who know these places, and particularly to those who live in them. A few of the places in the county are simply named after the township in which they are situated. Others are named after their founders, British statesmen, prominent men, well known local families, or places in England, Scotland, Ireland, Europe, Asia and the United States. A few seem to have reference to their geographical or topographical position. Unfortunately, some of the names were thrown at the places by the post office department without regard to their fitness. This is to be regretted, as surely there have been sufficient numbers of prominent men, members of parliament, wardens, reeves, councillors and others who could have been honored by having a place named after them. For the following interesting story of the origin and history of the names of the prominent places in Oxford county, much of the credit is due to Mr. Wintemberg, who has done a considerable amount of research work for the Ontario Historical Society, and has kindly made his records available.

OXFORD COUNTY.

Although most of the townships comprising it had been named earlier, Oxford county did not come into existence until 1798, when it was enacted that "The townships of Burford, Norwich, Dereham, Oxford and Blenheim do constitute the county of Oxford." Later in 1837, it was called the District of Brock, which included the townships of Zorra, Nissouri, Blandford, Blenheim, North, East and West Oxford, Burford, Oakland, Norwich and Dereham. In 1849 districts were abolished and counties again named, and, by the re-organization of 1851, in which it is again referred to as Oxford, the following townships constituted the county: East and West Zorra, North, East and West Oxford, Dereham, Blandford, Blenheim, Norwich and Nissouri. These form the present county of Oxford, except that Norwich and Nissouri have been divided into two townships, and that the west half of the latter now belongs to the county of Middlesex.

The county, according to Hubert F. Gardner, of Toronto, who compiled a list of place names about thirty years ago, "Takes its name from Oxford city, the capital of Oxfordshire, an inland county of England. . . . The name is derived from a ford of the River Ouse, — Ouse-no-ford, altered to Oxnaford, and Oxford, hence the arms show an ox crossing a river. Oxford was called Oxnaford by the Saxons, and in the Domesday Book, it is Oxeneford. In the time of Chaucer, the name appeared as Oxenford, which in course of time was sharpened and shrilled into Oxford."

1798 - Oxford County
Blenheim, Blandford townships



Anglican church. 1870.

1837 - District of Brock.

1851 - Oxford County again
2 new townships.

BLANDFORD.

Blandford township is named from the second title of the Duke of Marlborough, "Marquis of Blandford," conferred on him in 1792, about the time that the township was given its name.

BLENHHEIM.

The township of Blenheim, according to Gardiner, is named after Blenheim House which is situated near Oxford, England. This beautiful place was bestowed by the British nation on John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, for his victory over the French and Bavarians at the village of Blindheim-Hochstadt, in Bavaria, August 13, 1704. Blenheim is a corruption of the name Blindheim, meaning "dull home." According to Voltaire, the Germans called it Plentheim. Blenheim, the capital of Marlborough county, in New Zealand, has been most appropriately named. A street in London, England is named Blenheim, and there is a village of the same name in Kent county, Ontario.

THE OXFORDS.

What are now East, West and North Oxford, in all the early acts of parliament were collectively referred to as Oxford-on-the-Thames, and at the first territorial formation of the county they were thus described. East Oxford became detached from West Oxford between the years 1820 and 1822, and North Oxford became a separate township on January 1, 1842.

DEREHAM.

Dereham township was named after the ancient town of Dereham, in Norfolk, England. The name was applied to the township before the counties of Oxford and Norfolk were separated. The name is said to signify "the home of wild beasts, just as Derby, formerly Deorby, signifies "the village of wild beasts, deer, or perhaps wild animals generally."

NISSOURI.

When the first division of Ontario was made in 1792 the township of Nissouri was not known, and it was first alluded to in an act passed in 1821. Nissouri is generally thought to be an Indian name, akin to Missouri, which means "mud river," or "river of the big canoe tribe." Other, however, are inclined to the view that the name is a corruption of "Nig Zorra," that is, near Zorra, a term which was sometimes used by settlers in referring to the township.

NORWICH.

Massachusetts township now divided in-

to North and South Norwich, until 1798 formed part of the county of Norfolk. Thus it received the name of a city in Norfolk, England. The name is derived from the Anglo-Saxon "nord" the north, and "wic" meaning town.

THE ZORRAS.

When the first territorial division of the province of Ontario was made in 1792, the township of Zorra was unsurveyed and unknown. The first reference made to it by an act of parliament was in 1821, in which act it was with Nissouri added to the county of Oxford. East Zorra was detached from West Zorra in 1845. There are various reasons given for the origin of the name of Zorra. Some people claim that it is derived from a Biblical source, "Zorrah," the birthplace of Samson, and try to substantiate this by pointing that the township was first settled by the Scotch highlanders who were extremely religious. This derivation is interesting, but a more likely one is "Zorra" the Spanish word for a female fox. Whoever named the older townships, probably some surveyors who had served in the Spanish wars, had a great liking for Spanish names. Thus, besides Zorra, we have Oro, (gold), Lobo, (wolf), Rama (branch), Mariposa, (butterfly), Mono, (monkey), Oso (bear), and Sombra (shadow or shade) as township names in Ontario.

WOODSTOCK.

The city of Woodstock was long known simply by the name of the "town plot." Governor Simcoe, on a visit to the district in 1792, wrote back to the secretary of state that he had marked out Oxford (Woodstock) for a town site. Woodstock was named after the town of the same name in Oxfordshire, England. The name probably means "the dwelling in the wood." An interesting fact is that the venerable old city hall of Woodstock is an almost exact replica of the town hall of Woodstock, in Oxfordshire, England. That part of Woodstock which lies north of Ingersoll Avenue, and bounded by Riddell and Tecumseh streets, was called Brighton in the early thirties. It was named after Brighton, England, Henry Perrin, one of the settlers of the village, and possibly others, having come from there.

INGERSOLL.

Ingersoll, for a long time known as Ingersollville, was, as has been related in previous articles, named by Charles Ingersoll in memory of his father, Major Thomas Ingersoll, who came to this country from Massachusetts in 1793. The Ingersolls originally came from Bedfordshire, England, two brothers, John and Richard, settling in Massachusetts in 1629. The name is sometimes spelt Ingersole in some of the early records. In 1433 the name occurs as Hynkersell. The name is believed to be derived from Inkersale, a locality in Derbyshire, England.

TILLSONBURG.

The town of Tillsonburg was originally called Dereham Forge on account of bog iron ore from the neighborhood having been smelted and manufactured there. It was afterwards called Dereham. The name appears as Tillsonburg on a map prepared by George C. Tremaine, of Kingston, in 1857, and the northern part of the town was called Campbelltown. The town was incorporated at Tillsonburg in 1869. The name was given on the suggestion of the private bills committee of the legislature. Through a clerical error in preparing the bill, one of the "l's" was dropped, and the name had to struggle along with a single "l" until 1902, when several public-spirited citizens of the town, in consideration of the "many valuable and enduring services" rendered the town by the late E. D. Tillson, asked the Ontario legislature to have the name changed from Tillsonburg to Tillsonburg. The act was given assent to on March 24, 1902. It is doubted whether the annals of the province can furnish a similar instance where the name of a municipality had its spelling changed by act of parliament.

George Tillson, the founder of the place, was born in Massachusetts in 1782 and settled in the township in 1825. He died on March 15, 1864.

The names of the villages and streams of the county will be dealt with in another article next week.