

Hon. Russell: Slave dealer, land grabber

By Betty and Jim Kidd

In 1798, the area now designated Russell County was separated from the county of Stormont in the Eastern District and named Russell county after the Honorable Peter Russell (1733-1808), then administrator of the government of Upper Canada.

The county then consisted of townships Gloucester, Cumberland, Clarence, Osgoode, Russell and Cambridge. The act by which Russell County was created was drafted and sponsored by Chief Justice Elmsley.

Land clearing and settlement began in the township of Russell

in the 1820's. In 1841, the first settlement took place near what is now the village of Russell. Russell post office was established in 1848, William Duncan being the first postmaster. The post office was given the name of the township in which it was located. However, the growing community was known as Dun-canville, not Russell. The 1881 atlas of Prescott and Russell counties notes that "this name Russell — still clings to the office, though the village is never thus referred to." The police village of Russell was established by bylaw 509 in 1898, according to the records of Municipal Affairs in Toronto.

The man, for whom Russell county and township were named, and from whom Russell village indirectly derived its name, was an interesting eighteenth-century aristocrat. Born in Ireland in 1733, most of his adult life was spent in the British army, during which he obtained the rank of captain and served as assistant secretary to Sir Henry Clinton, commander-in-chief of the British forces in North America during part of the American Revolution.

It was at this time that he came to the attention of John Graves Simcoe. In 1792, Lieutenant-Gov-

ernor Simcoe appointed Russell as "Receiver General of the Revenues of Upper Canada". Russell served also in a number of other roles, including member of the Executive Council, chairman of that council's committee for dealing with petitions for grants of land and member of the Legislative Council.

In 1796 Simcoe left Canada for a leave of absence. Russell, as the senior member of the Executive Council, was appointed Administrator of the province. At that time, he was 63 years of age and subject to ill health. Although his responsibilities were similar to those of the lieutenant-governor, he was never given either the title or the salary associated with the position. In 1799, Peter Hunter was appointed lieutenant-governor, ending Russell's hopes of attaining the position.

During the period 1796-99 as administrator, Russell faced numerous problems, partly because Simcoe had taken most of the official papers and records with him to England; thus, Russell had no indication of the interests or intentions of the British government, and the delay in time to request and receive official responses from London caused misunderstandings. Several of the foremost problems which Russell faced

were Indian land questions, including the demands of Joseph Brant for confirmation of certain land sales in the Grand River area; the resistance of many influential persons to moving the capital from New York (Niagara-on-the-Lake) to York (Toronto); and the establishment of schools.

Peter Russell's reputation as a land-grabber is based on his extensive land holdings; however, he and his sister Elizabeth in claiming large land areas were simply following the pattern of the time. Other members of the Family Compact, the clergy, etc., all competed for shares of the "King's bounty" or land. In his official positions, Russell had a lot of influence in the granting of lands. In a letter from Lieutenant-Governor Hunter to Mr. King, dated October 27, 1799, it was noted: "The Councillors are all good men; Russell, had it depended on him, would have granted lands to the devil and all his family (as good loyalists) provided they could have paid the fees".

Little is known of Peter Russell's private life. He never married but throughout his life,

supported his sister Elizabeth who resided with him in Upper Canada. As a plantation owner in Virginia in the 1770's, Russell had grown tobacco but because of heavy debts and scarcity of money in the colonies had been forced to sell his estate.

It was during this period that he acquired slaves. For this, he is often criticized, but in this too he was similar to other aristocratic families in Upper Canada. In February, 1806 he offered for sale, through an advertisement in the Gazette and Oracle newspaper, "a black woman named Peggy, aged 40, and a black boy, her son, aged 15"; the asking prices were \$150.00 for the woman and \$200.00 for the son, Jupiter. He had brought these and other slaves to Canada with him before the law of 1793 which made illegal future importation of slaves.

Peter Russell died in 1808 in York (Toronto). Although not an outstanding figure in Canadian history, the man for whom this county, township and village are named, contributed to the development of Upper Canada; he certainly was an interesting individual.



Peter Russell

Metcalfe parking pinch

Negotiations are underway between Osgoode Township and farmer Clark Stanley as council attempts to acquire parking space desperately needed at the Metcalfe municipal hall.

The township would like to "pick up an acre or two" from the property owner for parking and in case expansion of the hall is ever necessary, Reeve Albert Bouwers explained.

A survey is now being conducted, and when its concluded, Reeve Bouwers anticipates a

deal being struck between the parties.

Following the official opening of the refurbished hall Jan. 1, Councillor Philip McEvoy brought to light the "dangerous situation" created by lack of parking.

When a meeting is held at the building, cars are forced to clutter both sides of Regional Road 6, the councillor pointed out. The situation is a poor example to Metcalfe businessmen, he said.

Council is also attempting to

purchase a lane belonging to Mr. Stanley which runs along the westerly side of the hall. While the township has been granted access by the owner, it wants to reverse the arrangement.

"We would like to own it and give Mr. Stanley access," the reeve said.

He doubted the municipality would have to resort to expropriation and would hate to do so because the property owner has always been "more than cooperative."

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