

A WORD PICTURE OF STIRLING'S PAST

by Lewis Zandbergen

A citizen of Rawdon Village (Stirling) of about 1825 would be hard-pressed to find anything even remotely resembling the village as it was when he or she knew it.

Perhaps the only constant is Rawdon Creek but even the creek has been shaped to some degree by the hand of man. The stretch which runs through the downtown core has in turn been diverted, dammed and denatured in man's quest to harness its power. Until the recent past an island lay between the east and west banks of the creek roughly in the area of the Stirling Creamery. The remains of a bridge abutment at the end of Wright Street are also evidence that another bridge joined the east and west banks of the creek; because of its small size it is believed to have been a footbridge.

From the height of the Oak Hills, pre-settlement Stirling would have been a quiet valley. The meandering creek would acquire a number of names depending on the prevailing political and social climate: named Fidlar's Creek, Singleton's Creek and Rawdon Creek, the waterway wound its way through several low hills. Tall trees stood on its banks and Indians had camped just east of the creek. Swampy areas between the Oak Hills and the creek were made passable with corduroy roads. Felled trees would be laid side by side across such swamps making for a bumpy but much drier ride.

Likewise, Stirling streets resemble their early 19th century counterparts only in that they are still in the same basic pattern as originally planned; a map which dates to 1856 bears this out; they would have been little more than narrow cart tracks 150 years ago. Grass would most likely have been growing in the centre of the "road" and cattle, pigs, geese and goats would have been allowed to roam freely. That would change as the population grew and eventually bylaws were enacted to keep farmyard animals under some sort of control. There's no doubt the village would have resembled pioneer villages like Lang, Upper Canada or Black Creek Pioneer Village and during wet weather they might even have looked like the streets of Deadwood; mud would be the prevailing "covering" on village streets.

Most townsfolk would have obtained their drinking water from the creek or from shallow hand dug wells. In those days the creek water was still relatively pure—at least above the dam; however, even in the days of the pioneer, the creek was often used as an efficient means of disposing of "industrial" waste; a tannery on Henry Street just across from the George Street intersection was just one of those industries. Of course, in the early 1800s farm animals would

also have been allowed to drink from the water of the creek; as a matter of fact even as late as the 1920s and 1930s cattle, while being driven to the railway station from south of town, were allowed to pause for a sip or two at a spot conveniently sloped down to the creek side next to the present covered bridge. Nature taking its course would have quickly fouled the creek.

New information coming to light also indicates many of the settlers would have had alternative beverages on hand: a beer-like tincture, homemade wine using anything from dandelions to elderberries, tea and coffee would all be consumed. The hotel bar-rooms would have been lively places—eleven village hotels once provided beverages from their taprooms: not all taverns resembled our contemporary notion of a drinking establishment. Many were nothing more than a room in someone's home where conviviality and good conversation were deemed the heights of respectability. And until around 1850 there wouldn't have been much between the "four corners" and the corner of Front Street and Frankford Road (Highway #33). It's thought the Bull house on the southeast corner of that intersection was once a tavern. A directory from 1857 shows no less than nine places where spirits could be obtained. They included Robert McRory, saloon keeper; George Reynolds, baker and saloon keeper; Mrs. Stevens, saloon keeper; George Sutherland, distiller; John Vannorman, saloon keeper; Daniel Watts, butcher and saloon keeper; and Thomas Worrod also a butcher and saloon keeper.



Campbell-Belshaw house

Housing would also startle many a 19th century time traveller. By the 1840s clapboard sided houses would have already replaced log structures, if indeed Stirling ever had any log houses. There is also the suggestion that by the time Stirling was settled, pioneers had left behind the log homes of the previous generation; because not one log house survives to