

Founding of Port Hope

On Sunday, July 21, 1968 at 2:30 p.m., a provincial plaque commemorating the founding of Port Hope was unveiled on the grounds of the Town Hall, 56 Queen Street, Port Hope.

This is one in a series of plaques erected throughout the province by the Department of Public Records and Archives, on the advice of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario.

The unveiling ceremony was sponsored by the Town of Port Hope together with the East Durham Historic Society. Mrs. Edgar Barrowclough, President of the Society, was the program chairman. Speakers included: Professor C.M. Johnston, McMaster University and a member of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board; His Worship Michael Wladyka, Mayor of Port Hope; Mr. Alex Carruthers, MPP, Durham; Mr. Russell Honey, MP, Northumberland-Durham; Mr. W.I. Thomas, Warden of the United Counties of Northumberland and Durham; Mr. J.W. Bannister, Reeve of Hope Township; and Mr. G.D. Carruthers, Reeve of Hamilton Township.

The plaque was unveiled by Mr. R.E. Sculthorpe, a descendent of Elias Smith, one of the founders of Port Hope.

The plaque reads:

FOUNDING OF PORT HOPE

Peter Smith, a fur trader, occupied a house here at "Smith's Creek" by 1788. The first permanent settlers were Loyalists brought to the township by 1793 by a group of associates headed by Jonathan Walton of Schenectady, N.Y. and Elias Smith, formerly of New York City. Walton and Smith were granted land after promising to build mills on the creek. The mills were operating by 1797 when Smith moved here, and in 1800, he laid out a town plot. The community's name, "Port Hope", was adopted at a public meeting in 1818, despite local pressure to call it "Toronto". A village with a board of police in 1834, it was incorporated as a town in 1850.

Historical background

Richard Beasley and Peter Smith, Loyalists and partners in the fur trade, petitioned in 1788 for land at "Toronto" and "Pemitiscutiak" to cover houses they had built at both places for use in their business. Toronto, at that time, meant the vicinity of the Humber River. Pemitiscutiak, or some variant spelling, was the Mississauga name of the stream on which the Cayuga village of

Ganaraske had stood during the last third of the 17th century. Though it is quite probable that Ganaraske was visited by French traders and Sulpician missionaries before 1700, there seems to be no reliable record that they made any prolonged stay there. Peter Smith, who used the post there for some years, may be regarded as the first European resident on the site of Port Hope. The stream to the west of his house came very soon to be called "Smith's Creek."

Peter Smith moved to Kingston in 1792 and turned his post over to Lawrence Herkimer. He had been unsuccessful in his attempt to get land at Smith's Creek, and Hope Township had just been appropriated to Elias Smith, Abraham Walton and Jonathan Walton "and their numerous associates." The whole township was reserved for settlers recommended by these men. The first group of settlers landed from Captain Jonathan Walton's schooner on June 8, 1793. The next day, they built huts on the east side of the creek at a place they called "the Flats." Most of the inhabitants of this temporary village soon dispersed to occupy their holdings scattered across the front of the township, but Elias Smith, Sr. sent one of his sons from Montreal with goods for a trading post, which was set up in a double log house on "the Point" near the foot of King Street. It is also stated that Myndert Harris, one of the first arrivals, took over Herkimer's post when the latter moved to Rice Lake before the end of 1793.

Elias Smith, Sr. was a United Empire Loyalist who had served as a captain of artificers during the Revolutionary War. He was a carpenter-contractor by profession and had been able to save part of his considerable property from confiscation by surrendering the rest. He had been for some years a merchant at Montreal, trading to the West Indies in his own vessels. Jonathan Walton had commanded armed boats in the Royal forces during the war, and now had a flourishing business based in Schenectady, New York, transporting goods to and from Upper Canada. These two associates now undertook to build a gristmill and sawmill on Smith's Creek in return for an extra grant of Lots 5, 6 and 7, Concession I of Hope Township, with their broken fronts – a block of more than 600 acres with the creek flowing through it. This grant was confirmed in July 1796 on the Council's being informed that the mills had been erected. But a faulty millrace and a spring freshet combined to necessitate the building of a dam and delayed the proper operation of the mills until towards the end of 1797. By that time Elias Smith, Sr. had moved his family to a frame house "of five rooms on a floor" which he built at Smith's Creek in 1797. In 1800, he had part of this land surveyed as a village plot.

This village of Smith's Creek remained for some years a very small and primitive place. It seems very likely that the two Smith houses were the only taxable ones in the place until about 1805, the others being of round logs with only one fireplace. In 1802, Elias Smith, Jr. took a licence for two stills, and either he or his father obtained a tavern licence. The trading posts, however, were apparently given up. The returns of rateable property for the Newcastle District make it unlikely that there was any store in Hope Township in 1803 and 1804, and none is returned for 1805, 1806 or 1807. However, in the full assessment roll for Hope in 1808 – the earliest surviving such record – Joseph B. Walton is assessed with the only "Merchant's shop" returned

for Hope, which was certainly at Smith's Creek. The assessment returns after 1806 show a marked increase in houses of the better grades, and the rolls from 1808 confirm the assumption that a good proportion of these were in the village – though, as no locations are given, it is impossible to determine how many. The Smiths seem to have ceased to keep an inn by 1803. However, the records of licences indicate that there was always one inn, sometimes two, at Smith's Creek. There was a distillery in the village and probably a tannery and various craftsmen's shops. Before 1802, a schoolhouse was built by public subscription, much on the system legalized by the *Common Schools Act* of 1816, and a "town hall" was erected.

Growth was probably slow before 1816. The total population of Hope Township from 1811-1816 varied little, and never reached 540. It must be remembered that, at this time and for long after, there was no harbour. Vessels had to anchor off the mouth of the creek, sheltered a little from the prevailing winds by the hills, and discharge cargo into boats of shallower draught. The village's chief assets were its mills and its position at the intersection of the Indian trail which had become the "Front" or Lakeshore Road and the creek. The government road called Dundas Street (Highways 2 and 106) was opened to Smith's creek (near Dale) by Asa Danforth in 1799, and was then connected with the Front Road by a trail across lots. This forerunner of the Toronto Road was surveyed and made a "legal road" in 1811. The Front Road, after crossing the creek, turned northward up the east bank and then northeast over what became "Ward's Hill" to follow the "Old Stage Road" for some miles beyond Gage's Creek, where its line is marked by certain farmhouses. It became quite early the travelled road to Kingston, but the fact that Danforth's road was also used explains why some travellers of the time do not mention the village at Smith's Creek.

The development of both township and village was greatly stimulated by the purchase of Indian lands in the Trent Valley in 1816 and the opening of townships for settlement, beginning with part of Cavan Township in 1817. The first settlers in Cavan waited in Smith's Creek until enough of the township had been surveyed for their locations to be allotted. A government building was set up to house these and subsequent "emigrants." The *Perth and Cavan Roads Act* was passed at the end of 1818 and the Cavan Road (Highway 28) was opened within a year. In 1820, the "Emily Road" was surveyed and brought to the line of the later "West Gravel Road" by adjustments made mostly before 1830. At the same time the back concessions of Hope began to fill up.

With these highways converging on it, Port Hope was one gateway to this rapidly developing back country, rich in pine timber. The change of name had come about in a curious way. An Englishman named Charles Fothergill took up residence in the village in 1817 and was soon appointed the first regular postmaster of Smith's Creek. He espoused a local movement to call the place "Toronto", but made the mistake of dating letters to the Surveyor-General "Toronto late Smith's Creek." These were seen by Colonel Samuel Smith, Administrator of Upper Canada, who issued an official rebuke and stated that "...Toronto, the name you have given to

the village at Smith's Creek, cannot be admitted of." The result of this snub was the calling of a public meeting and the adoption of the name "Port Hope." This seems to have been officially recognized in 1819, though MP Whitehead is listed as Collector of Customs for "Hope" in 1820.

The new port of entry seems to have had no harbour, for the steamer "Frontenac" did not call there in 1820. However, in the 1830s, with the aid of a government loan of £2,000, two piers were built at the mouth of the creek. By an Act of 1834 the limits of the village were defined and a Board of Police established. A larger harbour was being planned by a harbour company in 1846, but this had hardly been begun when Port Hope was incorporated as a town by the *Baldwin Municipal Act* of 1849, which came into effect on January 1, 1850. The population was then a little over 2,000. The census of 1861 gives the town 4,162 inhabitants, and 20 years later the census figure was 5,585.



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