

Research Paper:
A Study in Settlement and Migration Patterns
For Central Frontenac County



THE DONALD CHASE
MEMORIAL ESSAY
PRIZE IN HISTORY

Presented to

Cindy Baker
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“Once I built a railroad; now it’s done. Brother can you spare a dime?”(1) Nowhere were the lyrics to this Depression era anthem truer than in Central Frontenac County in eastern Ontario. Central Frontenac County is situated north of Kingston, Ontario, on the edge of the Canadian or Laurentian Shield. The Shield is composed largely of Precambrian rocks. These rocky outcroppings interspersed with small pockets of tillable soil characterize the landscape. These pockets left behind by the glaciers constitute areas where the first settlers eked out their subsistence. Drainage patterns are uneven resulting in marshes and swamps that cover the rest of the countryside. (2) A once thriving and prosperous community at the turn of the century, the area became one of the more economically depressed regions in the province. This paper will attempt to offer some reasonable explanations for the significant downturn in the population of this rural area for the period of time spanning its settlement up until approximately 1941.

By 1800 Upper Canada included several administrative districts. The district of Midland included the future counties of Frontenac, Lennox, Addington, Hastings and Prince Edward. By 1830, the Midland district had extended northward to include Kennebec, Olden and Oso by the annexation of Native lands lying north of the existing county. In 1845 it was further extended one tier north.

In 1849, the provincial government passed the Baldwin Act, officially the “Municipal Corporations Act”. This eliminated the original districts and recognized the incorporation of County, Township and Municipalities, much as it is now.

Frontenac, Lennox and Addington were not separated until 1863 with the northern townships included after Confederation. (3)

In 1826, the policy of granting lands to establish development were abolished with the exception of grants for United Empire Loyalists and their children, who were able to receive grants until 1831. After this, the cost of buying this land was dependent upon the cost of surveyors, transferring deeds and additional charges for the government coffers. The Land Act of 1837 offered Crown land for sale at public auction with private land sales occurring after no purchaser had been found in this manner. (4)

The area comprising Central Frontenac was accessed by the “Public Lands Act” of 1853 which provided the construction of roads to the northern areas of the county to accommodate the influx of settlers. Free grants of up to 100 acres could be acquired adjacent to these roads. This ownership was given in the form of a patent and was conditional upon the settler cultivating at least twelve acres and building a house with the minimum dimensions of sixteen feet by twenty feet and by residing there for at least five years. These settlers were expected to maintain the road adjacent to their lot. Because sales were so poor in the area of the Canadian Shield, this policy was expanded to include back lots away from the road and was increased to 200 acres to compensate for the inferior quality of the land. In the 1850’s and 1860’s settlement significantly increased in Central Frontenac due to the land patents and increased accessibility. There was also an increase in the number of immigrant settlers coming to the region at this time. (5.)

In reviewing Abstract land records, these counties showed a substantial percentage of purchases by lumber interests. (6.)

New settlers cleared the land for cultivation. In doing so, the usable lumber was removed and stumps and brush were burned. These ashes were often rendered into potash, which was in demand for soap making. After clearing in this manner, the arable

land could be planted. The poor quality of the soil resulted in an agricultural shift towards dairy farming and cheese-production for a time. (7)

Construction and ship building in the industrial revolution in Europe put large squared timber in great demand. After the American Revolution, shipments from Canada increased to Europe although Baltic countries were used more commonly because of the cost of trans-Atlantic transportation. Napoleon's "Berlin Decree" in 1806 cut off this supply making Canada the supplier of choice. At this time, roads and railways were still far off in our future. Waterways were used to ship the logs. The huge white pine of Eastern Ontario was much sought after. It was shipped down through the Ottawa Valley to Quebec. The last timber raft went down the Ottawa River in 1908. (8)

The opening of the Rideau Canal was largely responsible for the establishment of new communities in central and northern Frontenac County. Bedford Mills, Brewers Mills and Devil Lake were the result of lumbering expansion from the Ottawa Valley through Northern Frontenac. Mills at Plevna, Ardoch, Sharbot Lake and others also helped to start to increase the viability of settlements in the area. (9) With the construction of the Rideau Canal beginning in 1826 the new settlements being cleared in the future Frontenac county were made possible through funding from lumber companies such as Rathbun Lumber, based in Deseronto, Ontario.

Hugo Rathbun was born near Aurora on Cayuga Lake in New York State. As a young businessman, Rathbun and associates made periodic trips to the north shores of Lake Ontario for timber. In 1826-1827, the government opened timber tracts for harvesting that had previously been the exclusive property of the Royal Navy for shipbuilding. Seeing an excellent business opportunity, Rathbun and associates established business

relationships in the Bay of Quinte and surrounding areas, directly across Lake Ontario from Oswego, New York. This is the outlet for the Hudson River, and the Erie Canal system.

The company was officially registered as A.S. Rathbun Company of Oswego, New York and its first sawmill was erected in 1848. The company spread out into the surrounding counties to the north and to the east. At one time the company employed almost 5000 people and it became a \$2,000,000 business by the early 1880's. The company controlled over 3, 844,240 acres of timberland in southeastern Ontario. With these fortunes, the company expanded into telegraph, telephone and other industries in the region. The last sawing was done in Deseronto in 1916 and the company was liquidated in 1923 (10.)

The reciprocity treaty with the United States between 1854-1866 increased lumber exports from British North America to the United States. The treaty enabled American fishermen to take advantage of Atlantic coastal waters of British North America. It allowed British North American fishermen to fish in American waters north of 36 degrees North. The treaty, more importantly to the history of this region, established free trade with the United States for a comprehensive list of natural products. (11)

Railway construction created a need for the lumber, supplying money to farmers and merchants thus creating other, secondary industries as well.

The Civil War of the United States broke out in 1861, eventually placing demands on this area for lumber by the Northern States. So much lumber was rushed to the United States that a glut in the market was created, causing prices there to be dropped by one half. (12)

After 1866, both countries tightened tariffs. Even with a twenty- percent duty on Canadian products there was still a tremendous demand for lumber. The reconstruction efforts after their Civil War left their own supplies short. The demands were so great that the Canadian public was concerned about the depletion of its resources. Our own economy was in a building frenzy at this time as well. As a result, in 1886 Canada raised the saw- log export tax to two dollars and in 1889 to three dollars. The term saw-log refers to any log from twelve to eighteen feet in length. (13) In 1897 additional levies were to be imposed. In anticipation of this event, vast quantities of lumber were shipped across the border. This resulted in a glut of lumber in the market and contributed to the collapse of Canadian lumber exports.

In Central Frontenac logging peaked in 1880 and rapidly declined thereafter.

After the depletion of the giant pines from the forests of Eastern Ontario, the larger timber companies followed the exodus West. British Columbia's forests were ripe for exploitation. Between 1900 and 1914 lumbering was British Columbia's largest industry, going from investments of two million dollars in 1900 to 150 million in 1913. (14)

Pollen analysis done by taking core samples of sediment in the bottom lakes shows scientists the changes in vegetation specific to a certain area. This analysis shows a dramatic drop in tree pollen in the 150 years as trees were cleared for logging and farming. The ragweed pollen has increased by such levels that it is the marker used for separating European settlement from previous Canadian history. By the 1880's the data shows that only twenty to thirty percent of Eastern Ontario remained covered in forest.

(15)

Lumbermen, whose employees built shanties for their families in the 1850's originally, settled Olden Township and by 1860 there were forty-eight settlers. After the arrival of the Ontario and Quebec railway it continued to grow with more homes in the area of the new station. In 1883 sawmills were constructed directly opposite to the railway station. (16) H.B. Rathbun and Son lumber company also bought up thousands of acres of land in Olden Township. After the building of a station for the Ontario and Quebec railway line the village of Mountain Grove became a supply centre for the surrounding areas. Here, local maple syrup, eggs, poultry, potatoes, pulpwood and cordwood were shipped to outside markets. A zinc mine located near Long Lake operated for a few years. After a peak in 1901, the area saw a great decline in population. Many residents loaded their belongings, livestock and goods into railcars and joined the masses heading West. (17)

Oso Township was a challenge to settle because of the terrain and the density of the forests. In 1858 only twenty families had settled there. After construction of the Frontenac Colonization Road, (now Highway 38), a second land survey in 1861 attracted more immigrants. On the 1861 census there were 380 persons, the majority being Irish. Many of these settlers worked in mica mines and lime kilns.

The construction of the Kingston and Pembroke railway in 1877 increased employment and eventually opened up markets for the lumber, mining and farming goods from the area. Three years later the Canadian Pacific Railway line running from Toronto to Ottawa ran through the area at Sharbot Lake. Lovell's *Gazetteer of British North America* of 1881 showed two sawmills, two stores, a church, an hotel and a telegraph office in Sharbot Lake. There was already a Post office and a bank there earlier. Eleven

years later, *The Farmers and Business Directory* of the Union Publishing Company showed these businesses but also added a shingle mill, a grocer, two hotels, a contractor, a lumberyard, a physician and a dressmaker. With the decline of the lumber trade and the downsizing of the railways Sharbot Lake reported only one sawmill in 1908. Even at this early date, Sharbot Lake was becoming a popular vacation destination. (18)

Kennebec Township was first settled in the 1850's. Its inhabitants were mostly the descendents of United Empire Loyalists who had settled in the townships adjacent to Lake Ontario, waiting for the more northern townships to open up so they could take advantage of their land grants. According to census records only a couple of the original Loyalists made it here to settle. Some men came up ahead of their families to run lumber down the Salmon River. The land was cleared of the lumber and what was left after was farmed. The land quality in Kennebec is quite poor although there are a few fertile pockets in the township. In 1870 the area was home to three general stores, two post offices, two sawmills, two Methodist churches, a tavern, and six schoolhouses.(19) In 1882 the Ontario and Quebec Railway built another railway in the region, The Toronto Ottawa Line, later taken over by the Canadian Pacific Railway. (20) Construction provided even more employment in the area. Upon completion, the railway itself provided employment as well as transportation outside of the area to work as well as providing daily delivery of newspapers and mail. There were four cheese factories locally but government regulations became too expensive to implement and eventually they had to close. By 1916 the area was supplying itself with hydroelectric power from Clear Creek. Kennebec farmers constructed their own telephone lines and had their own district system set up. (21)

In Ontario, railway expansion made ventures further north possible. The spruce trees that were originally discarded as useless, were found valuable in the new pulp and paper industry. Pulp and paper mills sprung up adjacent to available hydroelectric sources. Experienced lumbermen left Frontenac County to seek employment where they were needed. The more successful Ottawa Valley lumbermen had the capital and the timber limits to take advantage of this new and thriving business. (22)

It became increasingly difficult for small farmers to stay on their land. Higher shipping rates on the railways now made the marketing of their goods less profitable.

The “National Policy” was a protective tariff increased by Sir John A. Macdonald’s government in 1879 and continuing in one form or another until the 1935 government of Mackenzie King negotiated a trade agreement with the United States. This was amended in 1938 and suspended in 1948 in favour of the new General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade between the two countries. The tariff applied to most foreign manufactured goods in an attempt to stimulate the growth of Canadian industry. (23) It raised the price of most of the farm equipment and implements that were necessary to earn a living as a farmer. The cost of farming in the United States was much lower than it was in Canada while both countries competed in much of the same markets. (24)

The introduction of the railway systems into eastern and northeastern Ontario provided opportunities for expansion in the lumber industry. In the 1870’s, increase in commerce and industry in Ontario and Quebec precipitated the need for expansion in transportation routes. The most direct route to the East Coast Atlantic ports was through southern Ontario. This area was under the control of the Grand Trunk and Great Western Railways. In March 1881, shortly after the incorporation of the Canadian Pacific

Railway, a charter was granted to the Ontario and Quebec Railway Company to build a railway from Smith Falls and Carleton Place, west to Toronto. (25)

Construction of the Kingston and Pembroke Railway was completed in 1884. It was incorporated in 1871 to build a railway from Kingston north through the Ottawa Valley to a point near Pembroke. This line was to bring natural resources, principally lumber, year round down to Kingston and on to other destinations via rail or water. All of this construction was encouraged in no small part by the "Railway Aid Act", a Provincial Bill passed December 7, 1870. It was designed to subsidize and encourage railway construction towards remote, more northerly regions in the hope of developing Crown Lands. The contract was originally awarded to a Watertown, New York Company but, after default, it was divided among the Flower family of Watertown and the Folger brothers of Kingston.

In 1878 agreements were made with Kingston and Cape Vincent Boat lines, connecting the Line with Rome, Watertown, Ogdensburg and the New York Central, Hudson River Railroads. This would have expanded the markets for lumber and potash from the Central Frontenac area. (26)

It took twelve years of labour to the build the track from Kingston to Renfrew, providing an increase in employment from 1872-1884. The "K & P", fondly remembered by older area residents as "the old kick and push" was very busy during the lumbering and mining boom in Central Frontenac. As these resources dwindled, so did the rail service. In 1884 it was providing daily passenger service, plus daily freight service, with the exception of Sunday, in both directions. By January 1932, all freight trains were

removed and only one mixed train ran daily except Sunday. This service became more sporadic over the years with the rails finally being lifted by May 1963. (27)

Eventually the timber grew scarce and mines did not produce as much as expected. With fewer products to move, smaller railways went under. There were too many lines and too little traffic and demand.

The turn of the century marked a mass migration to the newly opened West, especially from Nova Scotia and Ontario. (28) Over the course of the next thirty years there was a dramatic decline in the population of Central Frontenac. Kennebec Township had a population of 1404 in 1901; by 1931 it had dropped to 964 and steadily declined thereafter. Oso Township dropped from a population of 1358 in 1901 to 1053 in 1931. Olden likewise saw a decline, having a population of 1126 in 1901 to 840 in 1931. In contrast, the urban centres within, a reasonable distance of the area showed substantial growth for the same time period. Kingston went from a population of 17,961 in 1901 to 23,439 in 1931 and continued to grow thereafter. Oshawa grew from 4,394 in 1901 to 23,439 in 1931. Ottawa also grew by leaps and bounds, going from 59,928 in 1901 to 126,872 in 1931. (29)

These statistics are not unique to this area. Similar situations occurred all over the province in this time period. According to the criteria for the 1921 Census of Canada, almost half of the population was urban. The most dramatic rate increase was between 1901 and 1921, but it continued to increase by 31% between 1921 and 1931.

Although industrial development began before Confederation, it increased dramatically between 1900 and the 1920's (30) The rural areas of Central Frontenac were mirroring conditions found in the rest of the country. The North American continent was

progressing technologically at an unprecedented rate. Bell started marketing telephones in the 1880's. There was direct telephone service from New York to San Francisco in 1912. The first commercial radio broadcast was in 1920. Refrigeration was introduced in the 1870's. The production of automobiles after the invention of the electric starter engine was facilitated by assembly line mass production.

In the period spanning 1900-1905 railways accounted for 81% of transportation investment and automobiles accounted for 1.9%. For the period from 1925-1930 these numbers had reversed, with railways accounting for 46.7% of transportation investment and automobiles increasing to 41.1%.

Before the First World War there were 32 domestically owned automobile manufacturers. (31) By 1918 there were nine, (32) with smaller companies such as McLaughlin-Buick in Oshawa being absorbed by larger, often American companies, like General Motors. (33) American capital investments replaced British, and southern Ontario attracted the lion's share of American branch plants, especially in the automobile industry. (34) According to House of Commons Debates April 1920, in the automobile industry in 1918 the total amount paid in wages was \$4,504,368 and in salaries \$1,121,564. There were 627 employees on salary and 3,941 on wages. (35)

Besides the proximity to their markets, companies from the United States had other reasons for setting up shop in southern Ontario. After the implementation of the "National Policy" to protect Canadian manufacturers, branch plants were set up on the Canadian side of the border to avoid these tariffs. (36)

At the turn of the century, Canada held preferential status as a trading partner with other nations of the British Empire. American companies locating here could take

advantage of this situation thus being able to export more freely to ports in Britain, South Africa and Australia. In the 1920's and 1930's Canada exported more automobiles than it imported. The automobile manufacturers weren't the only employers changing the economic makeup of the country. The auto-industry necessitated the creation of other spin-off industries such as companies making engines, the petroleum industry and the steel companies. These plants increased the need for hydroelectric power as well.

Industrialization and the modernization of farming also caused a large shift from rural to urban populations. In Ontario between 1891 and 1931 the proportion of people living in urban as opposed to rural regions rose from 35 % to 63%. The census records quoted earlier bear this out. (37)

Although the vibrant communities of the turn of the century are no longer with us, the area has found a new life as a recreational retreat for urbanites. Increased leisure time and more disposable income have helped to make the area a prime tourist area. Provincial governments in the 1940's and 1950's encouraged the establishment of conservation authorities. (38)

By 1990, Central Frontenac had a population of 6,000 seasonal residents, 6,000 permanent residents, and a transient tourist population of 250,000. (39)

The adventurous challenge of settling our "New West" would appeal to many descendants of rugged pioneer stock. The harsh terrain combined with poor economic conditions would have pushed many to move on. The lure of higher salaries and a relatively luxurious standard of living drew others to the city. The various conditions and situations presented by this paper undoubtedly influenced these choices.

The motivations behind this mass migration from the rural areas of Central Frontenac County to urban centres were as diverse as the individuals who left.

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