

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SCHOOLS IN HAMILTON TOWNSHIP

by Catherine Milne, 2005

When the first United Empire Loyalists came to the newly surveyed Hamilton Township in 1796 they found a solid forest interspersed with almost impenetrable cedar swamps. The only relief to their eyes as they followed narrow Indian trails northward was the park-like Rice Lake Plains, which were regularly burned off by the Mississaugas, the last group of native peoples who had been inhabiting the area for over 11,000 years.

Five years earlier John Graves Simcoe had been appointed the first lieutenant governor of Upper Canada. A member of the Church of England and a product of his times, he believed that education should be for the upper classes only and was not necessary for the "lower orders". The children of the well to do were sent to private grammar schools, but those of the poor had to be taught at home or remained illiterate.

But the loyalists had been used to schools in New England that were open to everyone and petitioned the government for common (public) schools. In 1816 John Strachan, a former grammar school teacher and the first Anglican Bishop of Toronto, presented a bill concerning education. The inhabitants could meet and elect three trustees if they could provide a schoolhouse, twenty students and raise the salary for a teacher. Unfortunately, with no governmental assistance, few early settlements could meet those requirements. Those that could built schoolhouses as cheaply as possible, usually of logs. Before churches were built in Hamilton Township services were held in these schoolhouses.

By 1829 there was one common school in the town of Cobourg on Division Street and three in Hamilton Township. Two were located on County Road #2 and a third near present day Harwood. Two Methodist businessmen of Cobourg, John McCarty and Ebenezer Perry built the latter, so that Indian children could be taught to read the Bible (Both these men would later be involved in the founding of Victoria College). Five years later the Indian school had been moved to the north shore of Rice Lake.

Gradually public schools opened further north and in 1842 the south half of the Township was divided into eleven school sections. Parents had to pay a fee according to the number of their children attending. In 1846 the Rev. Edgerton Ryerson, Superintendent of Education and founder of Victoria College in Cobourg, proposed a general local property assessment to finance common schools. But there was much opposition to this and many people complained they did not want to pay to educate other people's children.

When authoress Catharine Parr Traill resided in the northern part of Hamilton

Township (1846 to 1857), her four older children received only the teaching their busy mother had time to give them; time snatched from housework and the writings she did to keep the family from want. The three youngest managed to get some schooling: first when a short-lived private school was taught in the early 1850s by a poor widow in Gore's Landing and then when a log schoolhouse called "Walker's" was built a little later at the corner of the Sully Road and the 8th line. The first teacher was Hugh Close, an educated Irishman, who had a farm across from present Close Point Rd.

In 1850 a law was passed making property assessment optional in each section but it was not made compulsory until 1871. At the same time the compulsory age for school attendance in Ontario was raised to twelve and in 1919 to sixteen.

Eventually there were eighteen school sections established in Hamilton Township:

1	Front Road (west of Cobourg); County Road #2	10	Precious Corners on Dale Road
2	Kingston Crossing (east of Cobourg near the railroad tracks); County Road #2	10½	Camborne on Albert's Alley
3	Bleazard's on Van Luven Road	11	Stone on Minifie Road
4	Cook's on Danforth Road	12	Cold Springs on Burnham Street North
5	Bissel's on Dale Road West	13	Glourourim on Kennedy Road
6	No record of #6	14	Bethel Grove on Little Road
7	Baltimore on Burwash Road	15	Sackville's (Bewdley) on Cavan Road
8	Mason's on Alnwick Hill Road	16	Plainville on County Road #18
9	Stott's on Race Track Road	17	Westington's on Oak Ridges and Sully Roads (first known as Walker's)
		18	Harwood, erected on Old Schoolhouse Road

School section #18, Harwood was the first schoolhouse built in that section, which was erected in 1871. Until that date Harwood children attended school at school section #17.

As population increased a number of these eighteen schools changed location within their own sections several times as better and larger schools were built. For instance, the location of Baltimore School changed three times within living memory and there were two earlier schools before that according to historians.

In the 1950s drastic changes began to be made. It is difficult to follow the sequences because there were changes in administration every few years, new schools were built and old ones closed. In 1956 the 18 school sections in the Township were amalgamated into two separate areas and each had an elected board of trustees. Area #1 kept its sections intact longer as several new schools had been built: Bewdley 1950 (closed

around 1978), Harwood 1953 (closed 1977), Merwin Greer 1954 (located east of Cobourg but became part of the town's school system when the area was annexed from the Township in 1983), Plainville and Baltimore 1958, Dale Road 1965, the latter reserved for grades 7 and 8 a year later. School buses started operating in Area #1 in 1963.

Around 1956 buses were introduced in Area #2 as trustees scrambled to juggle students and grades around in order to keep enrollments evenly balanced among the various small schools. In 1962 a large elementary school opened in Camborne and the small schools in the centre of the township were finally closed. But to make things more confusing the new school proved to be too small and the old Camborne school had to be reopened for some years until the new school was enlarged. The same thing happened at Plainville when the old school, located in the present tennis courts, had to reopen. In other cases portables had to be brought in.

In 1966 another big change took place: The Hamilton Township School Board was formed with a single board of trustees with some representatives sitting on the Cobourg secondary school board as well. Three years later, on January 1, 1969, district boards took over and the schools in Hamilton Township were included in the Northumberland-Durham County Board of Education, with the board office located in Cobourg. Later the name was changed to the Northumberland Newcastle Board of Education, then that name was replaced by Northumberland Clarington. By the mid-1980s there were only four elementary schools operating within Hamilton Township: Plainville, Camborne, Baltimore, and Dale Road. Over the years these schools have all had additions and improvements.

In 1998 the enormous Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board was formed and is presently administering all the elementary and secondary schools in the Counties of Peterborough and Northumberland as well as the municipality of Clarington, with headquarters in the City of Peterborough. From the three trustees who once represented each small school section, Hamilton Township now shares one trustee with two other municipalities: Cobourg and Alnwick/Haldimand.

Most of the surviving little old schoolhouses in Hamilton Township have been converted to private homes. The one exception is Camborne (school section #10 ½) built in 1895. Volunteers restored it in 1994 under the leadership of the Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee. It is currently owned by the township and used as a recreational centre for the local children.