

The Caboose

Newsletter of the Cumberland Township Historical Society
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LAST MEETING

Our last meeting was a public lecture held on March 1st at the Cumberland Public Library on Tenth Line Road. The speaker was Jean-Noël Dessaint, whose ancestor Pierre de Saint-Pierre left his native Normandy for a new life in America over 325 years ago. Jean-Noël described in considerable detail the life of his grandfather Théophile, who arrived in the Township at the age of 19 in the 1850s, and of his father Camille, who lived through good as well as difficult times. The talk, enhanced by various documents and photographs, was filled with humour and compassion, and will long be remembered by the twenty-nine people in attendance.

NEXT MEETING

Our annual general meeting will be held on Saturday, May 6th, at the Cumberland Public Library on Tenth Line Road, between 1:30 and 3:30 p.m. Come along and bring a friend. New members are always welcome!

FEATURE ARTICLE

The Origins of Vars in Cumberland Township

by Bob Serré

On April 1st, 1886, a post office was opened at Bearbrook Station, and it was given a new name: Vars. A few years previously, the village had been named Bearbrook Station when it was decided that the Canada Atlantic Railway line would cut through the rear portion of Cumberland Township some four miles south of the village of Bearbrook.

The Canada Atlantic Railway had been formed in 1879 by John Rudolphus Booth, of Ottawa, who wanted to move his lumber quickly and efficiently to markets in the northeastern United States. The superbly engineered rail line connecting Ottawa to Montreal was opened in 1882. As Allan Bell explains in *A Way to the West. A Canadian Railway Legend*, published in 1991, it had a "well ballasted roadbed, easy grades and curves so gentle that the line was 'practically straight throughout'."

Between Casselman in Cambridge Township and Eastman Springs in Gloucester Township, the railway ran through six miles of dense bush. That bush country, as well as much of the southern half of Cumberland Township, formed at that time a mission of the Catholic parish of Saint-Jacques at Embrun in Russell Township. The parish priest who served there between 1875 and 1885 was Father Casimir Guillaume, a native of France who had emigrated to Canada to complete his theological studies at St. Joseph's College in Ottawa (now the University of Ottawa), where he was ordained a secular priest in July 1859. Father Guillaume felt that the railway would bring development and prosperity to the region, so he purchased several acres of land, along the railway track, on both sides of Bearbrook Road. By the time the post office was opened in 1886, Father Guillaume had become the parish priest at Saint-Isidore de Prescott, but as Luc Ricard explains in a 1991 book celebrating the 75th anniversary of Saint-Guillaume parish in Vars, Father Guillaume was able, using means that history has not recorded, to have the new post office called Vars, the name of the village in southeastern France where he had been born in 1829.

Father Guillaume died in August 1891, but his prediction that the railway would bring prosperity was fulfilled. That prosperity, however, was a factor in the decline of Bearbrook as well as of Dickenson (formerly called Veighton), just north of the Russell Township boundary line. According to the Farmers' and Business Directory for the counties of Carleton, Lanark, Renfrew and Russell, published in 1892, Vars had reached by that time a larger population than Dickenson and Bearbrook, and was fourth in size in the township after Canaan, Sarsfield and Cumberland. In fact, Vars had two hotels and a physician (Dr. W.D.M. Bell).

Many years later, an interesting article was published under the general heading of "Old Time Stuff" in The Evening Citizen (Ottawa) of Saturday, June 27, 1931. The journalist who wrote the story described the origins of Vars and explained that "a committee got their heads together (and) someone suggested a name which would be commemorative of those families which had been instrumental in procuring the post office (...) V for the McVeigh family, A for the Armstrongs, R for the Ronans, S for the Smiths." The first postmaster in Vars was indeed William Armstrong, and the McVeighs, Ronans and Smiths were in fact early settlers in the area, but as Floreen Ellen Carter summed it up in a book entitled *Ghost & Post Offices of Ontario*, published in 1986, Vars was "named for the birthplace in France of Father Guillaume."

FEATURE OBITUARY

The following notice was found in *Obituaries from Ontario's Christian Guardian 1873-1880* by Donald A. McKenzie, published in 1996.

SMILEY, John was born in County Fermanagh, Ireland, in 1799, and came to Canada about thirty years ago with his wife and eight children. The family settled in Cumberland Township and shortly after this, the eldest son, William, was drowned while bathing in the Bear Brook. Mr. Smiley died at Bearbrook, and was buried September 16, 1880.

SPECIAL REPORT

Report on the Historical Walks Project

by Jean-François Beaulieu

On January 24th, 1999, I approached the CTHS executive with a project proposal. The idea was to create a Public History Program for Cumberland Township, including a guided tour of the villages using a descriptive brochure. Since then, CTHS volunteers have been involved in doing research as well as writing, editing and proofreading the brochures for the historical walks series. Local residents are also involved.

Village of Cumberland historical map

A descriptive brochure has been completed. During the winter and spring of 1999, Ruth Parsons and I worked on the first walk. Ruth contacted several residents, in the village of Cumberland, who provided us with valuable information. The first Cumberland walk was held during the two-day Heritage Power Show in May 1999, and close to fifty people participated. The Cumberland walking tour will be held again this spring.

Village of Navan historical map

A descriptive brochure is almost ready. Since the summer of 1999, Verna Cotton of Navan has worked hard to add valuable information and contact other residents. The Navan walking tour will probably be held later this summer, perhaps at the Navan Fair. We hope to repeat it during the 2001 International Plowing Match.

Village of Vars historical map

A descriptive brochure is well underway. Last winter, I approached Verna Kinsella and Mr. Quesnel, of Vars, to provide additional information. Mrs. Kinsella has also contacted other residents, including Paul Guertin. Eventually we hope to produce historical maps and brochures for Leonard, Bearbrook and Sarsfield.

Since the start of the project in the winter of 1999, the Cumberland historical map has been completed. A second one for Navan is in the final stage. A third one for Vars was recently started. By 2001, three historical maps should be ready, describing the history of the various villages, with hopefully more to follow. The response has been favourable, and residents have assisted us. People are interested in local history and want to keep it alive.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

Verna Cotton, a member of our Society and of the Navan Women's Institute, has prepared a beautifully illustrated calendar for the year 2001. It contains 13 superbly enlarged photographs showing Navan buildings, scenes and people going as far back as the 1800s. The first printing sold very well, and a second has been ordered (Verna can be reached at 835-2490).

Last February 26th and 27th, our Society held a workshop on genealogy for beginners at the Cumberland Public Library. The participants learned about family trees and family history, research opportunities in the Ottawa-Hull area, note-taking and the importance of indicating sources. Bob Serré gave the workshop, and Ruth Parsons and Jean-François Beaulieu provided support. The workshop was held in French on Saturday, and in English on Sunday, when John Kenny added a delightful introduction to genealogical research using Internet. This workshop was even more of a success than the previous one organized on the same topic back in October 1998.

This issue of *The Caboose* marks the end of Volume XII. The July 1999 issue (No. 1 of Vol. XII) was sent to 34 members, whereas this issue is going out to 52 members. It has been a good year indeed for our Society!

DID YOU KNOW?

Back when the Rideau Canal was being built, what people called the ague or swamp fever raged in epidemic proportions along the whole line of the canal throughout the months of August and September, in 1828, 1829 and 1830. The ague was just another word for malaria, named by the Italian physician Francesco Torti from the expression *mal' aria* which means "bad air." (Source: E.F. Bush. *The Builders of the Rideau Canal*, 1976, pp. 25-26)

