

# Chapter 5

## Ottawa River Community Heritage

All along the Ottawa River, regional committees have been conducting research about their community histories in relation to the Ottawa River. This has contributed valuable, locally-based information about the human heritage of the Ottawa River. In addition, committees have provided written contributions to the background study. Research and writing provided by the committees is a strong indication of their commitment to the heritage nomination initiative. What follows are condensed versions of regional, site-specific histories that complement the river-length studies presented earlier in this Background Study.

**Figure 5.1 View of a Town on the North Shore of the Ottawa River, ca. 1850**



Source : James D. Duncan/Library and Archives/C-115898

### 5.1 Lake Temiskaming Heritage (Ontario)

Heritage Committee of the City of Temiskaming Shores  
 Edited by Norman R. Hawirko

This paper will describe the human heritage of the key places and communities along our section of the river. The fact that this part of Ontario was settled only in the early 1900s, coupled with geographical considerations, has meant that the unsettled shoreline of the lake/river has always been considered a wilderness area in spite of over 100 years of logging and mining.

At the head of the lake lie the towns of Cobalt, Haileybury and New Liskeard. Recently, Haileybury and New Liskeard were amalgamated under the new City of Temiskaming Shores, along with Dymond Township. In the late 1890s, agricultural settlement began, accelerated with the construction of the railroad from North Bay, and finally 'boomed' in 1903 with the largest silver mining centre in the world at Cobalt.

#### Blanche River

Entering the lake, the Blanche River (or White River), is the second largest tributary after Rivière des Quinze in Quebec. Along a tributary creek was the site of a major silver mine, one of the few outside of the immediate Cobalt camp that were economically operated for a time. Farther up the Blanche were

smaller 'landing' communities such as Judge, Pearson's Landing, Bell, Hilliardton and Tomstown – all were centres for the developing Claybelt farming community and are still, today, important to people living in the area.

In the pre-railway era the Blanche provided a transportation route during the season as roads were still very rough. The sticky clay of the area could bog down people walking, horses and wagons. The Blanche River lies within a marshy lowland. Farms have been created by the use of extensive drainage systems but many areas have not been turned into arable land.

### **New Liskeard – Wabi River and Bay**

The name Wabi is a simplified version of Wabigijic. Joachim Wabigijic, known locally by the nickname Swisha, made a small clearing at the mouth of the Wabi River, erected a cabin there, and apparently lived there for fifty years.

An Ontario Heritage Foundation plaque tells the story of the founding of New Liskeard:

*The Little Clay Belt, the rich agricultural belt extending north from New Liskeard, was originally inhabited by the Algonquin First Nations, including Joachim "Clear Sky" Wabigijic and Angela Lapointe who lived by the mouth of the Wabi River. In 1891, William Murray and Irvin Heard settled here and two years later Crown Lands Agent John Armstrong arrived to supervise development. The abundance of good, inexpensive farmland attracted people from southern to "new" Ontario and the town quickly grew. It was incorporated as New Liskeard in 1903 and Armstrong became its first mayor. The Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway arrived two years later, helping to develop New Liskeard into the commercial centre of south Temiskaming.*

In the early settlement period, people were dependent on, influenced by and enjoyed Lake Temiskaming and the rivers and creeks draining into it. The summer provided everyone with the chance to swim at the beach or congregate for the grand fairs and racing at New Liskeard's beach – which became famous throughout northern Ontario.

**Figure 5.2 New Liskeard**



Source: Ottawa River Heritage Legacy Landmark Network

Steamboats were the only viable form of transportation for settlers, supplies and the hauling of logs. Before the railway, food and other goods sometimes ran low, and people recall the anticipation within the community for the arrival of the first steamer bringing in badly needed flour.

In winter, teams and sleighs transported people and freight between Ontario and Quebec. The mail was brought in over the ice. The spring brought problems for New Liskeard's downtown though, with severe spring floods that brought water right into the downtown area of New Liskeard.

## **Cobalt**

Although Cobalt is not located right on the shoreline of Lake Temiskaming, its history is intimately tied to the Lake. The area was rich in forest, and the meandering lakes and streams allowed travel and trade. The Montreal River was used for canoe travel. Charles C. Farr, the founder of Haileybury and originally the factor at Fort Témiscamingue, used this route for his travels to reach Portage Bay and the upper reaches of the Montreal River. The whole area was under the control of lumbermen decades before Cobalt even existed. J. R. Booth's men were collecting timber in Long Lake (Cobalt Lake), damming the water and then letting loose the boomed logs that would fly down Mill Creek along timber log chutes.

As the railway bed was being excavated near the future town of Cobalt, rocks were collected, sent away for tests and the presence of silver was verified. The impact of the subsequent explosion in development from Cobalt overshadowed the fledgling agricultural development that was fanning out from New Liskeard.

The commercial underpinning for the whole area became mining, with significant amounts of money coming in and being spent to house, feed and clothe men. Timber was needed for mine shafts, and mechanical equipment needed to be repaired, so the Wabi Iron Works in New Liskeard developed into a major foundry. Horses needed hay, so farmers grew it and most was consumed locally. Farm produce was brought to the Cobalt market. Farmers in the upper townships got up before dawn, boarded the train to take their meat, vegetables, butter and milk to Cobalt.

Mine owners and managers did not live in the noisy and dirty Cobalt but in new houses built in Haileybury. Hotels like the Matabanick were home to businessmen, prospectors and government people who had business to do with Cobalt mining. Cobalt was the hub for the region's economy until silver mining declined in the 1920s and 30s.

## **Maiden's Bay**

The bay was named after Norman Maiden – a prospector who found silver nearby, which resulted in the Maiden's Mine. A small community grew up here, including a government dock, a school, several stores and boarding houses. As silver mining declined in the 1930s, people gradually moved away. To reach mine interests farther south, a government wagon road was constructed to Silver Centre in 1909. Silver Centre boomed in its early days while the area was still best reached by steamboat. Accordingly, a government dock was built just south of Maidens Bay.

## **Montreal River**

Two rivers come together at the bottom end of South Lorrain Twp. – the great Montreal River that drains down from the northeast and the Matabitchuan flowing from the southwest and connecting travelers to Temagami.

The Notch is a high cliff channel through which the Montreal River flows. Early travelers had to cross it. In the late 1890s a colonization road was broken through from North Bay to the Montreal River. Huge pine logs were laid down to span the gap to create a bridge.

### **Matabitchuan River**

The mouth of the Matabitchuan River was where two French Canadians settled to farm. Jolicouer and Bonin were both from Beauharnois, Quebec. In the 1900s, other families joined them. The farms grew hay and produce for the lumbermen working in the area.

Before a major dam was built on the Matabitchuan for hydroelectricity, travelers had to portage around a series of rapids and falls about 3 kilometres up from the mouth of the river. In 1909-10, a hydro dam was constructed to supply power to the booming Cobalt mining camp. Lumbermen could still send their logs down a long steel chute to the river below. The logs then flowed out to the lake. This historic chute still exists. A boarding house was built to serve the dam workers.