

5.5 Settlement History and Archaeology along the North Shore of the Ottawa River, Pontiac County, Quebec

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Champlain was the first to map this area, and local folklore claims that a cross with an iron plaque was erected on an island in the Chats Lake section of the river, claiming the region for France. One of the earliest trading posts in western Quebec / eastern Ontario was established in the first half of the 17th century at Big Bay, opposite Fitzroy Harbour at the southeast end of the Pontiac. Joseph Mondion, a squatter, set up a limited trade from his squatter's shack. After a few winters, he gave up and left the area.

A much more successful establishment was at Fort Coulonge, between Calumet and Allumette Islands. In 1694-95, Nicholas d'Ailleboust, Sieur de Coulonge, spent the winter at the confluence of the Ottawa and Coulonge Rivers, where he built his trading post. The actual fort appears to have been near today's village of Davidson, just outside today's Fort Coulonge. A farm of over 600 acres was carved out of the wilderness to support the post, which was managed by the North West Company by 1760.

The legend of Jean Cadieux, connected with this section of the Ottawa River, is one of Quebec's famous *coureurs-de-bois* legends. The story takes place at the head of the Calumet rapids, where Cadieux is said to have sacrificed himself to save his wife and companions from the Iroquois, diverting their attention while the group passed the rapids. Cadieux is forced to hide on Calumet Island, where some years later his companions almost find him. He expires just before they arrive, laying in a shallow grave he dug for himself. In 1905, workers in Bryson petitioned to build a memorial to Cadieux, provoking conflict between Bryson and the people of Calumet Island, who both wanted the memorial on their own side of the channel. The islanders 'kidnapped' the memorial and re-erected it in the village of Calumet Island itself.

As the 19th century progressed, the timber industry gained importance and Fort Coulonge became one of its major centres in the Valley. Lumber barons controlling the timber trade built enormous stone mansions at Fort Coulonge, an expression of their power and wealth, given that stone buildings were uncommon in this area.

George Bryson, lumber baron and Member of Parliament, almost single-handedly developed the Upper Pontiac. The farm he built outside Fort Coulonge is an important architectural milestone because it incorporates both Anglophone and Francophone building traditions. He combined barns, workshops, smithies, and storage into a unified structure within a single courtyard. The Ministry of Culture of Quebec has recognized the Bryson House as a heritage building of provincial importance.

The Calumet and Chenaux rapids at today's Bryson and Portage-du-Fort were tamed in the early part of the 20th century. The Bryson dam was one of the first built in Quebec; it belonged to the Gatineau Power Company. The bottom end of the Chenaux rapids was tamed in the 1930s by the construction of Ontario Hydro's Chenaux Dam. This complex of coffer dams destroyed some of the village of Portage-du-Fort, which had spread to several islands. An enormous sluice channel was blasted through the middle of Limerick Island, creating 'Big Limerick Island' and 'Little Limerick Island'.

Portage-du-Fort is one of the oldest villages along the Ottawa. Many of its earliest buildings are still standing, including a North West Company trading post and a Hudson's Bay trading post (both converted into private homes). The Rattray Hotel, a famous stopping place from the lumber-trade days, still exists, as well as homes of famous river captains, stores renowned for their goods, and depots for the timber trade. The Canadian Illustrated News, a Montreal newspaper, ran a series of articles in 1874 profiling up-and-coming Canadian towns and cities, including Portage. The engravings illustrate a prosperous and well-built city, where lobster was offered for sale in its pubs and restaurants. As a measure of the town's prosperity, the Lady Bond Head stayed for a number of days there during the Governor General's tour in the mid-19th century.

The newspaper also tells of a disease peculiar to the town: The Calumet Fever. The Calumet rapids and falls were so dangerous and scary that lumbermen preferred to walk from the town of Havelock (now Bryson) at the top of the falls to Portage, some miles distant, rather than ride the rafts through the rapids. Paired towns such as Havelock and Portage were another peculiarity of European settlement on the north shore of the Ottawa River. Since the rapids and waterfalls were so long, towns would emerge at either end of them, twinned by their role as trans-shipment points. The road between Portage and Havelock (Bryson) was the first 'macadamized' road in the County. Another paired village, Union and Pontiac at the Chats Falls, were connected by a horse-drawn railroad through the bog.

In Portage's harbour, there lies the wreck of the Prince Arthur. Tied up at shore one night, the Prince Arthur took fire. Afraid for the goods in the warehouses lining the shore, the townspeople cut the Prince Arthur adrift. It floated out into the harbour before burning to the water line. The disaster was averted... but a few short years later, in 1914, the entire centre section of the town went up in smoke (which it is said began in the Telegraph office). The town never recovered from the disaster.

The limestone and marble quarried in Portage make for an imposing village; many of the surviving buildings bear impressive stonework. The foundations and corner stone for the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill came from Portage. When the dams were built, quarries along the water's edge became flooded. These may be seen below the village today from the bridge.

The extraction of mineral and forest wealth out of the interior was made possible by the Ottawa River. So many logs had to be shepherded down the river that the major timber operators banded together and created a company to manage the river traffic – the Union Forwarding Company. This company, which existed in one form or another for nearly 150 years (in its final incarnation, the Upper Ottawa Improvement Company), was based on the north shore of the river. It built side-wheel steamships to act as tugboats and cargo carrying boats. Steamboat building was a major industry in the river town of Quyon in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Unlike the more famous Mississippi river boats, Ottawa side-wheelers were more maneuverable on account of the drive-wheels located amidships, had a deeper draught, and could steam through some of the smaller sets of rapids. In every river village, there were a number of people who made their living as river captains and pilots. There are a number of steamboat wrecks dotting the Pontiac section of the Ottawa River; some of these can be seen from the surface, and others can be observed while diving.

One of the original major shareholders of the Union Forwarding Company was John Egan, MP for Pontiac. In the mid-19th century, Ruggles Wright (son of the founder of the City of Hull), Joseph Aumond and John Egan started the construction of a ship canal to circumvent the Chats Falls, near Quyon and Fitzroy Harbour. These falls were described by one early visitor as 'grander than Niagara'. The trio had

invested heavily in timber slides and sawmills situated amongst the islands around the Chats. They had also built the unique Horse Railway to circumvent the falls. The route of the railroad may still be followed today, and visitors often note graffiti cut into the rock by the workers who made it.

The railroad was good, but Wright, Aumond and Egan felt the need for a canal. This was to be the first stage in a grand scheme to connect Ottawa to Lake Superior. They persuaded the Legislature to support the scheme, and in 1852, \$50,000 was voted towards the project. Work began in 1853, and even the Governor General, Lord Elgin, visited. Over 500 men were employed on the project. The canal was blasted to within 50 feet of completion when funds ran out; no more were forthcoming, and when cholera took John Egan in Quebec City in 1857, the project collapsed completely. The workers were by and large famine Irish, used to hardship; but they rioted at least once when they were not paid. The militia from Ottawa had to come and control the riots. Much of this canal was drowned by the construction of the Ontario Hydro dam across the Chats, but sections are still visible, and its course can be followed on marine charts of the Ottawa where it is submerged.

The dream of an inland waterway, safe from the Americans, was a constant in the history of Canadian canal building in eastern Canada. Certainly, it was the same impetus that resurrected Egan's dream of the Ship Canal in the early part of the 20th century, under Sir Wilfrid Laurier. The dream was to build a series of canals connecting Montreal with Georgian Bay - a route several hundred miles shorter than the alternative proposed for the St. Lawrence. It would have gone up the Ottawa, across the Mattawa into Lake Nipissing and down the French into Georgian Bay. Laurier even campaigned for the idea. Laurier lost the election and the large-scale industrialization promised on the heels of the so-called Georgian Bay Canal never materialized. Today, the Ottawa River Waterway is the modern successor of these schemes and calls for a series of bypasses to be built around the hydro dams that have tamed this great river, to open up the interior once again to the outside world and to pleasure boaters.