

“Nowhere Else But Here” –A (Very) Brief History of Burlington

By John Lawrence Reynolds

Joseph Brant, Chief of the Six Nations peoples and a man who counted King George IV among his admirers, was more than culturally aware and politically astute. He was also, in the opinion of many residents of Burlington, exceptionally perceptive.

As a reward for his loyalty to the British Crown during the upheavals of the American Revolution, Chief Brant was awarded a substantial grant of land. He claimed 1400 hectares (3450 acres) bordering Lake Ontario, stretching from the middle of the Beach Strip separating the lake from Burlington Bay all the way to what is now Spencer Smith Park at the base of Brant Street. *

It was an excellent choice. Along with access to the lake and its year-round moderating effects on the climate, the land included some of the richest agricultural soil in this part of Canada. In fact, over the 200+ years since, the sandy earth's productivity shaped the farming community that grew into the modern city of Burlington.

When the oak and maple forests were cut and much of the timber shipped to Britain as lumber to build sailing ships, the land was planted with wheat and oats. Later, when grain production moved west to Canada's prairies, local farmers shifted to fruit and vegetable production. Soon apple orchards began dotting the land bordering Brant Street, now Burlington's main thoroughfare. To the west, in Aldershot, the soil was especially favourable for growing melons. Through the late 19th Century, the label "Aldershot melons" was as familiar and highly regarded as "PEI potatoes" and "B.C. apples" are today.

Before the land could be cleared and made agriculturally productive, of course, it needed the spirit and determination of settlers, many drawn to the area by the same qualities that attracted Chief Joseph Brant.

Thanks to generous incentives it didn't take much money to become a land-owner, but it took a lot of energy and dedication. Early settlers could claim ownership to 100 acres of land if they agreed to "clear and fence five acres, build a dwelling house 16 feet by 20 feet, and construct one-half of a road in front of each lot," all within two years. This, of course, would be achieved only with the brute strength of horses, oxen and the settlers' own muscle, an intimidating goal.

But it worked. After the first settlers established productive farms, others came to provide necessary services. When a man named Alex Brown built a wharf bearing his name on the shores of Burlington Bay, ships began arriving to convey those rich and sweet Aldershot melons to York (now Toronto), Montreal, and beyond. And when mills to grind grain and cattle feedstock sprouted on the banks of nearby creeks and rivers, new communities sprang up around them. These villages, with names like Dakota, Tansley, Zimmerman and Lowville, were vibrant and lively. Sadly, with the decline of the mills and the drift to urbanization, they and a dozen others faded away, leaving only roadside historical plaques to mark their existence.

* Modern sensibilities will note, of course, that Chief Brant was simply given back a portion of land that his own people could lay claim to before the arrival of settlers.

The settlement adjacent to Joseph Brant's homestead, however, survived, and through the balance of the 19th and into the 20th centuries it prospered. In 1873, its 800 or so residents petitioned to have their community incorporated as a village, changing its original name of Wellington Square to Burlington.

Where did that name come from? No one seems to know for certain. Since before the War of 1812, the western tip of Lake Ontario had been known as Burlington Bay, and the low promontory overlooking the bay had been labelled Burlington Heights, their designations just as obscure and mysterious. Obviously these sites influenced the new name of the village, but beyond that, all is speculation.

The name and its source were secondary to the community's location and the optimistic attitude of its citizens. They ensured its growth and success, and through the balance of the century Burlington served as the hub of local agricultural activity and its associated industries.

Lake Ontario continued to play a key role in the town's development. Even after the provincial government began constructing roads along the lakeshore, the lake remained a primary route for commerce. Through the late 1800s, tall-masted sailing ships could be found anchored at piers along the shoreline, from Aldershot to Port Nelson at the foot of Guelph Line. Hefty stevedores handled cargo, lugging machinery and supplies off the ships and hauling locally-grown fruits and vegetables onto them.

The picture remained peaceful and bucolic for decades, changing only to accommodate the arrival of railways, motor cars, electric power, and other modern advances. Until the 1950s Burlington remained something of an island of peace and prosperity, separate from the heavy industrialization of neighbouring Hamilton and the solemn legislative focus of Toronto.

In the years after World War Two, however, both cities began expanding their suburban limits, transforming Burlington's orchards and farmlands into some of the most valuable residential acreage in the province. The Queen Elizabeth Way made access to Toronto relatively easy in modern automobiles, supplemented by the launch of GO rail service in the 1980s, and the opening of the Burlington Skyway in 1959 made Hamilton similarly accessible.

Citizens of both metropolitan areas recognized many of the qualities that had appealed to Chief Brant all those years earlier: Burlington is a great place to live, work, and enjoy life. Lake Ontario, the Niagara Escarpment, and the proximity to both major urban attractions and pastoral open country all contribute to a lifestyle that many Canadians admire and perhaps envy from time to time.

Like other North American communities, Burlington faces a wide range of challenges to be met and addressed in the future. Based on the history of its people and the constant appeal of its location, most of its citizens feel confident that the challenges will be met and solved.

Because they honestly prefer to be "nowhere else but here".

John Lawrence Reynolds has published more than two-dozen award-winning works of fiction and non-fiction. His most recent book is a mystery novel titled, *Beach Strip*. He has been a resident of Burlington since 1964