

COORJC Ghost Town Run: Discovering the History of Road Colonization.

Road Colonization

This government program launched in 1854 to increase settlement and encourage agriculture. Twenty-five such roads were built to lure pioneers to the highlands of central Ontario. In order to attract settlers, the government hired agents to both promote the scheme and then ensure the settlements were successful. Agents received pay packets that were based both on the number of settlers they were able to attract, and by the sustainability of the settlement. The program was an easy sell, particularly in countries like Ireland, devastated already by the great potato famine.

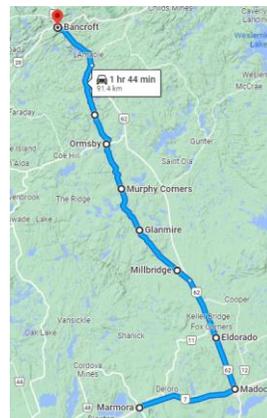
The requirements seemed simple enough. The settlers were promised 100 acres of land in exchange for building a house, 18 X 20 feet in size, and cultivating at least 12 acres of land over a four-year period. Unfortunately, the government made a number of major blunders that resulted in an almost complete failure of the program. The most serious of all was their inability to determine whether the land they were offering was actually suitable for farming.

Alternate opinion suggests this was a cunningly crafted scheme devised to lure new immigrants into the province in order to clear the inhospitable and rocky lands for the lumber industry. Thus, what was not mentioned, were the true conditions of the soil which were thin, rocky, acidic and completely unsuitable for any form of sustainable agriculture. In the early 1870s the government opened the rich farmlands of the Canadian prairies and many of the farmers headed out west. One-by-one the small communities began to fail as settlers abandoned their lands in search of better opportunities creating many of Ontario ghost towns.

The Hastings Road Settlement

The Hastings Road was one of the most notable failures of the road colonization program. Between 1856 and 1858, when the road was completed, almost 3,000 people settled along the new road. Other than poor farming, a major factor in the failure of this program was the defective quality of the Hastings Road. In 1868 a group of 57 settlers sent a plea to the Hastings County Council begging for funds and a competent crew to do the necessary roadwork. In it they referred to bridges being washed out, drainage problems requiring culverts and crossovers, terrain that was too rough for even light wagons and damage caused by the lumber industry. (Humm sounds like a jeep trail to me!) Nevertheless, as the settlers became established, they began to form small communities such as Glanmire, Murphy's Corner and Mill Bridge.

Our journey begins in Marmora where we will head out to follow the Old Hasting Road from Madoc where in 1856 the government opened an agency for attracting potential settlers for the road settlement. From there we follow the route up to Bancroft with various stops along the way.



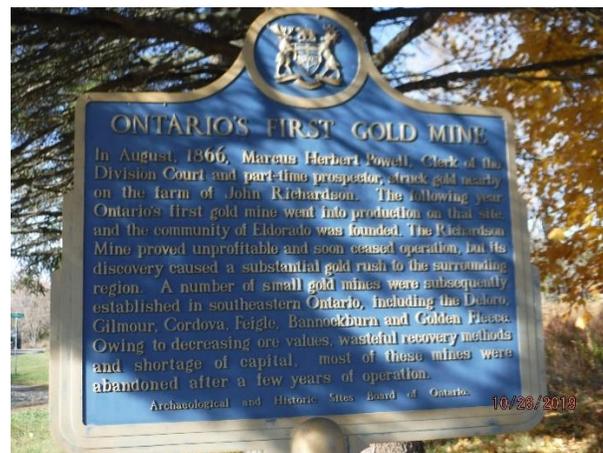
Eldorado

Eldorado's infamous history began with John Richardson, a middle-aged farmer, who had fled from Ireland almost 30 years earlier. As with most land along the Hasting Road, Richardson's land was thin and rocky. Richardson was tired and fed up when he decided to give it one last shot in the hope that the many outcrops on his land would yield something of value. In the summer of 1866, he hired Marcus (Mark) Powell, a young court clerk and part-time prospector to begin explorations on his land.

When rumours of gold discoveries such as "gold the size of butternuts" began to surface, the town, not surprisingly, grew from nothing to some 80 buildings almost overnight. Prospectors and speculators arrived in droves to have their pickings of the anticipated riches. It was estimated some 3,000 people gravitated towards the area. Eldorado boasted four hotels, two grocery stores, a dry goods store, a lawyer and a physician. Although the gold was supposedly extremely pure, the deposits were small, isolated and sporadic. Investors quickly bailed out and the mine was shut down.

Eldorado was able to reinvent itself as a railway centre during the early 1880s. The construction of the Central Ontario Railway, which began in 1882, offered employment to 200 men. During the mid 1880s, Eldorado's population stood at around 75. By then the village included three churches as well as a school. The seed of a new industry was planted with the opening of S. Thompson's cheese factory.

Today Eldorado has been reduced to a rural backwater although it is showing signs of rejuvenation. The village still contains a few homes, some of which are occupied and others that are abandoned. One of the early general stores still stands and remains partially occupied. A combination gas bar and general store remains open. Although the cheese factory stopped producing cheese in 1991, the retail outlet remained open until 2011. A historical plaque alongside the highway tells the story of Eldorado and the famous Hastings gold rush of the 1860s.



Millbridge and Millbridge Station

Millbridge originally named "The Jordan" because of its proximity to Jordan Creek, was first settled in the mid 1850s. When a mill was established alongside the water it eventually became known as "the mill by the bridge. The name stuck and Jordan got a new name.

By the mid 1880s, Millbridge was booming. The Millbridge annual fair was one of the county's big events. The population had grown to about 125 and the village counted three general stores and two blacksmiths. At the beginning of the 1880s Millbridge had one hotel. By 1886, that number had jumped to three.

The arrival of the Central Ontario Railway in 1883 led to the establishment of a small satellite village, a few kilometres east of Millbridge, near the site of the popular Hogan's Hotel which once hosted the village church services. Hogan's Hotel is now used as a private residence however the owners have retained the unusual hand-painted Victorian signs.

Millbridge continued to thrive during the latter part of the 19th century. In 1895 the village contained three stores, two hotels a church and a cheese factory. A new schoolhouse was built in 1904 and telephones had arrived by 1910.

Many of the original buildings in Millbridge, including the church, hotel, and general store still stand and are now used as private residences. Portions of the former rail-bed have been converted to a recreational trail.

Glanmire

Glanmire first settled around 1856, served the important function of sorting and moving the mail on a weekly basis from Millbridge to York River (now Bancroft). The postmasters found it next to impossible to traverse the difficult terrain. For a while it was also known as Jelly's Rapids, after Andrew Jelly, a prominent pioneer settler and former postmaster. Population was never large and probably peaked at around 50 but it was enough to keep things going for a while. A school was built in 1860 and St. Margaret's Anglican Church was eventually added in 1887.

Glanmire survived a little longer than many of the earlier Hastings Road settlements. The post office lasted until 1939 and the church until the late 1950s. The church demolished in the early 60s was a victim of ongoing vandalism. All that remains are the steps and commemorative stone. Commemorative stone for St. Margaret's Anglican Church



Murphy Corners

Murphy Corners was first settled in the 1850s. It began with a small sawmill and was in an ideal location to serve the milling needs of the surrounding communities. By 1870 it included a school and a church. Murphy's Corner was on the mail route that travelled through Glanmire but it never had a post office of its own. Unlike most of the failed communities along the Hastings Road, Murphy Corners still has a few relics left to show. The original Murphy home still stands along with an old gas station that was closed at least 30 years ago.



Ormsby

Originally called Rathburn, after the logging company, the town thrived in the late 1800s as the last stop on the Central Ontario Railway. In its heyday it had 2 hotels, 2 stores, 2 churches, a school, blacksmith, a sawmill and more. By 1893 the population was at 225. In the middle of the 1900's Ormsby also had a Department of Lands and Forests fire tower lookout on the nearby hill. Ormsby is the most intact of the road's ghost towns. Since 2003 however, interest and activity in the village have returned. In Ormsby you can find the Hasting Road historical plaque and the original town store now operating as The Old Hastings Mercantile & Gallery, featuring fine Canadian arts & crafts, vintage toys, antiques, nostalgia, cottage-themed gifts & clothing, country-themed merchandise... and penny candy.

