

NEWS views

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Simcoe County Historical Association
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Happy New Year!

Wishing you health, happiness, and prosperity in 2023!

Another year has gone by, and the Simcoe County Historical Association has survived to protect and record our County's stories. This, we have been doing since 1891, 132 years. Are you still there? That question is often asked of me when I talk to some of my history friends. Yes, we are still here, working to keep our history protected.

That doesn't just happen. We have people like Donna Wice who was our leader in producing our History Conference and Deb Crawford who has volunteered to edit our newsletter. They and others like John Merritt (Hunter History) and Mark Fisher our Vice President are rock solid volunteers for SCHA. Deb Exel has stepped back but she was important to SCHA's renewal. Jan Blommaert has added her experience to our Board as

well. Her health has slowed her down in the last little while.

The most gratifying to me are the new people who have volunteered for SCHA in the past few years; Karen Mahoney, Vanessa Kennedy, Janine Harris-Wheatley, Lindsay Earle, Bruce McRae, Amanda Wilce, and Bryan Wood. They have taken on a number of important roles with our Association. We can't get better without them. "Many hands make light work" as the saying goes.

Over all, I look forward to 2023 with hope as we continue the activities that tell our County's stories. Thank you for caring about our history.

Ted Duncan,
SCHA President



Get To Know your Long Ago

Membership Renewal Reminder:

With the coming of the new year, it's time for SCHA members to renew their membership! Fees are due at the beginning of every calendar year. Whether you're an individual, couple, family, group or institution, the annual fee for all SCHA members is just \$20.

Your annual membership fees help us do what we do as an organization, helping to preserve and promote local history through programs like our Community Partnership Grants, Heritage Business Awards and the Andrew Hunter Award for excellence in essay writing by Grade 10 Canadian History students. For individual members, being up to date with your memberships also brings unique opportunities to help shape what we do through voting rights at our AGM and the opportunity to serve on our Board of Directors. For group members, membership provides opportunities to promote your own group and its interests and activities through SCHA channels, including our newsletter, website and social media.

When you are renewing your membership, you will also have the opportunity to donate to the SCHA. Donations, no matter how small, can make a huge difference in what the SCHA is able to do for local history both now and in the future. All donations are tax-deductible.

To renew your membership online, simply visit our Membership page at <https://www.simcoecountyhistory.ca/memberships/>.

To renew by mail, you can send your cheque to Simcoe County Historical Association, P. O. Box 144, Barrie ON, L4M 4S9. For membership-related inquiries, please email membership@simcoecountyhistory.ca.

Stay Tuned for more details!

SCHA's Annual General Meeting (AGM) (late April 2023)

Following the business agenda, we hope you will enjoy our first post-COVID in-person speaker **Brian Charles** as he presents:

“ Wampum Belts Woven Through Anishinabbe History”

Brian is an off-reserve Band member of the Chippewas of Georgina Island and has worked collaboratively with a small group of knowledge keepers to research and assemble a physical repository of wampum belts connected to Ojibwa History.

The presentation will illuminate how wampum was used to record not only relationships and treaties between the First Peoples of the Eastern Woodland, but also with settler societies in Canada.



Watch your email for announcements confirming the date, location, and how to register will be coming to your in-box soon.

Fort Willow Conservation Area

Submitted by: Trevor Carter & Kyra Howes,

The Fort Willow Conservation Area has a rich history of local and regional significance which is linked to the Nine Mile Portage and has been designated as a Federal and Provincial historic site. The Nine Mile Portage connects Lake Simcoe to Willow Creek, into the Nottawasaga River and ultimately to Georgian Bay.



The portage route was used by Indigenous peoples prior to European contact. By the early 1600s, Samuel de Champlain became the first European to contact the local Huron or Wendat Indigenous peoples. The first mention by the British of the Nine Mile Portage is in a map dated 1793.

Upper Canada's Lt. Governor John Simcoe knew that the possibility of future conflict with the Americans was very real, so he planned alternate routes, like the Nine Mile Portage, for the provisioning of the western reaches of British North America. The Nine Mile Portage, was considered as an alternate communication and trade route to the west once the war of 1812 broke out and the British lost control over the lower Great Lakes.

The British immediately improved the portage route and built 29 batteaux (shallow draft boats), that succeeded in transporting much needed supplies up Willow Creek and ultimately to Fort Michilimackinac. They also built a supply depot of small huts and storehouses at what is now called Fort Willow.

When the War of 1812 came to an end, the Treaty of Ghent did not initially quell fears of further American attacks and the depot at Fort Willow and a new naval base at Penetanguishene continued to be provisioned. Penetanguishene Road (today's Highway 93) was intended to handle all transportation to the Penetanguishene base, however, the road was often in such terrible condition that the Nine Mile Portage continued to be used as a preferred alternate route.

The Fort's decline began in 1818, with the signing of the Rush-Bagot agreement between Britain and the United States. Under this agreement, all armed vessels were put up into 'ordinary' or dry-dock. The British military's interest in the portage route waned as it became clear that hostilities were truly at an end. The portage route would continue to be used by local fur trade companies P & W Robinson and Borland & Roe of Newmarket in 1824.

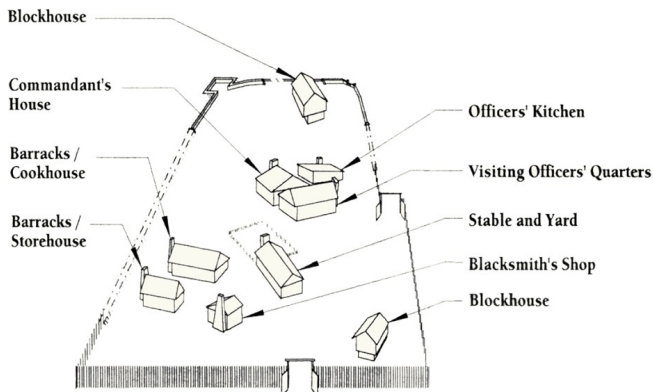
The portage and Fort also saw some other important visitors in the 1820s. In 1821, Lt. Henry Bayfield used the portage during his hydrographic survey of the Great Lakes; in 1823, members of the International Boundary Commission stayed at Fort Willow; and in 1825, Capt. John Franklin would pass along the portage route on his famous arctic expedition. Apart from these infrequent visits and occasional use of the trail by settlers heading west, the portage route rapidly fell into disuse. By 1831, the portage was reported as difficult to navigate and overgrown and by 1835, it was reported that all the buildings at Fort Willow had burned down.

The first archaeological surveys at Fort Willow were conducted by avocational archaeologist Wilfrid Jury. In 1954, in his search for the location of the Nine Mile Portage trail, he ventured into the Fort where he dug a few test holes. He returned to the Fort in 1958 and 1959, digging extensive trenches across the site and completing a survey map of the area that showed the locations of the War of 1812 structures he believed he had discovered.

(continued on next page)

(Fort Willow Conservation Area continued from previous page)

The first professional archaeological investigations were undertaken by students from Barrie's St. Joseph's High School ongoing since 2005. These excavations were conducted under the direction of Trevor Carter, a high school teacher and professional archaeologist licensed with the Ontario Ministry of Culture.



These excavations confirmed the presence of the visiting officer's quarters, the commandant's house, the soldier's barracks, the smithy, the brick kiln and the cookhouse.

The recent archaeological investigations disputed Jury's discovery of the presence of the blockhouses and palisades and the soldier's cookhouse. The ceramics that were found at the soldier's cookhouse were from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, indicating use at a later date than initially believed.

Archaeological surveys also identified evidence of Indigenous campsites throughout the site as well as Iroquoian pottery and chert tool fragments, confirming the original use of the site prior to the arrival of Europeans.

In 1973, the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority, with community support, purchased the property from the Barrie Chamber of Commerce. By this time, previous reconstruction work at Fort Willow had fallen into disrepair.

From about 1995 to 2009, a volunteer group known as the Fort Willow Improvement Group invested thousands of hours in rebuilding the site.

They constructed information kiosks, erected signs and began the work delineating the historic building outlines.

The Friends of Historic Fort Willow became active at the site in 2010. Their role has been to provide historic interpretation and educational opportunities to visitors to the site. The Friends help bring history alive at the property with demonstrations, informative displays and support the Festival at Fort Willow hosted at the site annually the last weekend of September.

The Friends of Fort Willow continue to introduce new initiatives and to maintain the site and are always looking for interested volunteers. If you would like to learn more about their work, please [contact the Friends](#).



“The Keeper of the Coffin Nail”

Two years into the War of 1812, a band of workmen, accompanied by oxen-driven sleighs carrying tons of supplies, were sent from Kingston to Willow Creek Depot, an arduous winter trek of 400 kilometers. Their task was to prepare the site for the 300 soldiers who would follow a month later. The workmen felled giant white pines to construct blockhouses, cabins, about 30 bateaux, and a corduroy road running through the Minesing Swamp to join the Willow Creek Depot to the Willow Creek Landing.

This Depot, located at what is now Grenfel Road and Portage Trail in Springwater Township, was most active in 1814 and 1815, then the population dwindled as the military moved on. By 1835, the deserted Depot had burned to the ground.

On February 7, 2022, following a stroll through the Historic Fort Willow area (once Willow Creek Depot), Harold Parker, a longtime resident of Minesing, asked me, “Did you know about the 12 soldiers’ graves?”. “Where?” was my intrigued response. Harold motioned behind him, indicating somewhere in that direction, and launching me on my journey in pursuit of the truth.



Dieter Mueller (L) Harold Parker (R)
Old Fort Willow February 7 2022

I learned that during that bone chilling journey and subsequent settlement at the Depot, conditions for the approximately 320 men were brutally harsh. Twelve of them died, not from combat but from the bitter cold, disease, accidents, and infections.

On another bitter cold day in late February 2022, I met with a few Friends of Historic Fort Willow to ask them the same question Harold Parker had asked me. One man told me that a North Simcoe Railway construction crew had chanced upon the 12 graves in 1878, exhumed

them, then built new coffin boxes and reburied the remains, “up on the hill...somewhere”. Next, I canvassed long-time residents along Grenfel Road and Portage Trail. Two of them had heard this same story.

Four months later, while researching this rumour, I came across documents written by a Captain Dallison while he was stationed at CFB Base Borden. During the summer of 1967, a unit from the Base constructed a block house on the site of Fort Willow to commemorate Canada’s Centenary.



Barrie Examiner August 26 1967

This story was featured in the Barrie Examiner (<https://news.ourontario.ca/Barrie/2915095/page/3>) . Soon after, Dallison was contacted by 81-year-old Charles McNiven, who claimed to know various stories concerning Fort Willow. As Dallison was a history buff working on a book about the War of 1812, he interviewed McNiven and recorded the following notes about the graves of the 12 soldiers:

“He and a friend (Ed Shear – teacher in Allandale) went looking for the graves in 1904. They found 12 graves in a straight line. They dug into one until they came to decayed wood. As proof he gave me one nail.”

You might ask whether these men were credible? McNiven became a conductor on the CNR, the company that bought the Grand Trunk Railway which ran the North Simcoe Railway. Ed Shear, a renowned Barrie educator, was Principal of King Edward School for decades. Shear Park in Barrie is named for him. The highly educated Captain Dallison

(The Keeper of the Coffin Nail cont'd from prev. page)

served in the Canadian Army for 34 years, obtaining the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Yes, these men were very credible.

Using the documents authored by Captain Dallison and knowing the area of Fort Willow intimately, it was a cinch to identify the most probable site of the graves. To test my theory, others I challenged each pointed in the same direction.

The Superintendent at the Barrie Union Cemetery told me that, after 64 years in the ground (1814-1878), the pine boxes would have rotted away and only disarticulated bones would remain, along with any metal and tanned leather items. Thus, the 12 reburial boxes would have been small (perhaps 2 feet x 1 foot x 1 foot) and placed in a shallow rectangular pit, possibly 12 feet long by 3 feet wide and 3 feet deep. Shallow burial is most likely as the construction crew would be in a hurry and later McNiven and Shear were able to easily dig down to them. In 1904, after 26 years of presence on the spot, there must have been some remains of grave markers, otherwise the two men might not have found the graves.

I left a couple of phone messages for Captain Dallison in June 2022. When he returned my call, he explained that my messages had sent him to check his toolbox in the garage. "I still have the coffin nail," he told me, "and you know what? I'm going to send it to you." The nail arrived at the end of June. While the machine-made square headed nail is a typical carpenter's nail from the 1878 era, Captain Dallison referred to is as a "coffin nail" because it is a nail that came from a coffin. The 145 year old nail was first used by a carpenter in 1878, retrieved by McNiven in 1904, given

to Captain Dallison in 1967 and finally passed on to me in 2022. What a journey.

Was the rumour of the 12 soldiers' graves just a tale or is it true? The documentation, the coffin nail, and the probable site all say that it is a true chapter in Fort Willow's history. This is how historical records are built, one discovered fact at a time.



Submitted photo: Dieter Mueller

Now I am the "Keeper of the Coffin Nail".

"Like a Dog with a Bone" Part 2 of Dieter's search for the truth will continue in a later newsletter.

About the author: Dieter was born and raised in post war Germany, he emigrated to Canada with his parents in 1959. While his post high school education and career were in business, he maintained a lifelong interest in history, geography, and nature. Dieter led the successful "Hunt for the Lost Case of Whiskey" in 2021 and also discovered unique, one of a kind "Tufa Rocks" "growing" in a creek near Barrie. Retired long ago, he lives in Barrie with Beverly, his high school sweetheart and their dog Ebony. Dieter can be contacted at: dieter.mueller4907@gmail.com



The Ontario Historical Society (OHS) is excited to announce the launch of its new podcast series, *The Crown in Canada*, hosted by Nathan Tidridge and produced by Leaking Ambience Studios. The series examines issues surrounding the Crown's role in both Treaties and in our democratic institutions. The two-episode pilot was produced with assistance from the Government of Canada, Canadian Heritage Community Projects Program on behalf of the 2022 Platinum Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The podcast can be found on the [OHS website](#), at the [Crown in Canada's home](#), or indeed [wherever good podcasts are distributed](#).

Congratulations to the 2022 Andrew Hunter Writing Award Winners

1st Place: Leo Weibrecht
Austrian Exch. Student
Eastview Secondary
School

2nd Place: Uzair Qureshi & Archi Patel
(tied)
Eastview Secondary
School

Once again SCHA is offering the Andrew Hunter Writing Award for the 2022-23 academic year.

The Andrew Hunter Award, named after an early historian of Simcoe County and co-founder of the SCHA, was originally offered to post-secondary Canadian History students at Laurentian University's Barrie campus. When Laurentian phased out its history program, the award went dormant for a few years until it was relaunched in 2020, this time focused on students of Canadian History at high schools across Simcoe County.

This program considers the final essays submitted by Grade 10 students enrolled in Canadian History classes at any secondary school in Simcoe County during either of the two semesters during the 2022-23 academic year.

Participating teachers can select what they consider to be the best 1-3 term papers from their class each semester and approach their students for permission to submit their essays to us for the chance to win.

Participating teachers can submit the essays at any time during the school year.



All

Above: Uzair Qureshi (L) Scott Webb, Teacher C , Archi Patel (R)

essays will be considered during the summer of 2023 and the winners will be announced in the fall of 2023.

Three winners will be selected from each academic year—1st, 2nd, and 3rd place. Each winner will receive a certificate, a modest cash prize, and the gift of a book on local or Canadian history. Winners will also be announced through our organization's social media and website as well as through local media. Winners may also have the opportunity to speak to our group about their experience, their essay and their plans for the future.

The program is a great opportunity to recognize local Grade 10 students who excel in the study of Canadian history and to help encourage them in their future studies.

To obtain more information or to submit essays for consideration email: info@simcoecountyhistory.ca .



THE WINTER CARNIVAL AND THE BARRIE COLLEGIATE BAND

By Mark Fisher

One of the community activities that the Barrie Collegiate Band often played for was the annual ice show, put on by the Barrie Skating Club in the 1960s. This was before the developed program presently run in conjunction with the Mariposa School of Skating and such champions as Brian Orser, Jeffrey Buttle or Jennifer Robinson. In fact, it goes as far back as the "Ice Carnival" of 1945 held in the old Dunlop Street arena. There were headliners from New York and Toronto, but they had to go with the Huntsville Skating Club for the remainder of the season.

To open the evening the sea cadets, led by Bill Bell and their own bugle band, marched in and slid their way across the ice in a demonstration of morning exercises. The rest of the music was provided by what was billed as the Barrie Collegiate Concert Orchestra--in reality the school band, seated safely in the stands--who accompanied one group of skaters to the tune of "Shine on Harvest Moon." The star of the evening had to rely on a phonograph that kept slowing down, despite repeated shouts from the crowd to "Wind it up!" Such was the technology of the time, but what could you expect for "General Admission 35 cents, Students 25!"

Eventually taken over by the Kiwanis and Lions clubs, the "Ice Carnival" continued on until 1950, when a high rental rate for the arena prompted the local service clubs to turn to a casino night in order to raise funds for the new hospital addition. Regardless, a winter carnival did persist through the 1950s with a variety of activities on the rock-hard surface of Kempenfelt Bay. Races on skates and those new-fangled snowmobiles, plus rides by dog team or horse-drawn sleigh, added to heavy vehicles and a multitude of onlookers, posed no danger of going through the ice. The "Arena night," as it became known, continued to be the major fundraiser as a full slate of activities and entertainment continued to grow. By 1950, in addition to featured figure skaters, those with sufficient energy and bravery could participate in broomball, log sawing, a tug-of-war contest and a moccasin

dance. The barrel jumping was left to the professionals!

Throughout the show, music was supplied by a newly formed Collegiate Alumni Band, led by W.A. Fisher himself. They would reappear the next year, but despite the best efforts of Bill Blain and Dr. Bob Delaney, this new organization proved to be short-lived. Alumni are well represented, however, in the current Barrie Concert Band that can trace its roots back through various town bands to as early as 1870. Although the students of the Barrie Collegiate Band did not march or, heaven forbid, perform on the ice of Kempenfelt Bay, they certainly played in the arena for the Barrie Skating Club during the winter carnival of 1962. On this occasion, they had to share honours not only with Rocket Richard of the Montreal Canadians, but the Kempenfelt Trumpet Band founded by Bob Lucas from the dying embers of the wartime sea cadet band. But just how complicated this business could be can be seen in the preparations Fisher went to, even attending the Ice Capades in Toronto for ideas. Working with the club professional, Sue Emms' (daughter-in-law of Hap Emms, owner, and coach of the Barrie Flyers) selections had to be agreed on and then hunted down through various music publishers in Toronto. Rehearsals by the band ultimately produced taped recordings of 21 selections, so the skaters could practice their routines. Finally, seated on a specially erected stage at the end of the arena, there was the dress rehearsal that went far into the night before the big show could go on. Arrayed in their full red and white uniforms, over many layers, the nearly three hour extravaganza proved to be a grueling experience for the 81 members of the Barrie Collegiate Band.

It is surprising that Fisher agreed to such a venue, given his aversion to marching or any other outdoor activity during inclement weather. He certainly drew the line at any thought of trying to cram an ensemble of any sort onto a flatbed truck for the Santa Claus parade. It did nothing for delicate instruments, the quality of the performance or the risk to life and limb. He

usually begged off, as in 1949, with “no winter uniforms” and left the honours to a clown band made up from members of the Barrie Citizens’ Band.

When the Santa Claus parade was revived by the Jaycees in 1951, they naturally sought as many bands as possible for the occasion. Asked at the last moment, Fisher was non-committal, for his usual reasons, but said he would ask the students, knowing full-well a number of senior players would be working on the appointed Saturday. According to him, the band members elected not to participate although I doubt they were given much encouragement. Patriotic events or skating carnivals in the arena, perhaps, but there was something about “boosterism” and “rah-rah” type of events that Fisher disliked. As always, he insisted the band was an educational organization that “should exist for the benefit of the pupil--not for entertaining at fall fairs and sideshows.” In the absence of the collegiate band, other than the drum majorettes, the parade had to make do with the clown band and, at the last minute, the Elmvale Bugle Band. Despite the success of the parade, witnessed by thousands, letters of criticism to the editor soon appeared in the local newspaper. The remarks followed the usual pattern of the “invisible” Barrie Collegiate Band that played everywhere else and was only around when asking for handouts from the town council. “It is an utter disgrace that youth should be allowed to disregard public affairs,” stated one disgruntled writer, and even the Chamber of Commerce pointed out the weather had cooperated and they probably could have arranged for working students to take time off

from their jobs.

Although Fisher was fully capable of repeating his oft-stated reasons for not participating in such an activity, he left it up to others rather than getting dragged into a catfight once again. Fortunately, the defense of the band was taken up by Ken Walls, publisher of the Barrie Examiner, a former member of the high school cadet band and the father of two members of the collegiate band. In a lengthy editorial he reviewed all of the reasons why the band did not necessarily participate in every community event, including the Santa Claus parade. He was ably seconded by a lengthy epistle from the pen of the ever-loyal Bill Blain, a former band president.

After 1965 and the dissolution of the school cadet corps, Fisher sold off the sousaphones and parade drums and could legitimately claim it was not a marching band. At the most it was left to a few brass players who volunteered to play Christmas carols on a school float in 1971. Yet the skating carnival was one way to show community support that continued until at least 1969. What may have brought an end at this time was the departure of Sue Emms, as well as the increasing use of “stars” from outside of Barrie who came with their own recorded music and no time to rehearse otherwise. Nevertheless, the many years that the collegiate band served in this capacity is a mark of not only community commitment but versatility.

An excerpt from NOTES IN TIME : A History of W.A. Fisher and the Barrie Collegiate Band by Mark Fisher mwfisher51@gmail.com



The Story of the Oro African Church Preserving History

Join Harry Hughes, former Mayor of Oro-Medonte & Samah Othman, Communications Officer tell their story of the journey to restore and save this national treasure on:

Wednesday February 15th 7PM (ZOOM)

Register at: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/the-story-of-the-oro-african-church-preserving-history-tickets-522139602607>

Or contact us at: info@simcoecountyhistory.ca



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Please contact organizations directly for current information as regularly scheduled events or meetings may be cancelled due to Covid-19