

Like father, like son: the Johnson family and the town site of Cornwall.

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At the close of the American War of Independence in 1783, thousands of Loyalists from the Thirteen Colonies became 'landless' refugees, in search of a new home. They had supported the Royal cause for a variety of complex reasons and with the war lost, they shared in the negative consequences of its failure. In the spring of 1784, several hundred such men, women and children under the leadership of Sir John Johnson sailed upstream from Montreal to establish new settlements along the north shore of the upper St. Lawrence River.

These new communities were called Royal Townships, and within Royal Township No. 2 a special town plot was laid out at a place on the river known as Pointe Maligne -- present-day Cornwall, Ontario. For most of the Johnson's followers, the spot was an unfamiliar tract of wilderness. But for Sir John, the location was one in which both he and his family were quite well acquainted.

A quarter-century before, Sir John's father, the eminent Sir William Johnson encamped on the very point where the town plot was laid out in 1784. So significant was this first encounter that the elder Johnson's name was for some time affixed to the spot. Sir John had also laid his eyes upon the district many times during the period between 1776 and 1783: once while escaping the young revolution in 1776, and many more times during his attempts to quell it. Then in 1784, the Sir John Johnson oversaw the birth of the town and the settlement of its environs. Quite simply, the Johnson family of the Mohawk Valley and the town site of Cornwall were linked, both before and during its settlement.

First Encounter - Sir William Johnson, 1760

Well before the American War of Independence had reared its head, British Regulars and American Militia of all kinds had fought side-by-side against a common foe: the Gallic armies of New France. The Seven Years' War in North America (or the French & Indian War, as it is known in American history) is most renowned for Wolfe and Montcalm's 1759 battle on Quebec's Plains of Abraham. But with this legendary British victory, the war was not yet won. Montreal was still in French hands and yet another colonial campaign was needed to pound the last nail into New France's coffin. Sir William Johnson participated in this campaign, thus beginning the link between his family and the town site of Cornwall.

As the campaign season of 1760 approached, British General Sir Jeffrey Amherst massed an army of 10,000 men at Oswego, New York. The force was a mixed bag of Regular troops, colonial militia and a several hundred Iroquois warriors. His objective was Montreal, the new capital of New France. His route was to be Lake Ontario and the treacherous St. Lawrence River. Sir William Johnson headed the Iroquois detachment in his capacity as Superintendent of Indian Affairs, but he had also made a name for himself in military terms at Lake George in 1755 and

Fort Niagara in 1759.

The campaign was rather uneventful until the British army approached Fort Levis in the St. Lawrence River near present-day Prescott, Ontario. The fort was commanded by Captain Pierre Pouchot. The French officer had met Johnson at Fort Niagara the year before, (1) but Johnson's involvement in the ensuing siege and surrender of Fort Levis was small. Following the fort's capture, Amherst quickly re-named it "Fort William Augustus" and prepared to descend the successive rapids of the upper St. Lawrence River.

These natural wonders were then known as being the most treacherous in the explored part of North America. "It must be confessed," wrote an early English historian of the conflict, "that the appearance of broken rocks and inaccessible islands, interspersed in the current of a rapid river, and the foaming surges rebounding from them, without a direct channel to discharge itself by, presents a scene of horror unknown in Europe." (2)

After descending the Long Sault Rapids, the army came to rest at Pointe Maligne, where it camped on September 1st, 1760. While in the neighbourhood of Pointe Maligne, Johnson was quite active in his position as Superintendent of Indian Affairs. General Amherst noted in his journal on that day that "Sir William Johnson went to Asquesasne, a small Indian Village, to assure them we would do them no hurt if they remained quiet." (3) For one reason or another, Pointe Maligne was known as "Sir William Johnson's Point" for a short time after this visit. Perhaps Johnson and the Iroquois warriors who remained with the expedition encamped right on the point, acting as an advanced guard of skirmishers for the rest of the army.

Amherst's troops went on to land on the Island of Montreal a few days later, completing the British conquest of New France. Johnson returned to his prosperous estate in the Mohawk Valley, where he lived in relative luxury until his untimely death in 1774.

The Second Generation - Sir John Johnson, 1776-1783

A mere two years after the passing of the elder Johnson, the flames of the American Revolution erupted into open armed conflict and civil war. In the early spring of 1776, Sir William's eldest son John and a band of hardy Scottish and German followers were forced to escape their homes and the persecution of their "Rebel" neighbours. They trekked through the Adirondack forests to the safety of Canada. On their way northward, the refugees were forced to eat "wild onions, roots & leaves of the beech trees." (4)

The assemblage of Loyalists emerged from the forest near the mouth of the Raquette River, near the point at which Johnson's father had made camp so many years ago. But he did not stop for long. He quickly moved on to the Mohawk village of St. Regis for provisions, then continued to Montreal in order to participate in the ensuing campaign against the Rebels who had invaded the St. Lawrence Valley the previous year.

General Guy Carleton met Johnson at Montreal and was immediately impressed with the younger Johnson's enthusiasm, and gave him permission to raise a Loyalist regiment on the spot. "I have therefore given Sir John Johnson a commission," wrote Carleton to his superiors in

London, "to raise on that Frontier of this province a Battalion of men (to be called the King's Royal Regiment of New York) of equal numbers with the other of his Majesty's marching regiments serving in America." (5)

During his duties as Lieutenant-Colonel of the Royal Yorkers, Johnson had the opportunity to pass by the future Loyalist settlements of Upper Canada many times in the summer of 1777 en route to Fort Stanwix, again in 1780 during a raid into the Mohawk Valley, and various other times when traveling from Montreal to Fort Haldimand (Carleton Island) and Fort Niagara. Little did he and his men know that a few years later, when the conflict ended, this forested expanse of land would become much more than travel scenery.

The Birth of a Town - Sir John Johnson, 1784

Despite numerous successful operations by Johnson's regiment, the war was over by 1781 and the Peace of Paris in 1783 rendered the Loyalists homeless. Many who had served in the Northern Department sought refuge in the province of Quebec to await their fate. Eventually, the British Government decided to settle many of the Loyalists along the St. Lawrence River west of Montreal. In March of 1784, The Quebec Gazette confirmed His Majesty's wishes. For those of Johnson's men who could read, the plans for resettlement were there for them in black and white:

"...the Loyalists and disbanded troops who are now dispersed thro'out the province (Sorel Excepted) and who wish to have Concessions of Land from the Pointe au Beudet (where the last settlements are) to Cataraqui and its vicinity, are required to repair to Lachine (where quarters will be allotted to them) by the 2nd day of April next, and where proper persons will be appointed to muster them, in order that the quantity of land that will be wanted may be ascertained, and that the Seigneuries may be marked out and granted by the Governor and Council according to His Majesty's Orders." (6)

Prior to actual settlement, Johnson accompanied survey parties upstream and selected a location on the river that was suitable for a town site, about 25 miles west of "Pointe au Beudet". This spot was none other than Pointe Maligne (now Cornwall). One of Johnson's first duties was the same as his father's a quarter century before. The lands slated for settlement were not entirely free for the taking. The Mohawks of nearby St. Regis (the same band of Natives with whom Sir William had consulted in 1760) claimed that they had always considered the entire north shore of the St. Lawrence from the Raisin River to the Long Sault Rapids (a great expanse) as their own. However, they had no written document to support the claim. The Mohawks were satisfied with the offer of a much smaller tract of land to the east of Royal Township No. 2, thereby throwing open the rest of the north shore to Loyalist settlement. In June of 1784, dozens of batteaux laden with Loyalist families and their property landed along the north shore of the river and the creation of a new colony had begun.

Despite such a promising prelude, the town site of Cornwall and the St. Lawrence Valley did not become the Johnstown and Mohawk Valley of the north, as far as Sir John Johnson was concerned. Shortly after the resettlement of his disbanded troops, Johnson settled in the Montreal area, where he spent most of his time. (7) He did, however, draw lands in nearby Charlottenburg Township where he built a house and mill and named its primary settlement "Williamstown"

after his father. But in Cornwall proper there is little evidence of the family's earlier impact. Sadly, the celebrated Johnson name remains obscure and unknown to the general populace.

(1) . Pierre Pouchot (Brian L. Dunnigan, ed.), *Memoirs of the Late War in North America, Between France and England* (Youngstown, N.Y.: Old Fort Niagara Publications, 1994), pp.302-303.

(2) . Thomas Mante, *The History of the Late War in North America*. (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1772), p.308.

(3) . Jeffrey Amherst, (J. Clarence Webster, ed.) *The Journal of Jeffrey Amherst* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1931), p.242. Amherst's "Asquesasne" was the Village of St. Regis, a Mohawk settlement on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River.

(4) . John Johnson to Daniel Claus, 20 January 1777. NAC, MG 19 F1, Vol. 1, pp.230-233.

(5) . Guy Carleton to George Germain, 8 July 1776. Anon., *A History of the Organization, Development and Services of the Military and Naval Forces of Canada from the Peace of Paris in 1763 to the Present Time, with Illustrative Documents, Volume 2* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, n.d.) p.179.

(6) . *The Quebec Gazette*, 3 March, 1784.

(7) . One reason for his lack of commitment to Upper Canada was the fact that he was not given the position of Lieutenant-Governor of that colony in 1791.

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