



The Nine Mile Portage Heritage Trail

The History of the Nine-Mile Portage

by Brad Rudychyk, Date unknown.

1. Pre-Contact

The stories of the earliest people, who traveled what came to be known as the Nine Mile Portage, are lost in the mists of time. Large villages of pre-Huron peoples existed in the area around Kempenfelt Bay. One such village covered eight acres near what is now Cundles Road West and Kozlov Street in Barrie. Eventually these peoples moved north and west and formed confederacies. The homeland of the Huron/Ouendat Confederacy, called Wendake, occupied the northern reaches of present-day Simcoe County. To the north and west, hard by the Niagara Escarpment, lived the Tionontatehronnon, more commonly known as the Petun or Tobacco people. To the south, the Neutral people made their home on the western shore of Lake Ontario.

The Huron/Ouendat lived in palisaded villages. They were primarily an agricultural people who supplemented their diet by hunting and fishing. Their hunting grounds extended as far south as Lake Ontario and as far east as the Trent River Valley.

The Huron/Ouendat, Neutral and Tionontatehronnon peoples traded extensively. The Nine Mile Portage, running front the western end of Kempenfelt Bay to Willow Creek and into the Nottawasaga River at Georgian Bay, was one of many pre-contact trade and transportation routes in Huronia. The Iroquois would use it when they overwhelmed Wendake in 1648-9.

2. The First Europeans: The French (1615 – 1760)

Samuel de Champlain arrived in Huronia in the summer of 1615. the world of the Huron/Ouendat would never be the same. At contact, it has been estimated that between 16,000 and 50,000 Huron/Ouendat lived in nineteen villages. The French brought their religion, their trade goods, and their diseases. The Huron/Ouendat's alliance with the French earned them the enmity of the powerful Iroquois Confederacy. By 1650, riven by internal division, ravaged by disease and defeated in battle, the sorry remnant of the Huron/Ouendat abandoned their last refuge in Huronia, Christian Island, and headed for Quebec City.

The victorious Iroquois ranged at will over Huronia from their villages on the north shore of Lake Ontario. Huronia's prime hunting and fishing grounds and water passages to the northern trade routes assured its continuing strategic importance.

The Nine Mile Portage/Nottawasaga River corridor became a favoured passage for Iroquois war parties. A W.A. Fisher writes in *Genesis of Barrie*, "the word Nottawasaga should be written Nahdowa-Sahging. It is a compound word and means a place where the Nawdawag... the Mohawks or Iroquois...used to come out."



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After 1689, French interest and influence in present-day central Ontario waned. The French River became the route of choice to the northwest. During the early 1690's, the Iroquois suffered two defeats at the hands of the Ojibwa, and withdrew to their homeland south of Lake Ontario. The victorious Algonkian-speaking Ojibwa then moved into Huronia from the north. By 1715, regular trading was once again taking place. In 1749, the French built Fort Rouille (present-day Toronto) to control the portage routes from Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay.

With the final defeat of the French in 1760, Huronia fell into British hands. As J. H. Coyne writes, at the time of the conquest, "Inland Ontario was practically an unknown territory.... The discovery and exploration of the interior were reserved for the British.

3. For Trade and Security: The British (1760-1811)

After the fall of New France, British interests moved quickly to consolidate their position in the lucrative fur trade out of Montreal. The ancient Lake Ontario-Georgian Bay routes were more or less abandoned in favour of the French and Niagara River routes to the great northwest. Following the American Revolution and the implementation of Jay's Treaty in 1796, the Niagara route was effectively closed to the British. The French River route was satisfactory for the great canoe brigades bearing high-value, low-weight furs but less so for the low-value, bulky trade goods and supplies required to support trade routes that now spanned the continent. Thus, the combination of land and water routes from York to Georgian Bay, via Lake Simcoe, once again attracted anxious attention.

As early as the mid-1780's, government and North West Company officials alike began to re-examine the suitability of the route from the old French Fort Rouille to Georgian Bay. After the founding of Upper Canada in 1791, Lt-Gov John Graves Simcoe made military security and economic development his primary goals. Accordingly, he set out early to establish a naval base at Penetanguishene to ensure British dominance on the upper lakes. The base was not built in Simcoe's lifetime; however, later events would prove his foresight.

4. "An army marches on its stomach": the War of 1812 (1812-1815)

In the early months of the War of 1812, Thomas Jefferson wrote that "The acquisition of Canada this year... will be a mere matter of marching.." He was nearly right. But the young American eagle quickly found that the old British lion could be extremely tenacious. The first year of the war saw the British flag once again over Detroit and Fort Michilimackinac – the undisputed gateway to the great northwest. The Americans had the better of 1813 with the capture of York and Fort George and the defeat of the British fleet on Lake Erie. The loss of Lake Erie was particularly devastating as it compelled Maj-Gen. Henry Proctor to abandon much of western Upper Canada and it effectively cut the supply line to Fort Michilimackinac.



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Fort Michilimackinac was the key to holding the northwest. Both sides acted accordingly. In 1814, the Americans assembled a strong force in a bid to recapture the fort. At the same time, the British moved to reinforce the fort and reestablish its supply lines. A plan to cut a road from the north shore of Kempenfelt Bay to Penetanguishene was rejected. It would require too many men and too much time. Instead, the Nine-Mile Portage would be improved and brought into general use despite the winding Nottawasaga River's countless rocks and shoals. In early 1814, carpenter and millwright, Jacob Gill helped to cut a rough road from near the head of Kempenfelt Bay to Willow Creek where a supply depot had been established in the previous fall. As J. Herbert Cranston notes in "Huronian" Cradle of Ontario's History," this was the first road built in modern Huronia.

Colonel Robert McDouall and his adjutant Lieutenant Andrew Bulger, with more than 200 reinforcements for Fort Michilimackinac, traveled this route in early 1814. Enduring great hardship, the force arrived in boats, built on the Nottawasaga, in time to repulse the American attack on 4 August. Lieutenant Miller Worsley crossed the Portage in July 1814. He was to take command of the schooner *Nancy*, the only British ship left on the upper lakes. Worsley was to ferry the supplies brought over the Nine-Mile Portage to Fort Michilimackinac. Unluckily, on 14 August 1814, American forces discovered and destroyed the *Nancy* in the Nottawasaga River, at present-day Wasaga Beach. The later gallantry of Lt Worsley and Lt Bulger resulted in the capture of the American schooners *Tigress* and *Scorpion*. Both vessels were pressed into His Majesty's service, supplying the very garrison that they originally had been sent to capture.

It is fair to say that without the bravery and resourcefulness of officers like McDouall, Bulger, and Worsley and their men, for Michilimackinac would have fallen into American hands. It is also fair to say that their efforts would have been for naught, but for an ancient aboriginal trade and war route – the Nine Mile Portage.

5. From War to Peace: Aftermath (1816-1855)

The Nine-Mile Portage proved its worth during the latter stages of the war of 1812. Although the Penetanguishene road had been opened in 1814, the Portage remained the military's preferred supply route. By November of that year, the inventory at Willow Creek included: "50,192 lbs of Flour, 377 lbs of Biscuits, 64,669 lbs of Salt Pork, 13 gallons of Rum, 177 packages of Indian Treaty Presents, and 10 boxes of Candles."

Over the next few years, the Portage was widened and improved for ox-drawn wagon traffic. In 1816, Fort Nottawasaga (Schoonertown) was established four miles upstream from the river's mouth. It was transferred to Penetanguishene in 1818. The next year, the government built storehouses at the head of Kempenfelt Bay and at Willow Creek. The Barrie storehouse stood at the eastern end of Marks Street (now Simcoe Street) until 1838 or 1839.



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As Andrew Hunter writes, in his *A History of Simcoe County*, apart from its military purposes, “the Nine Mile Portage was the only highway over which traders, settlers, and Indians passes for many years, and was therefore vastly important in the life of the district at that time.” Many of the area’s early settlers found work on the Portage. In fact, Barrie’s first settler, Alexander Walker, was a well-known and successful portage teamster.

About 1830, a small village started up Willow Creek. In 1833, surveyor William Hawkins laid out the new Town of Barrie.

By the end of the 1820’s, the None-Mile Portage was somewhat eclipsed by the opening of the Coldwater Road. Still, it remained in use until the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railroad pushed its way from Barrie to Collingwood in 1855.

6. Barrie; Then and Now

In early 1815, Col George head took up residence in a solitary log cabin at Kempefeldt at the southern end of the new Penetanguishene Road. His house was about three miles east of the Portage, however, the two points were separated by dense forest. There was no road.

Head found the Portage road “in the a rude state,”

Being merely a track where the trees had been partially felled by the axe, and the stumps even of these very imperfectly removed. This road...led from the end of Kempenfeldt Bay, straight to the Notawasaga River. Thence stores of all descriptions were in the season to be transported in bateaux, or flat-bottomed boats, down the river, a narrow sedgy stream, to Lake Huron, and ...across the lake to the upper port of Michilimackinac. Thus the line of transport all the way was, from York, now Toronto, by land to Holland River, communicating with Lake Simcoe. From Holland River, by water, to the head of Kempenfeldt Bay, an outlet of Lake Simcoe.

In late May 1815, Head removed his headquarters from Kempenfeldt to the head of the bay. In fact, to Head, goes the honour of having built the first structure in what would become the City of Barrie. In early June 1815, Head recording the arrival of boat-loads of government and North West Company stores, notes that the “the margin of the bay began to be a scene of active bustle.” It was so busy that he could hardly keep his own house to himself.

What Head saw in very different from what we see today. Barrie did not exist. There was the beach and then the forest, the dark, tangled, interminable forest.

As a lad of fourteen, Thomas Williams worked as a teamster for Alexander Walker. He describes Barrie in 1824: “there were two pretty good houses of logs, with a good chimney of brick in the center of each. They were in a line from the wharf and storehouses, between fifty and a hundred yards from the Bay.” Commodore Robert Barrie



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passes over the Portage during a tour of inspection in June 1828. He could not know that in five years' time, what he knew simply as "the portage landing" would be within the bounds of a town bearing his name.

The Town of Barrie, as first surveyed by William Hawkins in 1833, was bounded on the west by Bayfield Street, on the east by Sampson Street, on the north by Macdouall Street (Macdonald Street) and on the south by Marks Street (Simcoe street) and Dunlop Street. Kempenfelt Bay lapped at the south sides of both streets.

Today, almost all of Barrie's celebrated and much-loved waterfront on the western and northern shores of Kempenfelt Bay is reclaimed land, including Centennial and Heritage parks.

7. The Voyageurs

The voyageur was the backbone of the fur trade in North America. As early as the 1660's, independent, unlicensed French fur-traders called 'coureurs de bois' or 'wood runners' risked their very lives engaging in the trade. Over time, the seasonal and independent 'coureur' de bois' gave way to the hired 'professional' voyageur who paddled and packed his way across a continent. The voyageur and his life are the very stuff of romantic history. Mostly descended from French and French-Aboriginal Canadian forebears, he has been portrayed as hardy, fearless, cheerful, and improvident. These he may have been, but the life of the voyageur was 'nasty, brutish and sort.'" As A.R.M. Lower writes in *Colony to Nation*, "One hundred and eighty pounds a man over a portage, twenty hours traveling a day if necessary, salt pork, corn-meal, dried peas and pemmican, infinite amounts of strong tobacco: these were the pillars of internal exploitation."

John Johnston gives this contemporary account of portaging two ninety-pound packs:

This is done by means of leather straps or thongs the middle of which is broad and fitted to the forehead of the carrier. The first bale or piece is tied so as to lie a little above the reins, the second is lifted over the head and deposited, without tying, on the first, and thus loaded, the engages as they are called, trot off to the place chosen for a deposit, which they call a pose, and which, in large portages, are from two to three miles apart. This they repeat till the whole is transported; they then set off for the canoe, which they carry on their shoulders. They so go on till night, only stopping once for their meal, and once or twice for lighting their pipes. This is the mode of carrying all over the North-West.

Once can only stand in awful wonder at a Nine Mile Portage.

8. "The Great Geographer": David Thompson (1770-1857)

Many have wearied themselves upon the Nine Mile Portage – Huron/Ouendat, Iroquois, Ojibwa, soldier, sailor, settler, priest, voyager, to name but a few. Most must remain



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anonymous. However, on occasion, celebrity made an appearance. In 1824, explorer and surveyor David Thompson traversed the Portage as international boundary commissioner en route to Montreal.

Thompson was born on 30 April 1770 at London, England. He entered the service of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1784. Before he left in 1797, Thompson had explored and surveyed the Nelson, Churchill, and Saskatchewan Rivers, their surrounding territory, and Lake Athabaska. In the service of the rival North West Company, Thompson explored the upper Assiniboine, the Missouri, the headwaters of the Mississippi, and surveyed portions of the upper Saskatchewan, Athabaska, and Peace Rivers. Between 1807 and 1811, he explored the entire Columbia and Kootenay River systems. From 1816 to 1826, Thompson surveyed and defined the international border from the St. Lawrence River to Lake of the Woods. It was during this time that he traveled the Nine Mile Portage. Thompson died blind and in penniless obscurity at Longueuil, Canada East on 10 February 1857.

Thompson's journals fill 45 volumes spanning a 56-year period. His first and staunchest champion, J.B. Tyrrell, writes that Thompson was "the greatest land geographer who ever lived... With extraordinary accuracy he placed on the map the main routes of natural travel in one million two hundred thousand square miles of Canada and five hundred thousand square miles of the United States... Study of his journals shows that on foot, by canoe, and on horseback he covered fifty-five thousand miles."

9. "Duty, Honour and Ice": Sir John Franklin (1786-1847)

The spring after David Thompson had passed over the Nine Mile Portage, John Franklin and his party crossed over on their second overland expedition to the Arctic Ocean. On 11 April 1825, they stopped long enough to fix the longitude and latitude of the "Nottawassaga Portage" at 44°22'55"N and 79°53'41"W.

John Franklin was born on 16 April 1786 at Spilsby, England. He served at Trafalgar as signal-midshipman on board the *Bellerophon*. Lt. Franklin was slightly wounded at the British attack on New Orleans in 1815. From 1819 to 1822, he led an almost disastrous expedition from York factory to Great Slave Lake and from there to the mouth of the Coppermine River on the Arctic Coast. Ten men never returned. During his second expedition from 1825 to 1827, Captain Franklin continued his exploration of the Arctic coastline east and west of the Mackenzie River. He was knighted for his services on 29 April 1829. On 19 May 1845, at the age of 59, Franklin with a complement of 134 men embarked on his ill-fated third expedition to sail through the Northwest Passage. His two ships, *Erebus* and *Terror* became ice-bound west of King William Island. Franklin died on 11 June 1847 on board the *Erebus*. Both ships were abandoned and the crews tried to reach the safety of northern Hudson's Bay Company posts. None survived. The mystery of Franklin's fate and rewards totaling £23,000 fired the curiosity of a generation. The search would involve some 30 expeditions and last twelve years.



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Franklin was one of Britain's most successful Arctic explorers. Yet, his was a chequered career of great triumph and of dismal failure. As one biographer writes, his record resulted from his "Dogged determination, audacity carried to the point of recklessness, superb indifference to personal danger, bold enterprise and ingenuity in times of crisis..."