History Lessons

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the building of the Factor’s House (1846) and the 100th anniversary of the building of the Hotel Pontiac. Celebrate our local history and attend the historical events we have planned this summer! For your information we have reprinted this chronology of Fort William history from our September, 1994, newsletter. Pass it to friends, family, and visitors!

Ancient History: About 5000 years ago, aboriginal people occupied this area, manufacturing copper tools and ornaments. Native artifacts and European artifacts are frequently found in the Fort William area. Stone arrowheads, a flint for a French musket, and the clay pipes made in Scotland have all been found by cottagers.

17th century: The Ottawa River was called “la grande rivière des Algommequins” and later, “Rivière des Outaouais.” It was an important trade route for getting the furs from the interior down to the merchants in Montreal.

1695: Compagnie du Nord established a trading post at Fort William. After the defeat of the French, the British took possession of the French posts, and the Hudson’s Bay Company took possession of the Fort William post.

1821: There were trading posts at Fort Colunge and Lac des Chats, but it was soon realized that more active trading was needed up river, at Fort William.

1823: First building constructed at “Petite Allumettes Island,” for the purpose of a trading post. It was one of the last posts built by the Hudson’s Bay Company. A small log cabin served as a trading post, general store, and residence of the trader.

1828: The Hudson’s Bay Company, realizing the trade potential in this area, added more buildings to the post.

1830-1837: Nicholas Brown, an Irishman in charge of this post, expanded operations to sell supplies to lumbermen working in the region. He sold fresh vegetables from a farm on the property.

1836: Mass was held on the site by Father Dupuis and Father de Bellefeuille. Fifty Indians were present.

1838: In the presence of about one hundred converted Algonkins, a cross was placed at an Indian burial ground by Father de Bellefeuille.

1841-1864: The Perraults operated a tavern at the clearing at the intersection of Sarah and Tripp’s Road, where the Lefebvre and Deneault cottages now stand.

1845: By 1844, the post had taken over most of the Indian trade of the region. Operations were expanded and the main headquarters at the post was built.

1846/47: Chief Trader Hector McKenzie had a house built for him. His estimate was £150; measurements 42 x 30 feet, built with “unexpected touches of elegance” such as fluted columns on veranda. A fireplace was also included, and a new shop was built at this time. Today, this house is the residence of Elizabeth Miller.

1848: A post office was established on the site, and thereafter, the post became known as Fort William, named after William McGillivray, the managing director of North–West Company from 1804-1821. Governor Simpson, head of the H.B.C., offered the service of McKenzie as post master by guaranteeing him 20 pounds a year for the conveyance of mail from Pembroke.

1853: By this time, Governor Simpson by his hard work and initiative was able to report that the Fort William post was thriving.

1854: Steam boat service commenced on the Upper Ottawa River in 1854. A wharf was built at Fort William in the same year. This cut down the need of so many posts, as supplies were transported by boat.

1857: The Hudson’s Bay Company built a general store and a multi-denominational chapel to assist the missionaries. The Jesuit priests travelled from Montreal to administer to the Algonkins. Roman Catholic faith was shared by the Irish, French, and Algonkins.

1860: Merchants of Pembroke were cutting into the fur trade by offering advantages to the Indians before they set off to their hunting grounds.

1862: Governor Simpson died in 1858. In 1860, his successor, A.G. Dallas, is considering the closure of Fort William. The trade in furs was on the decline, and lumbering became the way of life on the Ottawa River. Also, the post suffered a lack of profits, experiencing competition from steam boats which were being used to transport supplies on the Ottawa. A.G. Dallas proposes that Fort William be closed and the post at des Joachims take over its functions.

1863: An inspection by A.G. Dallas, Governor of the H.B.C., describes the post: “...it is very fine and well kept establishment, with numerous and excellent buildings and 800 acres of land having a frontage of a mile on the Ottawa River. The maintenance of such a place is necessarily expensive. The staff consists of a Chief Factor, two clerks, a head farmer, blacksmith, and several labourers, some engaged by the year, others by the day.”

Oct. 1863: The Governor and Committee of the H.B.C. notified McKenzie that the buildings should be offered
for sale. McKenzie argued for its retention for Indian trade; the farm should be sold.

1869: Fort William is sold for $3,000 to John Poupore of Chichester, on behalf of James McCool of Pembroke.

Sept. 13, 1885: 200 Algonquins visited Fort William on the occasion of a visit of Bishop Lorrain.

1895: The last documented visit to the Fort by an Algonkin family, who sought food from the farm.

1896: The Hotel Pontiac was built next to the general store and post.

Late 1800’s–1900’s: Steamers made calls at the Fort, making it a popular summer resort for residents of Pembroke, Ottawa, and the Valley.

1958: A cross was placed at the Indian burial ground to mark graves of those Indians interred there in the last century.

Recent history: The general store was run by Lewis Miller, grandson of James McCool. His widow, the late Florence Miller, continued operations of the store until 1985. Her son, Robert Miller, maintains the family tradition, operating the hotel, where meals and drinks are served during the summer. Upstairs rooms at the hotel were rented until the early 1970’s.

Notes from Factor’s House tour of Elizabeth and Red Miller’s, September, 1990(?) (from materials borrowed from E. Miller):

The Hudson Bay Company operated as a fur trading post from 1828, when buildings were constructed. Site where Algonquins came from their hunting grounds in spring to trade furs. Hector MacKenzie was put in charge of the farms and trading furs for necessities, vegetables, etc. not only to Indians but also lumbermen.

This house was built in 1846 for the sum of £150. Labour from Pembroke. The first Factor was Hector MacKenzie whose wife wanted an open fireplace in the living room — against the HBC’s orders one was built for her and is in excellent condition today.

Trade being very poor, the Company put the post and 800 acres up for sale. It was sold for $3,000 to Red Miller’s grandfather, James McCool, in 1869.

The HBC originally called this Post des Allumette and changed the name to Fort William when a post office was established in 1848. The Postmaster was paid £20 per year.

The original store was also built with squared 1-foot logs and burned down in 1852. We think the reason the house was clapboarded was that during the fire at the store, the house was badly scorched. The living room had a plaster ceiling. When it was removed we were delight-ed to find beams. The nails were used to hang furs.

Catholic Church—St Theresa’s was built in 1857. Became Catholic owing to a predominance of Catholics not only among the Indians, but also because the countryside was settled chiefly by the Irish. There was also a graveyard established at the same time and it is still marked by crosses. It is generally referred to as the Indian graveyard, although we think a few non-Indians are also buried there.

For many years, Indians were married, their children went to school in a school building (no longer standing, but it was in the slide show!), and they were buried at Fort William.