

WHERE HISTORIES MEET: INDIGENOUS AND SETTLER ENCOUNTERS IN THE TORONTO AREA

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The Coldwater and the Narrows Settlement

The Coldwater Tract, that was the first reserve experiment where we were placed into a boundary.

—Vicki Snache, Chippewas of Rama¹

Thirty-five years after he'd accompanied Governor Simcoe on his trip up the Toronto Carrying-Place Trail to Lake Simcoe and Matchedash Bay, Major General Henry C. Darling, military secretary to the colonial governor general and superintendent of Indian Affairs, authored the first formal inquiry into Indigenous welfare.² The 1828 Darling report reflected a liberal humanitarianism gaining influence in Britain and America. It recognized at least some of the harms caused by colonialism and the “white man’s burden”—a moral if paternalistic responsibility to “improve” the condition of Indigenous peoples.

Impressed by the Credit River Mississaugas’ transformation, Darling recommended a general policy of assimilation. As a first step towards social integration, all Indigenous peoples in Upper Canada should be congregated on temporary reserves (protected environments away from the worst influences of Western culture) to be educated, converted to Christianity, and taught to farm. This “civilization” policy would also benefit the British by reducing the need for presents or government support and freeing up more land.³

Darling recorded that 550 Anishinaabek occupied the region of Lake Simcoe, Holland River, and greater York.⁴ Joseph Snake was identified as Chief of those whose territories covered Snake, Fox, and Georgina Islands in Lake Simcoe, the Holland River, and lands to the south (today known as Chippewas of Georgina Island).

Chippewa family traditional hunting territories, as described to the Williams Treaty commissioners, 1923, by United Indian Councils of Mississauga, Chippewa, and Potawatomi First Nations



Our family name, Snache, comes from ginebigowinini, which in Anishinaabe means “he is who is a snake” or “he can be a snake.” Some people would say “snake man.”

So the majority of the Snaches can trace their line back to their one person, within our community. So, from Georgina, we have Snake Island in Lake Simcoe, and that’s named after Chief Joseph Snake. He was the Chief or the Ogimaa. He was the speaker and the representative of that people. So his Clan was a spokesperson for that community, for external business. So, in a Western way, that’s their idea of a Chief. He has a big lengthy history.

—Kory Snache, Chippewas of Rama⁵

Musquakie / William Yellowhead led those whose territories bordered Lake Simcoe, including the Narrows/Mnjikaning (known today as Chippewas of Rama), and also served as Ogimaa or Head Chief of all the Chippewas of Lakes Huron and Simcoe. John Assance was Chief of the Chippewas to the west of Lake Simcoe along the Severn and Coldwater Rivers to Matchedash Bay (known today as the Chippewas of Beausoleil First Nation at Christian Island in Georgian Bay). The three Chippewa bands hunted over a wide territory and functioned independently but came together seasonally for Tribal Councils. According to Darling, Musquakie’s people had expressed a desire to “adopt the habits of civilized life.”

In 1830, the new lieutenant-governor, John Colborne, formally adopted the policy of

civilization, which appeared to offer a more humane alternative to the American policy, articulated in the 1830 US Indian Removal Act, of forced “removal.” (The act legalized the deportation of Indigenous peoples from their homelands in the eastern United States to the territories of other Indigenous Nations west of the Mississippi.) The Mississaugas of the Credit’s rapid transformation into Christian farmers might have helped the Indigenous Nations of Upper Canada avoid a similar fate. Colborne had initially focused on slashing the Indian Department’s budget but changed his mind after visiting the mission. That same year, Britain transferred the Indian Department from military to civilian control. The transfer signalled the end of Britain’s need for military alliances and its intention to make Indigenous peoples fully subject to the colonial government.

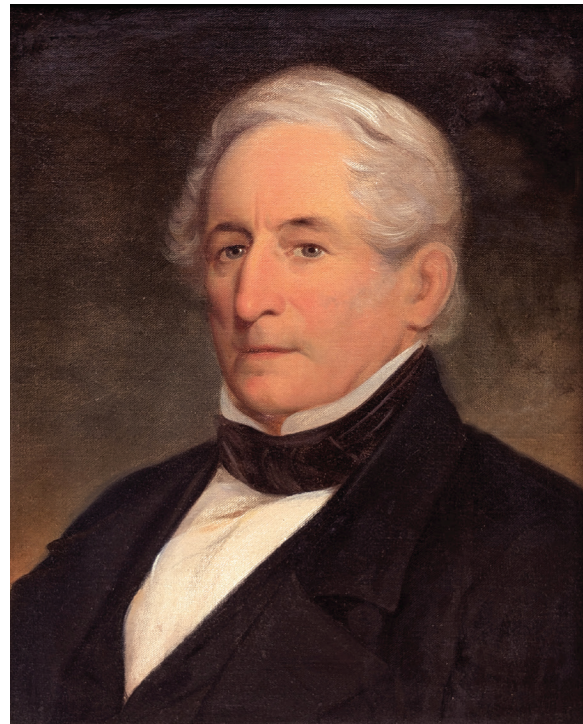
The civilization policy marked the beginning of Canada’s reserve system. Indian agents or superintendents would oversee the development of new settlements and provide livestock and agricultural implements, which would, in time, replace annual presents. British Wesleyan Methodists and Anglicans would serve as resident missionaries, replacing the Episcopal Methodists who had been responsible for the initial conversions. There would be two new model settlements: one at Sarnia and the other at Coldwater and the Narrows for the Chippewas, many of whom had already converted.

The Coldwater and the Narrows settlement would be administered by Superintendent Thomas Gummersall (T.G.) Anderson, a fur trader in the Upper Mississippi Valley who served as



William Sawyer, portrait of Elizabeth Ann (Betsy) Anderson, wife of Thomas Gummerall Anderson, 1854
| Courtesy of Margot Maddison-MacFadyen and the Huronia Museum

a clerk and interpreter at Drummond Island in Lake Huron before it was relinquished to the Americans. Like many Indian Department employees, he was married to a woman of mixed heritage. Elizabeth Anderson's grandmother was noted Anishinaabe fur trader Elizabeth Mitchell of Michilimackinac.⁶



William Sawyer, *Thomas Gummerall Anderson*, 1854
| Courtesy of Margot Maddison-MacFadyen and the Huronia Museum

Earlier Land Cessions

How and when the Coldwater and Narrows Reserves were acquired isn't clear. Britain claimed that it had purchased them in 1785 through the so-called Collin's Purchase. But Britain most likely acquired the Matchedash Tract through a cession in 1787–88. Discussions likely began at the Bay of Quinte, when presents were distributed and some kind of agreement for lands at Toronto

was made or at least discussed.⁷ “Kenease & his Band or Party” of Chippewas from Lake Simcoe, along with seven other Nations or parties, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, attended this Council.⁸ A 1788 document describes the tract as “beginning at Toronto & running on each side of the Communication to Lake Huron.”⁹ But the only surviving record of the 1787 Council is a copy of the infamous “blank deed,” which was never properly filled out or signed.

In 1798, the cession of Penetanguishene Harbour was finalized. During negotiations, the Anishinaabek apparently confirmed that the adjacent Matchedash Tract had been surrendered, although its boundaries and the terms were not clarified.¹⁰ In 1836, James Givins, chief superintendent of Indian affairs, conducted an inquiry and concluded that only the cession’s date was uncertain. However, in 1847–48, in a memorial to Governor General Elgin, the “Lake Huron and Simcoe Tribe of Indians residing at Snake Island, Rama and Beausoleil Island,” claimed the Matchedash Tract “had never been ceded to the Crown.”¹¹ Other claims to all or portions of the tract were made in 1859 and the early 1900s. The entire Matchedash Tract was included in the Williams Treaty of 1923.

Certainly, after the Penetanguishene Purchase of 1798 (Treaty 5), the British believed they had title to the Matchedash Tract and established a rough military road along the ancient Indigenous portage route running from Lake Simcoe to Matchedash Bay. This route, later known as the Coldwater Road (Highway 12), was used by the British to transport goods and troops to Georgian Bay between 1795 and 1812. By 1815, its military

use had decreased. It became the main route for settlers granted lots along it or in the vicinity.¹²

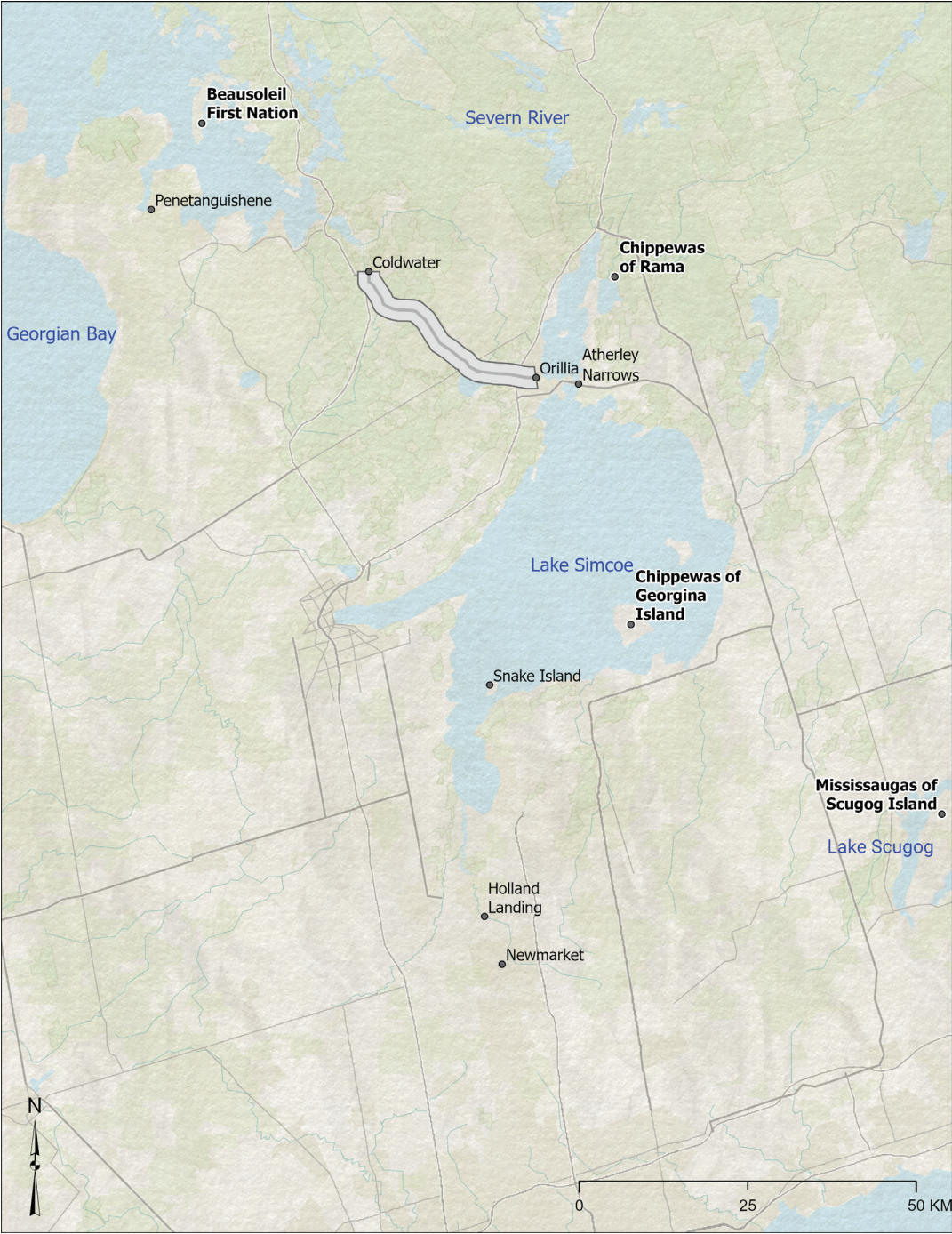
Establishing the Reserve

In 1828, after virtually all their lands had been ceded through Treaty 16 in 1815 and Treaty 18 in 1818, the Chippewas were promised a reserve on the Matchedash Tract, where they would be free from settler interference. In 1830, Lieutenant-Governor Colborne approved the creation of the 9,800-acre (3,966-hectare) Coldwater-Narrows Reserve between Coldwater near Matchedash Bay in the west and Mnjikaning (the Narrows at Orillia) in the east. The villages at either end were linked by a 22.5-kilometre (14-mile) road that followed the portage route and a mile on each side of the road. Five to six hundred Chippewas and other Anishinaabek, including the Potagunasees / Bootaaganasiig who had recently arrived in Upper Canada from Drummond Island, were promised houses, farms, and religious instruction.¹³ The long, narrow reserve was not large enough to provide significant opportunities for hunting.

They settled in Coldwater. Before that, though, they hunted everywhere. They travelled in family groups. They’d only come together, I think, in the winter, for an encampment. They hunted and fished. And they picked berries. They lived on a lot of berries back then.

—Albert Big Canoe, Chippewas of Georgina Island¹⁴

The Coldwater and the Narrows Reserve (1830–36) and present-day First Nations





Sir Henry Byam Martin, *The Settlement of Coldwater*, 1832
| Library and Archives Canada, C-115022

The initial plan was to survey the reserve into single-family farms strung out along the Coldwater Road, in the same manner as Yonge Street. But the road needed to be improved. In 1830, men from all three bands (plus the Potagunasees) received tools, oxen, and rations to clear and widen the road. Anderson directed that hay for oxen and horses be purchased from Mr. Roe of Newmarket. Eli Beman, son of Elisha Beman, provided axes, blacksmithing tools, and other necessities.¹⁵

From the beginning, the Chiefs had their own ideas about how the settlement should be organized. In July 1830, Chief Musquakie spoke out about the workers hired to build houses:

I never heard our Father [the lieutenant-governor] say that the work men who were to make our Houses would be



Titus Hibbert Ware, *Shanty on the Coldwater Road, Orillia Township, Ontario*, 1844 | Toronto Public Library, PICTURES-R-1622

continually drunk. I heard from my father that we should never see that bad liquid, which rendered us so miserable in times past, that it would be kept out of our sight. I heard my father say, children, come and tell me if any person, no matter whom, takes any of that bad liquid into the Village that is about to be built for you and you may depend upon it that I will send them away. Ever since I was at the other side (meaning Penetanguishene) the workmen at this place have been drunk almost every day and particularly on Sundays. I wish to know by what authority this is done and who is the cause of it.

I also ask my father to have our Village built like His Village at York vizt. the building in a line with streets as at York that we may see the people passing to and fro.¹⁶

Musquakie rejected the original plan to settle most of his people in houses stretched along the Coldwater Road. He asked that they be settled at the Narrows townsite with farmland located along the road. Seven of his young men and perhaps some from Snake's people could settle the portage road: "As for us old men, we intend to settle at the village you are building for us, & end our days there, & our children will be kept at school.¹⁷ Given that fishing at the Narrows had long provided a reliable source of food, they wished to be near their fisheries rather than inland.

Anderson agreed that the village site was more conducive to children attending school, and he shared Musquakie's concerns about the dangers of white people and alcohol. He recommended that no more land should be granted to white settlers close to the reserve and that settler-owned land should be purchased by the government (the latter was not approved by his superiors).¹⁸ Colborne directed that houses be built for the Chippewas on detached lots and reported that "they are now clearing ground sufficient to establish farms at each station for their immediate support, from which they will be supplied while they are bringing into cultivation their individual lots marked out for their residence."¹⁹

Of the two villages, Coldwater was intended for the Chippewas under Chief Assance, along with the Potagunasees / Bootaaganasiig. The village at the Narrows was for the followers of Musquakie and Snake. Oxen were purchased and crops planted, Anderson reported, and the department employed three labourers, a blacksmith, a surgeon, a farming instructor, and two

schoolteachers.²⁰ But by early 1831, the Indian Department had spent 3,000 pounds on the settlement and was under pressure to cut costs. Anderson recommended reducing the number of government staff and no longer paying the Chippewas for making repairs to the road or for clearing land for their houses.²¹

Constructing houses was slow and more expensive than estimated. By 1832, the original contractor had received two-thirds of his pay but had only completed one-quarter of the work. He was fired. The next contractor, Eli Beman, did some work but refused to do the rest for the remaining amount and quit.²² In early 1832, Anderson forwarded a list of buildings that still needed to be completed. The list included a building for teaching trades to the boys and girls, a blacksmith's forge for the same purpose, a large kitchen and dining room, a gristmill, a sawmill at Coldwater to replace another more distant one on the Severn, a house for the sick, a wash house, a large barn, and a sawmill and barn at the Narrows. By "employing a couple of Carpenters with the Boys who are to be taught the trade, many of them would be put up [at] a cheap rate."

Instruction in trades was a key part of the civilization plan. Anderson outlined the need to sow flax, provide spinning wheels, and employ a woman to teach the girls to spin. Buying raw wool would enable the girls to learn to make socks and cloth. Some of the boys should be supplied with leather and taught by a shoemaker to make shoes while others work in the blacksmith's forge. The making of pottery from local clay was also a possibility. An "active and practical farmer" was

needed at the Narrows. Anderson concluded: “I may also observe that the affairs of the Establishment [appear] to have taken such a turn as in all human probability to ensure success.”²³

But the houses were not finished until 1833, and they were paid out of the First Nations’ annuity funds because the government had refused to pay for their completion.²⁴ Over the next few years, the bands largely financed the reserve’s development themselves.

Settler Intrusion and the Coldwater Road

They’d been promised a reserve where “no white man would be allowed to set foot.”²⁵ But the Coldwater Road continued to be the main transportation route for settlers moving into the northwestern region of Upper Canada. Given that the reserve extended only one mile on either side of it, the road exerted an enormous influence on the Anishinaabek. Waystations for settlers were soon opened near the two villages, and fur traders, including Andrew Borland, operated nearby.²⁶ Band members went into debt to the traders while some settlers traded alcohol, trespassed on reserve land, and stole Chippewa crops.²⁷

Alcohol “to a degree now unimaginable . . . saturated almost all arenas of work and leisure” among European settlers at this time. In the 1800s, overconsumption became an increasingly widespread problem.²⁸ For settlers, “Rum was cheap and often helped to relieve the anxiety of being isolated in a hostile environment.”²⁹

With so many settlers using the road, Colborne saw transporting settlers as another opportunity for the Anishinaabek to become self-sufficient.

His Excellency thinks that all persons should be allowed to pass the new road with their own Horses, Carts, and Waggon, and baggage, but that the Indians should have a convenient establishment of Carts and Horses, formed at each end of the new Road, and under proper regulations, with a Batteaux stationed at Coldwater. And thus it is hoped the conveyance of Goods, will entirely fall into their hands, and His Excellency leaves it to your to fix a moderate price for the transport of baggage across the new road and to Pentanguishene.³⁰

Anderson tried to interest the Chippewas and claimed they “expressed much satisfaction and promised to be very attentive to the business,” but it didn’t happen. Within two years, the Narrows’ farming instructor, Gerald Alley, was operating a stagecoach.³¹

Despite promises that only band members would live on the reserve, Alley and Lewis, the first house builder, were given plots of land, intended to be temporary. Other white men acquired lots for speculative purposes.

Mr. Alley informs that Mr. Mitchell has purchased from Borland & Roe 60 Acres of Land in the Vicinity of the Village, that several other Lots have been selected

about the Village, and that Mr. Lewis has purchased 200 Acres from the Land Company, near the little lake, three or four Miles from the Narrows. This kind of speculation, as far as the traders are concerned, can only be prevented I believe, by advancing to the Indians on account of their annuity a sum sufficient to keep a shop and thereby obtain their supplies at a cheaper rate than they can purchase them elsewhere.³²

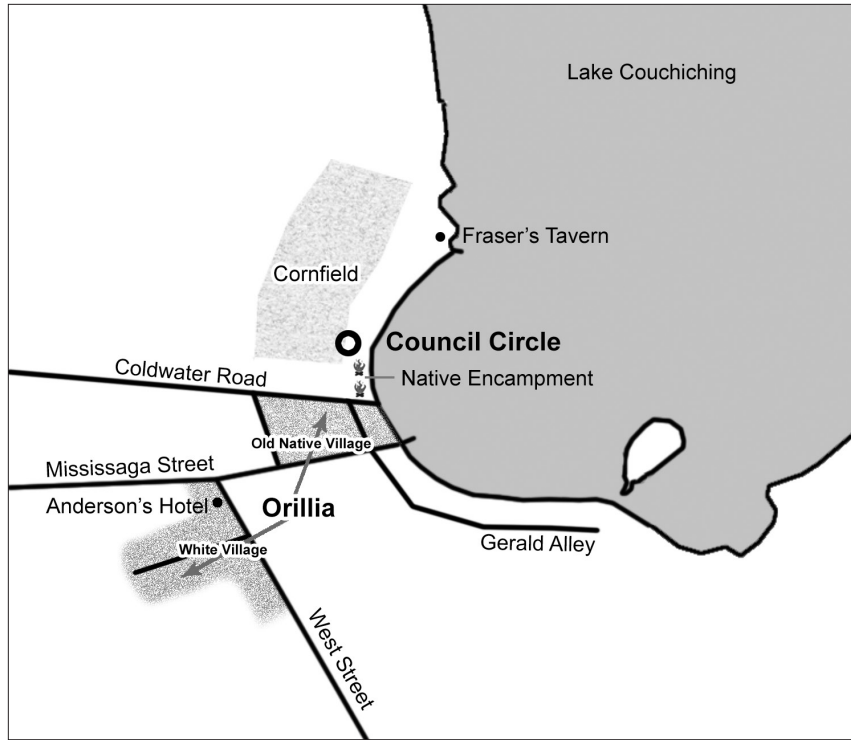
To solve the trader problem, officials proposed that the Chippewas should run their own store to become more self-sufficient and less in need of costly presents. Givins wrote to Anderson: "The Lieut. Governor approves of your plan for making the Indians storekeepers, and perhaps Yellow Head and the other Chief might be induced to consent to allow the stores required for their Shops to be purchased out of the land Payments." Colborne thought "a general Depot might be established at the Narrows for the reception of Furs." The Indian Department could purchase the furs at a higher price than the Chippewas could obtain from traders. If they could be sold in York or Montreal for more than the price paid, the balance could go to the Chippewas. "This plan would perhaps prevent Traders from settling among them. The Traders cannot be prevented from settling among the Indians by forcible means; But the property of Borland and [Roe] is in the hands of their Creditors."³³

Anderson also suggested that the Chippewas start an inn for travellers. He was finding "the burthen of Gentleman travellers too heavy

an expence for me to bear" since they stopped at his house along the way. He believed it would be "a convenience to the Traveller," one that would "push the Indians forward in every possible way to adopt the customs of whites . . . Of course no spirituous liquors would be allowed and merely eatables and bed kept by them, which they would find the means of providing without taxing their Land payments."³⁴

Anderson instructed Givins to help them establish "a shop on their own account, and to make arrangements for the liquidation of their debts with the Trader."³⁵ If they had their own store and sold the goods at a low price, it would "render it unprofitable for traders to settle near their villages. At the same time a House of Entertainment [an inn] at said village should be Established by them, and some person appointed for a time to direct them in the management of it." Colborne approved of establishing a shop and inn at each village and proposed that the debts to the traders be paid in instalments (including Musquakie's debt to Philemon Squires, who along with Borland had threatened to beat Chief Snake if he became a Christian) once they secured John Assance's consent.³⁶

Neither of these enterprises was established—perhaps because the Anishinaabek's annuity payments were already stretched, given their significant debts. Gerald Alley, responsible for advancing these ventures on the Chippewas' behalf, soon appropriated them. Alley was "a corrupt drunkard, little liked by his fellow government workers, who the Natives eventually said didn't know how to farm and had nothing



Chippewa and settler villages
at Orillia, 1836

to teach them.”³⁷ They complained that he “often smelled like a keg of whiskey.”³⁸ As Anderson’s man at the Narrows, Alley was tasked with running the supply depot, but he overcharged the Chippewas. He received permission to open a tavern on a dry reserve. Although the Chippewas complained about him and the Methodists forwarded a report to their mission conference outlining their complaints, Alley complained to the lieutenant-governor that the missionaries were encouraging disrespect to government authority.³⁹ He resigned from his position as farm instructor in 1832 but remained on-site.

In 1834, Anderson wrote Givins about the need for a “well-conducted” inn at the Narrows, now to be built and maintained by Alley: “There are two Inns at Newtown [the adjacent white village] & one other adjoining the South side of the reserve but they are disgraceful & unfit for genteel travellers to stop at.”⁴⁰ Anderson thought a two-storey house could be built for 600 or 700 pounds and command a rent that would increase over time: “If the Indians themselves could afford to build it, it would be funding their money to advantage. If not, the site might probably be leased until the Indians could afford to pay for

the Buildings, or . . . persons would be met with who would make the outlay provided they received, for a certain period, the usual interest for that outlay.”⁴¹

The Chippewas never had enough money to take control of the enterprise. By 1834, Alley had also been given a land grant of 100 acres adjacent to the Coldwater Road despite the reserve supposedly extending a mile on either side. Alley then sold town lots to build a settler village 200 metres from the Chippewa village.⁴²

Indigenous Milling

The proposed saw- and gristmills also drained the Chippewas’ finances. Given the emphasis on land clearing and building houses, they needed a sawmill, but for the first years, they took timber to a mill on the Severn.

The government had planned to lend the Chippewas the money to build the mill. Once operational, the thinking went, the mills would pay for themselves by running twenty-four hours a day, milling for settlers and reserve residents. But in July 1832, Givins asserted that “the funds of the Department will not admit this season of any further advance” for the mill. The government would halt any further loans, despite proposing the initiative: “As the Mill is intended for the benefit of the Indians, and is an object of importance to them, if the Chiefs will appropriate £200 from their Land Payments, His Excellency will feel disposed to sanction its being applied to the Completion of the Mill.”⁴³

Chief Assance consented to the requisition of 200 pounds from his band’s share of annuity payments. Beset by various difficulties, the mill finally opened in April 1833. By that time, the need for a gristmill was even more pressing. The reserve had produced between 300 and 500 bushels of wheat over the summer, and the Chippewas and settlers would have more to grind the coming year.⁴⁴ The Chippewas were pressed to use their annuity funds, and in 1833, the Chiefs consented to two more requisitions to cover the cost of construction. This was a significant drain since their total annuities amounted to only 1,200 pounds a year and they were also being pressed to pay off their debts to traders.

The government failed to discuss payment options transparently with the Chippewas. Anderson wrote: “On the subject I have not considered it necessary to consult the Indians at present, they being incapable of judging for themselves, they should and must submit to His Excellency’s decision on the subject who is in fact their Guardian.”⁴⁵ Thus, while the mill was said to be intended for the Chippewas’ benefit, their annuities effectively subsidized government initiatives to encourage settlement.

The government rationalized its decision to end government support by arguing that it didn’t want to stoke the jealousy of other Indigenous communities. The Royal Engineer, George Philpotts, wrote to Anderson: “[His Excellency] desires me to add that it is totally out of his power, with justice to the Indians in other parts of the Province, to advance more money for the Establishment at Coldwater, & therefore you will see

that unless the Indians consent to complete the Mill in the manner proposed above, nothing more is likely to be done towards it.”⁴⁶

The Chippewas were demoralized by this drain on their finances. Assance stated at a Council: “Father if you give us what you have promised us our young Men will be very glad and will work hard. Father when you purchased our Lands you promised us a great many hundred Dollars a year, but we never see any money—there is a Mill now building and if we could but see the Money on the Table we should be satisfied . . . Father when shall we see the profits arising from the Mill, as yet we have not seen a copper.”⁴⁷

Although annuities were used to fund the mill, progress was slow. Andrew Borland’s associate Jacob Gill carried out much of the building, under Anderson’s supervision.⁴⁸ Finally, on May 6, 1834, Anderson reported: “About 600 Bushel of Grain has been ground at the mill the Toll of which has been divided amongst the proprietors [the Anishinaabek] and has supplied them with provisions to enable them to go on more cheerfully than usual with their spring farming.”⁴⁹ The gristmill’s costs totalled £1,591.13, paid from First Nations annuities. A farmer with sawmill experience was hired to provide instruction. As the sawmill and gristmill at Coldwater came into operation, plans were made to construct another sawmill at the Narrows—to be paid for in the same way.⁵⁰

