

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

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ISBN 978-1-77385-644-5

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## The Postwar Fur Trade along Yonge Street

After 1814, there was renewed interest in transporting furs from Georgian Bay, Penetanguishene, and Muskoka to York via Yonge Street and from there to Montreal, the headquarters of the powerful North West Company of fur traders. When the portage route along the Humber was superseded by Yonge Street, Newmarket became the centre of trade because of its proximity to the Holland River, the gateway to Lake Simcoe and beyond. Holland Landing, the northern terminus of Yonge Street, became an important point of transfer from land to water transportation, briefly replacing York as the location for present distributions to the Anishinaabek.

*There were trading posts everywhere. You had one down at Toronto, near the mouth of the Humber, later it would be on the Humber. You had one at Holland Marsh at Holland Landing. And then Newmarket. And then you had one at the Narrows in Atherley, right outside of Rama. And then you had one over at Balsam Lake. And then there was another one just east of that. Literally, at every portage route, there was a trading post.*

—Kory Snache, Chippewas of Rama<sup>1</sup>

As fur traders moved through the territories of the Chippewas of Lakes Huron and Simcoe, they encountered three related groups led by Head Chiefs Musquakie, Snake, and Assance. Many of these Chippewa had family hunting territories to the north in Muskoka, while some hunted along the Holland River.

*The Snache family [previously spelled Snake], our harvesting grounds were the east and west branch of what's now the Holland River. Our family [were] the harvesters that utilized that whole area, all the way towards Schomburg, and all the way towards—I guess . . . I don't know what's down the east branch—I guess towards Newmarket. That was my family's harvesting grounds.*



Regional fur trade via Newmarket and Holland Landing



Interviewee and cultural land-based educator Kory Snache of Chippewas of Rama First Nation | Courtesy of Kory Snache

*And we used to call that river Gichiziibi, which means, basically, the “large river outlet” or “large river mouth.”*

—Kory Snache, Chippewas of Rama<sup>2</sup>

To the east of Lake Simcoe, traders encountered Mississaugas related to the Mississaugas of the Credit and those in the Peterborough area. Led by Chief Crane, they moved between Lake Scugog, Mud Lake (later Curve Lake), and Balsam Lake. This latter group traded mainly along the rivers and portage routes leading to Oshawa, but they also came to Newmarket.

Two groups of fur traders became especially prominent in the area north of York through their trade at Newmarket and Holland Landing. These groups branched out into other related businesses, such as milling, distilleries, retail stores, and transportation. Some of these traders or their families were of mixed Indigenous / European heritage. All had extensive interactions with local Indigenous peoples.

*I know that our ancestors travelled south right into York for trading. Down at the Toronto Carrying Place through Holland Landing, all those areas, and traded at York and around York. So I think those would have been good experiences and good relations. I think they’d have to be to maintain the trading relationship. The negative ones I’ve read about and heard about seemed to be based around alcohol, at least in this area.*

—Ben Cousineau, Chippewas of Rama<sup>3</sup>

## Borland & Roe: Intermarriage in the Fur Trade

William Roe grew up in Sandwich (now Windsor) where he and his siblings received “good educations, intermingled freely with the surrounding Indian children and learned their language fluently.”<sup>4</sup> He arrived in York in 1807 and moved to Newmarket after the War of 1812



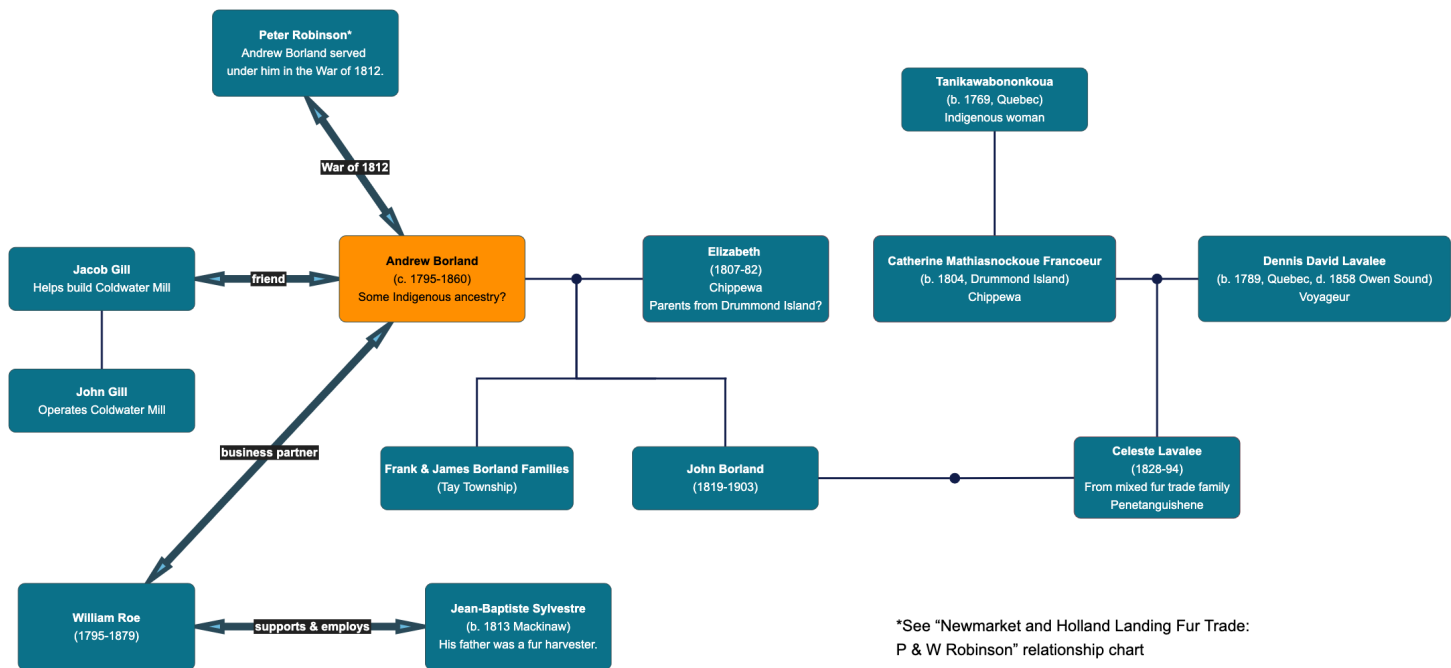
John Kuna, *Dawn on the Holland River*, 2018. This mural depicting the Newmarket fur trade was painted on an exterior wall of the Buckley Insurance Brokers building, Newmarket, across the street from the site of the 1814 Borland and Roe trading post | With permission of the artist

with his father-in-law, William Laughton, also a partner in the fur trade and, later, in a steamship business.

Andrew Borland is believed to have been born in Pennsylvania of unknown and possibly mixed parentage. He arrived in Canada either in 1808 or 1810. One source indicates he drove cattle north along the Hudson River to Montreal then travelled along the north shore of Lake Ontario to York, accompanied by Jacob Gill, a carpenter from the state of New York. Borland worked briefly as a clerk in Darcy Boulton's store at York

before setting up a Newmarket trading post with Roe to intercept traders heading for York, and another at Coldwater. They also established trading posts at the Narrows between Lakes Simcoe and Couchiching and farther north. He purchased 5 acres of land in Newmarket in 1815.<sup>5</sup>

Settler histories record that "Mr. Borland had a thorough knowledge of the Indian character, as well as of the language of the neighbouring tribes, and had acquired considerable influence over them."<sup>6</sup> While such descriptions of "friends to the Indian" are often settler hyperbole, Borland did



Borland & Roe, Newmarket fur traders, and their connections | Victoria Freeman and Ludia (Eun Seon) Bae

speak Anishinaabemowin and had close relatives who were Indigenous. He married Elizabeth, an Anishinaabekwe.<sup>7</sup> They were married in a country marriage (i.e., according to Indigenous protocol, not in a Christian church) around 1819. One source indicates she was born in 1797, making her twenty-two when she married, but census information suggests she could have been as young as twelve.<sup>8</sup> (If the latter is correct, this is very young, even by the standards of the day, though a significant number of settler women had their first child by the age of sixteen, and Anishinaabe girls often married at age fourteen or fifteen.)<sup>9</sup>

According to historian Gwen Reimer, “It was common practice for fur traders on and inland from the eastern shore of Georgian Bay to take up Indian wives in that period [the early to mid-nineteenth century].”<sup>10</sup> A country marriage ensured the safety of the fur trader and his access to furs through his wife’s kin. It also gave his wife and her family access to valued trade goods. The women made essential items such as snowshoes, winter clothing, and footwear and often acted as interpreters, negotiators, and guides. According to Reimer, these traders were the only Europeans in the area at the time practising intermarriage. While some fur trade marriages were purely



BAPTISTE SYLVESTRE.

Born at Mackinac, on All Saints' Day, 1813; removed to Penetanguishene and Newmarket in 1816.

Jean Baptiste Sylvestre, photographer and date unknown | Osborne, *The Migration of Voyageurs from Drummond Island to Penetanguishene* in 1828

transactional and temporary, Elizabeth and Andrew's marriage lasted until he died in 1860. She is remembered by descendants as "the real head of the family."<sup>11</sup> She was active in the community and acted as a witness to several marriages in her later years, when she lived in Coldwater, one of the two villages originally established as part of the Coldwater Reserve.

Andrew and Elizabeth's son John Borland appears on a list of seventy-five voyageurs and their families, largely people of mixed Indigenous / French Canadian heritage, evacuated from Drummond Island to Penetanguishene in 1828 after Drummond Island was deemed to be US territory. Many had served as soldiers for the British or worked in the fur trade for the North West Company and had married Indigenous women or their mixed-heritage daughters. Their children had likewise become soldiers or traders. While most received land in the vicinity of Penetanguishene, several collected furs in Muskoka and some traded at Newmarket. Some of the women married local fur traders.<sup>12</sup>

John Borland, only about eight years old, likely travelled with his mother (the list does not include the names of married women). They travelled to Newmarket where the Borland family expanded and lived until the 1830s before moving to Coldwater. John married a woman of mixed Indigenous / French heritage, Celeste Lavallee. As an infant, she had travelled on the same boat from Drummond Island to Penetanguishene with her mother, Catherine Mathiasnockoue Francouer, and her father, voyageur Denis David Lavallee, originally from Sorel, Quebec. Celeste's

maternal Indigenous lineage is known back to her grandmother, Tanikawabononkoua.

One other mixed-heritage fur-trading family from Drummond Island is known to have worked for or brought furs to Borland and Roe. Jean-Baptiste Sylvestre recalled that from 1816 “my father came to Newmarket with his furs”: “There were only a storehouse and two small log huts at the [Holland] landing. My father made arrangements with Mr. Roe, merchant at Newmarket, who sent me to school, and then I engaged to drive team for him and make collections all over the country. I met a party of young people in Georgina [on the south shore of Lake Simcoe] and played the fiddle all night for them while they danced.”<sup>13</sup>

These relationships with Indigenous peoples paid off handsomely for Borland and Roe: “The Indians at that time came to Newmarket in large numbers to exchange their peltries for supplies. These parties sometimes numbered as many as three or four hundred, and the value and extent of the trade may be realized from the fact that sometimes Mssrs. Roe and Borland obtained furs at one time amounting to fifty thousand dollars.”<sup>14</sup>

There was a darker side to this trade. Local fur traders were not above threatening Indigenous peoples who tried to break free from the destructive trade in alcohol. Mississauga missionary Peter Jones related the traders’ hostility to Indigenous Methodism (which required abstinence from alcohol): “Friday 22nd [June 1827].—Cautioned my brethren this morning against believing the traders when they threatened to hinder them from embracing Christianity, as W. Snake, the Chief, informed me that Mr. Bolen [Borland]

and P[hilemon] Squires had threatened to flog him if he did not leave off attending the meetings, and said many other things to intimidate him in becoming a Christian. Indeed, from all accounts the traders are exasperated at the Indians becoming a praying and sober people.”<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps because of injuries sustained in the War of 1812 or a gradual decline in the fur trade, Andrew Borland moved into another line of work. In 1832, he was appointed captain of the wooden paddle steamer *Colborne*, the first to make daily trips from Holland Landing through the Narrows to the Chippewa village that later became Orillia, the starting point of the Coldwater Road. The steamer completed the modernization of the Toronto Carrying-Place transportation route.

By mid-century, as the fur trade became less important to the area’s economy and as the settler population boomed, white settlers in urban areas such as York increasingly frowned upon inter-marriages. Families such as the Borlands came under pressure to downplay their heritage and identify as white, especially if they lived in settler communities where colonial and racist attitudes were a given. Census records reveal changing racial identifications over time. Some branches of the Borland family retained their Indigenous identity, especially in less settled areas or in more marginal occupations. For example, the 1901 census for Tay Township (east of Penetanguishene) lists two Borland families as “Chippewa English Breed.” Frank and James Borland both worked in the lumber trade. James’ son George was a river driver.<sup>16</sup>



distillery, while also maintaining his business interests in York. He shipped furs and potash for French Royalist fur trader Quetton St. George, distilled and milled grains in Newmarket for local markets, and sold goods obtained from wholesalers in York and Kingston. His son Eli built a mill and hotel at Holland Landing and opened a ferry and boat service on Lake Simcoe. The schooner was “chiefly manned and occupied by Indians.”<sup>18</sup> Both worked closely with Peter Robinson, who was building a wholesale retail enterprise in Newmarket / Holland Landing.

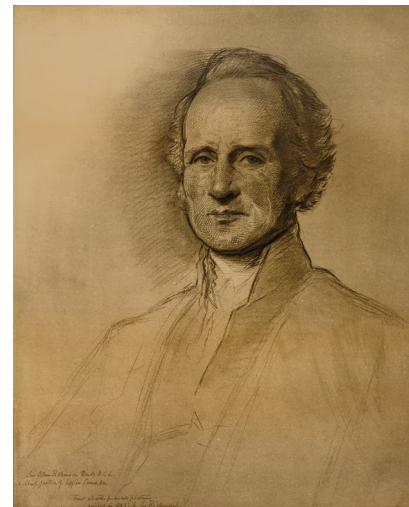
Beman was also a land speculator and served as a constable and justice of the peace. As a provincial commissioner, he was a signatory to the Lake Simcoe–Lake Huron Purchase in 1815, which ceded a large tract of land between Lake Simcoe and Lake Huron. Elisha Beman’s store and mills became the nucleus of Newmarket and were taken over by his stepson Peter after his death.

Peter Robinson was a wealthier, better-educated, and better-connected Loyalist than most of those who came to Upper Canada.<sup>19</sup> His father, Christopher, was a lawyer and United Empire Loyalist from a prominent Virginia slave-owning family who had acquired a great deal of land in Upper Canada, served as an elected member of the House of Assembly, and was a founder and bencher of the Law Society of Upper Canada. Peter Robinson moved with his father and mother to York in 1798 (from Kingston) and established himself in Newmarket in 1812. He opened a mill and bought lots on Yonge Street for the site of what became the village of Holland

Landing. He soon became an agent of the North West Company and the pre-eminent fur trader in Newmarket.

In 1815, George Head, the elder brother of later lieutenant-governor Sir Francis Bond Head and the author of *Forest Scenes and Incidents, in the Wilds of North America* (1829), visited Newmarket and noted in his journal that Robinson “kept a shop in the house where we now were, which was plentifully stocked with all manner of commodities, particularly such as were suited to the wants and tastes of the Indians: it was in fact, the great mart to which all those in this part of the community resorted to furnish themselves with the different articles of which they stood need,—flour, cheese, blue cloth, powder and shot, for the men, and all sorts of millinery and ornament for the [women], such as flaring gown patterns, beads, and rings for their noses.”<sup>20</sup>

That Peter Robinson moved in different circles than Andrew Borland and his family is evident from his career. Robinson was elected to the House of Assembly for York East in 1816 and for York and Simcoe in 1820, along with William Warren Baldwin, father of reformer Robert Baldwin. He was named director of the newly established Bank of Upper Canada in 1823. Yet in 1823 and 1825 he also sponsored the immigration of 2,500 impoverished and dispossessed Irish Catholic tenant farmers and their families to Lanark County, Carleton County, and the Peterborough area. In 1827, he became commissioner of Crown lands, a post he held until 1836, during which time he approved sales, appraised land, collected money from the sale of Six Nations lands, and



Peter, William B., and John Beverley Robinson | Peter Robinson and William B. Robinson, Toronto Public Library, Canadian Documentary Art Collection, C-2-23b and C-2-23a; *Sketch of Sir John Beverley Robinson* by George Richmond, Toronto Public Library, Canadian Documentary Art Collection, JRR315

settled Black veterans and Loyalists in Oro Township. Tory in his politics, he represented York on both the Legislative and Executive Councils. He died in 1838.

Peter Robinson was listed as unmarried at his death, but his will made provision for two children of an unknown mother or mothers. Whitchurch historian Marjorie Richardson reportedly found evidence that his prominent family “tried to suppress the fact Peter married a North American First Nations woman.”<sup>21</sup>

Peter’s younger brother William Robinson also lived in Newmarket and joined his brother in the firm P. and W. Robinson. He married Elizabeth Jarvis, daughter of William Jarvis and the sister of Samuel Peters Jarvis, who was

married to the daughter of Chief Justice William Dummer Powell. Robinson established two trading posts, on Lake Joseph and Georgian Bay. He became known as “one of the chief Indian traders throughout northern Ontario” and enjoyed a reputation for fair dealing among Indigenous peoples.<sup>22</sup> In 1833, he moved to Holland Landing. He was named a justice of the peace and was elected to the Legislative Assembly for Simcoe County numerous times between 1830 and 1854. He gave “lavish grants of land to Tories” to get elected in 1836. In 1844 he was named inspector general, and he was a member of the Legislative Council in 1844–45. Then, in 1846, he became chief commissioner of public works. He also acquired land in Seneca Township on the Haldimand Tract.

For the Anishinaabek and other Indigenous peoples, William Robinson's name is associated with the Robinson treaties. He negotiated the first Robinson Treaty in 1843 (for 700 acres in the District of Simcoe, to be held in trust for the Chipewas of Lake Simcoe and signed by Musquakie). He then negotiated the Robinson Huron and the Robinson Superior Treaties of 1850–51, which became models for the Numbered Treaties negotiated in western and northern Canada after Confederation. In a groundbreaking revenue-sharing clause, the treaties tied annuities to resource revenues, but these promises were not honoured by the Crown, which capped annuities at four dollars per person in 1870. In 2024, the twenty-one First Nations named in the Robinson Huron Treaty agreed to a \$10 billion settlement for past annuities.<sup>23</sup>

Mississauga Methodist missionary Peter Jones related an incident that reveals another side of William Robinson—his Eurocentrism—and the injustice inherent in the imposition of British law. Jones interpreted for Chief John Assance when he appeared before Robinson, who was a justice of the peace, at Newmarket in 1828: “The Matachedash chief had complained about a white man who had severely beaten one of the members of his band, but Robinson refused to issue a warrant to arrest the man because the chief could not cite the day of the month when the beating occurred.”<sup>24</sup> This incident is described in George Playter's *History of Methodism*:

The chief gave a fine reprimand to the magistrate. Said he: “I have been abused again and again by your people, and no

notices has been taken of them for their bad conduct; and I thought the reason you did not take notice of us was because we were so wretched, ignorant, and drunken; and consequently not worthy of regard. But now our eyes are opened to see our miserable condition, and in seeing we have endeavored to forsake our former evil ways. I cannot suffer any more from your young men, without having justice done to the offenders. Consider what I say.”<sup>25</sup>

The third of the Robinson brothers, John Beverley Robinson, was named attorney general of Upper Canada in 1814 and served as chief justice from 1829. He was also a member of the powerful Legislative Council. Along with John Strachan, the first Anglican bishop of Toronto, he headed what became known as the Family Compact, a small tightly knit group of men from interrelated families and their associates who dominated the government of Upper Canada in the 1820s and 1830s.

About half the Family Compact's members were second-generation Loyalists who, like Robinson, were “brought up in the tradition of unswerving devotion to the King and Mother Country.” The rest were born in Great Britain or sons of British immigrants. The Executive Council, senior officials, and members of the judiciary were conservative, Anglican, anti-American, and determined that Upper Canada should remain part of the British Empire, “the grandest, the freest, and the noblest political organization that man has ever developed.”<sup>26</sup> Advocating a “balanced”

government of King, appointed executive, and elected Legislative Assembly, as well as an official church (the Church of England), they were openly contemptuous of democratic ideas such as universal male suffrage and oblivious or hostile to Indigenous forms of governance (as were virtually all settlers). They ensured that like-minded men received positions throughout the colony as sheriffs, magistrates, militia officers, and so on. They were interested in trade, banks, canals, settlement schemes from which they could profit. They also supported a huge increase in British immigration in the 1820s and 1830s to offset the influence of the majority of settlers, who were American-born.

## The Rise of an Agricultural and Industrial Economy

The fur trade at Newmarket peaked in 1825. The Yonge Street route was increasingly bypassed after the North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821, and most furs were transported through York Factory on Hudson Bay directly to England rather than through Montreal, where most local traders had previously sent their furs. Upper Canada's economy, once based mainly on the fur trade, became increasingly focused on agriculture and industry.