



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

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“Progress,” Setbacks, and Strategies for Self-Sufficiency

So-called progress at Coldwater and the Narrows was decidedly uneven. Some families refused to live in log cabins and built wigwams instead. Half the residents gave up alcohol, but others, encouraged by alcohol traders, used alcohol excessively.¹ The school was attended sporadically as parents took their children out on the land for weeks at a time to learn traditional skills and engage in fishing, hunting and gathering, and syrup making. The Methodist Chippewas sometimes abandoned their farms to attend week-long camp meetings. At other times, T.G. Anderson had trouble finding workers for road construction or other manual labour.

We need to understand that we didn't live naturally as sedentary people. Our land base was much larger than a European land base would be. And our understanding, our relationship to the land different.

—Vicki Snache, Chippewas of Rama²

The behaviour and encroachment of settlers led the Chiefs to consider uprooting themselves to a more remote location. They made a formal request in 1832, but officials argued that the same would happen wherever they went.³ Since they had already given up their land, they had few options.

Religious differences hampered collaboration, and intolerance stoked divisions. Although Musquakie advocated Methodism, sobriety, education, and farming, roughly half his people preferred their own belief system and did not convert. Meanwhile, bitter competition between the various Christian denominations increased strife and slowed the reserve's development. Although Peter Jones had converted many in the Lake Simcoe area in the late 1820s, colonial officials still mistrusted the Episcopal Methodists because of their involvement in opposition politics and their links to American Methodists. Officials approved the appointment of an Anglican missionary in 1830, and Anderson, himself a devout Anglican, “saw his own role as that of chief missionary.”⁴

Titus Hibbert
Ware, *Indians at
Coldwater, Ontario,*
1844 | Toronto
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The Potagunasees were Roman Catholics connected to the Ojibwe and mixed-heritage fur trade community near Penetanguishene and to Catholic Odaawaas / Ottawa led by Jean-Baptiste Assiginack, who had settled at Coldwater despite fierce opposition from the Anglican missionary. Chief Assance, who shocked many Methodist Anishinaabek when he converted to Catholicism from Methodism in 1832, complained that Anderson had refused to allow a priest access

to the roughly one hundred Catholic Indians at Coldwater.⁵

Religious conflict led to conflict in education. Anglican missionaries were opposed to the Methodist school at the Narrows and set up a competing school, which failed because its teachers did not speak Anishinaabemowin.⁶ At the annual present distributions at Penetanguishene, Anderson, Assiginack, Peter Jones, and Adam Elliot, agent for the Home District of the Society for

Converting and Civilizing the Indians, engaged in intense religious debate.⁷

How to respond to settler depredations became a matter of controversy. Musquakie intervened to stop the Chippewas' violent retribution against a travelling white surgeon who had desecrated an Indigenous grave and helped himself to a skull and other remains. Musquakie insisted that they trust the white man's law to render justice—but it didn't. This incident among others weakened the Chief's support among his people; he was perceived as too accommodating and conciliatory. Support shifted to some of his sub-Chiefs, notably Bigwin, Nanigishkung, and Negenauquaot / Big Shilling, who took a stronger stand against the imposition of settler ways.⁸

At an 1833 Chippewa Council held at Coldwater, Musquakie spoke of the settlers' active interference: "My Father our Young Men take their Axes and go into the Wood, they do not however proceed far before they return to their homes . . . because the White Men are such close neighbors of theirs that they interfere with them."⁹ This interference included intrusion on the reserve and outright occupation and possession of Chippewa houses. A white man named Laughton took possession of two houses built for the Chippewas and leased them to white men. Another house intended for the Chippewas, occupied by Gerald Alley, burned down in a fire.

Chief Assance complained that village residents were not receiving produce from the communal farms:

Father you promised that you would have a small garden made for us, out of which

we could get what would be necessary for ourselves and families. Father you promised us that the Children at school should have from the Farm what was wanted for them as likewise what was required for the Teachers and likewise our Superintendent . . . Father I cannot take any thing I want from the Farm, not a potatoe or Turnip or a grain of wheat . . . Father there was a great quantity of wheat here last year when I asked for any I sometimes got it and some times was refused—a great deal of it rotted and was lost and some of it remains at the North river now . . . Father it would have been better if those articles that were spoiled last year had been given to the old and helpless people . . . Father a great many of my Friends & Countrymen come here to see how I get on—when they arrive here they see that I am poor and have nothing, they go home and say that John Aissance had an empty hand.¹⁰

Taugaiwinnini, the speaker for the Potagunasees, identified other issues: "Father our Young Men are good Workmen and would make quantities of Hay—but they have no scythes. Father We wish to have a Milk Cow, we could Milk if we had any thing to Milk. We wish if His Excellency saw fit that he would be pleased to grant us another pair of oxen . . . Father we have always been anxious to raise Cattle and had we any thing to give them to eat we might succeed in so doing."¹¹

Chief Assance pointed out that because their annuities were now being used to fund the mills,

and because the government would not fund a blacksmith or a doctor: "We have no doctor here there is one at the Narrows but he seldom visits us."¹²

Anderson responded by blaming the Chippewas for failing to feed their cattle and not securing a constant supply of logs for the sawmill: "Had I not fed the Cattle, they would have starved and without my hauling logs the Mill would have remained idle."¹³

Clearly, the requirements of the civilization initiative were not well-communicated to the Chippewas and did not adequately factor in their deep attachment to their own modes of life. The mills required constant attention, whether for maintenance, labour, input materials, or outputs ready for market. Interruptions would render the whole arrangement unsuccessful and less than self-sufficient, particularly where debt was concerned. The following year, Anderson reported that in the Chippewas' absence, the mills continued to operate with hired settler labour: "The Saw Mill has undergone a good order and is Grinding more or less every day. The Indians being all gone, with most of their children to the Fishery, the school has not been attended."¹⁴

Early in 1835, four Chippewa Chiefs (but not Musquakie) petitioned the government to allow bands to manage all operations on the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve, including schools, gristmills, sawmills, and agricultural enterprises.¹⁵ Anderson advised Givins:

If the Indians would attend to their Farms and raise their own food, which they are certainly able to do with a little industry,

instead of depending on the rent of the Saw Mill, and Grist Mill for food, they might be independant, and become valuable subjects. The Establishment is now in debt and it cannot pay Labourers to do all the work and at the same time supply Lumber free of Expence to the Indians without continuing a burden to the Government, whereas they would or ought to do every thing by their own labour.

Anderson favoured the government's continued control over the school, where he hoped the "civilizing" project would inculcate the discipline needed for the settler way of life: "I do not . . . consider it prudent that they should have the entire control of the School, but if His Excellency is pleased to exceed to their proposals in other respects they should of course support the School Establishment."¹⁶ The Chippewas also wanted control over the mill back from its lessee, George Mitchell. When a spell of cold weather shut down the mill and made it impossible for the lessee to pay his rent, they regained control.¹⁷

In 1835, five years after the creation of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve, Anderson reported favourably on its progress to his superiors. About 500 acres had been cleared, and each family had a farm under cultivation growing potatoes, corn, wheat, oats, and peas. Wigwams had been exchanged for log houses. Hunting "has in many cases been abandoned altogether" or no longer served as the only means of subsistence (though this might have been due to settler depredations and habitat loss). "Habitual intoxication is unknown," and instances of intoxication were



Titus Hibbert Ware,
Coldwater, Ontario,
1844 | Toronto Public
Library Digital Archive,
PICTURES-R-203



Musquakie's substantial house at the Narrows Village was constructed by Jacob Gill for the Indian Department. It was made of wood sawn at a mill in Holland Landing and shipped to Orillia by boat | Hunter, *A History of Simcoe County*

seldom seen even though the “near approach of the White settlers” had rendered a ban on alcohol impossible. “The Sabbath is carefully observed—their religious duties strictly attended to, and reading and writing with a moderate knowledge of arithmetic is almost universal among the young people.”

Anderson reported that Chiefs Assance and Musquakie now had frame homes, and schools existed at both Coldwater and the Narrows. A sawmill and gristmill were operating at Coldwater, and a sawmill was being built at the Narrows. On their own initiative, the Chipewas were building log barns and stables. Most Anishinaabek had adopted European dress and were manufacturing their own household furniture. They also understood the difference between barter and cash transactions, which would

Interviewee Mark Douglas, of Chippewas of Rama First Nation. Douglas is a founder and member of the Mnjikaning Fish Fence Circle, which protects the weir and sees that the site is honoured as a historical gathering place for Indigenous peoples | Photo by Robert Snache, courtesy of Chippewas of Rama First Nation



protect them from traders. The bands fished in the fall “as a source of profit, and not merely for their own food,” and they had built “two Bat-teaux each capable of holding 40 or 50 barrels of Fish.” Anderson continued, “Although obliged frequently to submit to irritating and extremely unjust treatment on the part of neighbouring White settlers, no Indian has during the whole period of my superintendence been complained of for any breach of the laws with one solitary exception, for the removal of part of a fence and that done in ignorance.” He concluded that “this Experiment will appear incontestably to prove, that the Indian, under proper Treatment, is capable of being weaned from his savage Life, and of being made, under the Blessing of the Almighty, a good Member of the Church of Christ, and a dutiful and loyal Subject.”¹⁸

All was not so rosy from an Indigenous perspective. Emblematic of the whole enterprise was the near destruction of the ancient fishing weir at the Narrows. In 1832, Andrew Borland was appointed captain of the wooden paddlewheel steamer *Sir John Colborne*, which made daily trips from Holland Landing to the village at the Narrows. In 1833, it was replaced by the *Simcoe*, which was bigger, faster, and flat-bottomed, making it less likely to get stuck in the Holland River’s mud. This steamer, renamed *Peter Robinson*, was bought by Charles Thompson, who also ran a stagecoach from Toronto to Holland Landing.

Before then, shallow waters had kept ships out of Lake Couchiching and away from the Narrows village, rendering white settlement difficult. In 1833, the *Robinson* forced its way through the Narrows: its big sidewheels churned up the sandy bottom and destroyed much of the five-thousand-year-old weir.¹⁹ The weir was damaged further when the channel was dredged to open it up for navigation. After 1833, the *Robinson* regularly brought settlers to the reserve wharf at the Narrows. From there, they travelled in large numbers to Coldwater along the Coldwater Road. At Penetanguishene, they boarded *Penetanguishene*, built by former fur trader Andrew Mitchell and partner Alfred Thompson and captained by Borland. The steamship ran from Penetanguishene to Sault Ste. Marie, transporting settlers and travellers into the northwestern regions of Upper Canada.²⁰