

First Days

From Hints to Immigrants, 1824

In 1824 Reverend William Bell, Perth's first pastor, published, in Scotland, a book entitled 'Hints to Immigrants'; its purpose and intended audience obvious from its title. Running to more than 60,000 words Bell's 'Hints' is comprised of a series of 25 'letters' written by Bell himself, plus an appendix of three additional 'letters' written by his son Andrew. The book well served its purpose, providing a wealth of detail that would be of interest and practical use to would-be emigrants, while at the same time leaving an equally detailed description of early Perth and Upper Canada to posterity.

Andrew Bell (1803-1856), the Reverend's eldest son, and eldest surviving child, had been born in Scotland and came to the Perth Military Settlement with his father at age 13 in 1816. He grew up at (indeed with) Perth and, when he contributed to his father's book, was studying at Edinburgh University in Scotland. Andrew's 'Letter # 1' included a description of the first days of the Perth settlement.

- Ron W. Shaw

1824

Dear Sir,

At my father's desire, I add to the foregoing series of letters a few of my own, containing such information as, since I came to this country, has appeared to me would be useful ...

Although Government does not now give the same encouragement to settlers as formerly, yet emigrants from Great Britain or Ireland may still obtain land from Government, on condition of performing the settling duties. These consist of building a house, clearing half of the road opposite to their own land, and clearing and cultivating five acres of the land within three years. They then obtain a title-deed on payment of certain fees, which now amount to about £3/10s.

Canada certainly affords great advantages to emigrants. Hardships and difficulties they must and will experience at first, as all new settlers do. But after a few years labour they will come to enjoy an independence, to which the members of an over-crowded and manufacturing population are entire strangers.

That you may, however, have some idea of the formation of a new settlement, I shall give you a sketch of the beginning of the Perth Settlement. The first emigrants who went to this settlement went out from Scotland in 1815, under the care of Government. When they got to Brockville, they were lodged in barracks there, till it could be determined where they were to be settled. Most of them wished to proceed as far as Lake Erie; but the agents of Government recommended lands, which were soon to be surveyed, about forty-five miles to the northwest of Brockville. As the season was, however, too far advanced to proceed to the land before winter, it was resolved that

they should remain in the barracks till spring. In the meantime, several new townships were surveyed, and other preparations for settlement were made. During the winter, the more industrious part of them dispersed themselves through the country, and obtained employment, some from the farmers and others from mechanics.

Early in the spring of 1816 a party of men [*from among the Scots settlers wintering at Brockville*], along with some surveyors, and under the direction of Captain McEver, went to mark out and cut a road to the land on which they were to settle. The new townships which had been surveyed were Bathurst, Drummond and part of Beckwith.

The country, for about half of the distance, was settled and partly cleared. But the other half of their way lay through the forest, where there was not the least trace of a road, and where no people of any civilized nation had ever lived. As they had some sledges with provisions with them, which could not be brought through the woods, they were obliged to find direction, upon the ice.

They reached the place where the town of Perth now stands, on the afternoon of the 22nd March. The snow was then between two and three feet deep, and the weather very cold. Here, in the midst of an immense forest, and many miles from any human habitations, they were obliged to sleep in the open air. They made themselves beds on the snow, of small twigs and branches of the hemlock trees, and, buried in these, with large fires on each side of them, they passed their first night's residence in Perth.

As soon as possible, they built some huts to hold the stores, and then proceeded to mark out and clear the road through the woods to the front, which occupied them the greater part of a month. During this time they experienced great hardships, having to sleep in the cold open air without any covering after working hard all day, often up to the knees in water. One man was taken very ill from fatigue and cold. His companions set out to carry him to his family at Brockville, but he died by the way.

When they had got the road through, they brought in their families, received their land, and built huts for themselves. It was now rather late for them to think of getting much crop in, but the most of them cleared a small piece and planted some potatoes.

The most of these people were settled together along both sides of the line between Burgess and Bathurst; and from the circumstances of so many Scotch people being settled together, that line was called the Scotch Settlement. The land they got was in general good, but very level. The two new townships are watered on the front by the Tay, and several other smaller streams, and on the back, by the Mississippi, which is a very considerable river.

A piece of land containing 400 acres, in the south corner of Drummond, was set apart for the town, and divided into small lots. Men who had been hired from the front settlements, built a Government storehouse, and an office for the Superintendent of the settlement and his clerks. Merchants now began to come in and settle in the town. Articles of every description were excessively dear, partly from the great expense attendant on the transportation of goods from the front, and partly from a circumstance which takes place in almost every new settlement, namely, the advantage which is taken of the necessities of the settlers. Flour was twenty-two dollars a barrel, wheat four dollars a bushel, and potatoes two; the four-pound loaf half a dollar, and other

things in proportion. It is true they had the Government allowance of provisions, but yet they had a number of other necessary articles to buy.

The little crop the settlers had put in, in a great measure failed, on account of the smallness of their clearings, being all shaded by surrounding woods, so that they yet received little benefit from it.

During the summer and in the autumn, great numbers of emigrants and about 1,200 soldiers, came to the settlement and received land. In 1817, several new townships were added to the Perth settlement, and they were soon filled up by emigrants who were continually thronging in. In 1818, a settling establishment was begun at Richmond, and in 1820 another at Lanark, and the population has now increased to upwards of 8,000.

Although it is only a few years since this settlement was begun, it is astonishing to see what improvements have taken place. The woods are beginning to disappear, and luxuriant crops are seen instead of them. Good roads are making in various directions. All the settlers have good and comfortable, and many of them handsome, houses for their own; and the country already contains three flourishing town.