

Village Essay 6

Public Buildings: Churches, Schools and Taverns

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Copied Monday April 19, 2021

As settlement grew in Oakville, there was an increased desire for places and organisations to connect the settlers scattered about the countryside. The relationship between the public institutions in Oakville, as in other Upper Canadian towns, was a close one. Churches, schools and taverns created a network of support systems outside of the farmstead in the age before government intervention in private lives.

Before the advent of any other public building, "taverns and inns made the trip to the front bearable for team and teamster alike." With travelling distances being much more than the average teamster could accomplish in one day even with a smooth snow-covered ground in the middle of winter, no farmer inland more than twenty miles inland could get to his destination and home to sleep again without a night on the road. One or more taverns "every six or seven miles became characteristic in Southern Ontario by the 1830s".¹ Trafalgar Township acquired its first tavern early on when Daniel Munn's tavern opened in 1814 at the south east corner of Dundas and the 6th Line.²

The tavern was much more than a venue for drinking. Until town halls were built "the inn was often a community's only public building [used for] political meetings, sale of crown lands, distribution of lots, church services, Sunday school, court sessions, township council sessions and all public entertainment" and "it was often stagecoach drivers who spread the news."³ In and around Oakville it was McGuffin's tavern which was frequently used for a polling station and "as the Methodist Church and a school were across Dundas Street on the north side it was traditionally stated that it was the south for legislation and damnation, the north for education and salvation".⁴

The law touched the tavern keeper's trade from the earliest days. Regulations included: No excess drinking, no profanities or gambling; sufficient sheds, stables and/or barns were required for the patron's horses, carriages and wagons. The innkeeper should also have at least four good beds in addition to those for his family. All of these regulations were controls to limit taverns and increase inns.⁵

Barnet Griggs had a one storey frame house on Lakeshore after 1828, then a few years later he added a second storey. By 1833 stages were changing horses at his halfway house regularly. It was subsequently leased by Jesse Belyea who advertised in 1853 that his Frontier House would "provide the best accommodation in Oakville." The hostelry soon became known as the Steamboat Hotel operating under that name until 1860.⁶ Another innkeeper of the time, Thomas Sumner, "was quite a character," and used his "waggish humour" to advertise his tavern to best advantage. His "Good Liquors," were "purified by an addition of Ontario's beautiful waters," and his "good stables--good Hay and Oats" were operated by "attentive Ostlers to comfort the noble steed".⁷

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A later addition to the town's register of taverns was the Canadian Hotel which opened in 1855 and coincided with the arrival of the railroad in Oakville. It was run by two women and the hotel's reputation was one of being loud and rowdy.⁸ William Johnson Sumner bought the Oakville House thereafter and the building survived until 1984 when it was torn down.⁹

In the 1850s and 1860s Halton County was "an object of derision to those who opposed prohibition".¹⁰ It was the first to take a step towards prohibition, therefore acquiring the name of the 'banner county'. In the late 1870s and 1880s Oakville's residents worked around the restraints imposed by the Scott Act¹¹ by "developing a frequent and prolonged need of spirits for medicinal purposes." There were five drugstore owners in the county who had been granted special spirit licenses under the Act. They were required by the government "to furnish lists of those customers to whom they had sold liquor, as well as the names of the prescribing physicians, the amounts purchased, and the purpose for which the liquor was required".¹² The residents of Halton County coped most imaginatively with the Scott Act in Oakville. Most of the residents of the town "appeared to suffer from some unknown malady the cure for which was everyone's favourite remedy." As an example, in one ten day period from 17-27 November, 1883 "more than 125 people bought 'medicine' from druggists C.W. Pearce all of it prescribed by Doctors Sutherland, Urquhart or Williams. One customer whose name appeared with regularity was Peter McDougald, a colourful mayor of Oakville whose dependence on 'medicine' resulted in his death only five months later".¹³

As early as 1795 the first Methodist circuit riders arrived in Upper Canada from New York State and continued to come until the War of 1812. After the original members left, the Methodists in Upper Canada reorganised to become the Methodist Church of England or Wesleyans until 1820. In the 1830s, up until the Rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada, Canadian Methodists were considered dangerous because of their American ties.¹⁴ At the same time, in 1827, Oakville built a frame meeting house on Navy Street at Randall Street and the first religious meetings were held there.¹⁵

Justus W. Williams was first to be concerned about establishing a Methodist church in Oakville. He and several other prominent Trafalgar citizens, Charles Sovereign, William Hatton, Robert Leach, Elijah Dexter, became trustees for securing land for a church. William Chisholm donated an acre of land valued at \$400 plus \$40 cash to assist them.¹⁶

It was also the influence of the Methodists that helped create the Temperance Society which was formed in Trafalgar Township in 1830. 17 From 1834 onwards, in Oakville proper, there was a Temperance Reformation Society, upon whose board Justus Williams sat as president. The Reformation Society built a Temperance Hall on the south-east corner of Randall and Trafalgar Roads in 1843 and remained there until it was demolished in 1969. 18 The new Methodist Church was built in 1877 where it stands today.¹⁹

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The Methodists were not the only ones concerned with temperance. As early as 1839 there was a lecture on abstinence in Oakville by the Rev. Robert Murray, a Presbyterian minister. In the lecture, Rev. Murray refers to the growing American temperance movement²⁰ an important influence in later years as will be seen.

The Roman Catholic Church was already represented in Trafalgar Township in 1835 when 150 people attended mass. Only a year later, Chisholm donated Block 35, at the corner of King and Reynolds to the Catholic Church, it is said because of his appreciation of the Irish labourers he employed. In return, they named the church St. Andrew's after the patron saint of Scotland, in honour of Chisholm's Scottish heritage.²¹

Chisholm's Scottish heritage was also represented in the Presbyterian Protestantism which had been established in Scotland. Before an actual building was erected, a minister was required to come from Hamilton to perform baptisms and marriages. The division into a Free Kirk created the Presbyterian Church of Canada in 1843. The first church in Oakville was built in 1850 on the north side of William Street halfway between Dundas and Reynolds.²²

Aside from the churches, the next established public service was the school system. The first general school affiliated with the town, the Oakville Common School, began in 1836. Included among the trustees was Justus Williams who, with the others on the board, employed William Tassie, a teacher who would one day become a great educator. School was held in the meeting hall which was converted to accommodate students taking penmanship lessons.²³ The rules and duties required of this first, as with subsequent teachers, included keeping the children clean and quiet, and ensuring that a good fire was being kept using firewood which each student contributed while enrolled there. Tassie's quarterly reports kept the trustees up to date on expenses as well as the students' enrolment.²⁴

After the Common School Act in 1841, legislation that moved towards unifying education around the province, Oakville Common School became School Section No. 14, Trafalgar Township.²⁵ The school remained the same until 1854 when £250 was raised for new seats, desks and other school requirements. The school was also enlarged and space was created for the Grammar School, the only one in Halton County. Fees for the Common School were 1s6d and for the Grammar School 1s6d for each individual subject studied up to 6s3d.²⁶

In addition to the establishment of the Grammar and Common Schools, the 1850s and 1860s saw the beginning of new alternative schooling methods. Eighteen-fifty-seven saw the creation of the Oakville Ladies Academy which along with reading and writing taught its pupils music, French, drawing and needlework.²⁷ Three years later, St. Mary's Separate School was established. Under the School Act in 1841, any other religious group was able to create their own school with their own religious instruction--mostly this group would be Catholic. St. Mary's was located in the rear of St. Andrew's Church and was "in the hands of the Sisters of St. Joseph."²⁸

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The School Law Improvement Act in 1871 changed the common school into a primary school and the grammar school became the first town high school. The Act also required that schoolhouses be placed on at least half an acre replete with a playground, and be "adequately heated and ventilated." The Oakville School became a brick building at the corner of Colbourne and Navy Streets. and alterations in the boundaries brought more students to study there than at any other time--a number which reached 475 students in the 1870s. To accommodate this population the school was enlarged several times over the next few years, during which time a new stove and well were added. For forty years the school remained there until moving to Reynolds Street in 1910.²⁹

In all, the first established public places in Oakville were a vastly important resource for the farmer on his plot of land. By having a centre of political, religious or educational life, the town became truly a place where people came together. Although at first the relationship between the schools, churches and taverns of Oakville seem disparate, they all held important posts in the lives of the residents of the community.

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Footnotes

1. David Wood, ed., *Perspectives on Landscape and Settlement in Nineteenth Century Ontario*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1975) p. 57
2. Edwin C. Guillet, *Pioneer Inns and Taverns*, (Vol. III & IV, Toronto: Ontario Publishing Company Ltd., 1958) p. 171
3. Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers, *Tavern in the Town: Early Inns and Taverns of Ontario*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) pp. 3-4
4. Edwin C. Guillet, *Pioneer Inns and Taverns*, pp. 171-172
5. Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers, *Tavern in the Town: Early Inns and Taverns of Ontario*, p. 5
6. *Ibid.*, p. 132
7. Edwin C. Guillet, *Pioneer Inns and Taverns*, p. 168
8. Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers, *Tavern in the Town: Early Inns and Taverns of Ontario*, p. 132
9. *Ibid.*, p. 133
10. *Ibid.*, p. 132
11. Austin Potter, *From wealth to poverty, or, The tricks of the traffic: a story of the drink curse*, (Montreal/Toronto: C.W. Coates, W. Briggs, 1884.) The Scott Act was passed in 1878 sixty-four years after the first tavern was opened in Halton County.
12. Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers, *Tavern in the Town: Early Inns and Taverns of Ontario*, pp. 130-131
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131
14. Ernest L. Wilson, *A History of St. John's United Church: 1832-1972*, (Oakville, Ont., St John's United Church?, 1972? pamphlet) p. 3
15. *Ibid.*, p. 2
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7
17. *Ibid.*, p. 6
18. *Ibid.*, p. 12
19. *Ibid.*, p. 30
20. Rev. Robert Murray, *Course of Lectures on Absolute Abstinence* (Toronto: British Colonialist Office, 1839, pamphlet)
21. *St. Andrew's Church Oakville: 1840-1990*, (Oakville, Ont., 1990 pamphlet) p. 6
22. Hazel C. Mathews, *Oakville and the Sixteen: The History of an Ontario Port*, pp. 266-267
23. *Ibid.*, p. 107
24. *Ibid.*, p. 108
25. *Ibid.*, p. 112
26. *Ibid.*, p. 282
27. *Ibid.*, p. 232
28. *Ibid.*, p. 285
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 422-423