

THE SETTLEMENT OF DURHAM COUNTY.*

I realize, in undertaking to speak before Durham Old Boys about the connections of my family with Durham County, that I am probably addressing gentlemen who are far better acquainted with the facts of history connected with this county than I am. But, be this as it may, I shall take the liberty to discuss the settlement of my direct ancestors in Durham County, or, more definitely speaking, in Darlington township, as being the first to settle in that locality.

My direct ancestor, Roger Conant, who ultimately was the first settler in Durham County, lived in Massachusetts at the outbreak of the American Revolution. He, unlike his two brothers, refused to join the patriot army. He had been educated for the law, and had attended Yale University, and owned several thousand acres of land in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Money was a scarce commodity, and for his large property Roger Conant could only get together \$5,000. This he obtained in gold, and in 1777 he set out from the vicinity of Boston with his family. Their conveyance was a covered wagon drawn by two horses, and following was an ox-team drawing a cart, laden with household goods. His first stop was at Hudson River, where he seems to have remained for some time. But Governor Simcoe's offer of grants of land in Upper Canada to those who would come and occupy them hurried Roger Conant's journey. Arriving at the mouth of the Niagara River and hiring a flat scow to convey himself and his family across, he landed at Newark, then the capital of Upper Canada. There he met Governor Simcoe, who tried to persuade him to go up Yonge St. to lands on Lake Simcoe. But he did not wish to leave the shores of Lake Ontario, so he refused. Following the lake shore, they at last reached the site of York, then a cluster of Indian wigwams. But he did not stop here, and continued his journey still farther east on the shore of the Lake.

It was late autumn and provision must be made for man and beast. October was upon them and winter near. They ultimately reached a spot which seemed to suit their exact convenience, and this, because it provided food both for the cattle and horses and for the settlers themselves. It was the mouth of a little creek, known as Barber's Creek, which flows into Lake Ontario about two miles east of the western county line of Durham County, and 5 miles west of Bowmanville harbour. This creek, I think, does not empty into Lake Ontario at the same place now as it did when Roger Conant settled there. It has somewhat deviated from its old course, but there still can be traced the place where it emptied into Lake Ontario when Roger Conant settled in that locality. It was a meadow, and dense marsh grass grew there, which the early settler was quick to observe would provide food for his beasts during the coming winter. And, again, this same little stream was to provide food for himself and his family also. Salmon ascended the creek in November in great numbers, and this would serve as their winter's food. Here they finally located and set about building a log cabin, the foundation of which still remains close by the waters of Lake Ontario. They brought their distaff, and were, to a certain extent, independent of the whole world for their existence. Hemp seed too they brought with them, and only last summer while visiting the spot I found growing there several stalks of the long hemp which originally they grew there.

It was truly a grand existence. The virgin forest around them still stood untouched by the hand of the red man, who, up to this time, had contented himself with hunting the beasts of the forest or catching the fish in the streams. The region about them was a

* Read before the Durham Old Boys' Association.

perfect result of the creation of God, as indeed is the whole of Durham County at the present time. It was a new world, a world just to be opened to the influence of civilized man.

The remainder of the fall they spent in building their cabin and in preparing for the severe Canadian winter which they knew was inevitable. Roger Conant was a literary man, having graduated from Yale in 1765, and he brought with him some books, which, no doubt, were company for him during the long winter months. Governor Simcoe had told Roger Conant, when he saw him at Newark, that when he had fixed on a location, he was to blaze the limits of the farm on the lake shore he would like to have, and that he, the Governor, would see that he got his patents for the area so blazed. So, after the log cabin had been completed, he, in accordance with the Governor's offer, began to blaze out the land which he wished to own. But Roger Conant was content with comparatively little, and only blazed out some 800 acres altogether. It is to be regretted by myself, and indeed by all of his direct descendants, that he did not blaze out at least a township. The lots so blazed were, precisely speaking, lots 28, 29, 30, and 31 in broken front, Darlington town, ship, Durham County. The reason he did not blaze more is undoubtedly because blazing involved considerable labour, since a straight line must be made out from blaze to blaze, and again, the early settler did not have any thought of any future value of the land thus acquired. He did not, consequently, bother blazing more than 800 acres. The blazing being completed, the settlers set about clearing away the forest, and the whole winter was spent in logging. In the following autumn they reaped the bounteous harvest which the virgin soil in its abundant fertility yielded.

But Roger Conant was not content to live like this. He had brought considerable money with him from New England, and this he proposed to use to some advantage. Furs and furs only would bring money, so with the capital which he possessed, he made his way to Montreal by canoe, and there, about 1799, had Durham boats built. They were broad-beamed open flat boats, and strongly built for rowing or towing. These he filled with blankets, knives, ammunition and the like, to trade with the Indians for furs. With these boats he returned to Durham County and his home. He went north with his goods to trade with the Indians, to the shores of Lake Scugog in Durham County. Trading with the Indians generally began in the early morning, and the Indians were informed of the trader's presence by the firing of three guns at sundown in quick succession. Upon this signal the Indians would hasten to the trader to exchange their furs. The dealing was necessarily very slow, as an Indian will trade only one skin at a time, and the bargain concerning that skin must be fully completed before he will enter upon another deal. But having finally disposed of all his goods, Roger Conant would return to the lake shore to get another supply for trading purposes.

It was a hard life, but Roger Conant did not suffer, being a man of very remarkable physique. They generally arrived at the trading grounds in the evening, and it was necessary to wait till morning before commencing operations. Therefore, having cut some boughs for a bed, they would soon be covered with their robes and, before long, sound asleep. It was more often the case than not that they awoke in the morning to find five or six inches of snow covering them, and they then no longer wondered why they slept so warm.

Roger Conant amassed considerable wealth in this way, both from his fur trading and from his sale of potash, which was the only other means of making money at that time. Potash then brought some \$140 per barrel, and this, with the fur trading, helped to make wealth for my ancestors and others.

Maple sugar making, too, although it did not enrich the settler any, added greatly to his home comforts. The sugar in the dense woods of that time was easily obtainable, both on

account of the great number of maples standing then, and also on account of the density of the woods.

But when the desire for fur trading had been satisfied, Roger Conant once more turned to his domestic duties. A small portion of the blazed area had already been cleared, but it was necessary to clear more. That which they grew upon this area was the main part of their food. There was no mill nearer than Kingston, and as taking grain this distance to be ground would involve too much time and labour, the settler sought to discover an easier method of having his wheat ground into flour. And now the ingenuity of a settler in need was brought to use. With a burnt outstump as a mortar, and a billet of wood as a pestle, he pounded or crushed the wheat, thus producing a kind of flour. But crude as it was, it served the purpose well, and was satisfying to the wants of the early settler. Their distaff served to provide them with clothing, and altogether they lived a fairly happy and contented life. Their food was crude and simple yet wholesome. The salmon of the creek which flowed past their door and the victims of their trusty guns, served as their chief diet, together with a kind of bread that was produced from wheat which they themselves ground up. Game there was and plenty of it. There were a great many bear about the vicinity, and the settlers often encountered them while at work. The deer also, at that time, came to the shore of Lake Ontario to water, and no doubt many of them fell a victim to the settler's rifle. Wolves were very numerous, but Conant did not suffer from them very much, since his abode was surrounded on two sides of a triangle by the lake and by the creek and he could keep a large fire burning at the other side if they became at all threatening. The Hudson's Bay boats could occasionally be seen going up or down the lake, and this helped to wear away the monotony of their secluded life.

Of the sons of Roger Conant it may be said that, although capable men, they were at a grievous disadvantage because of their lack of education. Education could not be obtained in Old Upper or Lower Canada as easily at that time as at the present time. There were no schools there in fact, and had there been any, there would have been no pupils. Consequently, we find Conant's sons possessing grand physical health, but with little education. They felled the forest, and obtained from the soil the crops that in its virgin state it is always ready to yield.

Roger Conant died a very large real estate owner. This part of his possessions is duly scheduled. But of his hoard of gold no mention is made. It is strongly believed by many of his descendants that he buried it, but why he did so is a mystery. On the farm at Darlington on which he resided, a few years before his death he took a large family iron bake-kettle, and placing his gold in it, he buried it. So there is a treasure yet to be discovered by some fortunate person beneath the depth of Durham County that is disturbed by the plough.

But we have been discussing events that took place before any real settlement began in Darlington, or more generally speaking, in Durham County. The Burks and the Trulls settled in Darlington soon after the Conants, and in about the same locality. These were the earliest pioneers who settled down in the then impenetrable forest. They built log shanties with bark roofs, plastered on the inside with mud, and their only neighbors, or rather occasional callers, were the Indians. They were never very troublesome, but caused considerable anxiety, being armed and equipped. But open hostilities were as a general thing avoided. They all took up land, and even at the present time there are Burks living in Darlington, who own the very lands that were originally reclaimed by their ancestors. These families are among the best and most prominent in Durham County.

Of the land which was originally possessed by Roger Conant, there is none, at the present day, owned by any of the Conants. There were four sons and two daughters in

the family, and Thomas Conant, my great-grandfather, was foully massacred in 1838 during the Canadian Revolution by a despatch bearer. This accounts for the fact that we, his direct descendants, do not possess any of the original property. However, we do possess at Port Oshawa, four miles west, some of the property which was owned and occupied by David Annis, who was a brother-in-law of Roger Conant, and who came from Massachusetts with him.

The first actual settlement of Darlington took place in 1794, and from this date onward the number of settlers steadily increased. The grandeur of this part of the country no doubt attracted many, and a census taken in 1829 revealed the fact that there were 118 people living in Darlington. A post-office was established in Darlington about the same year, and we already had the nucleus of a fine township.

Bowmanville, named after a man by the name of Bowman, a Montreal merchant, who at Bowmanville owned a large property, including the mill privilege, sprang into existence soon after this. It was incorporated as a village in 1853, and as a town in 1858. Now we have in Bowmanville one of the finest towns of its size in Ontario, possessing a fine harbour and many substantial residences and superb schools.

But to drive through Durham County at the present time and see the comfortable dwellings of the prosperous farmers and the well-cultivated land stretched out before us, we are apt to forget that our ancestors alone are worthy of credit for this. They found Durham County a dense and impenetrable forest and covered with heavy timber, but they left it a county which is one of the finest in Ontario, both as to the fertility of its soil, and also as to the large number of its inhabitants who are direct descendants of those who, through their diligent labour, opened up for us this vast and fair domain.

GORDON D. CONANT.