

## VII.

### THE FORMER NAMES OF THE THAMES RIVER.

BY JAMES SINCLAIR.

It has appeared to me that there are few sections of Ontario that can present material for historical consideration to a greater extent than the valley of the Thames, whether we consider it in connection with our Indian period, or as the centre from which radiated an influence which did much to stamp upon our earlier settlers those characteristics that have made Ontario as a whole, the premier province of our Dominion. The Indian trail, or as it was more generally known, the River Trail, which margined the river from this point westward had the effect of bringing our earlier settlers into more intimate contact with the natives, who, in many cases, rendered valuable service in the primitive pioneer period. This river had been for centuries prior to the advent of the white man an established highway across the western peninsula, connecting Lake Ontario, the Grand River Valley and the western lake front. It seems to have been a settled custom with the natives to select the river valleys of the country for their more permanent places of residence, which is explained when we consider their mode of life, and in the valley of the Thames all their requirements were abundantly supplied. For forty miles of the distance on the western point of the trail, an unbroken wilderness existed on both sides of the river. Here a band of Moravian missionaries established themselves 127 years ago (1792) and it is to these men we are indebted for what written records exist.

Perhaps it would be well at this point to give the principal source of my information as to what follows. I do not intend to repeat what is already on record as accepted history of events of the later military experiences, in this connection. It was my good fortune to meet at a very early period of my life an old Indian, known as Chief Tim, who frequently visited the home of a relative of mine, and as one who could claim to be contemporary with Simcoe and Brant, was always an interesting visitor, while the old man was always willing to recall the past, and was considered the oracle of his tribe. His knowledge of the history of his race was wonderful, and conflicted in many cases with the commonly received statements, which often proved correct on investigation, one of which was that Brant was the son of a chief. This he contradicted, and our evidence proved him correct. He also had a different version of the selection of the site of Ingersoll, and, as he stated, it was military matters that prevailed; and also of the naming of the river as recorded. And instead of exploration, as he presented it, it was for the purpose of exploitation, as the beavers were numerous and the trade profitable. They had only entered the river when they were forced by the natives to return. The name LaTranche was never recognized by the natives, although it passed into the records. *Picturesque Canada* (p. 502) gives the statement of Bellin, map maker of Louis XV's Depart-

ment of Marine, that the river was explored for 80 leagues without the obstacle of a rapid. Now there is something wrong about this statement of 80 leagues on a river of 135 miles long. The word trench is almost identical with the French word *La Tranche*, and in plain English means ditch. It is not a distinctive name; it is a term used to differentiate between a natural and an artificial water course, and is in fact a contradiction.

The statement that this river did not possess a name at that time, anyone at all conversant with Indian history will recognize at once as incorrect—one of their outstanding characteristics being their habit of applying names to objects of vastly minor importance. This river had a name, and an exalted one at that. While the name has been lost, the meaning has been preserved, and is “The Gift of the Manito of the Waters,” and is the subject of a legend which has been written presumably by the Moravian missionaries.

There is another matter in connection with the naming of the St. Clair, with respect to which our Canadian historians are not in evidence, while our friends in the U. S. have not overlooked it. In 1765, when the revolutionary pot was beginning to simmer, it was deemed advisable that some one in the interest of our country should be somewhere in the neighbourhood of our western front. The appointee to the situation was a British officer named Patrick Sinclair, who had been prominent in the campaign under Wolfe. Arriving at the western front, he decided to purchase a tract of land from the Indians, and which had to be done with the consent and assistance of the leading members of the tribe, as the situation was in almost direct connection with the River trail. Brant at this time was about 22 years of age, and acting chief of the tribes, while his predecessor, Abram, was still Titular Chief, which permitted him to conduct the diplomatic business with the revolutionary commissioners. With the following brief reference by the American chronicler:—“St. Clair, a river called Sinclair in honour of Patrick Sinclair, a British officer, who in 1765 purchased from the Indians a tract of land along the river,” all reference to the matter ends so far as it concerns the establishment of Patrick Sinclair on the western front, which had the effect of securing to the British the river trail as a complete line of defence. At a later period our friends in the U. S. claimed the naming of the river for Arthur St. Clair, who was also a British officer but resigned his commission in 1762, joined the revolutionists and opposed the British. He was defeated by the Indians at the Miami villages. There were therefore three sources from which this river (St. Clair) has derived its name:—from LaSalle in 1689, Patrick Sinclair in 1765, and Arthur St. Clair in 1800.

Governor Simcoe in all his activities was first of all a military man, and in his position as governor of the province, the selection of a more suitable situation for the seat of government was necessary. His initial step in this direction was renaming the river, and by a proclamation which he issued July 16th, 1792, it received the name of the “Thames River,” having for its prototype the world’s famous stream. Nor did he fail to accompany his proclamation with the dignity of appropriate ceremony, his own party, together with many others, assisted by the chaplain, singing *God Save the King*, a practice he followed whenever justified.

The delay in naming London at this time was no doubt due to political consideration in other quarters, as there is no question of his own desire

to name London as the capital of the province. However, in 1794 the site was selected, and London placed on the map. Immediately followed the naming of the counties, with Middlesex naturally following the naming of London, from its situation on the River, "Chatham," from its position on the River corresponding to that in the motherland in the County of Kent. Oxford was named in 1793, for in that year settlement had taken place, and Woodstock with Blenheim—the home of the Marlboroughs. Thus we behold the very heart of the empire recreated, in embryo, in the yet unbroken wilderness of Canada, and with its foundations laid in the valley of the Thames.

The foregoing is but a summary of a subject that lends itself to more extended treatment. Could we but visualize the mind of Simcoe at this supreme moment, what would we behold? His sentiment in the naming of places had a reality behind it that justified every forecast he made, and as Robert Gourlay (an Oxford man, and the stormy petrel of our early political life) said, the removal of Simcoe to another field of action put back the development of Western Canada for 50 years. By his system of naming places a dual purpose was served—it intimated to the English-speaking immigrant where, under the same flag, he would find the same laws and usages, both civil and religious, and with the same environment as in his native land.