



The Lost Townships of Duncan Sinclair and Hugh Savigny

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IN 1862 the Toronto map publishers, George R. and G. M. Tremaine, brought out a large wall-map of Canada West that gives a very good rendition of Ontario township surveys as they existed at that time. A student of the development of this township system would certainly be surprised to notice on this map, just to the south-east of Lake Nipissing (see Figure 1) an array of townships surveyed in what appears to be a cross between the American six-mile square township pattern and the Dominion Land Survey system of the Canadian Prairies. In this isolated set of townships a control

meridian and a standard parallel can be seen (following the American fashion) with the townships numbered east and west of the meridian, and "ranges" of townships numbered north and south of the baseline.

In this survey, which must have been inspired by the American system of public land survey, there are two rather surprising differences from the American pattern: the ranges run east and west, not north and south as they do in the American and DLS systems; and the sections are numbered from the south-east corner of the town-

ship, not the north-east as they are in the American system. This last peculiarity is all the more surprising because we see here for the first time the section numbering that will be used on the Canadian prairies starting some nine years after the publication date of this interesting map.

What has happened to these interesting townships? One looks in vain for them on modern maps of Ontario. Instead of seeing the first use in Canada of the 640 Acre Section Township, we find that the area has been resurveyed into 1000 Acre Section townships named Bonfield, Boulter, Boyd, Lauder, North and South Hemsworth, Pentland and Wilkes.

To get to the bottom of this mystery we must examine the survey notebooks of two Provincial Land Surveyors, Duncan Sinclair and Hugh Savigny. In 1855 Sinclair had surveyed the outline of the township of Nipissing at the eastern end of Lake Nipissing, as shown in Figure 1. In carrying out this survey he placed the

south-west township corner post about two miles south of the lakeshore and about four miles east of South East Bay. In the autumn of the following year Savigny was sent north from Toronto to extend Sinclair's survey southward into what was thought to be good farming country. Unfortunately he was caught by an early frost on the French River and couldn't reach Lake Nipissing. In 1857 it was decided by Joseph Cauchon, the Director of the Crown Lands Department in Toronto, that both Sinclair and Savigny should be dispatched to the area to conduct a new form of township survey. It was to be based on the American system which was proving most successful in opening vast areas of public land in the American West.

It is difficult to say, today, whose idea it was to adopt the American system (with the minor alterations already noted) for use in the Nipissing area and later in Northern Ontario. Cauchon was not a surveyor, and it is doubtful that the initiative was his. In 1856 Provincial Land Surveyor A. P. Salter had been sent to the north shore of Lake Nipissing to run a baseline westward to Lake Superior. Although he marked this line with township cornerposts every six miles, he did not actually survey the outline of any townships. Salter was employed by the Province on contract, so it is doubtful that he was the originator of the plan. It is far more likely that Cauchon's assistant, Thomas Devine, who was both a skilled surveyor and cartographer, suggested the adoption of the American system. Devine had surveyed in the Mattawa country, and no doubt as an official in the Crown Lands Department he had followed the work of his American counterparts with the idea of adopting some of their procedures if they proved successful. He evidently thought that 1857 was the year to try out the American system in Ontario, and convinced Cauchon that the Nipissing survey was the place to conduct the experiment. In any event, Sinclair and Savigny headed out for the survey area with orders to use the American pattern. No doubt they both had copies of the American survey manual in their packsacks.

Savigny started out from Toronto in early September, 1857. He proceeded by road to Penetang and from there went northwest to Lake Nipissing by bateau. Sinclair had a more difficult journey from Montreal up the Ottawa River by canoe. In his report he mentions that the 18 foot canoes supplied by the Government were too small for efficient use on a river with as strong a current as the Ottawa. They

didn't provide room for a sufficient number of paddlers to work against the current. As a result Sinclair arrived on the survey line on September 26th, some eight days after Savigny. By that time Savigny had located Sinclair's corner post at the south-west angle of Nipissing Township (which was to be the starting point of the survey) and had surveyed the Principal Meridian on a due south astronomic bearing for about four miles to the bank of the South River. It was there that Sinclair caught up with him. The two survey parties then crossed the river and worked together until the six-mile point on the Meridian was reached.

At this point the two parties divided with Sinclair and his men continuing to produce the Principal Meridian southward until they arrived at the 36 mile point. Sinclair then returned to the six-mile post and commenced the eastward survey of the standard baseline. This line was run for six townships and was completed on May 4th, 1858. He finished off his work by drawing up a plan of his survey which he titled "A Plan of a Range of Townships South of Nipissing and Mattawa" which he turned in to the Crown Lands Department with the rest of his field notes and journals in June 1858.

While Sinclair was surveying the Principal Meridian and Baseline, Savigny was surveying the township outlines in Ranges 2 and 3 South (as shown in Figure 1). In his notes he makes the following comment:

I was delayed in the work by local attraction which seems to pervade the whole of this section of the country, in some instances affecting the needle to the extent of 10 and 12 degrees, rendering the magnetic survey by no means satisfactory.

In no instance did I succeed in making the lines close within two chains, and this I attribute entirely to local attraction, as the chaining was most carefully done.

Both Sinclair and Savigny were using the theodolite to take periodic observations on the north star for azimuth, but used the survey compass for the running of lines. An example of Savigny's closures is given at the point where the south boundary of Township 1 West, Range 3 South closes back on the Principal Meridian was met at a point 2 chains 18 links south of the township corner.

What then became of these township surveys so carefully laid out during the autumn and winter of 1857-58? Today there is no record of them in the Surveyor General's office, and modern maps show only the townships mentioned previously all laid out in the 1000 Acre Section pattern oriented on the bearing common to such townships in this part of Ontario, namely North 16 degrees West Magnetic (as explained in the article by Hans Hietala in the Winter 1977 issue of this journal).

The answer is simple. In the early 1880s when the 1000 Acre system reached the old surveys of 1858 they were found to be completely grown over. It was decided at Queen's Park that the surveys of Sinclair and Savigny should be annulled, and the land resurveyed. In many ways it is sad that this happened. In the 1858 surveys we see the first use in Canada of the six-mile square township surveyed and subdivided in the American pattern. No doubt John Stoughton Dennis knew of this survey, and in 1871 when he wrote the first manual for the survey of Dominion Lands he incorporated many of the survey's characteristics. In particular the "Canadian" numbering of the square-mile sections is taken directly from the Sinclair-Savigny work. What could have been a monument to the origin of the vast DLS surveys has become only a curiosity on some old maps. ●

References:

FIELD BOOKS

Hugh P. Savigny, P.L.S., 17 August 1857 to 9 January 1858, Archives of Ontario call number RGI Series CBI Box 27.

Hugh P. Savigny, P.L.S., 27 October 1858 to 22 April 1859, Archives of Ontario call Number RGI Series CBI Box 27

Duncan Sinclair, P.L.S., 28 August 1858 to 4 May 1858, Archives of Ontario call number RGI Series CBI, Box 29

MAPPING MAPS

Rough Plan of the Nipissing and Mattawa Base Line East of the Principal Meridian, with Explorations, by Duncan Sinclair, 1858, Map Division of the Archives of Ontario, call number 21 Lib/Bibl R-N.

A plan of a range of Townships South of Nipissing and Mattawa, by Duncan Sinclair, June 1858, Map Division of the Archives of Ontario call number 21 Lib/Bibl. R-N.

ARTICLE

Mohawk Lands and Township Orientation, by J. E. Hietala, The Ontario Land Surveyor, Winter, 1977, p. 13.

PUBLISHED MAP

Map of Upper Canada or Canada West compiled from the most recent authorities and surveys ... Published by Geo. R. & G. M. Tremaine, engravers, lithographers, map publishers etc. Public Archives of Canada call number H1/400/1862.