

Ontario's First Township

John Collins' Survey of October 27, 1783 of a Six Mile Square Township in the Province of Quebec near the Ancient Fort Frontenac, Now Part of the City and Township of Kingston, Ontario

By Dorothy A. Ross Geiger

John Collins' 1783 description of the boundaries of Township #1 at Cataraqi (later, Kingston Township) has been quoted many times because it is the first survey for a township in what is now Ontario. A cairn at the corner of King and West Streets, Kingston, commemorates the planting of the first survey marker.

Collins sent his original survey and plan to General Frederick Haldimand, Governor and Commander in Chief of Quebec. Haldimand kept a copy of the survey with his own records of correspondence which were eventually presented to the Public Records Office in London, England. It is from a colour negative of the survey in the Haldimand manuscripts that the lithograph accompanying these notes was reproduced. Haldimand's copy was approximately 27 by 35 inches. The lithograph shows the fold lines and worn edges where the map overhung the correspondence file.

The 1783 survey serves as a window to look at the processes of planning and marking out the first settlement. The map fixes for a moment in time what the area was like then.

Survey Parties

Survey parties were made up of about 10 men - one qualified surveyor, axmen and chainbearers. In 1783 the Loyalists were eager to work in a survey party, to see the new land and how it would be laid out. The work included felling trees on the survey line, wading through marshes and swamps, climbing over rocks, rowing bateaux, and fighting off the bugs and the elements. The surveyor checked his compass readings and measurements against astronomical observations and calculations to fix positions; he supervised the measurements and kept records; he also organized the people, provisions and pay for the party.

Collins was an experienced surveyor. He was appointed Deputy Surveyor

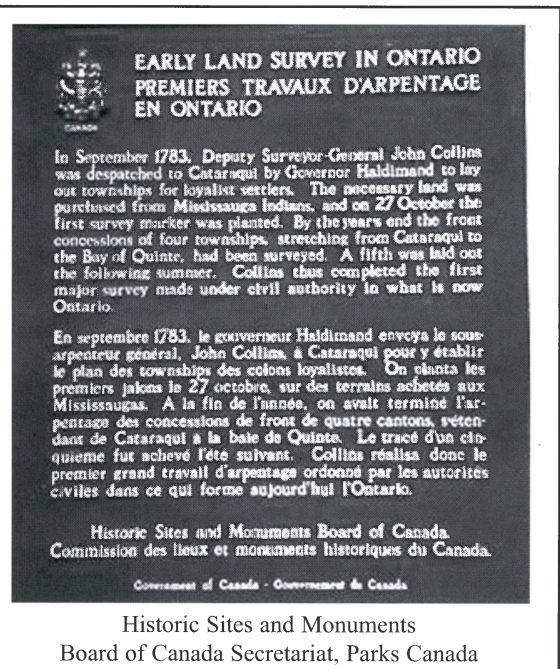
General for the area north of the Potomac River in 1764 on the strength of his experience in the southern colonies. When Surveyor General Samuel Holland was absent from Quebec - often for long periods - Collins acted as Surveyor General. Both men served on the Governor's Council.

Planning The Township

After the American Revolution, the preliminary Treaty of Versailles was ratified by the United States government in April 1783, although it was not signed until September. Governor Haldimand had several problems to deal with:

1. The new boundary left his troops at Oswego and Carleton Island in what was to become American territory. He had to move them to a place in Canadian territory where he could protect trade on the Great Lakes and keep communication lines open to the interior forts at Niagara, Detroit, and Michilimackinac.
2. The treaty recommended but did not guarantee compensation to the Loyalists for forfeited lands and possessions. There would be thousands of people needing land to re-establish themselves: soldiers from the American colonies who had fought in the provincial corps; Indians who had fought with the British; settlers who had remained neutral, but were being displaced as enemies; and disbanded British soldiers who chose to remain in Canada.

To compound these problems, there were no surveys of the Great Lakes area. The lakes were shown on maps, but tended to change shape with every new map that was published. The western part of Quebec was still essentially an Indian reserve with a few traders and settlers occupying land



near military posts. Some Loyalists had already moved into the Niagara area, where a few lots had already been laid out.

Both Haldimand and Holland were experienced in establishing new settlements. Holland, after a brilliant career as an army surveyor, had been Surveyor General for the provinces north of the Potomac since 1764; Haldimand had been Governor of British Florida. Both men had lost possessions and houses in the American colonies.

They knew the importance of quick resettlement to enable settlers to become self-sufficient, and orderly surveys to keep future land disputes to a minimum and to prevent people from monopolizing the best locations. They were familiar with the types of settlements the Loyalists would want.

By May 26, 1783, Haldimand and Holland had the survey work organized. The Indians, under Mohawk Chief, Joseph Brant, were anxious to get settled; their team scouted for their choice of location. Holland went to Carleton Island, collected military assistants, and proceeded to Cataraqi to survey the ruined fort, the harbour, and the general area as a possible site for both military post and settlements. He also sent a team to survey the shore of Lake Ontario from Cataraqi to Niagara. Preparations were under way.

Holland returned to Quebec City in late June with favourable reports on Cataraqi. Haldimand then ordered Major John Ross, commandant at Oswego, to move his command and most of his troops and supplies

to Catarauqui. Ross completed the move by the end of July. His chief task was to establish the military post with barracks, a wharf, defences, gardens, etc., but he knew that his men would also help prepare the area for settlers.

Holland decided in early July that Point Frederick would be the best site for the town. He and Haldimand had both been reading reports from the French era at Fort Frontenac and were concerned about the defence and layout of the town. Holland also hoped to “Perpetuate Fort Haldimand at Catarauqui, to all Posterity” to honour Governor Frederick Haldimand. Ross was instructed to have his men do clearing

and survey work on Point Frederick and to build a mill at Catarauqui Falls (Kingston Mills) in preparation for the settlers.

In September, just after the peace treaty was signed, Haldimand gave Collins his orders: to survey the town on Point Frederick; to reserve land around Fort Frontenac for the use of the garrison and the Indians, some of whom might be allowed to build there; to lay out a common of 400 acres; and to begin the surveys with a township on each side of the bay, following the New England pattern of the six mile square townships with which the settlers were familiar. The army officers were instructed to give him every assistance.

A few days later Haldimand sent new orders to Collins, to place the town on Point Henry. This suggestion had come from Ross who thought the defence there would be better. Collins was instructed to conform to any orders Major Ross thought fit to give.

When Collins left Quebec City, exploring survey teams were sent out to range over the eastern Ontario land and report on the feasibility for settlements. The teams were headed by Loyalist surveyors, with American experience, and army engineers. The teams went up the Ottawa River, up the St. Lawrence from Lake St. Francis, west and north from Catarauqui examining the interior lands a few miles back from the shore.

When Collins reached Catarauqui on October 1, he found that Ross had received orders to delay marking the townships



Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada Secretariat,
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while the land was being purchased from the Indians. The land north of Lake Ontario was claimed by the Mississaugas, although the Mohawks still regarded it as their hunting territory. Captain Crawford was instructed to arrange the purchase from the Mississaugas.

While the Indian purchase was being completed, the Collins party mapped along the lakeshore and up the Little Catarauqui Creek. They examined the lands to the west where other townships would be placed. Collins prepared a petition for land he liked on Bay Tonegeyon, now called Collins Bay. Haldimand was too busy with townships to consider individual land petitions in 1783, so Collins did not get the grant. He later built a house there, even though he could not own it, to use on his trips to the Lake Ontario region.

By October 15, the land purchase was completed. Some of the exploring survey reports told of stony and barren areas on the east side of the Catarauqui River. Collins and Ross agreed that the town and the first township would be on the west side of the river, a favourite Indian meeting place, the site of the French settlement of 1763, and the site Holland had suggested in June. The other townships would range up the lake towards Quinte.

The rain in the autumn of 1783 was excessive. It delayed Collins' trip from Quebec City and it hampered the progress of the survey. The rain made the general work more difficult; the clouds made astronomical observations impossible. On October 27, 1783, Collins completed the

first township survey and plan. By November 17, the next three townships were marked out and Collins was on his way back to Quebec.

By November 18, instructions had arrived in Quebec from England that the Seigneurial system was to continue. The land was to be laid out in Seigneuries or Fiefs with lots in 50 acre multiples. After 10 years, the tenant would pay an annual ground rent. Haldimand's use of the word “township” rather than “seigneurie” reflected his adaptation of the existing law to suit the incoming settlers. The Word “township” held hope for future land ownership, a system eventually instituted in Upper Canada in 1795.

Looking at the Survey

The original 1783 survey shows some of the work of the early surveyors. This included not only marking road and boundary lines, but also mapping, land inventory, feasibility, and other planning functions.

Collins started the survey at the southeast corner of the township, leaving space on the east for the garrison, the town, and Indian lands. The lines marked on the ground were probably the front and sidelines of the township and the corner posts of the first twenty-five lots. This “single-front” system was used for many years to take advantage of the existing water highways and to compensate for the shortage of trained surveyors. The corner posts were usually blazes on healthy trees, marked with a cooper's iron. The settlers would eventually be responsible for running the sidelines of their lots. The grid system for lot lines allowed use of few surveyors to start many townships.

The township's first surveyed road, now King Street and Front Road, was marked out when Collins surveyed the southern boundary and designated it a “Publick Road ... Forty feet Wide”. His placement of the road, so that parts of it are shown with dotted lines through the water areas, may have been an attempt to give access by boat to as many lots as possible.

Collins probably did not clear and mark the line on the northern boundary of the

township in 1783. No mapping detail is shown on the northern boundary, unlike the other three sides of the township. His description of the northern boundary “through a low country” is vague. His instructions to Phillip Frey, Deputy Surveyor at Niagara in 1788, were to mark the front line of the township and the side lines, only if necessary. Collins had to lay out three more townships in the autumn of 1783, a year when the autumn rains were heavy and the creeks were swollen. There was little time to spend marking a boundary which might not be used for years.

The physical features of the land are shown on the map in the creek outlines, rock out-crops, and marshes. The Lake Ontario shoreline detail may have been available to Collins from the work of the other surveyors early in 1783, but the interior of the township was previously unmapped. One example, the rock out-crop on the road line in front of lot 20, was reported in a nineteenth century court case as having been removed when the penitentiary was built; the rubble was used as fill to make a straight road line across Portsmouth harbour at the front of Lot 19. Fort Frontenac, Major Ross’ house, and a hospital are shown on the map. Their locations with reference to 1983 streets are given in the notes on the map. Ross had built soldiers’ barracks and officers’ quarters inside the old fort for his force of over 400 men, including one surgeon. There was also a bake house, lime kiln, and a provisions store. A few people had also built houses, but each person signed an agreement that the house was not considered private property.

The inventory and feasibility remarks are included in the written comments at the side of the map (see Appendix). Tree varieties and sizes, the suitability of the land for various crops, the navigability of the creek, potential mill and harbour sites were noted. Collins recommended that the marshy lots at the mouth of the Little Cataraqui be reserved as a common. The lots later were granted, but in recent years parts have been turned into a conservation area.

Survey Work of 1784

Early in 1784, the planned lots were increased in size from 120 to 200 acres, and the concession numbering system was adopted. As a result, road “K” on the map

was moved north to become the second concession road, now Concession Street and Bath Road. Lots 26-50 became lots 1-25 in the second concession; and so on through the seven concessions. The township plan had become 10 miles deep; there were four concessions, or rows of lots, plus part of the fifth concession in the original six miles. The broken front concession was added, extending the lots to the lake. Later in the year, an eastern addition to the township was approved, with lots just north of the townsite running from road “D” to the river. Road “C” was moved to the east side of lot 17. Collins and Holland spent the summer mustering Loyalists, placing them on lots, preventing “impositions in victualling”, administering oaths, and generally acting as agents of the governor for quick decisions when there was no time to wait for a reply from Quebec. They put all available surveyors - army, ex-army, Loyalists - in charge of other survey parties along the St. Lawrence and up to Quinte and carried on survey work themselves. By July, despite a very late spring, over 3,500 people had been placed on their lots, 187 of them in the first township at Cataraqui.

In August, Collins wrote that he had been ill with a fever, and had employed two other surveyors to mark the second and third concession roads and lot corners in the first township. He continued surveying until October 10, when Ross wrote, “Mr. Collins leaves this place to-day for Quebec, his personal exertion for to promote the service on which he was employed has given universal satisfaction. I wish he had been better supported as some of the people are not yet upon their lands...”. The survey of the town plot near Fort Frontenac was started in 1784 by John Frederick Holland, son of the Surveyor General.

Follow-Up

Michael Grass was awarded the choice township lot, #25, but found he had a triangle instead of the full 200 acre rectangle. The problem had arisen because the eastern boundary of the township did not run true north from the lake; due to magnetic aberrations, instead, it angled to the west, so that by the time the second concession was reached, there was room for only 24 lots. Grass was compensated by being given extra land elsewhere. This

method was used to solve the problems created by the incomplete surveys that were necessary to get people on their lands.

With three different surveyors marking out the first three concession roads in the township, with an eastern boundary that had angled, and with no time to cross-check, the lot corners on each concession do not necessarily align north-south.

The results are evident: the line of Days Road goes through Concession 1, it jogs to the east to become Gardiners Road through concession 2, then it runs to the west to pass through Concession 3 as Highway 38.

John Collins returned to the Upper St. Lawrence and Lake Ontario areas frequently to supervise the deputy surveyors and report to the Governor on the state of the surveys, the people, their needs, and to recommend responsible people to fill positions such as on the Land Boards. He used the name “Kingston” in August, 1787 in one of his reports. In Quebec, he served on the Council, establishing land policies and recommending on individual land petitions. After 1791 he remained in his position as Deputy Surveyor General in Lower Canada, as did the Surveyor General, Samuel Holland.

Governor Haldimand returned to England on leave in November, 1784. He did not return to Canada, although he was not officially replaced as governor until 1786. He retired to his native town in Switzerland.

Major Ross returned to England in January, 1785. He had requested leave in June, 1784, but offered to stay and help with the settlements, despite pressing family business.

The revised map of the township was used for land records, with the proprietor’s name written on each lot. If a lot changed hands, the old name was crossed out and a new one added. When new lots were surveyed to the east and the west, they were added. Other systems of record keeping were introduced, but the map continued in use as a reference. With the creation of Upper Canada, the new province’s land records department received the plan, still called “Collins’ 1783 survey”. It continued in use as a reference for land grants and leases until 1961 when two Bell Telephone cable crossings of the water areas were added. The original six mile square township is hardly recognizable.



Surveyed by Order of His Excellency General William Carr and
Commandant in Chief of the Province of Quebec, Geo. S. R. R.

A boundary or line of land of the late Governor being in the Province
of Quebec, situated on the South side of Lake Ontario, near the several Forts
Frontenac

Beginning at a stone monument standing South forty and Degree North
two hundred and twenty six feet from the West (right) of the main Fort, and the
back from the Bank of the lake and some one foot, crossing the mouth
of the little River Cataragui, ten miles to a stone monument standing ten
feet from the East End of the Bay, thence due South
crossing the Head of the Bay, thence due West a small creek that dis-
charges into the said Bay, thence to a stone boundary and fortification
due East bearing through in line crossing the little River boundary
standing on a N.W. twenty eight feet from the main branch of the little River
Cataragui and from thence due South, crossing the main branch of the little River
Cataragui, and then thence due North, crossing the said River, terminating
on the North Bank of Lake Ontario, at the first station, including twenty three
thousand and sixty superficial acres of land, the greater part of which appear
to be of an excellent quality fit for the production of Wheat, Oats, Indian Corn,
Rye, Flax, Timothy, and Clover, the Posts in General are Maple, Dog,
Honey Oak, Elm, Pine, and White Oak &c. the two latter are in many
places from two and a half to three feet diameter;

This tract of land, and the adjacent one of six thousand
having Lake Ontario on its West, and the small Bay of Frontenac, thence
for South, and the lake stands with great facility of excellent Fish, and the
small River Cataragui, is available for Commerce from St. Catharines, with
the lake to the upper branches of the stream, for which space are many fine
situations for making Mills.

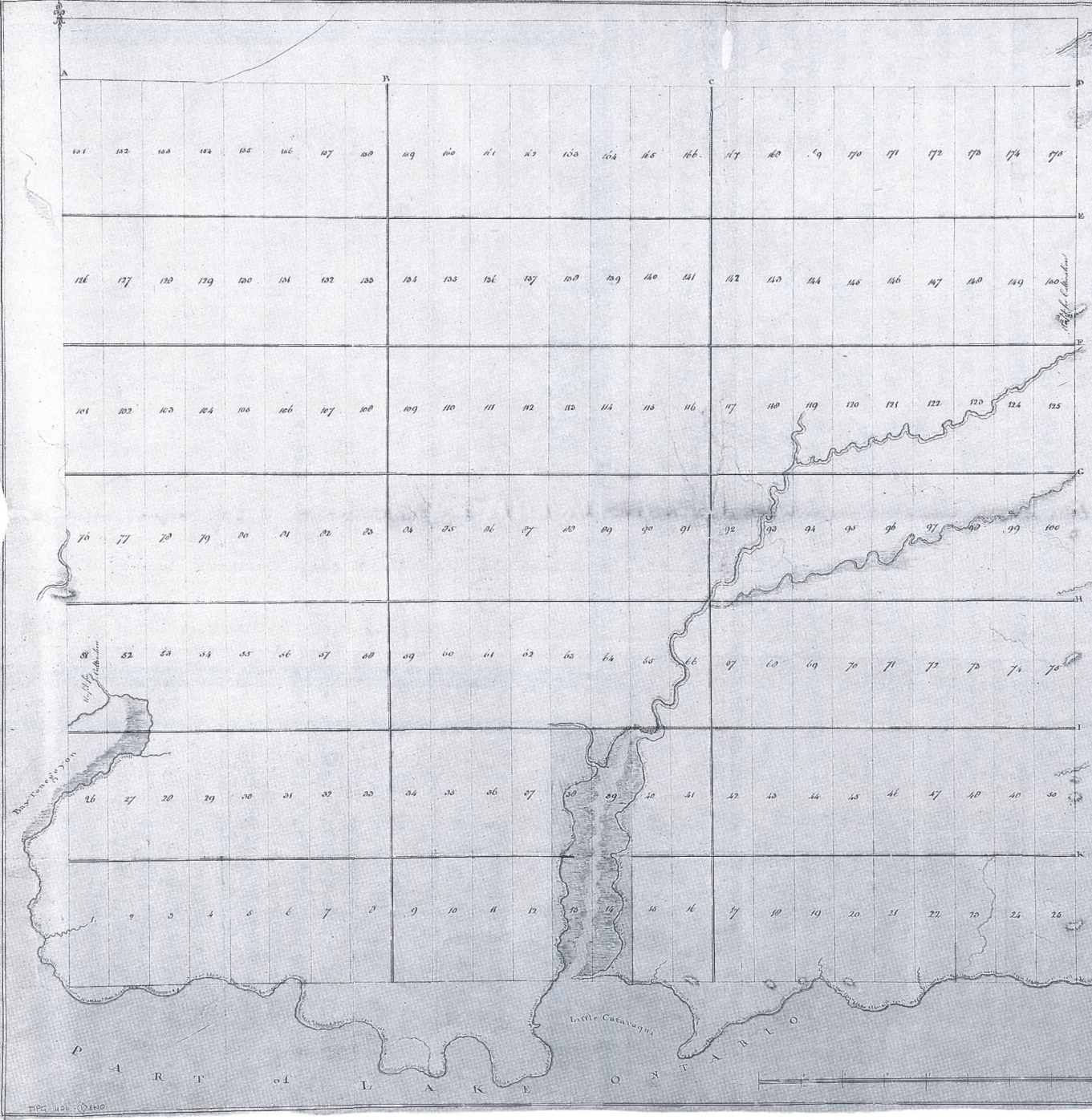
Surveyed the 27 day of October 1783

(Signed) John Collins, Lt. Col.

References

Nos. 16, 17, 18, 19 are on a land with the River and cannot be divided
they produce great quantities of various Grains, sufficient to support two
thousand head of Cattle through the Course of the River, it is estimated
to give Excellency when it might be proper to reserve these lots as a reward
for the benefit of the Township.

A. B. C. D. E. F. G. H. I. K. L. M. N. O. P. Q. R. S. T. U. V. W. X. Y. Z. are
lots -



- 1783 MAP NAME 1880 REFERENCE
Bay Frontenac
Cataragui River
Elevation Bay
Hospital
Ancient Fort Frontenac
Place d'Armes
- 1783 MAP NAME 1880 REFERENCE
Major Ross House
on Queen St. just west of King St.
Point Frederick
Point Henry
Isle au Cochon
- 1783 MAP NAME 1880 REFERENCE
Peltie I. au Cochon
Whiskey Island
Tay's Road, Catherine Rd. & Hwy. 24, approximately
Parliament Ave. & Spadina Rd. (moved to East between 17 & 18)
King St. and Front Rd.
- 1783 MAP NAME 1880 REFERENCE
Road "D"
West St. & Division St. This boundary, when surveyed, angled to the west because of a magnetic deposit in the barometer. The road surveyed in 1784 were farther apart to make 100 acre lots instead of the 130 acres shown on Colby's plan.
- 1783 MAP NAME 1880 REFERENCE
Roads "B", "C", "E", "F", "G", "H", "I", "J", "K", "L", "M", "N", "O", "P", "Q", "R", "S", "T", "U", "V", "W", "X", "Y", "Z"

ONTARIO'S FIRST SURVEY FOR SETTLEMENT
Copy of a survey by John Collins D.S.G., 27th October, 1783.
This survey was made in Ontario in the Province of Quebec and is now part of the City of Kingston and the Township of Kingston, Ontario.

- 1880 NAME 1783 MAP REFERENCE
Broken front concession
Lambton Point
Forest Point
Point Pleasant
Sand Bay
- 1783 MAP REFERENCE
lot lines were extended south in 1784 to the lot lines
Lot 1 and lot 2 to south & west
South of Lot 2
South of Lot 6
South of Lot 12 & 11
- 1880 NAME 1783 MAP REFERENCE
Catherine Point
Little Cataragui Creek
Lake Ontario Park
Parliament Square
Frontenac Park
- 1783 MAP REFERENCE
South of Lot 18
except lots by of same name
Point south of Lot 16
Bay in front of Lot 17
The bay in Lot 18 was filled in when King St. was straightened.
- 1880 NAME 1783 MAP REFERENCE
Kingston Penitentiary
Harris St.
City Park & Court House
In front of the
Bank of latter "L"
- 1783 MAP REFERENCE
West part of Lot 20, Broken Point
Line between Lots 24 & 25
Moss of Lot 25, which was most of the land to the town because of the magnetic deposit in the barometer
Bay north of Ft. Frederick & Ft. Henry
Bay north of the Fort. West of the bay has been filled.
- 1880 NAME 1783 MAP REFERENCE
Emtage into bay between Point Frederick and Ft. Frederick, originally called Hutchinson's Cove, between Ft. Frederick & Ft. Henry
Bay north of the Fort. West of the bay has been filled.

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Further Reading:

- Fryer, M. B., King's Men Dundurn Press, Toronto and Charlottetown, 1980.
- Preson, R. A. Ed., Kingston Before the War of 1812, The Champlain Society for the Government of Ontario, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1959.
- Thomson, D. W., Men and Meridians Volume 1. Queen's Printer, Ottawa, 1966.

Appendix

Transcript of the Wording of Collins' Survey

Surveyed by Order of His Excellency General Haldimand Governor and Commander in Chief of the Province of Quebec &ca &ca &ca.

A township or tract of land of six miles square lying and being in the Province aforesaid, situate on the North side of Lake Ontario near the ancient Fort Frontenac.

Beginning at a stone boundary standing South forty nine degrees West two hundred and twenty perch from the West angle of the said fort and six perch from the bank of the lake and runs due West, crossing the mouth of the Little River Catarauqui six mile to a stone boundary standing ten perch from the East end of the Bay Tonegeyon and from thence due North crossing the head of the Bay Tonegeyon and a small Creek that discharges into the

said Bay six mile to a stone boundary and from thence a due East course passing through a low country six mile to a stone boundary standing on a hill twenty eight perch from the main branch of the Little River Catarauqui and from thence due South crossing the main branch of the Little River Catarauqui and two other branches that discharge into the said River terminates on the North bank of Lake Ontario at the first Station including twenty three thousand and forty superficial acres of land, the greater part of which appear to be of an excellent quality fit for the production of wheat, oats, Indian corn, hemp, fax, timothy, and clover; the woods in general are Maple, Bass, Hicory, Ash, Elm, Pine, and White Oak &ca the two latter are in many parts from two and half to three feet diameter.

This Township hath great advantages on account of its situation having Lake Ontario in its front - all the small bays afford good harbours for boats and the lake abounds with great variety of excellent fish and wild fowl, the Little River Catarauqui is navigable for batteaux from the entrance into the lake to the upper boundary of the township in which space are many proper situations for erecting mills.

*Surveyed the 27th day of October 1783
(Signed) John Collins D.S.G¹.*

References

No. 13. 14. 38. 39 are on a level with the river and cannot be drained they produce great quantity of course grass sufficient to support one hundred head of cattle through the course of the river it is submitted to your Excellency whether it might not be proper to reserve those lots as a common for the benefit of the township.

A.B.C.E.D.F.G.H.I.K.L. Publick roads through the township forty feet wide.

Dorothy A. Ross Geiger is a retired teacher and former Assistant Professor in the Education Faculty at Queen's University at Kingston. She became interested in the original surveys of the town of Kingston, the surrounding townships, and the instructions to surveyors who were laying out lots for the Loyalist settlements while advocating increased public access to the water. She is a Life Member of the Kingston Historical Society, and a former president of the Social Planning Council of Kingston and District, the Association of Women Electors, and the Waterfront Users Association. She served on the Kingston Housing Committee, the Kingston Planning Board, the Editorial Board of the Kingston Whig-Standard, and on the Board of the Kingston Rowing Club.