

The Dundas Portage: Exploring the Logic of Trails

By Bob Henderson and Patrick Bermingham

Imagine Southern Ontario in the ... say 1400's pre European contact to the late 1600's of the French penetration into the western Great Lakes and interior. No roads yet. No cities: but walking trails and waterway land portage connections abound and native towns pepper the forested landscape. These trails were not linear but followed the lay of the land.

Where would these trails be? What significant features did they connect? In short, what was the logic in a pre-railway and automobile landscape? What would the lay of the land and needs for travel dictate?

One trail we can consider with some confidence is the "Fond du Lac" (Head of Lake Ontario) to the Grand River portage trail (24 kms). This portage wisely avoided the Niagara Gorge connection (hardly a connection for a canoe) between Lakes Ontario and Erie. Who would want to portage the Niagara Gorge? Better to gently climb out of a Niagara escarpment valley to enter the Grand River watershed. And then perhaps the route down the river to Lake Erie is one option, but one can



Page 82, *Every Trail has a Story: Heritage Travel in Canada* by Bob Henderson: "Pierre Raffex's Map, clearly shows the head of Lake Ontario and the Grand River portage. Taken from *Ontario's History in Maps*, Courtesy of McMaster University Map Library."

also continue west leaving the Grand River watershed for the westerly flowing Thames River, re-entering the Great Lakes near Lake Huron, thus avoiding the shallow chopping waters of Lake Erie. That is the logic of this well documented trail. First the big picture will allow us to see historical usage of the trail. Then the micro logic detail view of trail-finding examines

how old walking trails might be found amidst parking lots, city and county road grids, highways, train lines and conservation authority park land.

We think of the canoe portage as the Dundas Portage. There would have been many walking trails in the region. The Town of Dundas now fills out the valley from where the portage leaves Lake Ontario. No indigenous name for the trail has emerged. The first European travellers might have called the route, the Fond du Lac Trail or the route via Tinawatawa (This Iroquoian village in the 1600's might be an on-the-trail or nearby destination in the Dundas Valley or perhaps west in the Drumlin fields to the west. This might best be presented as a third instalment to this *Every Trail Has a Story* series.)

Here is what we know! Native peoples had elaborate walking trails and canoe routes throughout Southern Ontario. For example, geographers, Garrad and Heidenreich produced a map of the Petun Peoples, southwest of Huronia in the present-day Nottawasaga Bay region south to the



Whitemans Creek - a water handrail leading to the Thames River from the Grand River.



An old laneway/trail believed to be a part of the old portage.

Noisy River with over 70 kilometres of trails.¹ These trails joined over nine villages and hamlets and Jesuit missions in the 1630's. One of the trails followed a southerly line to Lake Ontario and along the Niagara Escarpment likely joining what is still called the Mohawk Trail today. This trail would then logically join the

“Dundas Portage” from the present day Hamilton ‘mountain’ dropping into the Dundas Valley. A Conservation Authority trail called the Heritage Trail today makes this link. There would be many trails radiating out from the head of Lake Ontario but likely only one main canoeing route portage corridor.

Following the intense conflict of the

1640-50's between Iroquois and Huron Peoples which decimated the Huron, and relocated the Neutral of the Hamilton and Niagara area, the French explorers and missionaries resumed their travels in the area generally. Specifically, the explorer René Robert Cavalier Sieur de LaSalle and the Sulpician missionary René de Brehant de Galinée and the Canadian-born adventurer Louis Jolliet all converged at Tinawatawa on September 24, 1669. Tinawatawa was the western most village of the Iroquois controlled area stretching east to the St. Lawrence.

LaSalle and Galinée, with partner François Dollier de Casson, travelled together from New France, approaching Tinawatawa from Lake Ontario. Jolliet arrived from the west having travelled to lake Superior and back on orders to ascertain the reports of a surface copper mine “somewhere” in the Lake Superior area. That's a big somewhere. At Tinawatawa, Jolliet informed the two missionaries of the presence of a large group of Natives to the north and west (Upper Michigan

State), the Potawatomi, who had not experienced European influences directly. The two decided to alter their initial plans for the opportunity to save souls amongst the Potawatomi. LaSalle went on to the Ohio River and eventually to the descent of the Mississippi. Jolliet returned to Montreal. They all travelled the Dundas Portage. It is serendipity that they crossed paths perhaps or it is logical. They were on the main artery through the country.

In Galinée's words:

We set out then from Tinaouataoua [I have seen four spellings] on the 1st of October, 1669, accompanied by a good number of Indians, who helped us to carry out canoes and baggage, and after making about 9 or 10 leagues [approximately 43 km] in three days we arrived at the bank of the river which I call the Rapid, [Grand River] because of the violence of its current, although it had not much water, for in many places we did not find enough to float our canoes, which did not draw a foot of water.ⁱⁱ

This must have been some portage, not to mention the chore of navigating on the nearly dry Grand River of early October. Neither the portage nor October paddle would be part of any modern-day canoeing agenda. And yet, there is much fun to be had in revisiting this historic portage that was originally a clever alternative to the extremes of the Niagara River as a route between Lakes Ontario and Erie. The portage likely inspired John Graves Simcoe as an early road construction project more than one hundred years later; that being of course, the Governor's Road, which joined the Grand and Thames Rivers to Lake Ontario. The 43 km suggests the village was a side trail from the portage or the missionaries had little idea where they were being lead.

Beyond the intrigue of exploring local hometown history there is the excitement of applying the logic of trails to local terrain. In so doing the

historic stories are "trail-stories" – the trails one might jog or walk their dog on. Now that's history, "dancing on the soles of your shoes".

First off, the logic of walking paths between two bodies of water – a portage – holds you within a corridor. We, as historical trail snoopers after days and days of exploring cannot say we have found "the" footpath. We can claim to have defined the corridor and have the acquired the smarts to make exciting suggestions.

Trail logic dictates that the distance between two endpoints (the first things to determine are endpoints) should be as short as possible though various forces "pull" one away from a straight-



Indian Trail is a curved road leading to the Cainsville Oxbow on the Grand River.

line, linear trail. Among these forces are, the least amount of gradient change (if you gain altitude, you keep it), avoid frequent stream and marsh crossing (this can pull a trail towards a height of land), avoid hostile meetings, seek out desirable trading liaisons (we think Tinawatawa was a major portage tangent well worthy of a pull away from a straight line route), follow handrail features such as ridge lines, waterways and seek out spurs rather than valleys. Finally access to water and food count as logic factors.

Similarly there are trail indicators or clues to consider. We feel we are blessed with many for the Dundas Portage. Current place names give us the most obvious clue. At the Grand River, western end of our Portage there are several kilometres along the

current bending Indian Trail Road leading to the shortest distance between Lake Ontario and Grand River points at Cainsville where a large oxbow protrudes easterly. Historic maps show the native village at Cainsville receiving and sending trails in many directions. Roads curved by logic other than the compass and surveyors transit are suggestive of trails with sometimes-long histories in these parts. The portage trail follows the Indian Trail road.

At the eastern terminus, Governor Simcoe's father in the early 1800's had plotted out a street grid for the town-to-be he called Coots. The town became Dundas and the East and West street marking the original plotted boundaries remain, while the North and South Quay (meaning 'unloading from water') place names are lost. From this location, Governor Simcoe would later stand with compass in hand and say something to the effect of: "build me a road here". We believe he was applying modern linear concepts (conceiving the straight Governor's Road, #99) to the more primal (closer to the earth) logic of

the native footpath. The history dictates we can be comfortable with these endpoint suggestions. It can't go without mention that the historic Lake Ontario "Fond du Lac" at Spencer's Creek now has within sight; a Tim Horton's, a beer store, and a Canadian Tire. Enough said.

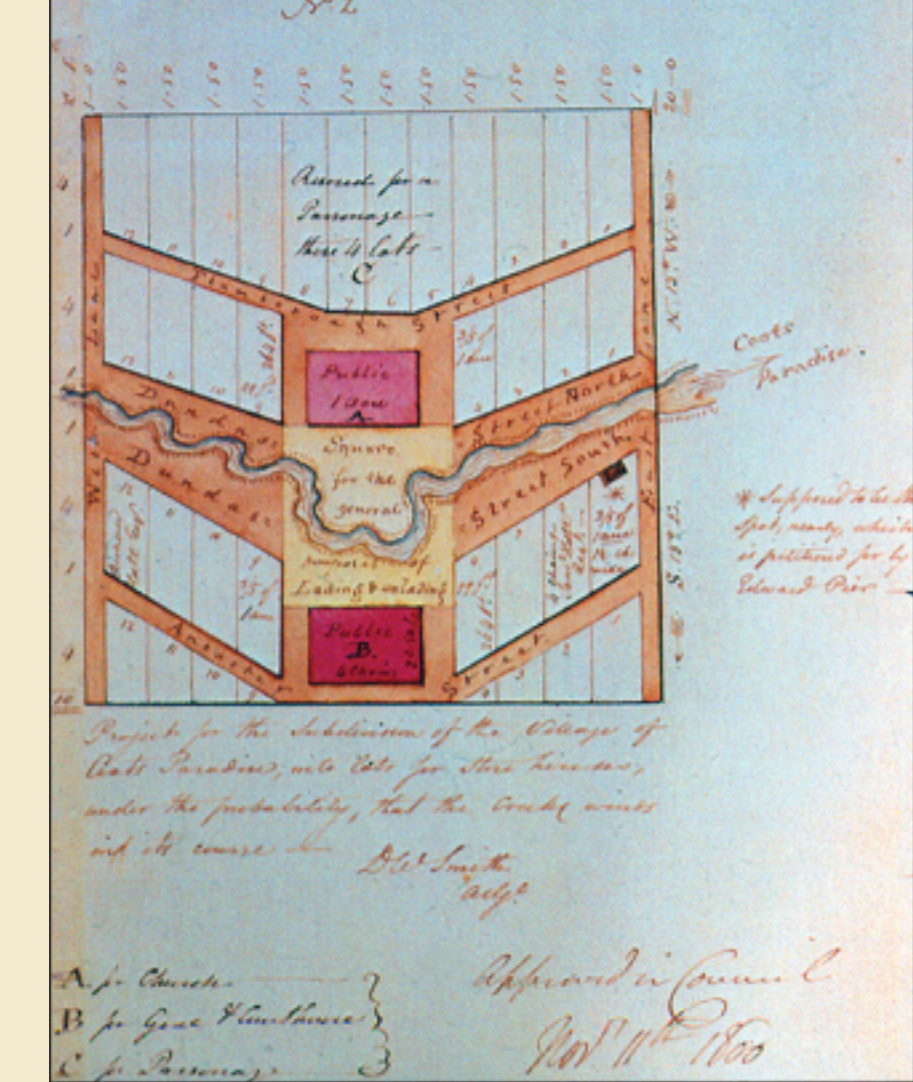
Less obvious than the current (Indian Trail road) and historic (plotted street names indicating water unloading and loading) place names are the heritage homes peppered within the corridor that do not fit the contemporary logic of straight concession roads. Certain homes within the corridor fit the more primal logic of a pre-road trail. One should expect houses to face the concession road and be a certain distance from such roads, but we find here houses that oddly do not fit this

pattern. When one goes to examine such houses from picking them out on a map; sure enough, they are very old homes. These old homes do not necessarily face the concession road and are set back at an odd distance from concession road logic. We think these old homes pre-date road logic. Now do they work for 'trail logic'? Yes, these houses are where they are because of a trail.

Why are the Cold Spring Mill of the late 1700's and the Otterburn home on Mineral Springs Road (another curved road) in such remote locations? These very early (late 1700's) sites were founded by following a pre-existing footpath certainly leading from Lake Ontario out of the Dundas Valley into the plains at the watershed divide (height of land) between Lakes Ontario and Erie. Maps from the 1600's show the trail, Galinée, Simcoe and others discuss the portage in their written accounts and early homes are built all along its routing. Plotting these varied older 'trail logic' homes on a map shows a reasonably straight line that matches nicely with the logic of following spurs and ridges, and watercourse handrails, and gradual ascents, and avoidance of water stream crossings. Voila! It does slowly add up.

We considered 'trail logic' and then followed that logic onto the land where all continued to make sense. Rather than define an exact trail (a strong temptation) we acknowledge that there were likely several trails in the region, though one choice portage route, and seasonal variations. What is certain is that the logic holds the portage trail to a certain corridor course.

We walk and explore this corridor. It was remarkable that the distance from the waters of Lake Ontario at the terminus of Spencer's Creek is a mere four kilometres directly into the Cold Spring Mill of the late 1700's. This is closer to double the distance by road now. The trails are there still. In Dundas, we have the benefit of the enduring Dundas Valley Conservation lands preserving many footpaths and laneways that we believe were once used as part of the portage. Walking



Simcoe's father's site unseen plot of a town for the head of the lake.

such trails now adds an enthusiastic gait to one's stride.

Happily, these are among our favourite walking routes today. If we could travel by time machine to any day in Canadian history to satisfy a curiosity, we would choose September 24, 1669 when Jolliet, LaSalle and Galinée were all at Tinawatawa, likely on a side trip from the Head of the Lake Portage. We would learn the location of this town relative to the portage whose route would also be clarified. Those Conservation Authority walking trails, not to mention Patrick's laneway, certain highways and county roads and particular spurs and re-entrants would never be the same on return. But then again, we know enough **now** to fill these places with excitement in the speculation and curiosity we bring to exploring the logic of trails.

¹ Khionontateronow (Petun) Charles Garrad and Conrad E. Heidenrich. In Handbook of North American Indians: Northeast, Volume editor Bruce G. Trigger, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, 1978.

² Quote in James H. Coyne, The Dollier-Galinée Expedition, 1669-70, Ontario Historical Society Paper and Records, Vol. 20, 75-81.

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