



GODERICH

On the Edge of Huron

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by

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[Front Cover Photo]
[Rear Cover Photo]

Goderich lighthouse sits atop a bluff high above the harbour and Lake Huron. Elizabeth Mary Jones, the chatelaine of the Canada Company, added an element of class and sophistication to this dusty frontier village when she moved here in 1839 with her husband Thomas Mercer Jones. The flowers in front of her former home are presented in her memory.

Dedicated to the memory of
Lisa Kathleen Kane (Strathdee)
1974 - 2009

☞ CANADA'S PRETTIEST TOWN ☞

Goderich is a charming town situated on a bluff high above the sparkling blue waters of Lake Huron. Perched 'on the edge of Huron', it presents a unique mosaic of built and natural heritage.

It is a community steeped in history and shaped by destiny. Its rich and dynamic history is filled with colourful characters who all contributed to the growth and vitality of the town. They provided Goderich with an historical provenance unlike any other community.

John Galt, the first commissioner of the Canada Company, and William 'Tiger' Dunlop, his 'Warden of the Woods and Forests', founded Goderich in 1827. Galt was responsible for the town's unique layout which features eight streets radiating from a central square. Although this classical design was widely accepted throughout Europe, very few communities in North America were laid out in this fashion.

In the early years most of the commercial activity took place on the Maitland River flats and in the harbour area. However, as the population of the town increased, businesses gradually moved up the hill to West Street and eventually to The Square. By the 1870's The Square was fully developed. Although fire and redevelopment have erased some of the early structures on The Square, thankfully much of the original Victorian streetscape remains.

In 1858 the railroad arrived, not from Toronto or London as would be expected, but from Buffalo, an American port city at the eastern end of Lake Erie and at the western terminus of the Erie Canal. Goderich

was promoted as a key link in a trade route between the Upper Great Lakes and New York City, the gateway to the world. Although this visionary plan did not develop as anticipated, the railroad did play a crucial role in the growth of both the town and port of Goderich.

Grain elevators were built in the harbour, initially by the railroad, and subsequently by commercial milling interests. Today Goderich can boast one of the largest active grain elevator complexes on the Great Lakes. Agricultural products such as corn, wheat and soybeans are shipped to world markets from this facility.

In 1866 Samuel Platt and Peter MacEwan accidentally discovered a vein of salt as they drilled for oil along the river flats. At that time no one could have imagined the enormity of the salt bed underlying Goderich and Lake Huron. In the ensuing years the mining and refining of salt have had a tremendous impact on the local economy.

From a dusty pioneer village on the western frontier of Upper Canada, Goderich has developed into a modern, progressive community. In addition to being the commercial, industrial and residential hub of Huron County, Goderich can proudly lay claim to being 'Canada's prettiest town'. Its exotic layout, shady tree-lined streets, stately Victorian homes, extensive park system with miles of beach, boardwalk and hiking trails, and the finest sunsets in North America all contribute to the allure and singular beauty of Goderich.

↪ THE EARLY YEARS ↪

As he sailed along the east coast of Lake Huron John Galt, the first commissioner of the Canada Company, marvelled at “the houseless shores and shipless seas of Huron”. When he reached the mouth of the Menesetung River, Galt revelled in the surreal beauty of the landscape and instinctively recognized the potential importance of this natural harbour.

Today, almost two centuries later, the view from Lake Huron toward the shore remains dramatically beautiful. Despite certain modern features, the basic visual elements remain unchanged -- the broad sweep of the Maitland River valley, the tree-shrouded hillsides, and the high plateau where the town of Goderich was founded.


However, to fully understand this unique and remarkable town, we need to examine the events and personalities that made it all possible.

The lead character was a most unlikely candidate, an enigmatic, scholarly Scottish novelist and poet by the name of John Galt. In 1820 he was appointed to a commission to resolve outstanding damage claims arising from the War of 1812 in Upper Canada. At that time the government of Upper Canada had no reliable sources of income with which to pay claimants and the British government was unable to provide any financial support because it was still recovering from the ravages of the Napoleonic War.

After meeting with a delegation of claimants and various Crown representatives, John Galt recommended that the Clergy and Crown Reserves of Upper Canada be sold to raise the necessary funds. The Constitutional Act of 1791 had set aside one-seventh of all lands in Upper and Lower Canada for the Protestant clergy and one-seventh of all lands for the Crown. The remaining five-sevenths of the land in Upper and Lower Canada was open to settlement. Although the legislation had been well intentioned, the resulting checkerboard pattern in the rural areas was a detriment to settlement.

In 1824, John Galt convened a meeting of merchants and businessmen in London, England to set in motion the formation of a land development company similar to those already underway in Australia, India and the United States.

After a lengthy negotiation, and in response to the refusal by Bishop John Strachan to release the Clergy Reserves, the Crown agreed to substitute 1,000,000 acres of uncharted wilderness bordering Lake Huron. The lands which came to be known as the Huron Tract had recently been purchased by the Crown from the Chippewa Nation led by Chief Joshua Wawanosh. In total, including the Crown Reserves scattered throughout Upper Canada, the Canada Company purchased from the Crown 2,384,413 acres of land, on the basis of 3s. 6d. per acre. A further 100,000 acres of land was given to the Canada Company by the Crown to compensate for lands in the Huron Tract which were deemed unsuitable for settlement.



The proceeds from the transaction were supposed to be used by the Crown to satisfy claims arising from the War of 1812. In point of fact, none of the claimants was ever reimbursed, much to John Galt's chagrin.

On August 19, 1826 the Canada Company finally obtained its charter of incorporation with £1,000,000 of authorized share capital.

Immediately upon the formation of the Canada Company, John Galt sailed from England to New York. He met with Governor Dewitt Clinton in Albany and marvelled at the newly-constructed Erie Canal which was the first modern trade route through the Appalachians. Galt was very familiar with the economic benefits generated by canals, having actively promoted the construction of the Union Canal in Scotland.

In Batavia, New York he conferred with Joseph Ellicott, the founder of the Holland Land Company which had vast land holdings in western New York State. He was so impressed with the unique layout of the frontier village of Buffalo that he replicated the design in Guelph.


From there Galt proceeded to York (now Toronto) in Upper Canada to begin the arduous task of setting up Canada Company operations.

In April 1827, Galt travelled to Shade's Mills (soon renamed in his honour, and then in modern times renamed Cambridge) where his cousin William Dickson had begun settlement of Dumfries Township. A road had already been surveyed from Dundas at the head of Lake Ontario to facilitate access to this new community.

John Galt was joined by fellow Scotsman William Dunlop, his 'Warden of the Woods and Forests', surveyors John McDonald and Mahlon Burwell, John Brant, son of Chief Joseph Brant, and a group of woodsmen. Before proceeding westward to the Huron Tract, their first task was to follow the Speed River north from Shade's Mills to a location in the heart of the 42,000 acre Halton Block, another of the many tracts of land owned by the Canada Company. On April 23, 1827 they founded a settlement which was to become the headquarters for Canada Company operations in the area. Galt was a staunch royalist and named the new community Guelph in honour of reigning King George IV whose royal lineage was descended from the House of Hanover in England and the House of Este and Guelph (or Welf) in Europe.

Upon being advised of the name chosen for the new settlement, the Court of Directors in England was irate and demanded that it be renamed Goderich. Galt had no intention of doing so and the new settlement continued to be known as Guelph. This was only one of numerous disagreements between Galt and the Court of Directors in London, a situation which would ultimately result in his recall to England in 1829.

The Court of Directors in England ordered John Galt to survey two roads, one from the new headquarters in Guelph to the mouth of the Menesetung River (soon to be renamed the Maitland River in honour of Sir Peregrine Maitland, Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada), and another from Guelph to the mouth of the Ausable River, both on the shores of Lake Huron.



Again, in defiance of London's wishes, he instructed his crew to survey the road from Shade's Mills, where it would connect with the Dundas Road, westward through the Canada Company lands in the Wilmot Block (now Waterloo County), to the Huron Tract.


It is fascinating to consider that if Galt had opened a road directly from Guelph to the mouth of the Menesetung River, the route recommended by the Court of Directors in London, the new settlement of Goderich would almost certainly have been established on the north bank of the river, given the immensity of the river valley and the lack of bridge-building expertise in 1827. Furthermore, if all of the rural surveys had been based on a route between Guelph and Goderich, the geography of Huron and Perth Counties would have evolved totally differently. It is ironic that eighty years later the Guelph & Goderich Railway built a line of railroad along the route originally mandated by the Court of Directors in England, the route that John Galt eschewed.

Upon reaching the Huron Tract, Tiger Dunlop and his crew of surveyors and woodsmen initially headed on a north-westerly compass bearing toward the mouth of the Menesetung River on the Lake Huron shore. However, after encountering an area of impenetrable swamp they changed direction and blazed the trail due west until they reached a river which they named Little Thames (now the Avon River). Within a few years a mill was erected at this site and the village of Stratford was founded.

After fording the Little Thames River they proceeded in a north-westerly direction until they reached the mouth of the Menesetung River on the shore of Lake Huron. Today's Highway 8 through Mitchell, Seaforth and Clinton deviates very little from that original 1827 survey.

In the meantime John Galt returned to York to attend to Canada Company business. Within a few days he travelled overland to the naval base in Penetanguishene where he boarded the schooner 'Bee'. He sailed along the coast of Georgian Bay, around the tip of the Bruce Peninsula, and then south along the east coast of Lake Huron to the mouth of the Menesetung River.

The 'Bee' arrived on June 29, 1827. John Galt was met by William Dunlop and the survey party who had finally reached the shores of Lake Huron after spending weeks hacking a primitive trail through the uncharted, mosquito-infested wilderness. After an evening of camaraderie in Tiger Dunlop's newly-constructed 'Castle', they proceeded to clear and survey the town site which they named Goderich in honour of Frederick John Robinson, Viscount Goderich, Chancellor of the Exchequer and future Prime Minister of England. Viscount Goderich had expedited legislation in the British House of Commons to enable the Canada Company to receive its Royal Charter. The honorary title 'Goderich' is of Saxon origin meaning 'good kingdom', with written records of its usage dating back to the Norman conquest in 1066.



In 1828, Deputy Provincial Surveyor John McDonald and his crew marked out the townships along the Huron Road. A grid of concession roads and side roads was laid out in a very orderly fashion, facilitating settlement and market access.

To stimulate settlement and to provide overnight accommodation for travellers entering the Huron Tract, the Canada Company contracted with Andrew Helmer, Sebastian Fryfogel, Andrew Seebach and Anthony Van Egmond to build and operate inns along the Huron Road. These primitive hostels were situated about twenty miles apart, the distance a settler on foot or by wagon could travel in one day.

Initially lots were sold by the Canada Company to settlers at 7s. 6d. per acre, with one-fifth down, and the balance spread over five annual instalments. In addition, the settler was required to build a log shanty, to clear certain acreage per year, to pay property taxes, and to provide statute labour on local roads.

During the early years immigrants were attracted to lots elsewhere in Upper Canada and avoided the Huron Tract because of its remote location on the western frontier. Those early immigrants who did move to the Huron Tract purchased lots within the village of Goderich and along the Huron Road.


In the 1840's during Frederick Widder's tenure as commissioner, a revised leasing arrangement with an extended repayment term enabled settlers of lesser means to qualify for land and stimulated the flow of immigrants into the Huron Tract.

By the 1850's all of the townships within the Huron Tract had been surveyed and most of the desirable agricultural land was settled.

In summary, the creation of the Canada Company, including the purchase of its immense land holdings in Upper Canada, the work to survey, organize and settle those holdings, and the creation of an organization to administer the project, was a monumental undertaking.

We owe a debt of gratitude to John Galt, the father of the Canada Company and the founder of Goderich. He was a bold visionary and a courageous humanitarian who responded to the pleas of impoverished farmers and shopkeepers in Upper Canada who had suffered tremendous losses during the War of 1812. He also saw an opportunity to provide a better way of life for thousands of poor and dispossessed people from the United Kingdom and war-torn Western Europe. Galt surrounded himself with an eclectic group of dedicated men and women whose hard work and perseverance under extremely difficult circumstances set in motion the settlement and transformation of the Huron Tract and the vast Canada Company holdings.

John Galt's tenure as commissioner of the Canada Company ended with his recall in 1829. Ten years later, a combination of declining health and broken dreams brought his life to an end. His three sons eventually emigrated to British North America and enjoyed illustrious public careers; in fact, one of his sons, Alexander Tilloch Galt, was a Father of Confederation in 1867. We are surrounded by John Galt's legacy and it is incumbent upon us to understand his passionate vision for Goderich and the Huron Tract, to remember his many accomplishments, and to honour and perpetuate his memory.





The town of Goderich sits proudly on the edge of Lake Huron, surrounded by a verdant tapestry of farmland and wooded areas.



The natural arc of the tree-shrouded hillside is reminiscent of an ancient Greek theatre on the Aegean coast. Looming in the distance is one of the world's largest salt mines where an army of men and machines work around the clock extracting salt from beneath Lake Huron.



The lighthouse sits on a promontory high above the harbour. It was built in 1847 by Scottish stonemason Adam MacVicar to replace an earlier lighthouse which was located further inland. Although it is shorter than the majestic imperial lighthouses further north along the Lake Huron coast, its location atop the bluff affords a commanding view of the harbour and Lake Huron. Its automated light, which pulses at six and nineteen second intervals, is visible for over twenty miles.



The tomb of Dr. William 'Tiger' Dunlop is located on the north bank of the Maitland River, on land which was originally part of the Dunlop estate in Colborne Township. His proposed community of Gairbraid which was to be laid out in a radial pattern similar to that of Goderich failed to develop as planned.



Many miles of
hiking trails
can be found
throughout
Goderich and
the Maitland
River valley.
It is difficult
to imagine that
the original Huron
Road from Shade's
Mills to Goderich would
have been very similar
to the trail pictured here.
Although the Huron Road
was improved and widened in
the late 1820's, the original road
was simply a narrow path hacked
through the pristine wilderness.





This inuksuk on the shore of Lake Huron is a poignant reminder of a way of life so different from the one we enjoy. Inuksuit (plural of inuksuk) are found across the Arctic from Alaska to Greenland. Constructed by the Inuit and other native Arctic peoples, they serve as wildlife migration markers, navigational aids, food cache markers, and spiritual symbols.



Looking west from Lions Harbour Park near the former location of 'Tiger' Dunlop's Castle, the sparkling blue waters of Lake Huron loom in the distance. As early as the seventeenth century European cartographers identified this wondrous body of water as 'Lac des Hurons'.



On a warm summer day the MacDonald Marine tugboat is reflected in the languid waters of Goderich harbour. The 'Dover' was built in Welland in 1931 and has spent her lifetime working on the Great Lakes. The lighthouse sits on the distant bluff, barely visible above the pilothouse of the tugboat.



This beautiful High Victorian house on Essex Street was built in 1877 by County Judge Wilmot Squier. A subsequent owner of the house, Judge Edward N. Lewis, purchased the original frame Buffalo & Lake Huron railway station on Huron Road and rebuilt it as two cottages, making sure to place the cottages at the extreme edges of his bluff property to ensure that the view from his house was unobstructed.



[Facing Page] The Huron Historic Gaol was constructed using local Maitland valley limestone. Its unique octagonal layout which mimics the shape of the downtown Square was regarded as the epitome of humanitarian prison design when it opened in 1841. The third floor beneath the cupola housed the Huron District Court until more appropriate facilities were available at the Court House which was built on The Square in the 1850's. In 1901 the Governor's House was constructed using limestone from one of the courtyard walls. The Gaol served the community until its closure in 1972 when it was converted to a museum.



The Pillars were erected in 1929 to commemorate the centennial of the founding of Goderich and the opening of the Huron Road. They are located at the intersection of Huron Road and Britannia Street and are a permanent tribute to the Canada Company and to those early settlers whose hard work and perseverance transformed the Huron Tract from unexplored wilderness to the prosperous agricultural area we enjoy today.

The Goderich Public Library was built in 1903 with financial assistance from Andrew Carnegie, the American industrialist. The red brick structure was built in a Romanesque Revival style, typical of public buildings of that era. The library is also the home of the Reuben R. Sallows Gallery where the works of this renowned local photographer are displayed.. His photographs offer unique insight into rural and community life in the late 19th century.





[Facing Page] The rear portion of the Livery dates back to the 1840's when it served as a harness and blacksmith shop owned by Jacob Seegmiller. A. M. Polley purchased the building in 1862 and operated a thriving livery and stagecoach business. In 1878 he added the front section with its distinctive boomtown façade. The building is now the home of a thriving performing arts theatre.



This stairway connects Rotary Cove with the parkland and residential neighbourhoods above. The view from the top is breathtaking and those who make the climb are well rewarded. On the upper level, just south of the stairway, MacEwan's International Salt Works operated a salt refining plant in the late nineteenth century which produced 600 barrels of salt per day. A tramway ran down the hillside to a private wharf where the refined salt was loaded onto lake boats for delivery to American ports.