

Interest in the New World, Canada in particular, was driven by a quest for resources – initially, fur and furs. The largely unexplored spaces promised these natural resources in seemingly unlimited quantities. In what was initially single-minded quests for these resources, some became aware of other attributes of the land. A few stayed to populate the favourable areas. Once news was relayed back to Europe that there was fertile land to settle, the flow of immigrants rapidly increased. Conditions in Europe for the average person were poor. Because of seemingly unending wars, potato famine, highland clearances and religious intolerance (to name but a few factors), there was a large segment of the population willing to cross the “Pond” for a chance at a new start. Referring to the North Atlantic as the “Pond” certainly understated the risks, the rigors, and indeed the terror of the crossing. Nevertheless, many made their way across and into our locality, especially immigrants from England, Ireland and Scotland. Loyalists escaping the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 from the United States of America added their numbers to the flow of immigrants.

The settling of Canada was one of pushing from East to West. The French had settlements in the Maritimes. Then (after Jacques Cartier’s forays in the 1530s) they settled along the St. Lawrence River, first at Quebec then on toward Montreal. For more than two centuries, the Seigneurial system saw the development of agriculture in that area. Then, the push was further West spurred on by the dominance of the British after the end of the Seven Years War (1763). Once the Lachine Rapids were no longer an insurmountable obstacle, settlers moved on into what was then Upper Canada (Ontario).

This surge of settlement happened in orderly fashion for the most part (Nuttall, A.J. 1982. *Country of a Thousand Lakes: The history of the County of Frontenac 1673-1973*. Frontenac County Council, Kingston). Initially, settlement began along Lake Ontario/St. Lawrence and then inland and further from the lake/river. Nuttall outlines three periods of settlement: 1783-1814: Settlement of the Lake Ontario littoral; 1815-1852: Settlement of the Interior Townships and 1853-1880: Settlement of the Rear Townships.

This pattern recognized that Canada is a country of bounded spaces. Settlers were squeezed by rock and cold to the north and by a political boundary to the south. (Harris, C. 2020. *A Bounded Land: Reflections on settler colonialism in Canada*. University of British Columbia Press.) The patches of potential farmland were close to the northern limits of North American agriculture (Harris, C. 2020). To boot, the best lots with the best soil were the first to be taken – along the shorelines of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River.

The first settlers viewed the forest as the enemy – something to be tamed by its removal (see for example, Jameson, Anna. 1838. *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*, Saunders and Otley, London). At the same time, wood was readily available for building houses, barns, outbuildings, fences, fuel, potash etc. Some realized that the wood itself had a value beyond the locality and the timber trade began.

Shipments of timber to Britain had started in the 1770’s beginning in the Maritimes and Eastern United States, then expanding inland as supplies of quality timber were becoming depleted in the east while demand was growing rapidly. Great Britain needed huge quantities of wood to build and maintain its fleet of ships, the glue by which the British Empire was held together. Indeed, British America was

destined to be viewed as “Great Britain’s Woodyard” (Lower, A R M. 1973. Great Britain’s Woodyard. McGill-Queen’s University Press).

Initially, Britain was able to obtain wood from the Baltics – close to home. However, as war broke out between Britain and France (1793), Napoleonic blockades eventually closed European ports to Britain. As a result, Britain turned to the colonies which were said to have inexhaustible supply of wood. “By 1811, England was getting more timber from Canada than from Europe, and by 1830 there were 275,000 loads coming from British North America and only 65,000 from Europe and elsewhere.” (Riley, J. 2013. The Once and Future Great Lakes Country. McGill-Queen’s University Press).

It is hard to overstate the demand for wood for ships in Britain. Huge volumes of oak and pine especially were transshipped to Britain from North America. “In the first half of the 1800s the shipyards of Europe and the Americas were the largest non-agricultural industries in the world. The weaponry was metal but the muscle was wood” (Riley, J. 2013). Unlike in the Ottawa Valley where the timber barons Philemon Wright and John Rudolphus Booth had major operations (MacKay, D. 1978. The Lumberjacks. McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd; Lee, D. 2006. Lumber kings and shantymen: Logging in the Ottawa Valley. James Lorimer and Co. Toronto, Ontario), local operators had more modest operations, which were of great importance to livelihoods in the Rideau Lakes. Before the opening of the Rideau Canal, there were sawmills operating which provided sawn lumber for settlers needs. Indeed, there were many dams and mills that operated before the canal (Dr. John Gray, Presentation to CALA, Aug 22, 2026). Once the canal was opened in 1832, there was the opportunity to send timber to international markets. (Warren, S. 1997. Hub of the Rideau: A history of South Crosby Township. Haynes Printing Company, Cobourg, ON).

Before exploitation the dominant tree species as recorded in surveyor’s notebooks (Keddy, C. 1993. A Forest History of Eastern Ontario. Eastern Ontario Model Forest Project 2.1/93) were, in order of abundance: Hemlock, White Pine and Sugar Maple, Basswood then Cedar. A summary of cut lumber by J.P. Tett and Brothers in 1885 (granted, some years after cutting had commenced) confirms this snapshot of availability but with a lens to the useful and desired species:

Hemlock 6061 pcs
Pine 3021 pcs
Ash 1231 pcs
Basswood 332 pcs
Oak 178 pcs
Elm 139 pcs
Maple 85 pcs
Tamarac 5 pcs
Cedar 720 lin ft
(Tett Fonds at Queen’s University Archives)

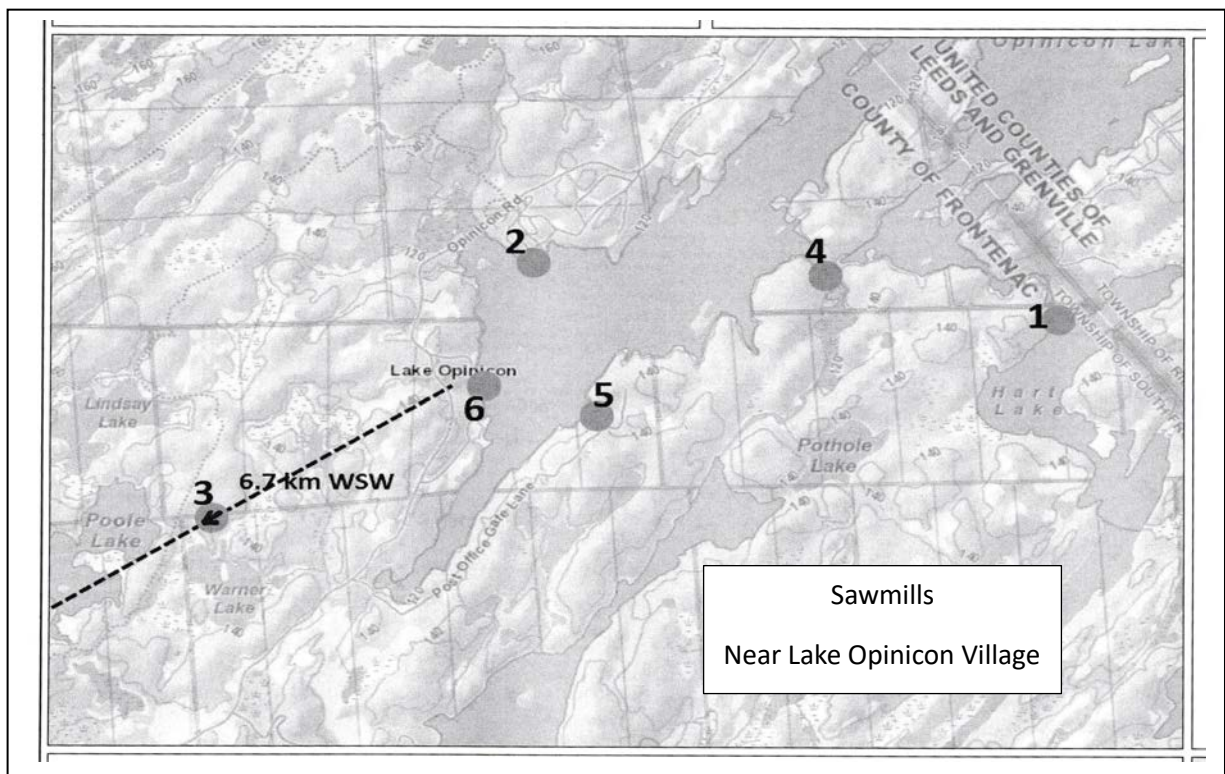
In early days, masts and spars were in great demand. Mainmasts for ships were required up to 118 feet long with diameters over 36 inches. These could be moved down the canal for transshipment, but sometimes special arrangements were needed to get these massive timbers to the water. One means was a dedicated and engineered trackway or “Mast Road” (see B & L Jones, Gray, J, Roberts, D, Stinson, G and D. Pugh. 2025. Sticks: from Bedford Township’s Mast Road to the British Navy. Woodpecker Land Press). In the locality of Lake Opinicon Village, undoubtedly some masts and spars

were cut and shipped, but without specialty means, only white pines along easily accessed lakes were available and would have quickly been depleted.

The largest sawmilling operation in the area was that of J.J. Tett at Buttermilk Falls (Bedford Mills) at the outlet of Devil Lake (estd. 1831). Dr. John Gray, a descendant of the Tetts is writing a book on Bedford Mills and the Tett Family. He will effectively cover the complete history even as he has produced an overview of the timbering at Bedford Mills in “Sticks” (cited above).

While never to the scale of Bedford Mills, there was considerable timbering and sawmilling at Lake Opinicon Village. There were at least six sawmills in or near Lake Opinicon Village (in alphabetical order):

- 1) Drummond Mill (water)
- 2) Gildersleeve Mill (steam)
- 3) Guthrie Mill (water)
- 4) Hunter Mill (water)
- 5) John Poole (steam)
- 6) Samuel Poole (steam)



- 1) The Drummond Mill was located at the outlet of Hart Lake (Conc 15, Lot 23 Storrington). Operated initially by Robert Drummond (1833) and later by a Mr. Mathewson (1841). What little is known of this short-lived mill is outlined by Ken Watson (Watson, K W. 2015. The Dead Lock. Rideau Canal – tales of the Rideau. Rideau-info.com). Robert Drummond had contracted for some of the locks of the Rideau Canal.

- 2) The Gildersleeve Mill was located at Steam Mill Point (now part of Skycroft Campground Resort) in Conc 16, Lot 1 Bedford. The owner was one Charles Fuller Gildersleeve, a businessman from Kingston with wide commercial interests in boatbuilding and railroads, and he was at one time Mayor of Kingston. This mill was based on a 40 hp steam engine under the direction of L.M. Warren. The 1871 census notes employment of thirty men and ten boys in the production of 400,000 bd ft lumber and 1,600,000 shingles. In addition, 4000 logs were also shipped out (Patterson, N.A. Opinicon: The Ghost Town. Chaffey's Lock and Area Heritage Society). [more on CF Gildersleeve below]

- 3) The Guthrie Mill was located west of Stonehouse Lake, in Conc 13, Lot 1 Storrington, some 6.75 km West of the village. It is included here since it is part of the watershed feeding into Opinicon Lake, though quite far upstream. This was a water-powered mill owned by William Guthrie. The census of 1871 lists employment of two men for four months, producing some 60,000 bd ft of lumber.

- 4) The Hunter Mill was located at the outfall of Rock Lake Creek into Opinicon Lake (Conc 17, Lot 1 Bedford). James Hunter established this mill in the 1850's, although an earlier mill was located here as the Brewer's Mill (1932) and subsequently by Mr. Mathewson (as in 1) above) in 1841. Hunter's Mill was a successful water-powered mill. The 1871 census listed sixteen men with 160,000 bd ft lumber and 400,000 shingles produced. This mill ceased operation before 1880 (Ken Watson, The Dead Lock).

- 5) The John Poole Mill was a 22 hp steam mill in Conc 14, Lot 17 Storrington. It employed two men in 1880 (Tett Fonds, Queen's University Archives). Located directly across the lake from his brother Samuel's Mill, 6). Some 100,000 bd ft of lumber were produced in 1871 (Patterson, N A.).

- 6) Samuel Poole's Mill was 25 hp steam outfit located in Conc 15, Lot 17 Storrington, site of what is now Darling's Farm on Darling Road, within the village of Lake Opinicon. Two men produced some 100,000 bd ft of lumber in 1871 (Patterson, N A.)

These mills produced material for the local market – for buildings (structure and shingles), local shipbuilding (covered in a separate piece in this series about Lake Opinicon Village) and cordwood for heating or as fuel for steamboats and barges. The bill of lading (below) provides one example of materials produced at Lake Opinicon via the mill of John Poole: The Opinicon Lake August 8, 1879 Consignment: "Shipped this day by John Poole, in good order and condition on board the Raft whereof Ichabod Sherwood is the Master, 6000 bd ft of boards, plank and scantlings" etc.

Charles Fuller Gildersleeve was perhaps the biggest name in sawmilling and timbering at Lake Opinicon Village. He was born in Kingston in 1833, the son of Henry, a ship builder who moved from Connecticut in 1816 and established shipbuilding and shipping operations in Kingston. Charles served many years as councilor of the City of Kingston, then later on, as Mayor (1879). He was a businessman with many interests. He was instrumental in the building of the Kingston and Pembroke Railway and

for this purpose. A considerable portion of this came from the Rideau Lakes district, after the construction of the canal, in sailing scows - dubbed the "mosquito fleet" due to the pests which infested the wood - and small steam barges. The Gildersleeves were interested in getting out this wood, and some time during the "fifties" acquired the wharf at the foot of Queen street, south side, for storing the fuel wood, not only for use of their steamers but for sale otherwise" (Horsey, E. 1942. *The Gildersleeves of Kingston – their activities 1816-1930*).

Several timbering operations were at work in the hinterlands of Lake Opinicon Village. In addition to Gildersleeve, George Chaffey (son of Samuel Chaffey) had a shanty crew of eleven working the south side of Lower Rock Lake (Patterson, N A.). Another account shows George Chaffey with a shanty Crew of fifty men going north through Storrington in mid-1800s sending timber to shipyards at Portsmouth and Brockville (Battey-Pratt, A F.). There is also a reference to cutting into Opinicon Lake at the time (Roberts, D. 1971. *The Bedford Forests: Lumber Industry to 1860*. Special Collections, Queen's University).

Wood cut by the shanty crews would normally be laid on the ice of the lakes and moved downstream with the spring melt and freshet, sometimes aided by the opening of small dams and weirs meant to retain as much water as possible in early spring. This could be a lengthy and difficult process, depending on distance to collection points at mills or the Rideau Lakes themselves.

Rafts of logs and sawn lumber (rafted or on barges) were moved down the Rideau from many locations. Local timber, both raw and squared, were formed into rafts, specifically "lock drams" – of dimensions which fit into a Rideau Canal lock. Many of these lock drams would be towed by a steamer. At each lock, the string would be taken apart, locked through a dram at a time and then reassembled for towing onward. Once through the locks at Kingston Mills, the lock drams were towed to Garden Island. Garden Island was the key point between small rafting operations and the huge rafts which were sent down the St. Lawrence and on to Montreal and Quebec (Glover, T R. and D D. Calvin. 1937. *A Corner of Empire: The Old Ontario Strand*. Cambridge University Press; D D. Calvin. 1945. *A Saga of the St. Lawrence: Timber and Shipping through three Generations*. Ryerson Press, Toronto; Boyd, Marion C. 1973. *The Story of Garden Island*. Hanson & Edgar Ltd.,. Originally dated 1923 and unpublished. Edited and published in 1973 by her daughter, Margaret A. Boyd.). At Garden Island, lock drams were incorporated into huge rafts which could be nearly a kilometer long and include 165,000 cubic feet of timber: they were among the largest man-made structures in the 19th century. These were then sent down the St. Lawrence ending up at Montreal or Quebec City. The era of timber rafting ended in the St. Lawrence in the early 1900's. On the Rideau, timber rafting ended earlier and the mills closed down before 1900, largely because the forests had been diminished by about 1880 (Keddy, C. 1993).

The huge rafts of logs were bound together by withes and secured by toggles. Withes are strong, flexible twigs, or in this case, saplings of willow or alder. These were sometimes softened by passing through rollers and may have been twisted together. Withes are preferable to chains or ropes (cheaper and strong while flexible) and unlike chains, unlikely to mark the timbers being bound. The Rideau Lakes provided many shipments of withes and toggles, as referenced in the Lockmaster's logs of the era. For example, the Lockmaster's Logs for Chaffey's for the years 1867-1869 list "withes" 22 times and "toggles" 5 times among all shipments. An important contribution from the locality to the larger rafting enterprise beyond the Rideau Lakes!