

Early Settlers to Glengarry County

By Rod Fraser



Building a Cabin circa 1815 in Glengarry County

Last week, there was an interesting article about the 'Pilgrims' who traveled from England to settle in Massachusetts — four hundred years ago this month. William Bradford was their leader and the ship in which they sailed was 'The Mayflower'.

I thought I had a better tale to tell. A little over 200 years ago, my g-g-g grandfather, William Fraser, and his wife, Mary Campbell, left the Western Highlands of Scotland to settle in Glengarry County in Upper Canada. It's a better story, because

the difficulties of the early settlers in Canada are not as well known, but are just as compelling.

Their journey included a brutal ocean voyage (lasting the best part of two months), hardships in a new land, Mary Campbell's death and the making of a home in the wilderness. There are few tales that can match the determination of William Fraser to make a success of his life in Upper Canada. But I suspect the Pilgrims' story may come close.



A few decades before William and Mary immigrated to Upper Canada, Americans fought a war of independence. When it ended, those who fought for the British Army had their lands confiscated. Most made their way to Upper Canada in the mid-1780s.

John Cameron, one of the many soldiers in the *King's Royal Regiment of New York*, was a part of this exodus. His wife, Nancy Jean Cameron, wrote a letter to a friend in Scotland explaining their predicament.

"As soon as it is possible, we shall set foot on our travels for a new land of promise. A settlement is to be made on the northern shore of the St. Lawrence River, some 50 miles from the Town of Montreal. Our lands have been confiscated and it is hard to raise money on forced sales."

"We expect the journey to be long and hard and cannot tell how many weeks we will be on the road.... The children little realize the hardships ... and long to start off."

As these soldiers and their families — later known as 'Loyalists' — traveled north, the British government granted 100 acres of land to each ordinary soldier. Officers were allocated larger parcels. Army rations for three years and the necessary tools for farming were provided.

These settlers, by common consent, agreed to locate according to ethnic group and religion. The Scots from the Western Highlands occupied what would become Glengarry County, one of the initial 19 counties proclaimed by the new Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada in 1792.

This was the start of the settlement of Upper Canada. From the mid-1780s to the 1880s, immigrants, primarily from the United Kingdom, came to Upper Canada for low-cost land and opportunity.



Mary Campbell was born circa 1786 in the Western Highlands of Scotland. She married William Fraser in 1806, when he was a young man of 22 years. The times and prospects for earning a living were not good in Scotland, and thousands had already left for

Upper Canada.

Reports back from Glengarry County told of a land of opportunity, where Highlanders were welcome and Gaelic was spoken. Why stay in Scotland, they must have argued? Why not trust in providence and take a chance on the New World?

William and Mary left for Upper Canada between 1811 and 1819, sometime after their daughter was born. A more likely date suggests the year of Napoleon's defeat in 1815.

The economic downturn from the end of that war, as well as fears of American expansionism, persuaded the British government to encourage Scottish emigration with land grants of 100 acres and free transportation.



The ships providing transport to passengers were primarily in the lumber business. They loaded their holds with lumber from Quebec and transported it to England and Scotland. To avoid returning to Quebec empty, they took on passengers intending to immigrate to Upper Canada.

Temporary wooden berths were built along the sides of the hold. It was expected passengers would travel below deck, provide their own food and live in

cramped uncomfortable conditions, with minimal privacy and ventilation.

The stench of rotting food, improvised toilets, poorly washed bodies and vomit made it intolerable. It was made worse when the ship was tossed about in a serious storm. Many were sick and some died in the crossing.

Many of the Scots from William and Mary's village in Scotland settled on the 4th and 5th Concession of Lochiel Township in Glengarry County. The lot taken up by William Fraser consisted of 100 acres.

The owner was required to occupy the land, build a habitable residence (usually a log cabin), clear the forest surrounding the home, cultivate a certain area of the land annually and complete the required roadwork at the front of the farm. When these conditions were met, the owner received clear title to his land.



Log cabins built by the early settlers were usually small. They were normally no larger than 300 square feet (20 feet long by 15 feet wide). In later years, a loft was often added to provide a separate sleeping area for the children.

They were built by placing round logs, roughly notched together at the corners, one on top of

another to a height of eight feet. The log walls, so constructed, had openings for a door — and one or two windows. Spaces between the logs were chinked with small splinters and plastered with a mixture of clay and lime. A roof of hollowed out logs was then constructed with two sloping sides, so that snow or rain was easily carried away.

Such buildings had a large fireplace constructed of mortared field stone to the height of the walls and a chimney above this was built from small logs, plastered with mud and clay.

When the cabin was built, the next task was to clear the land of trees, so crops could be grown to feed the family. The farmer took his axe and cleared the forest as quickly as possible, then burned the trees and boughs to free up land for planting.

By 1851, more than twenty years after he acquired his land, the census tells us that William and his son, Andrew, had 23 acres under cultivation, as well as 12 acres of pasture (out of their 100 acre farm). This was grueling work, requiring great strength and an iron will. I doubt the Pilgrims worked any harder in Massachusetts.



Mary Campbell died during the early years and William, a widower approaching 40 years, buried his

wife and looked to the future. He married a spinster, in her mid-forties, who lived on a nearby farm. Her name was Mary McRae. The two of them lived with William's two children, at Lot 2, Concession 5 in Lochiel Township.

At some point in the 1850s. William and Andrew built a larger frame house of one story and a loft, no doubt required because the family then consisted of seven people, including Andrew's wife and children.

Although neither the frame house nor the original log cabin has survived, I thought the farm buildings below might give readers an impression of what William and Andrew's farm might have looked like when the new frame house was built.



Frame house and barn as they might have appeared in 1861.

Mary McRae died in 1861 at the age of eighty. After she passed on, William revised his will to leave

Andrew a life interest in the farm, with the understanding that it would go upon his death to Andrew's two younger sons. The eldest boy had been given an education in lieu of a claim on the estate. He was a Presbyterian minister in the southwestern part of the province.

William Fraser died in 1867 and is buried with Mary McRae at St. Columba Presbyterian Church. When I visited their grave, the morning sun had just cleared the trees in the southeasterly corner of the cemetery and shone warmly on the stone that marks their final resting spot.



Grave of Wm. Fraser and Mary McRae

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