

Planter Settlements in the St. John Valley

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The new settlements founded or projected in the St. John Valley in the 1760s were of three distinct types: first there was one “do-it-yourself” settlement¹; second, there was one mercantile settlement; and third, there were a number of townships and estates projected either on managerial-proprietorial or on landlord-tenant principles.

The one “do-it-yourself” settlement was the township of Maugerville. It became a “dominating influence up and down the St. John River” and, in Dr. Esther Clark Wright’s estimation, “one of the most successful [townships] in the old province of Nova Scotia.” This settlement was Massachusetts in origin and inspiration and in its incarnate self-help principles. Its founding father figure was Captain Francis Peabody, who had served as a sergeant in a Massachusetts company at Annapolis in 1755 and had later distinguished himself as the commander of a company in the western campaign.² The most active promoter of Maugerville was Israel Perley,³ another former officer. He visited the St. John River Valley at the head of a scouting expedition that came overland from Machias in 1761 to look at lands recently abandoned by the French, and came again by way of Saint John in 1762 when the site was chosen. A trained surveyor, Perley was one of five petitioners who in 1763 made a request to the Board of Trade and Plantations for a grant of the lands on which Peabody, Perley and a number of fellow colonists had already settled. Both were natives of Boxford in Essex County. Most of the other “do-it-yourself” pioneers were from there or from neighboring areas.

The land on which they had settled was a low-lying plain on the east bank of the St. John River about seventy miles inland. Three years later Beamsley Glasier described it as:

flat, not a stone or pebble....It runs level...such land as I cannot describe. The New England people have never plowed but harrowed in their grain, such Grain of all kinds, such Hemp, Flax, etc. as was never seen.⁴

1 The phrase is from E.C. Wright *Planters and Pioneers, Nova Scotia, 1749-1775* (Hantsport, 1982), 12.

2 W.O. Raymond, *The River St. John* (Saint John, 1950), 141; New England Historical Society, “New England Enlistments in Gov. Shirley’s Regiments 1755.”

3 S.E. Patterson, “Perley (Pearley), Israel,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, V, 665-7.

4 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 178-9.

The quality of the grass on the intervalles met with similar enthusiastic approval: "I never in my life," he says, "saw fatter beef...."

The grant was laid out in 101 freehold lots extending for twelve and a half miles along the river bank.⁵ They were equal in size, each, that is, of 500 acres. Two large islands in the river were divided into sections and assigned to individual lots. At the rear of the grant an area about the same size as the surveyed section was left undivided. The land at the upriver end was less desirable than the lower part of the township and most of the grantees at the extreme upper end abandoned their properties; these later passed into the hands of incoming Loyalists. In the fertile lower section, where the height of land between the St. John River and a parallel waterway inland is today the Trans-Canada Highway, the lots had the advantage of having two fronts on navigable water -- one on the St. John River, the other on French Lake or the Portobello Stream. The lakes had the potential for a useful fishery and the township's only sites for water-powered mills were on small streams flowing into this inland waterway.

After giving initial support to the successful effort of the settlers to gain title to the grant,⁶ Halifax exerted very little influence in Mougerville, except to give at least nominal approval to the distribution of land. Internal affairs were managed largely through the traditional New England institutions of the congregational church and the town meeting,⁷ with the Halifax-appointed justices of peace being local men who, for the most part, found it convenient to fit into the "do-it-yourself" system. Although from 1765, when the St. John Valley and Passamaquoddy were erected into the county of Sunbury, members were chosen for the assembly at Halifax, they seldom took their seats.

Mougerville and the commercial enterprise at the mouth of the St. John River were interdependent, the first merchant there, James Simonds,⁸ being a Mougerville grantee who later "married into the settlement," choosing one of Captain Peabody's daughters as his life partner. Little ships employed by Simonds shuttled between the St. John River and Newburyport, carrying people, goods and information, and keeping the people of Mougerville in close contact with their relatives and their roots in and near Essex County. The St. John River was closer to Boston by sea than it was to Halifax.

While most of the settlers seem to have been attracted to the valley by the opportunity to continue, or to return to, the rural pattern of their

5 W.D. Moore, "Sunbury County 1760-1830," M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1977, 8.

6 Moore, "Sunbury County 1760-1830," 6-7.

7 Moore, "Sunbury County 1760-1830," 13-4, 17-9.

8 T.W. Acheson, "Simonds, James," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, VI, 717-20.

ancestors, what attracted James Simonds was the opportunity to participate in the North Atlantic trading system. Other notable examples of commercial settlements in this corner of the world at the end of the Seven Years' War include those of George Cartwright in Labrador, Charles Robin on the Gaspé and, much nearer at hand, that of William Davidson on the Miramichi.⁹ Simonds began scouting for business opportunities in the province of Nova Scotia in 1759, before the smell of gunpowder had cleared from the harrying of the French in the St. John Valley. Three years later, in 1762, he accompanied the vanguard of the Maugerville settlers and established himself at Portland Point in Saint John harbour where, early in 1764, he obtained a reserve of valuable marshland and a license "for carrying on a fishery and for burning limestone." He also conducted an illicit fur trade with the Indians until he was able to obtain a license for that trade.

Armed with these assets he and his younger brother, Richard Simonds, were able to enter into a partnership with their cousin William Hazen in Newburyport and with a Boston merchant who provided capital and access to a trading network. The partnership,¹⁰ which changed somewhat in its composition over the years, is the one popularly known as Simonds, Hazen and White. Richard Simonds was killed by Indians in 1765 and James White, another cousin, joined James Simonds as a resident partner at Portland Point.

The firm's many activities — which included serving the garrison at Fort Frederick; trading with the Indians for furs, feathers and castor; limeburning; a fishery; barrel-making; sawmilling; shipping and ship building — provided employment for many hands in the years 1764 to 1774. In these operations Simonds, Hazen and White employed workers from New England, most of whom came to the St. John River on a seasonal basis, though some became permanent settlers. Simonds and White also employed local Acadians to drain part of the great marsh to provide hay and pasture land, and also, probably, in preparing the way for a tidal-powered sawmill.¹¹

In the meantime, the several individuals and groups who form my third category of sponsors of settlements had acquired blocks of land. Their goals were either to found settlements or to establish agricultural estates

9 G.M. Story, "Cartwright, George," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, V, 165-7; David Lee, "Robin, Charles," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, VI, 652-4; W.A. Spray, "Davidson, William (John Godsmen)," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, IV, 195-7.

10 R.C. Campbell, "Simonds, Hazen and White: A Study of a New Brunswick Firm in the Commercial World of the Eighteenth Century," M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1970.

11 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 193-4. For a reference to the mill irons, which were originally intended for another mill, see Massachusetts Historical Society, St. John's Society Collection, Simonds to Col. Glazier, 20 August 1765.

on the landlord-tenant principle, then so ably defended by Arthur Young and other British agricultural theorists. Most of these enterprises were idle speculations of men of influence, such as General Gage and Governor Wilmot, but one group did for a time actively promote development. This was the Canada Company, formed by officers in the Montreal garrison in 1764 to take advantage of the opportunities in Nova Scotia. Their headquarters later was in New York. They recruited to their numbers prominent persons such as Governor Thomas Hutchinson, Sir William Johnson and Frederick Haldimand, and also enlisted local men whose talents and resources were likely to be helpful, such as Charles Morris, the surveyor general, and James Simonds and William Hazen, who provided both a New England agency and local contacts.¹²

Their plans were ambitious and far-reaching, embracing the idea of an extensive fishery, a major lumbering and sawmilling enterprise, agricultural estates and a village community. The site they preferred for their colony was the Cape Sable area, but when that was denied them, their choice narrowed to either Prince Edward Island (Ile St.-Jean) or the lower St. John Valley. Their agent was another Essex county man, Beamsley Perkins Glasier,¹³ who had served as a captain in the capture of Louisbourg in 1745. Glasier rejected Prince Edward Island without actually visiting it, assuring a director of the company who had favoured the island that "There is scarce any good land upon it...and all sumer (sic) covered with fogg....All that can be said for it is fish...."¹⁴

The Nova Scotia government reserved five townships in the valley, amounting in all to around 400,000 acres, and also an island in Passamaquoddy Bay, for the company, which renamed itself the St. John River Society. Four of these townships were on the west bank of the river and corresponded to the areas around West Saint John, Gagetown, Oromocto and Fredericton South. The fifth township was a grant centered on the waterfall, later called the Great Rapids, in the Nashwaak River at Marysville. There in 1766 Glasier expended a considerable part of the company's resources on the construction of a dam and what was planned as a large sawmill.¹⁵ His preferred site for a village was St. Ann's Point at Fredericton, but it being unavailable, he chose Gagetown instead.

There is as yet no analytical study of the St. John River Society. In some respects its projects are reminiscent of the activities of the company

12 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 177, 179-80; W. Inglis Morse, ed., *The Canadian Collection at Harvard University: Harvard Library Bulletin VI* (1948-9), 54-7, 95.

13 D.M. Young, "Glasier (Glasior, Glazier), Beamsley (Bensley) Perkins," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, IV, 299-301.

14 Massachusetts Historical Society, St. John's Society Collection, Glasier to John Fenton, 1 March 1765.

15 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 182-4.

incorporated in Britain in 1832 for the development and sale of lands in central New Brunswick.¹⁶ But there were great differences, for the nineteenth-century enterprise was a modern joint stock company, whereas the St. John River Society was essentially an extended partnership intended to be an instrument of both corporate and individual enterprise. In fact, it impresses me as being a creature designed by a committee — with very mixed objectives. In part it was grandiosely capitalist and business minded; in part it was a romantic dream of landed estates and deferential tenants. Above all, it gave institutional expression to the desire of mostly impecunious and temporarily rootless men to explore any opportunity that might yield a financial, social or political advantage. In 1767 the company suspended activities due to the failure of the proprietors to subscribe sufficient capital. In 1768 the land was allotted to the sixty-eight individual proprietors. Only the sawmill property and Perkin's Island in Passamaquoddy Bay were to continue to be held in common.¹⁷

Few permanent settlers had arrived in the Society's townships by 1768. Even the company store was in Maugerville, where the storekeeper, Sergeant Barlow, became a permanent resident. After 1768, the introduction of settlers depended upon the energy and enterprise of individual proprietors, and on the willingness of potential settlers to accept their terms. A few proprietors did make serious efforts, but only two of the townships contained significant numbers of settlers in 1783: Gagetown with at least 172 people and 34 houses, and Burton with 218 people and 32 houses.¹⁸

Burton and part of Gagetown lie directly across the river from Maugerville and in the 1770s became extensions of that community. Most of the settlers recruited by the proprietors were New Englanders, though some were sent from Ireland by proprietors from that country. Several of the most energetic of the townships' inhabitants, or at least those who left the greatest mark in the records, were "self-help" families from Maugerville who moved across the river to avoid the annual floods or to obtain better land.¹⁹ Even Israel Perley established an outpost of his Maugerville property on the Burton side of the river. He occupied the high grassy knoll that later became the site of the Sunbury County courthouse (at the end of the Burton bridge).²⁰ It was a convenient refuge for his livestock during the

16 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 182-3; for the nineteenth-century company see Ivan Saunders, "The New Brunswick and Nova Scotia Land Company," M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1969.

17 Morse, *The Canadian Collection at Harvard University*, 62-70.

18 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 187; Wright, *Planters and Pioneers*, 25; Wright, *The Loyalists of New Brunswick* (Saint John, 1972), 116.

19 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 174.

20 Moore, "Sunbury County 1760-1830," 57-8.

spring freshets. Land records of the Loyalist era tell the stories of families who squatted in the Society's townships or made arrangements with the agents of the proprietors.²¹

Of the remaining townships, two, Sunbury and Newtown, remained little more than fur trading outposts on the frontier of the French settlements and of Indian territory. The third, Conway, was looked upon primarily as a base for the fishery. There, across the river from their Portland Point estate, Simonds and White placed a dozen useful Maugerville families in an effort to ensure title to lands allotted to them as proprietors.²²

Within a decade of its founding Maugerville itself was showing signs of prosperity and stability, so much so that in 1774 it was able to attract a resident clergyman and two years later to provide a parsonage and a commodious framed meeting house.²³ How does one account for its early stability? Many reasons have been suggested by historians:²⁴ the benefits derived by the settlers from their corporate heritage and self-help institutions; the presence of a strong mercantile establishment near at hand; the advantages of having adequate capital and possessions at the time of arrival, of being first on the ground, of having the way prepared for them by earlier French settlers, of receiving outright grants of large lots of fertile land under a system of freehold tenure, of being beyond the administrative reach of Halifax, and of being able in the early years to maintain continuous contact with their roots in Massachusetts. In our era of genealogical enthusiasm and prosopographical history, it is probably safe to add to this list the advantage of the presence of a number of kinship groups as well as a mix of generations among the settlers. When eight Burpee children were orphaned by the deaths of their father in 1767 and their mother in 1771,²⁵ they were able to retain their identity as a nuclear family under the guardianship of their aged grandparents, Jonathan and Mehetable Burpee. Jonathan's other sons had not moved from Massachusetts, but the children had other relatives in Maugerville, including their mother's brother and sister, whose households were open to them.

Life in the settlements was disrupted by the break between Britain and Massachusetts in 1774. Two years later privateers, military adventurers and discontented Indians invaded the valley. Commercial enterprises collapsed. By 1778 both James Simonds from Portland Point and William

21 Moore, "Sunbury County 1760-1830," Chapter III.

22 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 187.

23 J.M. Bumsted, "Noble, Seth," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, V, 627-8.

24 W.S. MacNutt, *New Brunswick: A History, 1784-1867* (Toronto, 1963), 4-5; Wright, *The Loyalists*, 116; Moore, "Sunbury County 1760-1830," 14-21; Raymond, *The River St. John*, 166, 174.

25 D.M. Young, "Burpee, David," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, VII (forthcoming).

Davidson from the Miramichi were living inland, in Maugerville.²⁶ The establishment of British garrisons at Saint John and at the mouth of the Oromocto in the winter and spring of 1777-8 brought a return to stability. The Indians gradually became less threatening, so that by late 1779 William Davidson was able to put a crew to work cutting masts for the navy.²⁷ William Hazen and Benjamin Glasier, who in person or on behalf of relatives had claims to large estates, moved to the valley during the time of troubles, bringing to an end the Planter migration from New England.²⁸ By 1781, Hazen and White, this time without Simonds, were back in the export business, with masting added to their list of trades.²⁹ By 1783, when a census of the old inhabitants was taken, there were signs that pioneers of the second generation were already moving into areas that had previously been left to the Indians. Later, the appearance of Planter family names in Loyalist settlements indicates that descendants of the Planters continued to play a remarkable role in the peopling of the frontiers.

Planter families also continued to thrive after 1783 in the heartland of the original settlements at Portland Point and Maugerville. The Hazen and Simonds extended families, with wealth derived from the property and skills acquired in the Planter era, occupied a central position in New Brunswick politics throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, with political influence resting initially in the Hazen connection and passing later to the Simonds connection. Other St. John Valley Planter clans — Burpees, Esteys, Hartts, Perleys, Pickards, Estabrooks, Coys and Glasiers — filled important niches in nineteenth-century lumbering, merchandising, manufacturing, education, religion and politics.³⁰

26 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 222, 237.

27 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 237.

28 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 243, 278.

29 Raymond, *The River St. John*, 238.

30 Biographies of many descendants of Planter families appear in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. For the Estabrooks family and its connections, see the publications of Florence C. Estabrooks and her papers in the New Brunswick Museum. The bibliographies attached to the individual biographies in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* serve as an invaluable guide to the extensive manuscript material available on the St. John River settlements, as well as to later writing on their history.