

## A HISTORY OF WASAGA BEACH

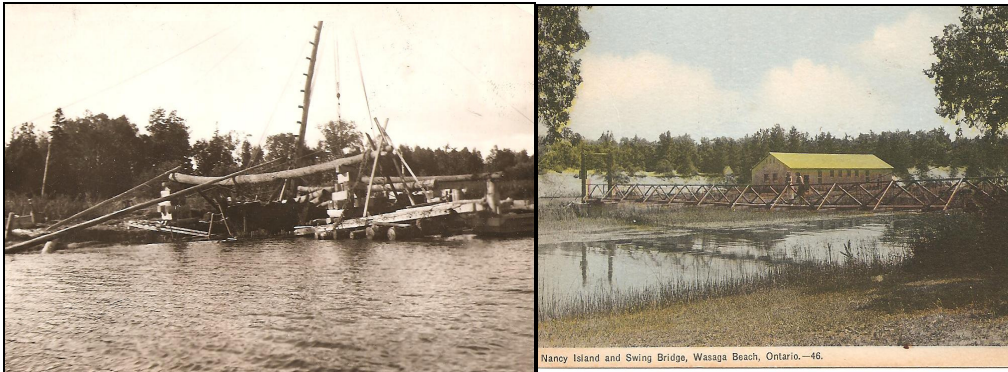
Wasaga Beach and its surrounding area was first occupied by the Algonquin Indians. The word Nottawasaga is an Algonquin word. Nottawa means Iroquois and Saga means “mouth of the river”. The Algonquin Indian Scouts, when posted at lookouts along the river, would pass along the word Nottawasaga if they saw Iroquois raiding parties approaching. This meant “Iroquois at the mouth of the river”. (*Information taken from the on-line Ojibwa-English Dictionary*)

In the early 1800's, Upper Canada was drawn into the struggle between Great Britain and the United States. As the most accessible and vulnerable part of the British Empire, Upper Canada was to bear the brunt of the American attack. As we all learned in school, the United States declared war on Great Britain in 1812.

The British had early success controlling the Great Lakes during that war, but on September 9, 1813, a battle between six British and nine American ships took place on Lake Erie. This battle saw the capture of all six British ships, with the Americans gaining control of the Upper Great Lakes. The last surviving British ship of any significance was the British Schooner *The Nancy*, a fur-trading vessel that was pressed into service during the war.

On August 13, 1814, three American ships arrived at the mouth of the Nottwasaga River, and found *The Nancy* hidden up river. *The Nancy* was subsequently sunk and the mouth of the river was blocked with debris by the enemy, which shut down the supply route. After the Americans left the area, the surviving crew built several small boats and made their way on Lake Huron to Fort Mackinac.

The war ended soon after, with the British keeping control of the Upper Great Lakes and Upper Canada. In 1816, the British established a fort about four miles from the mouth of the Nottawasaga, called Fort Nottawasaga or Schoonertown. The military establishment was moved to Penetanguishene, but a government storehouse was left for use by provincial land surveyors in the 1820's and 1830's.



*Raising of The Nancy 1928*

*Nancy Island Museum 1940*

The remains of *The Nancy* were discovered in the Nottawasaga River in 1911 and were raised in 1928. *The Nancy* had been burned to its waterline, but the hull is preserved and displayed at the Nancy Island Museum, along with artifacts of that era. The Nancy Island Museum was opened as a single building in 1928 to house the remains. It has evolved to include a theatre, museum, replica lighthouse and outdoor artifacts and is now known as The Nancy Island Historic Site.

Although there was not much farming in our area due to the sandy soil, the first sign of settlement began when the area was surveyed in the 1820's and became known as Flos Township. Most of the land was surveyed by the 1830's. Due to the abundance of large trees, the Wasaga Beach area became popular for logging. The Nottawasaga River was a natural route for logs to be floated to the several lumber mills that were located both up river and across the bay in Collingwood.

During this time, plans were made to build a canal from Lake Ontario to Lake Huron, using the Nottawasaga River as a connecting link. This proved to be too expensive. A railway was then

proposed joining York (Toronto) to Georgian Bay, and construction began on the first leg of the railway to Barrie in 1851. Based on the proposed railway, plans were made to create a town named Hythe at the river mouth, but due to the shifting sandy river bottom, a proper harbour could not be built. The railway was then extended to Collingwood and Hythe was never formally created.

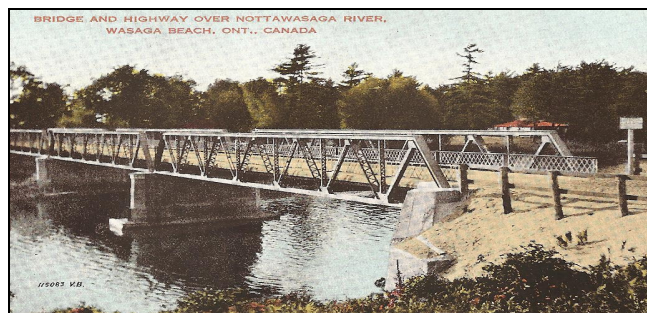
In 1870, John Van Vlack purchased 69 acres of land near the Nottawasaga River and became one of the area's first permanent residents. He was a commercial fisherman, built a saw mill, ran a general store and was the area's first postmaster. By 1896, a settlement of around 70 people lived in what was then known as Van Vlack. A wooden bridge was built over the river in 1872, with a hotel opening a few years later. Most of the families in the Van Vlack settlement either fished or logged, with the surrounding area gradually developing small farms. The settlement also had a school.



*Van Vlack Bridge*

The first official use of the name Wasaga Beach appears around the end of the 1880's. The Van Vlack settlement was situated in Flos Township, and the beach area was located roughly at the top end of Sunnidale Township. When the lots were subdivided in that Township, one subdivision was called Wasaga Beach. The name was obviously a derivative of "Nottawasaga". It is interesting to note that even in the 1890's, Wasaga Beach was known locally as "The Beach".

Railway and road services gradually started to improve, and by the turn of the century, Wasaga had a hotel and a few cottages. It was becoming a favourite spot for picnics and holidays because of its proximity to Toronto and surrounding communities. Cars were becoming popular and it was a grand adventure to drive from your home to Wasaga Beach to spend the summer there. As more cottages and hotels were built and summer businesses were established, the Van Vlack wooden bridge was replaced with a steel bridge in 1909. This bridge was built in a more westerly location and connected to what was then Main Street. When the Van Vlack School was moved further east, the small settlement gradually became absorbed by Wasaga Beach.



*Steel Bridge*

Most of the businesses in that era were built along the beachfront, as that was the main transportation route during the summer. John McLean built a hotel known as The Capstan Inn in 1911. It was rebuilt in 1915 after a fire and became a landmark at Wasaga Beach. He also built the Dardanella Dance Hall across the street from the hotel and owned several other hotels.



*Capstan Inn*



*Dardanella Dance Hall*

Other hotels would appear, with names such as The Wasaga Inn, Hotel Breakers, the Allistonia, the Dyconia, etc. Smaller cottage courts were springing up as well, with wonderful names such as “Grouch No Longer”, “Birch Haven”, “Wasaga Huts” and “Golden Sands”. The businesses along the water would close in the winter as the beachfront would be impassible unless on sleigh or snowshoes, and most of the cottages were not winterized. Wasaga Beach had become a summer tourist haven.

Local residents built their homes further inland, to avoid the blowing sand and winter elements. Houses were built along Golf Course Road, Mosley Street and Vanlack Road (now River Road East). Several families moved to Wasaga Beach from Toronto and surrounding areas during the Great Depression, when they lost their homes and their jobs. This area was ripe for entrepreneurs!

Wasaga’s first school was a classroom above Eberhardt’s Store at the northwest end of the Main Street Bridge and was called S.S. #14. A permanent school was built in 1939 on property donated by Anabel Sage Mills, and now houses the Wasaga Beach Municipal Office. Other small schools gradually became part of Wasaga as its boundaries grew.

An event of national significance occurred at Wasaga Beach on August 8, 1934, with the first successful overseas flight from Canada to England. This location was chosen due to Wasaga’s long, smooth, hard-packed sand beach. The airplane was named the “Trail of the Caribou” and a stone cairn commemorating the flight was unveiled on August 28, 1958 at the entrance to the Nancy Island Historic Site.



*“Trail of the Caribou”*

During the Second World War, Wasaga Beach became a popular holiday haven for soldiers on leave from Base Borden. More cottage courts were built, and the soldiers and their families enjoyed the atmosphere at the “Main End”, where one could partake in midway rides, a movie theatre, outdoor and indoor bowling and dancing, and everything in between. Wasaga would see up to 100,000 people visit on the weekends when the weather was sunny and warm. Everyone enjoyed the carnival atmosphere.

Many of the weekend visitors would eventually return to Wasaga Beach and build summer cottages that later became their permanent homes. As Wasaga grew, area residents began

pushing to become a Police Village, in order to gain more control of their future. Wasaga Beach became a Police Village in 1940 with a council made up of trustees. Wasaga was designated an Improvement District in 1946 and an incorporated village in 1949. By 1966, Wasaga Beach had annexed Oakview Beach from Sunnidale Township, and ultimately became a Town in 1974 with expanded borders from Nottawasaga, Sunnidale and Flos.

During the late 1940's and early 1950's, Wasaga Beach was gaining a reputation as being a "party spot" for young people. With unique problems often associated with a resort town, local residents and the government knew something had to be done to keep Wasaga's reputation as a safe appealing summer resort. A plan was developed in the late 1950's to have the province assume control of the beachfront, as they had considerably more resources to do so. By 1959, the beachfront became officially known as a Crown Beach. Manned lifeguard towers, change huts and washrooms were built along the beachfront, as well as organized parking areas. Thanks to provincial funding, the construction of a new bridge was completed in 1961, which replaced the steel bridge that had been built in 1909.

During the early 1960's, the Department of Lands and Forests put forward a plan to acquire a seven mile strip of beachfront that would ultimately affect a thousand privately-owned cottages and buildings. By 1967, many properties had been expropriated, with the buildings being auctioned off and moved to other areas. In fact, the first building to house the Collingwood Airport was a cottage moved from Wasaga's beachfront. By 1973, the Province prohibited all vehicles from being driven along the beachfront, for both environmental and safety reasons.

More changes occurred in the 1970's. What was known locally as the "Main End" was closed off and turned into a pedestrian mall in 1972. The Wasaga Beach School was purchased by the Town and opened as Wasaga's municipal office in 1974 when Wasaga Beach officially became a town. In 1976, a second bridge was built further up river, again funded by the provincial government. Municipal sewer and water was provided, subdivisions were being built and a "new" downtown was envisioned in the area of 19<sup>th</sup> Street.

Due to the linear shape of Wasaga Beach, it was only a matter of time until other areas developed their own nodes of commercial uses. There are now several big box stores, franchise restaurants, many privately-owned businesses, a new YMCA, our arena, RecPlex and library. The permanent population has grown considerably, with both young families and retirees moving to Wasaga. With many service clubs and our marvellous recreational opportunities that residents can enjoy, Wasaga has indeed grown into a thriving four season town with a fantastic lifestyle.

*By: Mary Watson, Town Archivist June09*

