

The 2003 OCAPG Award

Catherine Whiteley of Qualicum Beach BC won the 2003 OCAPG Award, offered by the Ontario Chapter of the Association of Professional Genealogists for the best short essay on an unsolved problem in Ontario genealogy. The award, which includes a certificate plus professional help in addressing the problem, will be offered again in 2004. Details on www.rootsweb.com/~onapg

Part I - The Winning Essay

Peter Thomson (? – 1895) by Catherine Whiteley



Peter Thomson was a something of a public figure in his last few years. As first Superintendent of Algonquin Provincial Park, his activities were news. Visits to Toronto occasioned mention in the *Toronto Globe*ⁱ. News of his unexpected death in the Park was heralded on the *Globe*'s front page. Notice of his death also appeared in at least three other newspapersⁱⁱ. Yet for all his public visibility, his parentage, birth date and birth place have been strangely obscured.

The earliest documentation found of Peter Thomson was his marriage to Isabella Aitken on January 27th, 1860ⁱⁱⁱ in Ancaster. It reveals only that he was "of Ancaster". The *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the County of Huron*^{iv} tells us he moved to Brussels in that County in 1860. He made Brussels his home for the next thirty years. His six children were born there, four daughters who lived to maturity, and two children who were buried in the Brussels Cemetery as infants.

Peter was a carpenter and contractor most of his life. About 1891 he was hired by the Colonization Roads Dept. as road and bridge builder. In 1893 he was hired first as Chief Ranger, and a year later as first Superintendent of Algonquin Park^v. On September 5th, 1895 he succumbed to either pleurisy or paralysis (accounts vary) and died at Park Headquarters. He was buried in Brussels.

The usual sources for birth place and date have not been forthcoming. His death registration cannot be found in the Ontario Death Registration Index for 1895. There is no tombstone in Brussels Cemetery. The obituaries in the *Brussels Post*, *Huron Expositor*, *Huntsville Forester*, and *Toronto Globe* all fail to mention his background and give his age variously as 55 or 62.

He can be traced in the censuses of 1861^{vi}, 1871^{vii}, 1881^{viii} and 1891^{ix}. These provide the ages of 24, 36, 46, and 64 (should perhaps be 54?) and state only that he was Presbyterian, a carpenter and born in Canada. His father was born in Scotland and his mother in England.

The Death Registration of his oldest daughter, Janet, who died in 1939, has been applied for of the Registrar General.

A tiny clue appeared in a letter from a grandson's widow^x, in which she stated that her mother-in-law, Clara Thomson, (Peter's daughter) had worked or lived with her uncle at Rose Point Lodge in Parry Sound before marriage. Sure enough, the proprietor of the Rose Point Lodge was a William Fritz (or Frances) Thomson. Perhaps a brother of Peter's. If so, finding the brother's origins would also uncover Peter's.

William F. Thomson was born in Ontario in 1852 to John Thomson and Mary Ann Hodgins. John Thomson was a native of Glasgow and Mary Ann was born in Carlisle, England.^{xi} So far, this would fit with what we know of Peter.

In *McKellar Memories*, author Evelyn Watkins Moore states that William originally kept McKellar House Hotel with his brother Robert^{xii}. Robert Thomson's marriage was located, verifying that his parents were also John Thomson and Mary Ann Hodgins and that he was born in Napanee, Lennox County in 1847^{xiii}.

Since none of Peter, William and Robert were farmers, I guessed that their father might also not have been. Browsing through the online version of the 1871 Census of Ontario for all John Thomsons born in Scotland of approximately the right age, I located a John Thomson, millwright, married to a Mary Ann, in Hamilton Township, Northumberland West^{xiv}. In the same household were adult males Alexander, **Robert**, **William** and James. The *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Northumberland* of 1879 lists an Alexander Thomson as hotel proprietor and steam yacht owner. This certainly provides some support for Alexander Thomson to be the older brother of the Robert and William F. Thomson in Parry Sound who later in the decade were also running hotels and steamboats. It still provides no link to Peter.

Since Robert was born in Napanee in 1847, the 1851 census of that area might capture the whole family, including Peter, since he would be approximately 17 years old at that time. John Thomson's family was located in the 1851 census of Addington County^{xv}, Five sons (including Alex, James, Robert and William) and four daughters are listed. Peter was not listed although it is quite conceivable that he would have been out working for someone else. Michael B. Katz, in his book *People of Hamilton*^{xvi} argues that in Canada West during this period, young men between 15 and 22 were usually working away from home. Even if Peter were now "found" in an 1851 census, it would not provide the link to this John Thomson family.

Small circumstantial links are there. Carpentry would be a likely trade for the son of a millwright. Peter's first daughter was named Janet Anne, a repeat of part of his "mother's" name, his fourth daughter was Mary Maud, another part of his "mother's" name. In the 1871 census his daughter Clara was actually called "Dorcas", the same name as one of John Thomson's daughters found in the 1851 census. But most strongly of all, Peter's daughter Clara was said to be staying with her **uncle** William at Rose Point Lodge.

Family census data is not going to provide the link I had hoped for. Peter's marriage record is woefully brief. No notice of marriage appeared in the Hamilton newspaper. It seems that John Thomson, perhaps as a function of his trade, moved around a lot. If he is Peter's father, it would explain why Peter didn't refer to where he came from – he had come from a lot of different places and perhaps had formed no real attachment to any of them.

I have come to a brick wall. How can I find Peter's birthdate and place and verify his parents' names?

ⁱ *The Globe*, Toronto, Friday, September 21, 1894, p.6.

ⁱⁱ *Huntsville Forester*, Sept. 13, 1895; *Brussels Post*, Sept.13 and 20, 1895; *Huron Expositor*, Sept. 13, 1895, p.8.

ⁱⁱⁱ AO Marriage Registers RG8 1801 – 1948 MS 248 Reel 17 Vol. 82, p.40.

^{iv} *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the County of Huron Ont.*, Toronto, H. Belden & Co., 1879, p.75.

^v Donald Standfield. *Algonquin: the park and its people*. Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, c1993, p.52.

^{vi} NA Film C1036, Morris Township 4, p.38

^{vii} NA Film C9932, Dist. 26 G2, p.68.

^{viii} NA Film C13274 Dist. 175G Brussels, p.14.

^{ix} NA Film T06344 Dist.76 Huron East, S. Dist. Brussels Village, p.46

^x Letter from Helen Taylor, Owen Sound, October 1994.

^{xi} Province of Ontario Death Registration. Cert. No. 028332.

^{xii} Evelyn Watkins Moore. *McKellar Memories*, p. 95.

^{xiii} Ontario Marriage Registration. FHC Film #1869505, Reg. No. 06894.

^{xiv} NA. Census of 1871. Reel C9983 Northumberland West (054) Hamilton Township (A1) p.11.

^{xv} NA Census of 1851 Reel C11712 Addington County Twp 4, p.39.

^{xvi} Michael B. Katz. *The People of Hamilton, Canada West*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, c1975.