

Part II - The OCAPG Analysis and Report

Summary of the Problem

Peter Thomson was born in Ontario in about 1837, married Isabella Aitken in 1860 in Ancaster, and was a carpenter in Brussels, Huron Co. for much of his life. He was appointed superintendent of Algonquin Park in 1894 and died there the following year. His origins remain a mystery: The usual sources of information about birthplace and parents are either incomplete or missing. One tiny clue: Peter's daughter Clara was said to have worked for her uncle at Rose Point Lodge in Parry Sound. Building on that clue, Catherine Whiteley developed a theory that Peter was the son of John Thomson and Mary Ann Hodgins of Addington Co in 1851 and Hamilton Twp., Northumberland in 1871.

A Brief Critique of the Essay

Catherine's research was extensive. She presented compelling circumstantial evidence, but resisted the temptation to reach a firm conclusion without direct proof. Her essay was interesting and well written. How could it have been improved? A few more key facts, and better source citations would have been helpful. One example: A death record for William F Thomson, a possible sibling of Peter's, was cited. However, his date of death was omitted and the footnote gave a registration #, but not the year. A reader wanting to find the actual record, or related information such as an obituary, would be unable to do so easily.

Further Information and Ideas

The problem was published to all OCAPG members with a request for comments. Numerous ideas were generated - more than could be pursued in the short time available, especially on a surname as common as Thomson. Catherine was also asked for some further information. Among other things she provided b/m/d details for Peter's six children, including Clara¹, and death details for William F Thomson. She also mentioned she had searched without success for Peter Thomson in Renie Rumpel's indexes to the 1851 census in both Wentworth and Lennox & Addington counties.

¹ Clara Thomson, b. Dec. 1870 Brussels, d. Sept. 26, 1956, Owen Sound. m. William Taylor March 11, 1908 in Toronto. Lived in Owen Sound after marriage.

Research and Comments

1.0 The prime areas of interest appeared to be Wentworth (where Peter first appeared in 1860), Huron (where he lived for many years) and Addington, Northumberland, and Parry Sound (pursuing Catherine's theory that he was a brother of William of Parry Sound and therefore a son of John & Mary Ann Thompson). The first steps were to check several readily available indexes, bearing in mind that Peter was apparently born in Ontario, his father in Scotland and his mother in England. Note: All searches included both "Thomson" and "Thompson". Some records used the first spelling, others the second for the same person.

1.1 An 1851 index² for Lennox & Addington listed the family mentioned by Catherine - in Sheffield Twp.: John Thompson, 65, M, b. Scot, Presb, wheelwright, Mary Ann, 35, M, England, plus children, all born CW – Eliza 17, Alexander 16, Margaret 14, Elinor 11, James 9, Robert 7, John 6, Dorcas 3, and William 2. There was a Peter Thompson in L & A Co - also in Sheffield - but he was 34, M, b. CW - too old to be our Peter.

1.2 An 1871 Ontario head of household index³ listed 200+ John Thom(p)sons, including the one mentioned by Catharine - John Thomson, age 73, b. Scot, millwright, living in Hamilton, Northumberland. If, as she believed, he was the same person as in 1.1 above, his age should have been about 85. (See 2.1 below) There was also a John Thompson death in Hamilton Twp. - age 54, b. England.

1.3 An 1848/50 CW head of household index⁴ showed a Peter Thomson in Haldimand, Northumberland. Our Peter seems too young to be head of a household in 1848.

1.4 An 1857 Directory of Ontario⁵ included these entries:

Thompson, Peter - Hamilton, Wentworth - Innkeeper, Wentworth St. Possibly a relative . Or conceivably even our Peter, although he would have been very young to be an innkeeper, and was later a carpenter.

Thompson, John - Tamworth - Addington - wagon & sleigh maker. Likely the same person as in 1.1 above.

No Thompson entries were found in Ancaster. There were two Aitken entries in Hamilton, Wentworth - Stephen, shoemaker, and Samuel, auctioneer/commission merchant. Could they be relatives of Peter's wife?

1.5 An index⁶ of the 1881 Ontario census listed this interesting family in Ancaster: George Thomson, 78, b. Scotland; Sophia Thomson, 60, England, and William Thomson, 20, Ontario. Sophia seems young to be Peter's mother, but her age (or his) could be inaccurate. (A George Thomson, 67, Scot, shoemaker, Presb, was also found in Ancaster in the 1871 index.)

Also in Ancaster was a Peter Thomson, 36, W, b. Scotland, and family.

The 1881 index listed no John Thomson in Ontario born 1800 or earlier, suggesting that John in 1.1 died before 1881. (and John in 1.2 died between 1871 - 1881)

² Waller, Russ, 1851 Census Lennox & Addington County, Kingston, 1989, p. 20

³ Family Tree Maker CD #116, Ontario Canada, 1871.

⁴ Dilts, Bryon L., 1848 and 1850 Canada West Census Index, Index Publishing, Salt Lake, 1984

⁵ Wilson, Thomas B., et al, Directory of the Province of Ontario, Hunterdon House, NJ, 1987

⁶ Family Search, 1881 Canadian Census, CD (The reference to the Thomson family is Ancaster, Wentworth, NAC C-13256, Dist 147 SubDist E Div 2 page 39 Family 181)

1.6 If any of the daughters noted in 1.1 took a husband with a less common name than Thompson, they might be easier to trace. An Ontario Marriage Index⁷ 1858 – 1869 listed only one of obvious interest: Dorcas Thompson, 19, b. Camden, res. Sheffield, d/o John and Mary, m. Jan 18, 1867, Thomas Adam, 32, Camden, Sheffield.

The 1881 census index listed no Dorcas Adam(s). However, another marriage index⁸ gave the names of the parties as Dorcas Thompson and Thomas Adair. The 1881 Index listed this family: Thomas Adair, M, 43, Dorcas, M, 32, and 7 children, living in Parry Sound/Parry Island, Muskoka. Interesting – another member of the John & Mary Thompson family moved to the Parry Sound area.

1.7 An index of Northumberland wills at the Archives of Ontario listed this entry:

John Thompson - Hamilton - #676 - 1871.

(There were several other John Thompsons in other townships)

2.0 With the above background information, the following more detailed research was undertaken.

2.1 To provide reassurance that the families in 1.1 and 1.2 (plus the later families in Parry Sound) were the same, the original 1871 record⁹ was retrieved. John was actually 83 and a wheelwright, not 73 and a millwright as shown in the index. Living with him was Mary Ann, 52, Alexander, 37, Robert, 27, William, 22, plus James, 29, his wife Isabella, 23, and two infants.

It does indeed appear that the families in the two areas were one and the same.

The large age difference between Mary Ann and John suggests that she may have been a second wife. If Peter was a son of the first wife and she died when he was young, he might have been raised by relatives - hence not found with the John Thomson family in 1851. And if he was raised by a maternal aunt, for example, he might even have been recorded with a surname other than Thomson in 1851.

Comment: This search and the one in 1.6 illustrate both the value of indexes and the risks in relying too heavily on them!

2.2 The estate file¹⁰ for 1.7 above was retrieved. This John Thompson appears to be the one who died age 54 (See 1.2 above.), not John Thomson age 83.

2.3 The detailed 1871 census record¹¹ referred to in 1.5 above was retrieved. Briefly: George Thomson 67, M, b. Scot; Sophia 52, M, b. Eng; and (all single and born in Ontario) John 22, George 20, James 17, William 10.

It seems likely that George and Sophia came to Ontario before 1850. Where were they in 1851? Could they have been Peter's parents?

⁷ Family Tree Maker CD # 266

⁸ Hancocks, Elizabeth, County Marriage Registers, L & A Co, Generation Press, 1983

⁹ NAC C-9983, 1871 Census, West Northumberland, Hamilton, page 11

¹⁰ Archives of Ontario, GS-1 Reel 298

¹¹ NAC C-9924, South Wentworth, Ancaster Div. 3, p. 46

2.4 Since at least three of Peter's supposed siblings (William, Dorcas and Robert) moved to the Parry Sound area, his obituary might have appeared in the local newspaper there. A book of b/m/d excerpts from The Parry Sound North Star¹² 1874 to 1904 was found, but Peter Thomson was not listed in the index. There was an obituary on Oct 6, 1898 for Mrs. W. F. Thomson of Rose Point with some details of the family's locations prior to her death, but no other relevant information.

2.5 An index¹³ of Hillcrest cemetery, Parry Sound was found, with this entry:
Adair, Diercus, res. Parry Sound, d. June 13, 1923.

The death record¹⁴ was retrieved and gave this further information:

Adair, Dorcas, b. Sheffield Tp, Addington, March 7, 1847, father - John Thomson, b. Edinburgh; mother's maiden name - Hutchison, b. Carlisle, England.

The Parry Sound North Star probably carried an obituary, but unfortunately copies for 1923 are missing.

2.6 An obituary¹⁵ for Wm F Thomson was found in the Parry Sound North Star, May 22, 1930.

"W. F. Thomson ... late proprietor of Rose Point Summer Resort ... survived by his widow, formerly (illegible)hompson of Orillia, one son Guy of Rose Point... one daughter, Mrs. W. H. Campbell of Vancouver ... The following friends and relatives from a distance attended the funeral ... Mrs. Archibald, and the Misses Irine and Isobel Campbell of Toronto, Mrs. Wm. Taylor and Mr. Humphrey Taylor, Owen Sound, Mrs. J. B. Miller and Mrs. Peuhen(?) of Toronto, Mr. Geo. Thompson and son, Orillia."

Mrs. Wm. Taylor, one of the attendees, appears to be Peter Thomson's daughter Clara. Thus, the obituary supports the theory that she was a niece of Wm F. Thomson, as it seems unlikely she would have made the trip from Owen Sound just to attend the funeral of a former employer or distant relative. However, the widow's maiden name raises another interesting question: It appears that after his first wife died in 1898 William F Thomson must have married a (??)hompson (probably Thompson) of Orillia. Could Clara have been a niece of the widow, hence a niece of William by marriage? It would be interesting to find more about the widow, e.g. the record of her marriage to William.

What of the other attendees? Since both George Thompson of Orillia and his son attended the funeral, they were likely close relatives - perhaps George was the widow's brother. We can speculate that Humphrey Taylor may have been Clara's son and the Campbells may have been in-laws of William's daughter. Were Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Peuhen(?) just friends, or were they nieces, cousins, sisters ... ?

¹² North York Library. Heidman, Laura Knight, and Fred, *Star gazing reflections from the Parry sound North Star*, 1999

¹³ North York Library, Belanger, Marion F., *Pioneers of Hillcrest*

¹⁴ Archives of Ontario, MS 935, Reel 304 , #26931 (1923)

¹⁵ Archives of Ontario, N 422, Reel 13, May 22, 1930, page 1

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is still too early to draw any firm conclusions. We have found further support for Catherine's theory that Peter Thomson was related to William F Thomson of Parry Sound, who was a son of John Thomson and Mary Ann Hodgins (or Hutchison) of Sheffield Township, Lennox & Addington and latterly of Hamilton, Northumberland. And we have raised several interesting new questions:

- a) Might Peter have been a son of John Thomson by an earlier marriage, and might this explain why he does not appear with the family in the 1851 census?
- b) Might Peter have been related to William by marriage - a brother-in-law, not a brother?
- c) Might Peter's parents have been George and Sophia Thomson of Ancaster?

There are still many potential sources that could establish Peter's origins. The most likely are an estate file, or an obituary, for one of his parents or siblings. Or, if a church record of his marriage could be found it might provide more than the bare bones registration. His wife's death record and obituary might yield further clues. Clara, so far missing in the 1891 or 1901 census, might be found living with a relative, with the relationship noted Finally, with more and more newspaper files being digitized, there are improving chances of finding one of those tidbits in the Personals column of a small town paper:

"Mrs. ----- visited her brother, Peter Thomson of Brussels last week."

The problem is challenging, made more so by the very common surname Thom(p)son, but the potential leads have by no means been exhausted. We wish Catherine well in her continuing search, and would remind her of the old motto: *"The difficult we do immediately; the impossible takes a little longer!"*

Acknowledgments

A committee of Elayne Lockhart, Janice Nickerson, Alison Hare and myself conducted the OCAPG Award program, with advice and suggestions from other OCAPG members.

D. Russell Morton