

## Town of Ajax History - The Founding of Pickering Village

A historical plaque commemorating the founding of Pickering was erected on October 3, 1976 at the intersection of Kingston Road and St. George Street in the former village of Pickering. The ceremony was sponsored by the Ajax Historical Board, and the plaque was unveiled by Mr. C.A. Mason, Mayor of the Town of Ajax. The inscription reads:

"The Founding of Pickering" Between 1801 and 1807 a settlement developed here in Pickering Township where the Danforth Road crossed Duffin's Creek. Among the early settlers was Timothy Rogers, a prominent Quaker and colonizer who built a saw and grist-mill in 1809. A post-office was established in 1829 but the hamlet of Duffin's Creek developed slowly. The construction of the Grand Trunk Railway, completed in 1856, and growing agricultural prosperity stimulated the community's development as an important grist-milling and local commercial centre. Known as Pickering from the late 1870's, it became a police village in 1900 with about 1,000 inhabitants. In 1953 it was made an incorporated Village and in 1974 amalgamated with the Town of Ajax."

### Historical Background

East of Toronto, one finds between Lake Ontario and the rolling mill plain slightly to the north, an off-shore terrace. This terrace varies from two to eight miles in width, and its clay and silt soil beds-end level surface are earmarks of a fertile lake plain. Hence, early in the history of Upper Canada, pioneers were attracted to this easily accessible area, and settlements soon clustered along the streams - Cobourg Brook, Ganaraska River, Bowmanville Creek, Oshawa Creek, Duffin's Creek, Rouge River - whose valleys led northward dissecting the till plain. Later, with the completion of the Kingston Road about 1805, villages such as Cobourg, Port Hope, Bowmanville, Oshawa, Whitby and, of special interest here, Pickering, gained further impetus for growth.

Pickering Township was surveyed in 1791 by Augustus Jones, Deputy Provincial Land Surveyor. The site of the later village of Pickering on Duffin's Creek was part of the 4,800-acre block in Pickering granted in 1793 to Major John Smith, an officer in the 5th Regiment during the Revolutionary War and later commanding officer at Detroit (1790-1792) and Niagara (1792-1795). On Major Smith's death, the land passed to his son, David W. Smith, Surveyor-General of Upper Canada (1792-1804). In 1797 Smith planned to erect a saw and grist-mill in the township. Although these mills were never begun, an order was sent by Smith to the Commissary-General's department for the issue of millstones and necessary hardware. Smith still had this equipment in 1799, and it was possibly sold along with a portion of his land in 1807.

The area around Duffin's Creek was unsettled prior to 1801, with the exception of local traders. An Irish trader, Duffin, was active in the area around 1788-90, and by the time of Jones' 1791 survey, Duffin's name was connected with the creek that flows into Lake Ontario. Another trader, William Peak, reputedly located at the mouth of Duffin's Creek as well. Between 1801 and 1807 a small group of houses formed the initial Duffin's Creek settlement near the Kingston Road Bridge. Among the earliest settlers was Samuel Hunger, a farmer who leased the crown reserve Lot 16, Concession 2, in 1801 and lived there for some years. After 1805 Noadiah Woodruff, a Quaker, also had a house on Lot 16.

In July 1807, Smith sold an 850-acre block around the Creek to Timothy Rogers (1756-1827), a native of Connecticut and prominent member of the Yonge Street Quaker settlement. Rogers intended to build a grist-mill and sawmill on Duffin's Creek, and began erecting the mills and other buildings in 1809 near his house on Lot 14, Concession 1, and southeast of the Kingston Road Bridge. In 1813, in order to repay several debts before attending the annual Quaker meeting in New York State, Rogers sold the mills and some property to Alexander Wood, who thereafter operated the mills sporadically. In Rogers' estimation, Pickering Township was the centre of Quaker settlement in Upper Canada and he fully expected that a Yearly Meeting would be established near Duffin's Creek. The Quaker population of Pickering did increase, but in 1813 the small Duffin's Creek village still only consisted of a few houses, including a tavern operated by Noadiah Woodruff since 1808. Settlement progressed very gradually.

Before 1820, attempts to establish commercial stores in the county failed, largely because of the scant population and the lack of sufficient cash crops that farmers could trade for manufactured goods. The first attempt had been made at Duffin's Creek when a Mr. Smith operated a store near the former Rogers mill in 1817- 18. This enterprise, however, exhibited the same instability as did milling operations. The real state of commercial activity and milling in Pickering was revealed in 1820 by one Whitby township settler:

"The County north of that (was) one unbroken wilderness ... With no grist mill in the Township of (Whitby), the nearest being situated at Duffin's Creek, which was of the rudest character, and hence out of repair, the family was obliged for weeks at a time to go without bread. Meat of any kind was only a rarity which few could afford. The nearest store was at Little York, where the journey, for years, had to be made on foot."

Four years later a store was again opened at Duffin's Creek, this time by Francie Leys, a Scot from Aberdeen. Although he did not have a licensed inn, Leys accommodated travellers in his house at the west end of the settlement. A post-office, subsequently established in 1829 with Leys as postmaster, was officially known as Pickering, yet the village continued to be called Duffin's Creek.

Though the centre of a large agrarian community, Duffin's Creek continued to grow slowly after 1830. The village's lack of a good road north and the vigorous growth of Markham and Stouffville prevented it from achieving the status and prosperity of its lakeshore rivals, Whitby and Oshawa. These factors and the later post-Rebellion depression contributed to the village's slow development, and attempts to accelerate the natural growth rate met with failure. After 1831, for example, Charles Fothergill, the noted naturalist, author, and politician, planned on an elaborate scale the foundation of a community to be called Monodelphia. Churches, a tavern, printing office, mills and distillery were all part of Fothergill's ambitious plan. Although this plan failed to materialize, Fothergill did encourage the construction of a few houses at Duffin's Creek, and resided there himself between about 1831 and 1837.

In late December 1830, Fothergill had purchased the mill owned by Alexander Wood since 1813. He intended to rebuild Wood's old mill, then inoperative, but was prevented from doing so until 1833, when he acquired the necessary rights for forming a mill-pond nearby. The completed mills temporarily gave the community the name of Pickering Mills, in addition to Duffin's Creek and Pickering, and the village was again served by ships which came up the creek to Fothergill's mills. Plagued by misfortune, principally the destruction of his dam and a mill, Fothergill abandoned the village projects and mills in 1837.

Despite the failure of Fothergill's projects, Duffin's Creek remained as a small village with many of the typical trades then found in other rural communities throughout the province. Milling operations were continued by Christopher Elliot, who had built a grist-mill on the Creek, north of the bridge, by 1837. In that year, there were about ten houses at Duffin's Creek, most of them located near the bridge on the Kingston Road. The population of Duffin's Creek, or Canton, as it was also called, was conservatively estimated in 1846 at 130. By that time, there were four churches (Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, British Wesleyan and Quaker), a grist-mill, brewery, tannery, taverns, and the shops of shoemakers, tailors, a blacksmith and a wagon-maker.

Following the now common pattern of rapid transfer of milling lots, the Elliot grist-mill was subsequently owned by Peter Head, an innkeeper who purchased it in 1846. By 1851 several more trade shops had opened, and throughout the 1850s at least three saw and grist-mills were in operation simultaneously at Duffin's Creek.

The village, known as Pickering from the late 1860s, obtained rail connections when the Grand Trunk Railway opened between Oshawa and Toronto in August 1856. The line reduced road traffic, but benefited milling operations, certainly the settlement's main industry. Head's mill remained operative until 1869 or 1870. After 1867, Moses Smith built a grist-mill at the former Rogers mill site. John R. Hoover purchased this mill about 1877, named it the Elm Dale Mill and, after a fire, rebuilt it between 1885 and 1887. Perhaps the largest grist-mill complex in Pickering was that built in 1875 by William and John L. Spink, near the old Head mill site.

Both the Spinks, experienced millers who supplied commercial firms in Toronto and Welland with flour, and Hoover incorporated the latest advances in milling technology. In addition, each mill was served by a spur line of the Grand Trunk. The Spinks and Elm Dale mills remained in operation under various owners until 1934 and 1956 respectively.

In 1881 the Pickering News proudly described the village as a growing, important town and drew particular attention to the flour-mills, the large Pickering Woodworks and other local industries and institutions. Among the latter was the Pickering College, a residential secondary school built by the Quakers in 1878 near their Yearly Meeting House at Pickering. Sectarian difficulties within the Society of Friends in Canada forced the closure of this Quaker-run school in 1885. Reopened in 1892, the College remained at Pickering until its destruction by fire in early 1906. The College was later rebuilt at Newmarket after having achieved a high reputation for its business department and preparatory courses for university and normal school.

Evident from various other newspaper accounts between 1880 and 1900 was Pickering's position as a commercial and professional centre for a prosperous rural community. Through the Grand Trunk, Pickering also functioned as a shipping centre for area produce: livestock, grain, and flour ground at the village mills. In 1900 the community's population was estimated at about 1,000. Village promoters supported the municipal elevation of Pickering, and on June 2, 1900, the Ontario County Council passed a by-law making Pickering a Police Village. Pickering became an incorporated village in March 1953 and on January 1, 1974, it was amalgamated with the Town of Ajax.