

RICHARD PIERPOINT AND THE NAMING OF DICK'S CREEK

Dick's Creek is a tributary of Twelve Mile Creek, and a former route of the First and Second Welland Canals through south St. Catharines. The Creek has three main branches (Burgoyne, Merritton and Secord), which come together near the intersection of Oakdale and Westchester Avenues. The Burgoyne branch has several tributaries, including one extending all the way up to Brock University. The Merritton branch was followed by both canals, though today it is totally artificial. The Secord branch flows through a culvert in its lower reaches beneath a former municipal dump (currently a municipal golf course), but its headwaters still exist.

Dick's Creek was supposedly named for Richard Pierpoint (variously spelled Pierpont, Parepoint, Pairpine, Pawpine and Paupine). He was also known as Captain Dick and Black Dick. Pierpoint was a former slave and one of the earliest settlers in Grantham Township. The attribution is puzzling, because the creek barely touches the land to which he had title, namely lots 13 and 14, concession 6. This leads to a toponymic question: was the Creek really named after Pierpoint?

The Life of Richard Pierpoint

Pierpoint was born in about 1744 in Bondu, now part of Senegal, West Africa, then largely a Moslem state. In about 1760 he was captured by slavers and was taken to North America. There he was sold to a British officer, perhaps as a personal servant. At the close of the Seven Years War in 1763, he may have been sold to another British master, and may have taken his name from the Pierpont family in Connecticut.

During the War of American Independence a notice dated March 4, 1779 appeared in the *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser* announcing that Pierpoint had been held in the Sunbury Jail since October 1778 as a possible deserter or runaway slave. The notice was repeated on March 13 and 23. His age was estimated to be 26, though he was actually about 35. He claimed to have been a wagon driver with the Continental (rebel) Army, but was captured by the British in Rhode Island. He subsequently escaped, only to be captured by the rebels and imprisoned at Sunbury. Six weeks were

allowed for his master to claim him, otherwise he would be sold for fees.

Another notice in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on December 19, 1779 (repeated on January 19, 1780) refers to Richard Lincoln, formerly Richard Pierpoint, who was "bred a barber," and was the property of Mr. Dorsey of Maryland. The reason for the name change is not clear.

Pierpoint was evidently released or escaped from jail, for he joined Butler's Rangers, who were active in the Sunbury area. He may have joined the Rangers because the British government offered freedom to any slaves if they fought on the British side. He was one of eight Blacks in the Rangers. A return of Loyalists in the Rangers does not mention Pierpoint by name, but it does show a Black man and woman in the Indian Department; the man's age (40) matches Pierpoint's.

In 1784 the Rangers were disbanded, and in the same year Pierpoint was listed among disbanded Rangers wishing to take up land on the west bank of the Niagara River. In 1784-85 he and an unnamed woman were listed as having taken the Oath of Allegiance, and in 1785 he was listed in Muster Roll 18 as a settler between Four Mile Creek and the Head-of-the-Lake (currently Burlington Bay). Since no surveys had been carried out Pierpoint must have been a squatter. In 1786 he was included, with an unnamed woman, in a victualling list in Murray's District, which basically became Grantham when surveys were carried out. But in 1787 he was not included in a list of settlers west of Four Mile Creek.

Between 1787 and 1789 surveys of 14 Niagara Peninsula townships from Burlington Bay to Fort Erie were made, though some surveys were carried out in 1786. The first to be surveyed were Townships No. 1 and 2 (Newark and Stamford respectively) in the second half of 1787. Township No. 3 (Grantham) was laid out by Daniel Hazen between December 27, 1787 and March 31, 1788. In 1791 Pierpoint received a Land Board Certificate for lots 13 and 14 in concession 6 in Grantham, and in roughly the same year "Black Dick" was recorded in a register of lots for the District of Nassau.

In 1794 Pierpoint signed the first of the three petitions from him to the government. This one, submitted to John Graves Simcoe, first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, was the Petition of the Free Negroes for the establishment of a Black settlement. This is part of what the petition stated, “Your Petitioners therefore humbly Pray that their situation may be taken into consideration, and if your Excellency should see fit to allow them a Tract of Country to settle on, separate from the white settlers, your Petitioners hope their behaviour will be such as to shew, that Negroes are capable of being industrious, and in loyalty to the Crown they are not deficient.” Pierpoint signed, along with 18 others, but it was not granted.

In 1804 Pierpoint received a patent for his lots in Grantham, but on November 11, 1806 he sold them individually to Robert Hamilton and Garret Schram. On the same day Pierpoint acquired 100 or 150 acres in Louth Township from Schram (part of lots 7 and 8, concession 2). The precise nature of the transactions is uncertain, for the original instruments are missing, and no money is shown in the *Abstract Index* or the *Commissioners Book* summary. It is not known if Pierpoint actually went to Louth to live.

In June 1812 the War of 1812 broke out, and Pierpoint (at the age of almost 70) submitted a second petition, possibly to Isaac Brock, for the creation of a Black unit. The petition itself does not seem to have survived, but it is referred to in a letter of recommendation written for Pierpoint in 1821 by Adjutant General of Militia Nathaniel Coffin, “I further certify that the said Richard Pierpoint, better known by the name Captain Dick, was the first coloured man who proposed to raise a Corps of Men of Color on the Niagara Frontier, in the last American War; that he served in the said corps during that War, and that he is a faithful and deserving old Negro.”

It is said the petition was at first refused and then was granted, but a white man was put in charge, and the unit came to be known as Captain Runchey’s Company of Coloured Men or the Coloured Corps. Pierpoint served as a private from September 1, 1812 to March 24, 1815, and he saw extensive action, including Queenston Heights and Lundy’s Lane. The Coloured Corps ended the War as a non-fighting labour unit.

At the end of the War Pierpoint still owned the land in Louth, for his name is mentioned on an instrument for the sale of an adjacent property. But he no longer

had it by 1826, when the same land was sold by John Thompson to Adam Haynes. The question is what happened in the meantime. In 1820 a return of the Coloured Corps lists Pierpoint as “St. Catharines Grantham.”

In 1821 he submitted a petition to Lieutenant-Governor Maitland to be allowed to return to Africa. This is how the petition began, “The Petition of Richard Pierpoint, now of the Town of Niagara, a Man of Color, a Native of Africa, and an Inhabitant of this Province since the year 1780.” The petition contains key personal information, both about his background and his current life. It continues, “That Your Excellency’s Petitioner is now old and without property; that he finds it difficult to obtain a livelihood by his labor; that he is above all things desirous to return to his native Country; that His Majesty’s Government be graciously pleased to grant him any relief, he wishes it may be by affording him the means to proceed to England and from thence to a Settlement near the Gambia or Senegal Rivers, from whence he could return to Bondou.” The petition was presented in person at York, but it was not granted.

In 1822 Pierpoint received a ticket for the eastern half of lot 6, concession 1 in Garafraxa Township (now including Fergus) as a veteran of the War of 1812. By 1826 he had fulfilled the required settlement duties — a 16 x 20 foot dwelling, plus five acres cleared. Over time the area became known as the Pierpoint Settlement.

In 1828 Pierpoint made out his will, which left his estate to a friend called Lemuel Brown. This included the Garafraxa land, plus lot 13, concession 8 in Grantham. The problem here is that this Grantham lot is not land to which Pierpoint is known to have had title. The will was witnessed by Henry Pawling and John Tenbroeck, the sons of Ranger officers, and was obviously made out locally. The will was probated in 1838; if that was the actual year Pierpoint died, he would have been 94. The application for probate says “Richard Pierpoint of Grantham.”

In 1844 Lemuel Brown’s claim for ownership of lot 13 was rejected, because a patent had been granted to George Hartzell in 1798. This is what a letter of inquiry written by lawyer James Cahill of Hamilton said in 1844, “The Heir of Richard Parepoint claims a title to lot no. 13 in the 8th Concession of Grantham ... Parepoint was one of the old Rangers (he went by the name of Captain Dick) this old Ranger said he got this lot from the Government for his Services, but now it is

claimed by some stranger, who never did any Service, the Canal runs through a part of it, — you will oblige me and let me know whether Richard Parepoint ever had any claim for this lot from the Government and if so whether he sold it to any person, and to whom, or who now has the best claim on the lot, — and also whose name is first mentioned as having any claim on the same.”

First References

When was the first reference to Dick’s Creek? An “1809” map in *Page’s Atlas* of 1876 shows Captain Dick’s Creek, but includes lots that did not exist until later (not to mention a railway built in 1852-4). It was probably a map of St. Catharines as it was in 1829 (it’s likely that 1809 was a misprint), but drawn much later, possibly in the 1860s to resolve a land dispute between the heirs of Duncan Murray and Robert Hamilton. However, it does provide a clue to determining the first use of the name, for the properties extending east of St. Paul Street terminate at the Creek. The instruments for the first land transactions refer specifically to Dick’s Creek; the earliest was in 1817.

When was the first reference to Captain Dick? The Page map proves nothing, while the Cahill letter gives 1844. The letter accompanying Pierpoint’s petition of 1821 written by Nathaniel Coffin mentions Captain Dick. He was never a proper captain, but he probably acquired honorary status during the Revolutionary War or the War of 1812. This is possibly another reason why the map in Page’s atlas cannot show the situation in 1809.

When was the first reference to the Creek being named for Pierpoint? This was in “A Walk about Town!,” published on a weekly basis in the *St. Catharines Journal* in 1856. It was written by ‘Junius’ (Oliver Seymour Phelps), and was contained in “Walk F.” But this was 50 years after Pierpoint sold his land in Grantham, and cannot be considered proof. Oral history is unreliable; indeed, it is significant that Junius gave the wrong lot numbers.

Dittrick’s Claim

Though Dick’s Creek barely touches Pierpoint’s land, the Burgoyne branch runs right through the middle of several lots belonging to the Dittrick family. Jacob Dittrick (Tedrick) was granted 500 acres in Grantham as a non-commissioned officer (a sergeant in Butler’s Rangers): specifically lot 15, concession 7 and lots 14-17, concession 8. This is confirmed by a

Land Board certificate dated 1791; he received a patent for the 500 acres in 1797. In addition, he acquired the eastern half of lot 18, concession 8 in 1806.

Dittrick was a much more significant figure than Pierpoint. He was a member of the first church in St. Catharines, a stockholder in the First Welland Canal, and a worshipful master of the masonic lodge. He was present at Simcoe’s arrival in Niagara in 1792, and was one of 54 signatories on an address congratulating Simcoe on his appointment. He was a captain in the Lincoln Militia from 1797 to 1808. He married Margaret Pickard, and they had eleven children, and his sons became captains in the Militia also. He died in 1828, whereupon the land was sold to non-Dittricks by the early 1830s.

Was it really (Captain) Dittrick’s Creek, later shortened to (Captain) Dick’s Creek?

Key Questions

Was the Creek named for the Dittricks? The answer is probably no, for three reasons. First, there is no evidence of any sort for Dittrick’s Creek, and the Creek was already called Dick’s Creek by 1817. Second, Jacob Dittrick’s homestead was on the Twelve Mile Creek at the western end of his property, a considerable distance from Pierpoint’s land. Third, Jacob’s son Robert, in his evidence to the Welland Canal Board of Arbitrators in 1826, claims to have had lot 15, concession 7, courtesy of his father, since 1796, and he refers to Dick’s Creek. That leaves Pierpoint as the only possibility.

Was the Creek named for Pierpoint? The answer is probably yes, but the question arises why. According to Meyler & Meyler, authors of a Richard Pierpoint biography, the naming reflects the fact that “Pierpoint had some status in the area and was well-respected in the community.” That may be so, but that in itself would be insufficient (especially given Jacob Dittrick’s prominence). Pierpoint must have lived in a significant location relative to the Creek for it to be named after him.

So where did Pierpoint live? The obvious site was near the south-west corner of his property, which had two locational advantages: first, access to the valley (a source of water), and the better-drained ground of the Homer Bar and the Iroquois Plain (farmland); and second, proximity to an important Indian trail (subsequently called the Iroquois Trail) which was

used by early settlers, and possibly another trail along the Oakdale Branch. It was also on the concession 6 road allowance, though as explained below Pierpoint couldn't have been aware of this when he first settled.

How did the Creek acquire its name? It occurred by a gradual process of association, not because of some conscious act on part of any neighbours. Four factors contributed to this:

(i) isolation

The area was sparsely populated, and people lived in small, scattered clearings; Pierpoint was about the only person around.

(ii) topography

Pierpoint lived at the confluence of two ravines to form the main Creek valley; it was a dramatic location, and people would know of it.

(iii) traffic

Because of frequent travel along the Indian trails past Pierpoint's cabin, he would be a familiar figure to other settlers. Indeed, it is said that he used to ferry people across the Creek; but this is likely not true, since the Creek was probably too narrow.

(iv) colour

Pierpoint was black, and hardly anyone else was; he obviously stood out, as reflected in the nickname Black Dick. Moreover, Pierpoint was a free man, while many other blacks were slaves held by Loyalists.

It makes perfect sense that the Creek should become Dick's Creek. But when did this occur? The first documented use of Dick's Creek is in 1817, but this was eleven years after Pierpoint had sold his land in 1806. It was presumably called Dick's Creek before this, but precisely when is unknown. The remaining discussion seeks to narrow this down, and also to pinpoint exactly where Pierpoint lived.

Buried Treasure

"Walk M" of Junius speaks of Pierpoint's deathbed declaration about buried treasure on his former land alongside Dick's Creek, and of subsequent owner Benjamin Franklin Reynolds's search for treasure. The treasure may never have existed, but Reynolds thought it did, which is all that matters. However, Reynolds'

land (5 acres) was not on Pierpoint's lots, but was in lot 14, concession 7, just south of the concession 6 road allowance (the road allowance coincides with the lower reaches of Eastchester Avenue today). It was purchased from Oliver Phelps in 1842, and disposed of in three stages; the final piece was not sold till 1857, one year after Junius wrote his "Walks."

This suggests that Reynolds was searching for treasure in the wrong place, but it may not have been so. It turns out that Pierpoint did have some claim to the lot in question. His name appears there on early maps: 1791 (crossed out), 1794, 1795 and even 1811. A patent to the lot was not granted until 1829, by *Order in Council* to Alexander Nickerson. That *Order* states, "...to Alexander Nickerson in consideration for his having furnished decent and comfortable support to Phyllis Wright, widow of Samuel Wright, until her decease ... land having been granted to Samuel Wright by Letters Patent 12 June 1798, as transferred from Richard Pierpoint." This was evidently the lot Pierpoint referred to in his will, though he mistook the lot and concession numbers. Could it be that Pierpoint's cabin was actually on lot 14 of concession 7, not concession 6?

Conclusion

Following the discharge of the Rangers in 1784 Pierpoint and others moved west from the Niagara River in search of land. The resources at Fort Niagara were insufficient to feed soldiers, Rangers, refugees and Indians assembled in the vicinity. The official response was tardy and inadequate; provisions were supplied on a sliding scale for three years only. Proper surveys were not commenced until 1787, and the result was a rash of squatter settlement: lists printed in 1785/86/87 indicate well over 100 below the Escarpment west of Four Mile Creek. Pierpoint built a cabin on a bluff above what became Dick's Creek, possibly in 1785.

Following the Grantham survey early in 1788 and the establishment of the Nassau Land Board in 1789, Pierpoint applied for a 200 acre grant as a Loyalist. He was granted lots 13 and 14, concession 7 in Grantham, no doubt because he was already living and farming there. No one realised that the cabin was in the wrong concession because the road allowance was not marked (only lot lines were surveyed) and still uncleared (this was the settler's responsibility). At some point Pierpoint acquired the lot to the south also, on which the cabin was located.

He may have continued living in the same place after the transfer of the southern lot to Samuel Wright in 1798, and even (though this is less likely) after the sale of his Grantham land in 1806. He was certainly there long enough for the Creek to be associated with him and named after him. The naming could well have happened quite early, even in the late 1780s.

Whether or not Pierpoint actually moved to Louth after 1806 is unknown, as is the question of what caused the loss of his Louth land between 1815 and 1826. The evidence suggests that he had relinquished it by 1820, for the 1820 list places him in Grantham. His 1821 petition has him in Niagara and states that he is landless. He is known to have spent time in Garafraxa from then on, but he also seems to have maintained links with Grantham. His will was made out with local

witnesses in 1828, and the 1838 application for probate refers to Pierpoint of Grantham.

One question remains: where exactly did Pierpoint live? This was probably on Reynolds' property, half way up Eastchester Avenue from Oakdale Avenue on the right-hand side.

Principal Sources: (in addition to those cited in the text):

Credits: maps and layout (Loris Gasparotto); editing (John Burtniak).

Copyright © 2013 by Alun Hughes (ahughes@brocku.ca)