

ST. THOMAS, PAST AND PRESENT

SET UPON a plateau, with picturesque ravines winding about it on two sides, the city of St. Thomas may claim a distinctiveness and natural charm that any community might justly envy. Though among the oldest in date of settlement in Ontario, there is none which may be pointed to as being more progressive than the "Railway City" in its present appearance and life. Notably a community of home-owners, its progress and development has been of a permanent rather than a mushroom character. Today, with a population of 18,000, it affords its citizens in the essential things for civic contentment, with practically all those enjoyed by the large city without its disadvantages.

The history of St. Thomas goes back to the year 1910, when Daniel Rapeljie and David Mandeville erected their pioneer homes on Talbot road, close to the spot where Kettle Creek and the London and Port Stanley Gravel road intersect. Others, who soon joined them and erected their modest homes close by, included William Drake, Jonas Barnes, Benjamin Wilson, Leslie Pearce, Archibald McNeil, and among their co-temporaries on the ninth concession of Yarmouth were Garrett Smith, James T. Curtis, George Lawrence, Mr. Thompson, J. B. Miller and Mr. Mann. David Mandeville, with his sons, Henry, Abram, Richard and William, came from the Long Point settlement and located on 200 acres of land on the Southwold side of the creek. Mr. Mandeville kept a tavern at the foot of the hill, where the gravel road intersects Talbot street; the sons located on farms nearby. The first marriage in St. Thomas was that of Richard Mandeville and Ann Smith in 1818. Daniel Rapeljie was one of the strong hearted pioneers; he immigrated from the state of New York, first to the Long Point settlement then to lot 1, Yarmouth, south side of Talbot street. His log house was near the site of what until recently was the residence of Mr. John Farley; he built the first mill at St. Thomas. This afterwards passed into the hands of the late Mr. Paul, and later to the Turville Bros. Mr. Rapeljie laid out part of his farm into village lots in 1821, and gave the land where the picturesque churchyard and church erected prior to 1825, and now the oldest church edifice between the Grand and Detroit Rivers, is still to be seen; he moved in 1823 to Yarmouth Heights, where he died in 1828. The trials of these early settlers are recounted elsewhere, and those who read or think of them must conclude that St. Thomas, then and now, are widely different. A bushel of wheat for a yard of cotton, and eighteen bushels for a barrel of salt, seems a strange tale in 1914, but it was true in 1817.

St. Thomas received its name in honor of Colonel the Honorable Thomas Talbot, the founder of the Talbot settlement, the Saint being added for euphony. Embraced in the settlement which began in 1803 when Col. Talbot took up his residence at what is now Port Talbot was the whole of the present county of Elgin and parts of Essex, Kent, Middlesex and Norfolk. This immense tract of land was granted to Colonel Talbot, an Irishman of good family, upon the recommendation of Lieutenant Simcoe, for whom Talbot had acted as private secretary from 1791 to 1794, and had with him visited this part of Upper Canada, landing at Port Talbot, and penetrating the wilderness to the forks of the Thames, where London now stands. Talbot was so pleased with the country that he applied for, and was granted, five thousand acres of land on condition of conveying fifty acres out of every two hundred to an actual settler. He was also commissioned to settle other parts of the

western peninsula, and thus became possessed of vast property estimated to have been worth from £75,000 to £100,000 at the time of his death in 1853.

The position of St. Thomas upon Kettle Creek and the Talbot road at the intersection of such a thoroughfare as the London and Port Stanley road, and surrounded by one of the best agricultural districts in the Dominion, soon made it a place of importance. House was added to house, and store to store until a thriving village covered the hillside, and even essayed to stretch itself northward over the ravine, many of the principal places of business being built on long piles that found a foot hold far down the precipitous side of the hill.

Among its early vicissitudes was its occupation during the War of 1812-13 by the American General, McArthur, with a force of more than a thousand men, who bivouacked on the Rapeljie property, and devastated the crops and levied upon the live stock of the settlers.

James Hamilton, for many years sheriff of Middlesex, was the first merchant of St. Thomas. In 1817 he brought a few goods by water to Port Stanley, and later took in as his partner, John Warren. Bela Shaw and Lucius Bigelow also served the early settlers in similar capacity, and from the files of an early newspaper published in St. Thomas, it would appear that at this time the only mercantile firm was that of Shaw & Co. Goodhue and Duncombe also sold goods as well as formed a partnership in the practice of medicine.

About the year 1825 St. Thomas had a beginning as a village. At the time the village commenced at the foot of the hill near the bank of the creek, and extended on Talbot street to Mr. Shaw's store, which was on the north side, near the crest of the hill, and fields of wheat and corn and uncleared land occupied the site of the rest of the town.

In 1832, Talbot street was used as a race course, the half mile reaching to the site now occupied by the city hall. Stanley street was at that time a corduroy road, and none of the other streets were opened.

The high prices of farm produce, especially wheat, during the Crimean war, in 1854 and '5 made every one rich and resulted in much speculation. The first substantial brick blocks, the Metcalfe buildings, were built at that time by Benjamin Drake, Esq., and were first occupied by the Roe Brothers in 1855.

St. Thomas was first incorporated as a village in 1853, with a population of 1,300; in 1861 it numbered 1,631, and in 1866 not many more; in 1870, it was less than 2,000.

Mrs. Jameson, the well-known authoress, in her "Sketches in Canada," gave the following description of the town as it appeared in 1837: "St. Thomas is situated on a high eminence to which the ascent is rather abrupt. The view from it, over a fertile, well-settled country, is very beautiful and cheering. The place bears the christian name of Colonel Talbot, who styles it his capital, and, from a combination of advantages, it is rising fast into importance. The climate, from its high position, is delicious and healthful; and the winters in this part of the Province are milder by several degrees than elsewhere. At the foot of the cliff, or eminence, runs a deep, rapid stream, called Kettle Creek (I wish they had given it a prettier name), which, after a course of eight miles, and turning a variety of saw-mills and grist-mills, etc., flows into Lake Erie at Port Stanley, one of the best harbors on this side of the lake. Here steamboats and schooners land their passengers and merchandise, or load with grain, flour and lumber.