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A brief history of New Tecumseth (and the hamlets Bond Head, Newton Robinson and Dunkerron, now part of Bradford West Gwillimbury) based on the Tecumseth and West Gwillimbury Historical Society video production:

## **NEW TECUMSETH**

### **"The New Town with a Long Past"**

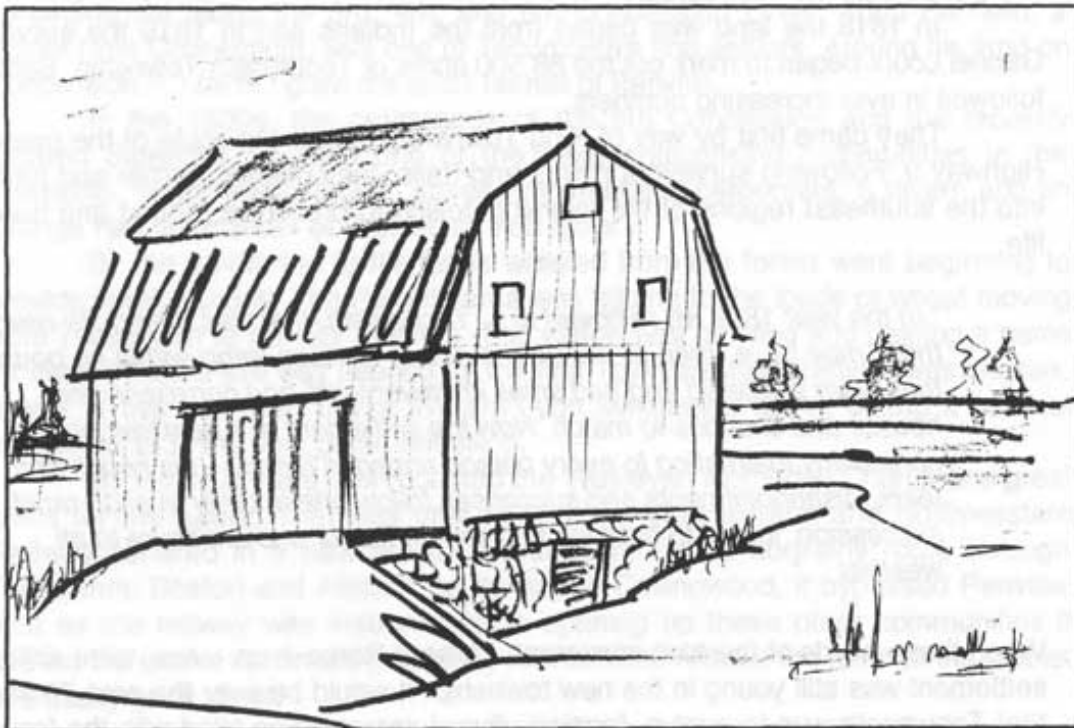
*Brother warriors, we are about to enter an engagement from which I shall not return. My body will remain on the field of battle."*

With these words Chief Tecumseh (1768, Old Piqua, OHIO - Oct. 5 1813 near the Thames River, Ontario.) , leader of the Indian troops wrote his own epitaph.

For it was on a gloomy October 5th, 1813, that the voice of this exceptional man and gifted orator, was forever silenced.

But not forgotten ...

It was only eight years later that a bill was presented to the House of Assembly of Upper Canada, naming a new Township in the County of Simcoe. Its name would be Tecumseth, after the courageous warrior.



**TIKAMTHI or TECUMSETH** means "one who moves quickly from one place to another." How fitting are these words of those who came to make a life for themselves and their families in this picturesque Township in the Nottawasaga Basin southwest of Lake Simcoe.

Its history is one resonant with stories of ordinary people meeting extraordinary circumstances; forging for themselves a new existence from a wilderness grown out of an ice age and its reverberations. From the indigenous peoples who inhabited the region for thousands of years, to the pioneers that settled the area, all have come to shape the land and the history that have given rise to the present Town, New Tecumseth.

### **BEGINNINGS TO THE FIRST SETTLEMENTS**

With the retreat of the glaciers of the last ice age, melt waters flooded vast areas of Simcoe county, creating what geologists now call Lake Algonquin. With time, the lake receded and in its wake a landscape of great biological diversity and beauty developed. It was to this evolving world that the first inhabitants were attracted. Little is known of the first peoples but archaeologists believe the area was first inhabited between 8,000 and 6,000 B.C. with some settlements in the years leading up to the 1600s. The area, however, appears to have been largely unoccupied after this period until the 19th century.

In 1818 the land was ceded from the Indians and in 1819 the surveyor Gabriel Lount began to mark out the 68,500 acres of Tecumseth Township. Settlers followed in ever-increasing numbers.

They came first by way of King Township, across the route of the present Highway 9. Following surveyors marks and trails, they pushed further and further into the southeast regions of the township toiling to break the ground and build a life.

*"In the year 1822 we removed to ... Tecumseth, that was then quite new; there may have been at the time a dozen families living within its bounds, they were scattered and had small improvements and corresponding houses and shanties to match. Now the settlement of a new township is particularly interesting to every person engaged therein - his hopes and fears, disappointments and successes follow one another in such rapid succession, joined to hard toil and severe labour and exposure to all weather ..."*

When these words of the Irish immigrant, Richard Rorke, (1805 - 1889) were written, settlement was still young in the new township. It would be over the next 70 years that Tecumseth was to evolve, forming vibrant communities filled with the fervent spirit of the first pioneers.

**DUNKERRON**, one of these early settlements, was the first hamlet on the Tecumseth - West Gwillimbury Townline, the current Highway 27. On the north side of the 3rd Concession, Lot 24, Peter Doyle built his first house: a two story brick house complete with a bake oven in the basement. Across the road from him was his friend Henry Nolan, the first wagon-maker. Both were Quakers: members of the Religious Society of Friends. A number of these experienced pioneers were second generation Canadians whose families had originally populated Pennsylvania and New York State and had emigrated north to Upper Canada.

On land donated by Doyle, the Quakers built a Meeting House which was dismantled in 1919. Now there are only the cemetery and an historical plaque, as testaments to the pioneering role of these people.

On the West Gwillimbury side of the Townline, a number of Irish immigrants from Armagh came together in community, building for themselves and their Quaker neighbours a school, to the east, and a post office that thrived from 1884 to 1915. They also constructed a Methodist church, which still stands among the old grave stones .

Little of Dunkerron's commercial past exists now. Good farms and pleasant houses tell today's story.

## **PENVILLE**

Settlers, following the paths of those who had gone before, moved into Tecumseth spreading out along the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Concession Lines. Adna Penfield, a farmer from Connecticut, was one of Tecumseth's first settlers. Around his land on Concession 4, Lot 18, grew the small hamlet of Penville.

In the 1830s, the crossroads of the 5th Concession and the recently created Sideroad 18, held one of the most enterprising communities in the Township. There were houses, stores, shoemakers, carpenters, a tavern and an Orange Hall, a reminder of Protestant Irish roots.

By the 1840s the fertile lands wrested from the forest were beginning to provide surplus crops. The Penville area was adding to the loads of wheat moving from Tecumseth to the city markets. The village was growing and gaining a name for itself. When a site was needed for the first Township hall, Penville was chosen. It was at this hall that orator William Lyon Mackenzie spoke during a political meeting in 1837 the year of the Rebellion.

By the 1870s the town boasted the Wesleyan Methodist Church and great plans for the future. That was until 1877 when the Hamilton and Northwestern Railway ushered in a new era for Tecumseth. On its northerly route through Tottenham, Beeton and Alliston, on its way to Collingwood, it bypassed Penville. Just as the railway was instrumental in opening up these other communities it spelled the end of continued prosperity for Penville. Without the railroad the hamlet eventually grew silent.

Today, only faint reminders of its once dynamic past remain.

As Yonge Street, The Government Road, improved, people gradually moved into Tecumseth through West Gwillimbury, along the 6th and 7th Concessions to the Townline. It was at the junction of the present Highways 27 and 88 that the hamlet of Bond Head was born.

In 1850 Bond Head was a thriving community with a population of 400 served by 2 general stores, 4 blacksmiths, shoemakers, a tannery, a grist-mill and 3 hotels.

In 1837 Reverend Featherstone Osler became the first Anglican Priest of the parish, which in time, was served by two churches. He and his wife, Ellen, took up residence in a converted cattle stable. Snow covered half the kitchen floor and milk kept near the stove was sometimes frozen.

After he threatened to leave the parish, if better accommodations were not



provided, the people collected \$ 365 to build a house and church on the 7th line. It was here, in their cottage on the hill, just a half mile west of Bond Head, that their eighth child, a boy, was born in 1849. Because of the date of his birth, July 12th, he was named after William of Orange. The lad had a stormy elementary education and went on to excel at university and as a physician and pathologist and became one of the most influential pioneers of modern medicine. Only a cairn remains near the location, marking the birthplace of the world renowned physician, Sir William Osler.

A frame structure, St. John's, an Anglican church on the 6th line, was built in 1837. It served the parish for over 40 years and when the present brick church replaced it in 1881 the elderly Reverend Featherstone Osler re-visited Tecumseth for the official opening. The Oslers had been joined in this same year by other members of the English gentry. The prosperous times of the mid 1800s is evident in some of the heritage buildings that still remain.

Squire Joseph William's Regency cottage, similar to the Osler rectory may have been designed by John Howard, the architect of Colbourn Lodge in Toronto's High Park. The home on the 7th line has been designated and plaqued as a Tecumseth LACAC heritage site. Squire William's son-in-law, Alexander Gaviller built a 16 room two storey frame home, complete with ball room and servant's quarters. This home still commands a scenic view of Bond head.

In 1885 the church which developed on the 7th line was moved on rolling logs to Bond Head.

In 1833 John Cerswell purchased his 200 acres for 75 pounds from the Canada Company. He built a water-powered saw mill, as he cleared the forest, and a Georgian inspired two storey brick dwelling house. His descendants have gained international recognition in the breeding of Holstein cattle.

The Brazel name appeared in Bond Head in 1822. By 1835 they were in possession of all three corners of the hamlet. About 1845 Patrick Brazel built a fine two storey brick house. Following a 20 year restoration period, this home has recently been designated an historic property under the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

Another restored building, the Orangeman's meeting hall was moved to a new site behind the Brazel house and now serves as a cabinet making shop. The preservation and restoration effort of individual residents is well illustrated by these two beautiful heritage buildings.

In the late 1880s two separate fires ravaged the north and south sides of the main street, destroying all the original frame buildings. The Simcoe House escaped the conflagration and still remains as one of the two surviving buildings that were originally hotels.

The post office remains as one of the chief meeting places where people gather to exchange news and gossip, just as they did in their first post office in 1837.

## **NEWTON ROBINSON**

Along the eastern townline and concession roads more farms appeared as the pioneers pushed north. The great mature forests of pine and oak attracted men planning to build mills, as well as barns and houses.

In 1832, on the 10th Concession and 20th Sideroad Hiram Bigelow, a Quaker, built the first grist mill in Tecumseth Township. Soon there followed a brickworks, houses, an inn (strictly dry) and a store built by William Chantler, another Quaker from the Dunkerron Meeting. However, as the townline came to carry more transport, the 20th sideroad and its commerce withered. Chantler moved his log store further east to the Townline, now Highway 27. This junction, known as Latimers Corners, was named after Thomas Latimer who had established a thriving Inn on the southeast corner.

The hamlet was renamed Newton Robinson in 1848 after a town in Ireland and the Honourable William Benjamin Robinson a member of the Family Compact and the local Member of Parliament.

Quakers, John and Isaac Merrick developed a thriving woollen mill in 1843 followed by a saw mill, grist mill, sash and door factory and construction business. There was a tannery, a cheese factory and an Orange Hall which is now the Tec-We-Gwill Women's Institute Hall.

By 1908, the early building years had ended and with a depression in Ontario many young men moved west. Newton Robinson could not compete with the towns that had railways. The tannery equipment was sold to a buyer from Bradford and the machinery of the woollen mill was dismantled and moved to Alliston where manufacturing was increasing

## **BEETON**

In 1856, when Robert Clark, a blacksmith, was handed the deed to lot 10, 8th Concession, little did he realize that he had created the beginning of the village of Beeton.

People were first attracted to the area by Robert Clark's blacksmithing services. Soon the hamlet began to grow. It was known as Clarksville.

Around 1860, a man named David Allanson Jones was drawn to this small community. He was to become its most influential resident. In June of 1867 he acquired his first 50 acres and over the succeeding years became the largest land speculator in the area. At one point he owned nearly all the land on which the village developed. To his credit, he had the main streets surveyed and planted maple trees on both sides. Some of these great trees stand today. He held the postmaster's position for some 50 years but most interesting of all, he kept bees.

D.A. Jones holds the distinction of being Canada's first commercial beekeeper. In 1870 he bought his first two swarms of bees, and from that time on, his enterprise blossomed. Over time this purchase developed into large-scale honey production, an achievement that gave him local and international recognition

as the 'Bee King'. One important result of Jones' efforts was that the village eventually came to be known as "bee town" and then, Beeton as it was officially incorporated in 1874.

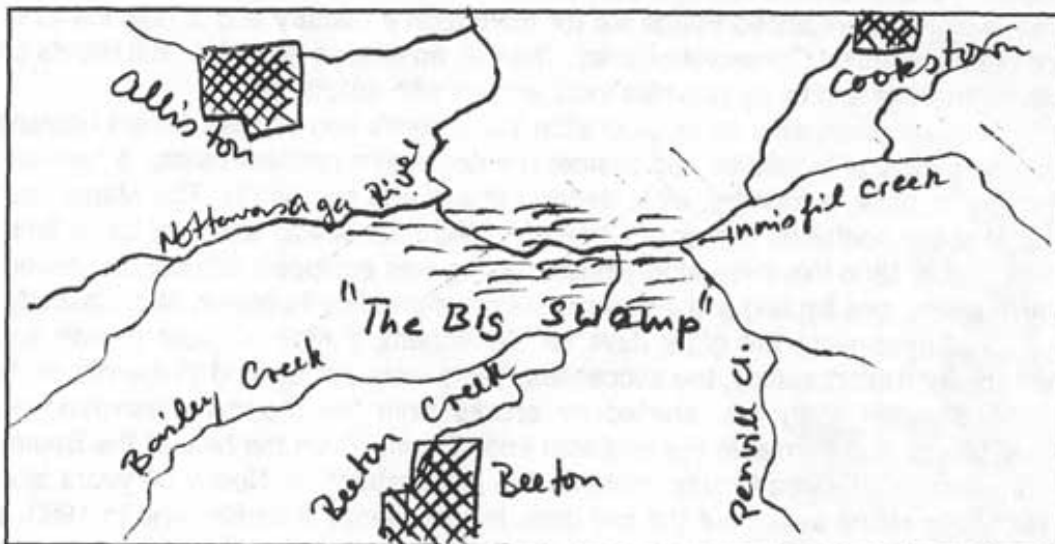
Just like Tottenham to the south, the coming of the railway played a key role in the building of Beeton, and by the 1890s, the Beeton streets were a hive of activity. At its core, standing on the northeast corner of the main intersection, was the Queen's Hotel.

Built sometime before 1884, the hotel was one of the finest north of Toronto supplying its travel-weary patrons with the best of amenities. Its three-storey brick construction made it an impressive sight for its time. It flourished over the years, but was unfortunately demolished after a developer purchased the land.

As with most villages in the mid-19th century, much of the construction in Beeton was of readily available timber. This made the buildings inexpensive but susceptible to fire. It was on October 19th, 1892 that tragedy struck. In under four hours, flames destroyed a large number of the businesses and homes in what older residents still refer to as the 'Great Fire'.

But Beeton's citizens chose to resurrect the small village from the ashes. The building frenzy that ensued created a need for a new seat of government for the village's municipal affairs. On February 5th, 1895 the new Beeton Town Hall was opened.

On the first floor were the council chambers. On the floor above was the Opera House with its slanted floor and orchestra pit. Many touring and local acts came to grace the stage over the years providing a wide variety of entertainment. Over time, the ownership of the Town Hall has passed through many hands. Today it stands as the home of the Record Sentinel, Beeton's weekly newspaper.





## TOTTENHAM

It is believed that Tottenham, an hour's walk from Beeton, was named for Alexander Totten, a farmer, who arrived in the area around 1825 from Ireland. Alexander retired in a Georgian-style home in the hamlet and remained until well after the incorporation of the village in 1884.

One key element in the evolution of this small village, in the western part of the township, was the coming of the railway in 1878. Tottenham might very well have disappeared had it not been for this single formative event in its history. Unlike nearby Keenansville, which the railway bypassed, Tottenham was ushered into a new age when the Hamilton and Northwestern Railway steamed into town. With the arrival of the CPR in 1907, Tottenham had established itself as a two railway town, complete with a passenger service that continued until 1960.

The rich rail history of Tottenham remains alive to this date, preserved through the diligent efforts of the South Simcoe Railway Heritage Corporation. This group of rail enthusiasts has struggled for the last 20 years to restore and maintain old trains and rail lines. Their most exciting acquisition was the century old steam locomotive used in the filming of the railroad epic "The National Dream". Today it pulls a tourist train on a short journey between Tottenham and Beeton. It was on June 20th, 1992, that this run was opened, to the delight of 600 passengers, with thousands more taking advantage of this historic ride over the following months.

One of Tottenham's early enterprises was the mill. Built in 1865 by George Nolan, an Irish immigrant, it was originally called the Avoca Mill. Its location was on Beeton Creek, which was dammed to supply power to the large overshot water wheel. The resulting pond enhanced village life for more than a century and is now the focal point of a beautiful Conservation area. The mill, an historic landmark, still stands on its original site and today provides local farmers with animal feed.

Four years after its incorporation Tottenham's tree-shaded streets boasted a wide variety of industries and businesses including a hardware store, a furniture factory, a bank, a foundry, eight general stores and two hotels. The Maple Leaf Hotel at the northwest corner of Queen and Mill Streets was a marvel for its time. Finished in 1886 this three storey brick building was equipped with hot air heating, flush toilets, gas lighting and a water system designed by its owner, M.J. Casserly.

These were the glory days for Tottenham, a time of great growth and prosperity. Unfortunately, the succeeding years were not as kind to the village. In 1895 a devastating fire, started by sparks from the foundry, destroyed 80 businesses and homes in the southern end of town. Even the help of the Beeton and Alliston fire departments couldn't stop the destruction. Nearly 60 years later Hurricane Hazel swept out the mill dam, leaving barely a trickle. And in 1983, a major part of Tottenham's past was erased when The Maple Leaf Hotel, operating as

the Tottenham Inn, was levelled in a spectacular blaze.

Much of the town was rebuilt after the 1895 fire, and the dam quickly repaired after the 1954 storm, but time and changing economics had begun to take their toll on the village. With the depression and the switch from rail to trucking, as a key part of transporting goods, Tottenham began to shrink, eventually reaching a population of only 822 in 1968.

Recently, however, new industry and residential property development, related to the town's commuting proximity to Toronto, revitalized the village. Today, some 3500 residents enjoy the pleasant 'small town community atmosphere which the village provides.

### FARMING

At the time of peak wheat production, the two townships of Tecumseth and West Gwillimbury were referred to as the "Bread Basket of Canada". The Northern Railway, which reached Bradford in 1852, served to solidify this reputation and provide easier access to markets in time for the township to benefit from shortages created by the Crimean War and the American Civil War. Wheat dominated until the supplies from western Canada, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, became more plentiful. The farms continued in prosperity by conversion to mixed farming

The Great Swamp, also called the Beeton Swamp, which existed until recent times, had developed on the bed of the ancient Lake Algonquin, a remnant of the last ice age. This huge flat area made up most of the central area of the township. Its marsh and thick cedar growth prevented the settlers from moving into the central township. Rather, they went north and west along the present Highway 89 in earlier times.

Gradually the swamp was cleared as farmers needed wood supplies. The drainage was continued by the township into the present time. The lake deposited soils have produced an abundance of tobacco, potatoes, sod, asparagus and other cash crops such as beans.

Farming has, of course, always formed an integral part of the development of the township. From the dairy farming and cash crops of the uplands in the south, to the beef and hog production of the northern uplands, to the yields of the swamp, Tecumseth farming has had a history as varied as the landscape that has produced it.



## **THOMPSONVILLE**

As more settlers moved into the swamp area a hamlet on the 13th Concession evolved, called Thompsonville.

Named after one of its first settlers, Thomas Thompson, the hamlet was registered in 1856. Arriving in Tecumseth around 1850 Thompson and his sons built several mills in the area powered by a dam on the Nottawasaga River.

Toward the end of the 19th century a businessman named William Train, along with his partner, bought the Thompson Mills. This purchase was followed by a full survey of the west side of the Nottawasaga River. The survey clearly outlined Train's grand plan for Thompsonville.

At the height of its prosperity, toward the end of the 19th century, Thompsonville boasted a woollen mill, a sawmill and a grist and flour mill, along with a general store, hotel, church and post office. It was during this time that Margaret Grant lived in the hamlet and married William Banting. They became the parents of Sir Frederick Banting co-discoverer of insulin.

Thompsonville's mills and other enterprises would eventually be absorbed by the nearby town of Alliston leaving behind the rural tranquillity of today.

## **ALLISTON**

With the continuous growth northward more settlers came to the township. One was an English immigrant called William Fletcher, who came to Lot 15, Concession 3 in 1821. Fletcher worked on Toronto area farms until he was able to afford his own. William worked this piece of land for the next 26 years along with his wife Margaret and their three sons. William and his eldest son, John, struck out in search of a site on which to build a mill. After a few attempts they discovered a site on Essa township Lot 1, Concession 1.

The land they found was flat, swampy and inhospitable, but to William it meant opportunity. He was interested in the water privileges of the land and gambled that the swamp, in the near future, would become productive. He proved himself right, for this settlement, which came to boast over 1,200 acres, a saw-mill and a grist-mill, grew to be the town of Alliston occupying the corners of four townships: Essa, Tosorontio, Adjala and Tecumseth.

In 1849, the Fletchers built a frame residence which remained in the family for many years. After the naming of Alliston in 1856, the house held the first post office with William's second son, George, as postmaster.

By the time Alliston officially became a town in 1891, schools, churches, and a railway were all part of everyday town life. It was in that same year that the town saw its first real set back.

Like the history of so many Tecumseth villages and hamlets, Alliston suffered a great fire. On the afternoon of May 8th, (1891) the inferno which started in the stables of the Queen's Hotel spread quickly. When it was over, the fire had

reduced 30 acres of the town to smouldering ruin, leaving many families homeless and a majority of the businesses destroyed.

Because it was a significant centre for agricultural services, Alliston had to recover fast. Waterworks were installed, a town hall built, and fire protection improved.

Just after the turn of the century the CPR rolled into town for the first time, with it came a pride to the community and a business spirit which continues to flourish to the present.

With the outbreak of the First World War the failed farms on the sand dunes north of Alliston became the site of Camp Borden. This made a great impact on the social and economic life in town through World War Two and even modern times.

Today, Alliston is a modern, progressive community and agricultural service centre attractive to large industries like Honda and numerous other activities in need of good access to transport and an industrious workforce.

Alliston is indeed the leader of the town of New Tecumseth.

## **CONCLUSION**

1991 marked the formation of a new amalgamated town in Simcoe County announced by the Province of Ontario. By January 1, 1992, it had chosen a name for itself: New Tecumseth. It includes the old Township of Tecumseth, from Highway 9 to Highway 89. On the east is the newly amalgamated municipality of Bradford-West Gwillimbury which now takes in Highway 27 and the communities and lots adjoining, formerly in Tecumseth. Adjala remains, its borders unchanged, to the west. New Tecumseth retains the three communities of Tottenham, Beeton and Alliston and a growing population of 20,300.

Tecumseth was once part of the frontier. Its first settlers, pioneers in Upper Canada. The forests provided their homes, their crops grew, the villages were built. Now, we are part of a changing scene: New Tecumseth. We too are pioneers, working out a mutually-supportive rural and urban life inspired and invigorated by the richness of the land and the strength of the communities handed down to us by those who have come before.

Our past is the heritage the present preserves, and passes on to the future.

The challenge, then, is to preserve our heritage and land, planning our changing town with sensitivity, intelligence and integrity.

Our town of New Tecumseth, "the new town with a long past".