

Burnstown – An Historical Tour

As most of you know, Burnstown is situated on the edge of McNab/Braeside Township at the intersection of two historic roads –

- a. the Burnstown Road coming from White Lake and then onto Renfrew, and
- b. the Calabogie Road, which was originally the Sand Point-Burnstown road.

It also is on the rugged north shore of the beautiful and historic Madawaska River - about half-way along what was 16 miles of treacherous rapids, known as the Long Rapids, which started at Springtown and ended at Stewartville. They say the roar of the river could be heard for miles! Starting in the 1820s, the Madawaska River became an important river for the timber trade and many rafts of square timber came down each spring.

The settlement dates back to around 1825, about the same year Laird McNab started bringing his settlers from Scotland. It had a few other names before settling on Burnstown.

- a. It was first known as Johnston's Rock after a huge boulder in the Madawaska where a Mr. Johnston was supposedly drowned or maybe that is what saved him?
- b. When a bridge was built around 1837, the little village became known as Madawaska Bridge for a time. It was the only bridge over the Madawaska River then - there wasn't even one in Arnprior. It was built after two men and a child drowned while trying to cross the turbulent river to attend a church service at a nearby barn.
- c. When a post office was established in 1853, the village was named Burnstown, in honour of Robert Burns, Scotland's beloved poet. Some say, though, the name was from the 'burn' (Scottish for creek) that merrily rolls through the village and behind the church to the river.

It has been said the Burnstown Bridge has been replaced 7 times over the years.

- The first ones were swept away with the spring flooding.
- One of the last bridges occurred when the hydroelectric dam was built at Stewartville in the mid-1940s. This raised the water by 40 feet, taming the river and silencing the roar.
- The current bridge was completed in 1974, 51 years ago. At that time a deep rock cut was made across the river and the bridge raised to that height to eliminate the extremely steep road that led down to the previous bridges. Upstream, concrete piers from the former bridge were left to protect against spring ice damage.

Burnstown has never been ravaged by fire like so many other villages. As a result, many of its buildings along the Burnstown Road date back to the original settlement or shortly afterwards and have been restored and adapted for new purposes.

- The oldest house is thought to be that now owned by George Wade and Cari Forteath, built in the early 1840s by John Forrest, the village blacksmith.

- At the crossroads is a brick complex containing the Blackbird Café with apartments above and a house beside it. This was built in 1876 with the café then being the general store. At the other end of this brick building, is the original General Store dating back to 1851, with its original square timbers. It is now the Burnstown Village Market.
- Across the street is our post office; one of the last remaining ones in our Township. It was originally a Good Templar's Hall and then a dance hall.
- The schoolhouse was built in 1889 and closed in 1967 when McNab Public School opened. At that time its bell was relocated to the church belfry across the road. Today this location is now the Neat, with its many concerts throughout the year
- The church on the hill overlooking the Madawaska River was built in 1899, replacing a previous log church. Very few changes have been made to the church and grounds over the years. The notable exception is the steps leading to the church doors. They changed with each of the bridges. In 1900 there were only a few steps from the door to the road. Now there is a 12-foot retaining wall from these steps to the road below. This church closed at the end of 2023, after 175 years of worship.
- Across the street from the church is the original log home of George Rochester, a businessman from Bytown (now Ottawa). He arrived around 1850 and built a stone gristmill along the Madawaska and a canal from the river for waterpower - just downstream from the current bridge. Prior to this, the settlers had to travel to Perth to get their grain ground. By 1861, there was also a sawmill and brewery. This mill site was flooded as a result of the Stewartville power dam. After George Rochester moved back to Ottawa around 1876, his home became a cheese factory for years and was called the Diamond Cheese Factory for a time.

Burnstown was a rowdy place in the spring back then - much different than its current tranquil nature. Township council even received complaints regarding the intemperance occurring here.

There were 3 hotels at one time in Burnstown to accommodate the many shantymen and log drivers passing through.

a. One was the Commercial House built in the 1840s and later known as the O'Connor Hotel. It is still standing today as a home on the main street.

b. Another hotel is now the home of Richard Gill and the office of the Burnstown Publishing House. It sits on Leckie Lane, a narrow street beside the Post Office. This was the original road to Calabogie and not the current road between the church and the post office. This hotel was either built by David Leckie around 1847 or was purchased from Duncan Anderson who ran a tavern at this site starting in the 1830s. A dinner delicacy at this tavern was Beaver Tail Soup.

Across Leckie Lane are beautifully restored outbuildings of the hotel. Up until last year this was Bittersweet Gallery, as well as Richard Gill's Fog Run Studio.

Duncan Anderson, the original owner of the tavern was in the township prior to the arrival of Laird McNab. Anderson was one of the Laird's 'Cabinet Council of Five' and his tavern was a favourite place for Laird McNab to meet his 'Council'. The spring 1840 meeting at this location was the last straw for the settlers. Amongst other things, the Laird was forcing the settlers to improve his two strategic roads (Arnprior to Burnstown and Arnprior to White Lake), rather than improving roads near the settlers' homes. The frustrated settlers pressed the government further to remove the dictator.

There are numerous stories of the loggers that stopped at Burnstown on their way up to the shanties or down the Madawaska with the timber. One prank has a group of loggers in the O'Connor Hotel sneaking to the Leckie Hotel in the wee hours where a rival group was staying the night. There they thoroughly soaped the stairs and yelled "Fire!" The sleepy men hastily donned their boots and made for the steep stairs. As the men stepped on the slippery steps, they shot down them and straight out the front door, which the rivals had left open. Imagine the pile of men at the doorstep and the laughter of the O'Connor clan seeing their stunt work so well.

Today, do not come to Burnstown just for its history. Come and eat at the various restaurants, browse the shops, and visit the park with its beautiful beach. And do not forget the beauty of the area any season of the year.

by Irene Robillard

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for the celebration of the bicentennial of McNab Township

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