

Founding of the Town of Latchford

On July 15, 2009, the Ontario Heritage Trust and the Latchford Heritage Board unveiled a provincial plaque at the Municipal Office in Latchford, Ontario, to commemorate the Founding of the Town of Latchford.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

FOUNDING OF THE TOWN OF LATCHFORD

Latchford began in 1903 as Montreal River Station, a town site and river crossing for the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway, the colonization line designed to open the Little Clay Belt to settlement and provide access to the area's vast timber resources. In 1904, a three span iron bridge was built to carry the railway across the Montreal River and construction of a station house and water tank soon followed. The town was surveyed in 1905 and renamed in honour of Francis Robert Latchford (1856-1938), then Ontario Commissioner of Public Works. A brief boom period ensued when silver was discovered to the northwest in 1906 and Latchford became the provisioning and starting point for prospectors travelling up Bay Lake. Latchford was incorporated as a town in 1907 and by 1911 its population was 429. As area silver deposits were depleted Latchford's prosperous timber and pulp mills assured its longevity, giving the town its nickname of "Sawdust City."

FONDATION DE LA VILLE DE LATCHFORD

Latchford voit le jour en 1903 sous le nom de Montreal River Station. Elle est à la fois un site urbain et un lieu de franchissement de la rivière pour le Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway, la ligne de colonisation conçue pour permettre l'installation dans la Little Clay Belt et donner accès aux vastes ressources de bois de la région. En 1904, un pont en fer à trois travées est bâti pour permettre la traversée de la rivière Montréal par la voie ferrée. La construction d'une caserne de pompiers et d'un réservoir d'eau suit rapidement. En 1905, un levé de la ville est réalisé et celle-ci est rebaptisée en l'honneur de Francis Robert Latchford (1856-1938), alors commissaire aux travaux publics de l'Ontario. Une courte période de prospérité suit la découverte d'argent dans le Nord-Ouest en 1906, et Latchford devient le point d'approvisionnement et de départ des chercheurs voyageant jusqu'au lac Bay. Latchford est constituée en ville en 1907. En 1911, elle compte 429 habitants. Une fois les gisements d'argent épuisés, la longévité de Latchford est

assurée par ses scieries de sciages légers et ses usines de pâte à papier prospères, qui donnent à la ville son surnom de « Sawdust City ».

Historical background

Latchford's geography was shaped 12,000 years ago by the glaciers of the last ice age. Vast sheets of ice half a mile (nearly one kilometre) and more in thickness spread southward from the Arctic, scouring the Hudson Bay basin to the bare Precambrian rock of the Canadian Shield.

When the climate warmed and the ice retreated, it left behind silt that settled in irregular arable tracts now known as the Great and Little Clay Belts. Water from the melting glaciers filled the lowlands, forming the network of lakes and rivers that now flow from the height of land, northward to James Bay and south to the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence basin. One of these water routes, the Montreal River, extended southward from the height of land, widened into Bay Lake and then narrowed again to continue southward to Lake Temiskaming and the Ottawa River system.

Vast expanses of forest soon covered much of the ice-scoured rock, providing habitat for thriving populations of fur-bearing mammals and a growing wealth of resources that attracted the Algonquian peoples. Nestled at the point where the Montreal River leaves Bay Lake, the Latchford region and the lands to the southeast became the preserve of the Algonquin First Nation, while the Cree hunted the territory to the north draining into Hudson Bay, and the Ojibwa occupied the lands to the west.¹ The site of Latchford would have been a convenient stopping point for native travellers.

During the post-European contact period, the furs of the beaver and other animals attracted French traders into the region and trading posts, such as nearby Témiscamisque, were established to take advantage of the trade. European national rivalries led to the founding of British trading posts on James Bay, including Rupert House and Moose Factory, and to the initial exploitation of the water routes between the Ottawa River and James Bay. Rival trading empires continued to vie for supremacy along this corridor until the eventual triumph of the Hudson's Bay Company early in the 19th century.

By 1850, the timber trade frontier had moved up the Ottawa River to Lake Nipissing and entrepreneurs in the Province of Canada (present-day Ontario and Quebec) were beginning to cast covetous glances at the great expanses of land to the north and west. Confederation in 1867 helped turn these dreams to reality. In 1870, the vast territories of the Hudson's Bay Company were placed under the jurisdiction of the Dominion of Canada, and in the ensuing decade Ontario claimed an extension of its borders to James Bay, a claim recognized by the

federal government in 1898. Prior to this, Ontario pressed its claims in more tangible ways. The Ontario-Quebec boundary was defined in 1874 and provincial survey parties ventured into “New Ontario” in the 1880s, surveying the land to the west of Lake Timiskaming. These surveys hinted at the possibilities of mineral wealth and recommended agricultural settlement in the newly discovered rich clay belt to the west and north of the lake.

By the mid-1890s, the communities of Haileybury and Liskeard (incorporated as New Liskeard in 1903)² had appeared on the western shore of Lake Temiskaming. Though they had a waterway connection to the south, they were quite isolated in the winter and soon began petitioning the government at Toronto for a year-round railway service. No railway entrepreneurs proved willing to back such a venture, but a number of factors soon came together to make this north-south railway a reality.

Late in 1899, Sir George William Ross became premier of Ontario, leading a Liberal government that had been in power for 26 years. In part, to show that the government, despite its years in office, remained vigorous and far sighted, Ross began to focus on northern development in “New Ontario.” This initiative was also a response to Quebec’s efforts to settle its new northwestern territories and there was concern that French and Catholic settlers would flood into Ontario’s English and Protestant hinterland.³ Ross initiated another survey of the province’s northern resources in 1900 and, following its enthusiastic findings in 1901, determined that the government would build and operate a railway to the north.⁴ Plans to build the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway (T. & N.O.) were announced in 1902 by Francis Robert Latchford, Commissioner of Public Works in the Ross government, who, along with his officials, would oversee its early development.⁵ It was initially conceived as a colonization effort not unlike the colonization roads of the 1860s that attempted to open the areas between the Ottawa River and Georgian Bay. Established under a government commission, the T. & N.O. was to be the province’s first public utility, predating the Ontario Hydro Commission by three years.

Initial plans called for the new railway to connect North Bay on Lake Nipissing with New Liskeard, a distance of 113 miles (181.9 kilometres). While financing proved difficult, the railway venture was buoyed by the discovery of silver at Cobalt in 1903.⁶ When the Conservatives, under Sir James Whitney, defeated the Ross government in 1905, the railway had reached New Liskeard. While Whitney had advocated a privately operated railway when in opposition, he accepted the arrangement he had inherited from Ross and the railway remained a public utility. The federal government’s decision, announced in 1903, to support the construction of a transcontinental railway further north of the T. & N.O., led to the latter’s extension northward from New Liskeard. By 1906, the T. & N.O.’s schedules were routinely being published in southern newspapers.⁷ The railway was extended to the junction of the Northern Transcontinental Railway at Cochrane in the summer of 1909.

Latchford's beginnings can be traced back to the 1903 decision to have the railway cross the Montreal River just east of Bay Lake at mile 94 of the developing line.⁸ The choice was based on the gentle grade of area topography and the immense tracts of surrounding forests that would be made accessible for the timber trade. The north bank was chosen as one of the railway's town sites, originally known as Montreal River Station, and in 1904 the Dominion Bridge Company of Montreal built a three-span iron railway bridge across the river at this point.⁹ In the following year, the Empire Lumber Company opened the area's first sawmill there. A station house and water tower were also erected in 1905 and the community was renamed Latchford to honour the Commissioner of Public Works, Francis (Frank) Latchford (1856-1938), who had directed the line's initial construction. The first town lots were laid out and sold in the same year.

The discovery of precious metals at Elk Lake to the northwest – accessible via Bay Lake and the upper Montreal River – briefly fanned development to a fever pitch. In 1906, a reporter for the *Toronto Globe* caught the sense of excitement in the community:

At Latchford, a little village of one hundred and fifty inhabitants, some eight miles [12.9 kilometres] south of Cobalt, the evidence of the boom are to be seen. Two fine new hotels have been erected, a branch of the Bank of Commerce has been established, the Presbyterians have bought a lot and have erected a church on it, numerous stores and dwellings are going up, and in general the place presents a made-while-you-wait appearance. Latchford is the centre of the outfitting for the prospectors who go up the Montreal River, and if the recent find of gold proves to be authentic, Latchford may yet become a second Dawson City or Nome.¹⁰

In 1907, the same southern newspaper, under the headlines "Town of Latchford Has Had Boom This Summer," "Rich Finds Being Made," and "Over Two Thousand Claims Have Been Staked," gave the following glowing progress report:

Latchford, Oct. 4. – This town, which is the gateway of a big silver belt of the Montreal River, has had a boom this summer. Hundreds have gone to this district, the greater number of whom have been fitted out at Latchford, resulting in an increase of business to that town. The establishment of a mining recorder's office has also greatly helped the place. Nearly 2,000 claims have been staked, and a goodly number of these have passed inspection. Rich finds are being made every week, and the rush up the Montreal River is practically only beginning in earnest.¹¹

As the community grew so too did its desire to control its own local affairs, despite the devastating fire that levelled much of the business district in April 1907.

Since the fire last spring which wiped out the greater portion of the business section of the town, nearly one hundred new buildings have been erected. These include upwards of a dozen fine new residences, [a] new store for the Latchford Hardware Company, Mr. Napier's barber shop and pool room, Angus Mortsin's restaurant, William Pollard's butcher shop, Bardwall's new store, Chamady Brothers' new store, new telephone central, which has been established in Mortsin's restaurant, James R. Todd's new drug and stationery store, Joe Clusiau's barber shop and pool room, Roman Catholic and Methodist churches which are now being built, McLaughlin's new tin shop, and Pipe and Presley's new general store. The King Edward Hotel has been enlarged and remodelled.¹²

Latchford was incorporated as a town in July 1907. Its initial administration consisted of Empire Lumber Company general manager J.J. McNeil as mayor, with general store owner and magistrate Ira B. Bradley, Arthur Caley, livery stable and boarding house owner Archibald King, R. H. Burton, hotel owner Robert Morrison and barber Andrew Napier as councillors.¹³ Tenders were called to build a dam at the confluence of Bay Lake and the Montreal River in 1907 and the dam was completed in 1910, providing hydroelectric power and a secondary means of crossing the river.¹⁴

The people of Latchford are in high spirits over the action of the Dominion Government, which has plans posted calling for tenders for the big dam near the bridge, and also for blasting out Pork Rapids to a depth of eight feet [2.4 metres]. This will furnish a straight passage to Mountain Chute, therefore cutting out considerable amount of portaging.¹⁵

The 1911 federal census gave the population of Latchford as 429.¹⁶ But Latchford's initial boom ended in 1913 with the construction of a T. & N.O. branch line to the Elk City silver deposits previously accessible only by the waters of Bay Lake. The steamship companies that had taken prospectors and their supplies northward from Latchford closed, their steamships idle and offered for sale.¹⁷

Throughout the first half of the 20th century the town depended on forestry and gained the nickname "Sawdust City." In 1927, Highway 11, named the Ferguson Highway after Ontario premier George Ferguson (1870-1946)¹⁸ – now a portion of the Trans-Canada Highway – was opened from North Bay through Latchford and further north to New Liskeard and Haileybury.

The new road broke the transportation monopoly of the T. & N.O. and provided additional service opportunities for the towns it connected. At Latchford, the railway used the 1910 dam to bridge the Montreal River until the Sgt. Aubrey Cosens VC Memorial Bridge was constructed in 1960.¹⁹ Although the bridge collapsed in 2003, it was rebuilt and functional by the fall of 2005.

During the second half of the 20th century, Latchford developed a tourism industry based on hunting, fishing and wilderness recreation activities and continues to service the traffic of Highway 11. The community celebrated its centennial as an incorporated town in 2007. Although small in size, with a population of 370 in 2009, Latchford's residents boast a strong sense of community spirit and proudly stand by their municipal motto, "The Best Little Town by a Dam Site!"



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¹ Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations; a History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 15 and 42-45.

² An Ontario Heritage Trust provincial plaque commemorating the Founding of New Liskeard is located on the shore of the Wabi River in New Liskeard. For more information, please see the online Plaque Guide at www.heritagetrust.on.ca.

³ Charles W. Humphries, *'Honest Enough to be Bold:' the Life and Times of Sir James Pliny Whitney* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), pp. 145-48.

⁴ Robert J. Surtees, *The Northern Connection: Ontario Northland Since 1902* (North York, Ontario: Captus Press, 1992), pp. 9-13.

⁵ Henry James Morgan (ed.), *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1912), p. 639. *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, 15 Aug. 1938, p. 5. Latchford was Minister of Public Works in the Ross administration from 1899 to 1904 and Attorney General until the Liberal loss in 1905. He was appointed to the Ontario bench in 1908 and rose to the position of Chief Justice of the Second Divisional Court of the Appellate Branch of the Ontario Supreme Court. He died in 1938.

⁶ An Ontario Heritage Trust provincial plaque commemorating the Cobalt Mining Camp is located opposite the Cobalt Northern Ontario Mining Museum, 26 Silver Street in Cobalt. For more information, please see the online Plaque Guide at www.heritagetrust.on.ca.

⁷ *Toronto Globe*, 23 June 1906, p. 9.

⁸ Albert Tucker, *Steam into Wilderness: Ontario Northland Railway, 1902-1962* (Don Mills, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1978), p. 18.

⁹ *Toronto Globe*, 15 Apr. 1904, p. 12.

¹⁰ *Toronto Globe*, 5 May 1906, p. 16.

¹¹ *Toronto Globe*, 5 Oct. 1907, p. 14.

¹² *Toronto Globe*, 5 Oct. 1907, p. 14

¹³ *A Pictorial History of Latchford* (Cobalt, Ont.: Highway Book Shop, 1974), p. 21 and George L. Lefebvre, *A Historic Walk Through 'Sawdust City' (Latchford)* (Latchford, Ont.: Temiskaming Abitibi Heritage Association, 1995), p. 5.

¹⁴ *The Toronto Daily Star*, 16 Sept. 1907, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Toronto Globe*, 5 Oct. 1907, p. 14.

¹⁶ Canada, *Census, 1911*, Nipissing District, Sub-district 100.

¹⁷ *Toronto Globe*, 30 Oct. 1911, p. 15.

¹⁸ An Ontario Heritage Trust provincial plaque commemorating The Honourable George Howard Ferguson, 1870-1946, is located on Van Buren Street, just south of Prescott Street in Kemptville. For more information, please see the online Plaque Guide at www.heritagetrust.on.ca.

¹⁹ An Ontario Heritage Trust provincial plaque commemorating Sgt. Aubrey Cosens, VC, 1921-1945, is located on Highway 11, just south of the northern junction with Highway 67, near Porquis Junction. For more information, please see the online Plaque Guide at www.heritagetrust.on.ca.