

Opinicon Lake

by Rosalind Gill

Historians tell us that human habitation of the Rideau area dates back to the retreat of the glacier some 13,000 years ago, when people followed wildlife into regions where new vegetation was growing. Situated on the so-called Frontenac Axis – the area between the Canadian Shield to the north and the Adirondack mountains to the south, Opinicon Lake, along with other areas in the Rideau corridor, is a transitional zone characterized by a great deal of diversity of flora and fauna.

Not surprisingly, this area became a rich hunting and fishing ground after the glacier retreated. The main paddling route for those early First Nations inhabitants going to points north of Lake Ontario would have approximated the route of the present-day Rideau canal, through the Gananoque River up to Big Rideau Lake and the Rideau River and onwards but an alternative “short-cut” route existed that included Opinicon Lake, running up the Cataraqui River through Dog Lake and Loughborough Lake into Hart Lake and down present-day Peterson Creek into what is now Deadlock Bay on Opinicon.



Opinicon Lake

The area would have provided plenty of good fishing in well-stocked lakes and as well, good bird hunting, as this was a region of migration routes. It is believed that Samuel de Champlain traveled this route with a party of Hurons in 1615.

I have paddled the Loughborough to Opinicon route many times and can attest to its beauty. I must admit that my imagination ran wild as I paddled and portaged that area. Who were these people who lived here all those years ago? My reading has taught me that, given the complexity of indigenous life on the land, it is difficult to declare Opinicon and its surrounding area the fixed homeland of any one particular group. Indigenous relationships to the land were mostly characterized by sharing of resources, nomadism, and shared occupancy, involving common campsites where socializing between various groups could take place. The meaning of land for Native groups involved relating to the land as a social rather than individual relationship. There was no "private" land as such. There were no clear perimeters or edges to a homeland. The mobile existence of indigenous peoples meant that peripheries were negotiated and constantly changing. This indigenous cultural perception of sharing and shifting of land, nature and resources runs counter to European settlers' cultural notions of fixity, appropriation of territory, expansion and firm boundaries. As such, many groups used the waterways of the Rideau region. There are accounts and archeological evidence of Algonquin, Iroquois and later, Mississauga, all hunting and gathering and traveling in the Opinicon area. Indeed, the word Opinicon is seen by some linguists to be most likely an Algonquin word, by deducing from the Anishinaabemowin morphemes: 1. Opin. - potato 2.-ig - (-iig-) - plural marker (animate nouns) 3.-on. (-ong) - locative ('at the..'/'place where')From which we get "place of wild potatoes'. This would fit in with the fact that Opinicon Lake was once much shallower than it is now and was known as Mud Lake, a place where wild potatoes could grow.

The arrival of European explorers and settlers in the 16th century gravely affected Native populations, first by European diseases that decimated communities and secondly by the imposition of a new concept of geography by

which traditional Native lands were appropriated. So called "unknown territory" was eventually surveyed and mapped and flora and fauna were given "Western" names. By the early 1800's, Europeans had acquired large extents of territory through treaties. A new system of land ownership was developed, removing Native peoples from their traditional hunting and gathering



areas in the Rideau Corridor and placing them on Indian reserves. In present day Eastern Ontario, these reserves are situated mostly along the North shore of Lake Ontario. It is widely agreed that European resource activity such as the fur trade and land appropriation altered Native geopolitics and led to a new types of conflict between First Nations groups that had previously shared land and even inter-married. During the Rideau purchases (1819-22), the government acquired lands ceded by the Mississaugas

but the Algonquins complained that these negotiations had taken place clandestinely. Conflict developed as the Algonquins tried to claim what they considered to be their shared traditional hunting grounds. Negotiations over these land claims continue to this day.

In the 1820's, European settlers built sawmills on Opinicon Lake, notably at the rapids at Davis and at Chaffeys. Construction of the Rideau Canal began in 1826. These major developments, along with massive land appropriation and felling of trees, soon curtailed Native hunting and fishing opportunities in the area until they disappeared altogether. The old portages at Chaffeys and Jones Falls and Davis that had been used for thousands of years gradually disappeared. Indigenous life in the area would never be the same again.

Construction of the Rideau canal not only affected existing cultural communities but also changed the watersheds and the very landscape along the waterway. The dam at Davis Lock altered Opinicon Lake dramatically, turning it into a much deeper body of water by flooding it with 10 feet of water and enlarging it considerably. The present-day Deadlock Bay only came into existence after this flooding. The once shallow "Mud Lake" was a thing of the past.

During the 19th century, the presence of European settlers on the lake increased, their main activities being farming, milling and mining. In the mid-1800s, a type of phosphate known as apatite was discovered near the shores of Opinicon Lake. The very old pre-Cambrian rocks found in the Frontenac Axis and in the Opinicon area were favorable for the formation of this mineral as well as

concentrations of mica, both of which were mined for a period of time in the area..

The mines were small scale and located mostly around the Hart Lake and Rock Lake areas, with a few on the northern side of the lake. Four to five tons of apatite were taken daily from pits, then hauled to the lake and transported by water to Kingston from whence it was shipped to London and Hamburg. At one point, there were enough workers involved in the mines and the mills to warrant construction of a small village on the western end of the lake. However, by the 1890's, mining had ceased, due to the discovery of much less expensive open-pit phosphate deposits in Florida. Lake Opinicon Village eventually died off after World War I.

The 19th century saw the building of several sawmill dams on Opinicon Lake. As mentioned above, in 1820, an early mill dam was constructed by Walter Davis Jr. at the rapids that formed the outlet for the lake (present-day Davis Lock). Conditions for construction were arduous. Pre-made parts for the mill - blades and pullies- had to be transported to the site. Then local wood was used to complete the dam. The Davis dam was purchased by Colonel By for the construction of the canal lock. Around the same time, Samuel Chaffey settled at the narrow inlet between Opinicon and Indian Lakes and, together with his brother Benjamin, built a large mill complex that included a mill dam, distillery, carding mill, sawmill and a grist mill. Samuel Chaffey died of malaria in 1827 (a non-tropical form of the disease existed in the area - it was not extremely virulent unless combined with other illnesses such as dysentery).



Peterson Creek

Colonel By purchased the mill complex from Samuel's widow Mary Ann and his brother Benjamin and removed it to make way for the canal works. Several years later, another mill dam was built by Robert Drummond, a Kingston contractor involved in the construction of the Rideau, at the steep drop of water at the outlet from Hart Lake into Opinicon. Remains of this dam can be seen by paddlers who make the beautiful trip up Peterson Creek and walk the ancient portage past the falls tumbling out of Hart Lake. Natural history specialists tell us that Peterson Creek has been flowing out of Hart Lake for some 12,000 years. There are also remains of a bridge and road that once spanned Peterson Creek, probably for use by the largest of the apatite mines—Opinicon Rock Lake Mine.

The mouth of the creek flowing into Opinicon from Lower Rock Lake was the site of the Brewer Mill and shows up on an 1833 map. Sometime before 1860, James Hunter took over this site and built an impressive operation of mills and dams. Today this outlet is known as the Hunter Mill

site. Later in the century, both the Hart Lake and Lower Rock Lake dam sites were taken over by the government to build reservoir dams, turning Hart Lake and Lower Rock Lake into reservoirs to provide additional flow into the Rideau system when needed. It is reported that local farmers were not pleased by the existence of these dams, as they led to their farmland being flooded. It was hence not long before both reservoir dams were destroyed, most likely by angry farmers, but no successful prosecution for the deed was ever carried out. It is interesting to note that the Hunter estate was eventually sold, passing through several hands before being purchased by Queen's University in 1989 and named the Cape-Sauriol Environmental Studies Area.

The later part of the 19th century saw the development of tourism on the fish-rich Opinicon Lake. By the 1870's the old Chaffey family residence in Chaffey's lock had become a guest house for fisherman and eventually a private fishing club, mostly for wealthy American families, who were to come for many generations to fish on Opinicon. In 1921, a hotel and cabins were built. The Opinicon resort became the grand dame of the Rideau, employing over 40 fishing guides and is still operating today, having been restored to its former gloriy after it was sold in 2016.

Another development of great significance on Opinicon Lake was the establishment of the Queen's University Biological Station on a 34 hectare site on the lake in 1942. QUBS would go on to acquire a number of properties near and around the lake, where they conduct research. Still going strong after 70 years, QUBS has become a premier scientific field station where researchers and students conduct leading-edge research and participate in courses spanning ecology, evolution, conservation, geography, and environmental science. Opinicon Lake and its surrounding area provide endless natural material for investigation. The presence of QUBS on the lake helps cottagers, paddlers, boaters, fishers and all manner of tourists learn to appreciate the immense diversity of our lake and strive to protect it. The mines and the mills are long gone but

Opinicon Lake is now dotted with cottages and attracts hundreds of bass fishers and canal boaters every year. The lake boasts two fish sanctuaries and two Rideau Waterway Land trust properties, Sugar Bush Island and the Warren Nature Reserve, where hikers can enjoy the natural beauty.

In 2002, the area north of Kingston to Westport and west to Verona and extending to Gananoque and Brockville in the east was declared the Frontenac Arch UNESCO Biosphere region. As part of this biosphere, these traditional Algonquin and Iroquois lands, including Opinicon Lake, are protected by a network of people who contribute to strengthening sustainable community development, celebrating the interconnectedness of nature, livelihood, well-being and culture, for this and future generations.

Sources

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