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 Please see our website [sparrowlake.ca](http://sparrowlake.ca) for a complete list of executive and contacts.

## WASHAGO HERITAGE DAY



The first **Washago Heritage Day** was a big success on Saturday, October 20, 2018 at the Washago Community Centre from 1-5 pm. Sparrow Lake Historical Society had a table, along with many other local heritage displays, including the Ramara Historical Society. Marcel Rousseau had a table there with copies of his book *Postcard Memories Orillia* and hundreds of antique postcards that he has collected over the years. George Page supplied a video presentation on the Trent-Severn Waterway with pictures of all the locks along the canal, followed by other local presentations. There was also food and a live band.

This special-issue newsletter is published in honour of the occasion. (The next regular issue is May 2019.)

Steve Stanton

## Early History of Washago

by Steve Stanton

In 1852, Henri Quetton St. George, a Toronto wine merchant and land speculator, was granted 450 acres of land known as Severn Landing to the north of Lake Couchiching where the lake drained over waterfalls into the Severn River. The terms of the land grant called for St. George to build a sawmill and grist mill at the shore to encourage settlement. A water-powered sawmill was constructed in the centre branch of the Severn River, and in 1856 St. George acquired the local timber license for 80 square kilometres. Logging became the main activity in the area, and local settlers referred to the location as “the mill.” In order to bypass the falls at Severn Landing and Wasdell Falls 5 km to the northeast, a portage trail led from “the mill” to “the bridge” at the Severn River, which flowed northwest into Sparrow Lake.





## AGENCY FOR THE SETTLEMENT OF THE Severn and Muskoka Road.

August, 1859.

**T**HE undersigned Agent appointed by His Excellency the Governor General, for the Settlement of the Severn and Muskoka Road, passing through the Townships of Morrison and Muskoka, to the North of Lake Simcoe, Upper Canada, hereby gives notice to all persons willing and having the means of locating thereon, that the Lots on the Road are now ready for location. His Office will be (for the present) at Orillia, and will be open every day in the week from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Grants of One Hundred Acres will be made to any Settler Eighteen Years Old, subject to the following conditions, viz.:

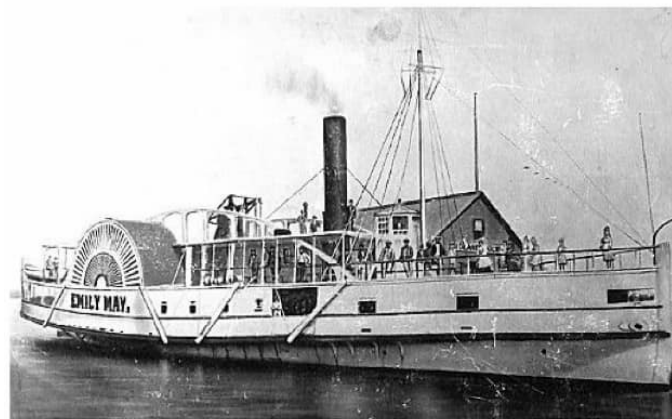
To pay a Fee of Five Dollars; to take possession within one month, and to put in a state of cultivation at least Twelve Acres of Land in the course of Four Years; to build a House (at least 20 x 18) and to reside on the Lot until the conditions of settlement are duly performed; after which accomplishment only shall the settler have the right of obtaining a title of property. Families comprising several settlers entitled to Lands, preferring to reside on a single Lot, will be exempted from the obligation of building and of residence (except upon the Lot on which they live), provided that the required clearing of the Land be made on each Lot. The non-accomplishment of these conditions will cause the immediate loss of the assigned Lot of Land, which will be sold or given to another.

The Road having been opened by the Government, the Settlers are required to keep it in repair.

**RICHARD JOSE OLIVER,**

*Agent, Severn and Muskoka Road.*

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The graceful 144-foot Emily May, launched in 1861 and operated until about 1883.

When a post office was established in 1868, Ojibwe Chief Bigwin gave the native name Washago to the growing community (pronounced Wah-shay-go, meaning “sparkling waters”). In that year, Henri St. George sold the sawmill and all the property in the village for the sum of \$8000 to lumberers Robert Cozzens and Robert Hamilton, who then sold it three years later to Abial Marshall. A grist mill was finally built in 1872 to fulfill the requirements of the original land grant, and in 1873 Marshall had a village plan drawn up and began selling lots for \$10 and mill sites with water privileges for \$25. Also in 1873, the Muskoka Branch railway extension reached Washago from Barrie and continued building track north toward Gravenhurst. In May 1874, the *Orillia Expositor* reported that “Washago is improving rapidly and many new frame buildings are being erected.” The local mill dam provided water power for a grist mill, a shingle mill, a sawmill, and a pump that supplied a water tank for the steam locomotives of the Northern Railway of Canada.



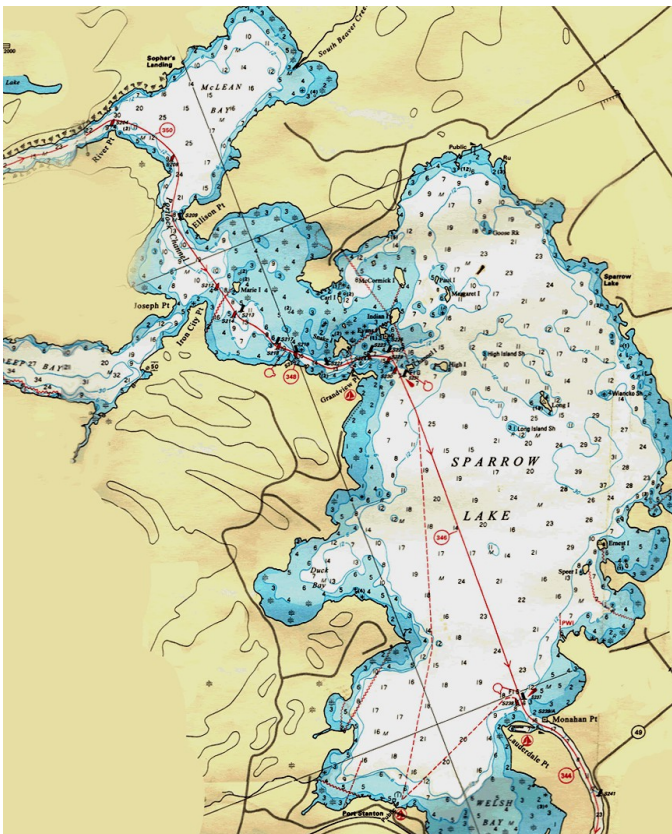
Compiled by Steve Stanton, 2018, from SLHS archives with credit to “Severn River,” by James T. Angus, Orillia, 1995, “Gazetteer and Directory of the County of Simcoe,” Toronto, 1866, [www.ruralroutes.com](http://www.ruralroutes.com) and [www.canada-rail.com](http://www.canada-rail.com).

In 1858, construction began on a colonization road from Lake Couchiching to Severn Bridge and northward into the Muskoka wilderness. Free land grants of 100 acres were offered to homestead settlers who would agree to clear and cultivate at least twelve acres of land. In 1860, the Muskoka Road was planked all the way up to the Muskoka Wharf at Gravenhurst, but the three-inch pine boards quickly deteriorated from the horse and carriage traffic. The first census of 1861 reported 297 landowners in the newly surveyed Morrison and Muskoka Townships (not including women and children), and land grants were still being registered in the area. The sawmill property at the north end of Lake Couchiching became a public transportation port with daily steamboat trips to Orillia, where the only grist mill was available for settlers to grind their grain into flour for the winter.



## The Legend of Sparrow Lake

The earliest name for this body of water through which Samuel de Champlain famously passed through in 1613 was “Muska-dag-a-ba-sink,” meaning “lake of the big fire” in native Ojibwe, likely in reference to the wonderful sunsets visible from the northeast shore. (The Huron nation of Champlain’s era was driven out by Iroquois warriors from the south in 1649, allowing Ojibwe nomads from the north to populate the wilderness.) The only record of the origin of the name “Sparrow Lake” comes from the preface to an unpublished book of amateur poetry by Malcolm Weethee Sparrow in 1924. Malcolm Sparrow was a summer resident from Toronto who undertook some research after being asked repeatedly if the lake was named after his relatives. At that time, there was no living person who could vouch for the origin of the name, but two stories were still being circulated about a man named Sparrow.



In both stories, an Englishman named Sparrow travelled periodically to the lake by canoe with the

aid of native guides—“a young man, of good family, wealthy, and apparently in poor health, but with a propensity for gambling.” He was reportedly well known by the native guides and the few white settlers in the area as a friendly man, however, on one trip he was reported missing by his guide, who then promptly disappeared, leading to speculation that Sparrow had been killed “after an altercation over cards.”

The other legend circulated among the natives recounts a mysterious white girl who was frequently seen canoeing alone on moonlit nights near the north shore of the lake, where she lived with her father, “a white-haired trapper.” Her Christian name was Aleeka, but the natives spoke of her as “Wanee-moo-sha,”—Spirit of the Moonlight. She was a “very extraordinary personage, shy and illusive, yet affecting the Indian costume, she visited the Indian camps, if any of the children were ill, to minister unto their sufferings.” According to legend, one of Sparrow’s native guides, who was enamored of the girl, became upset with young Sparrow’s interest in Aleeka and killed him in a fit of jealousy.

In both stories, Sparrow’s corpse was never recovered, and the body of water became known as “Sparrow’s lake,” later shortened to Sparrow Lake. (Adapted from “Legend of the Lake” by Malcolm Weethee Sparrow, 1924.

## The Murder Mystery of Swift Rapids

In the early morning hours of March 6, 1920 at 3:20 a.m., Superintendent George Page received a telephone call from a Swift Rapids employee, Bob Ironside, pleading for assistance and claiming that another employee, Fred Gilbert, had shot him. Ironside was rushed to Hydro Glen station by horse and sled and taken to Orillia on a freight train, where he died the next day. With no witnesses, no motive, and no weapon, Gilbert was acquitted at his subsequent court trial. Years later, a scuba diver recovered the barrel of a gun from the bottom of the Severn River, but the murder mystery of Swift Rapids remains unsolved to this day.

## **Sparrow Lake Historical Society Membership Renewal & Application Form**

**We now accept PayPal from the link on our website at [sparrowlake.ca](http://sparrowlake.ca)**

**Name**

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**Mailing Address**

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**Postal/Zip Code** -----

**Email address** \_\_\_\_\_

**Will you receive your newsletter via email?      YES      NO**

**Single \$15.00 ----- Family \$25.00 -----**

**New ----- Renewal -----**

Also note that now there is a ten-year membership available for \$200.00 for a family or \$125.00 for a single membership.

**Ten Year Single ----- Family-----**

Please make cheque payable to – **Sparrow Lake Historical Society** – and mail to  
Treasurer - Karen McKenzie  
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