



COLLINGWOOD'S "BIG MILL" 1867-1903

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When the good soil of Simcoe County was covered by vast stands of primeval forests, the 19th Century was a time of mega lumbering operations to clear the land for settlement and agriculture. The huge logs required huge sawmills to turn them into marketable lumber. We learned in our public school days that the white pine trees, some of them 150 or more feet tall and straight as a pencil, were coveted by the British Royal Navy for use as masts and spars on their ships. The British warships may have been known as "Hearts of Oak" but it was Simcoe County pine that held their sails. The building of the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron (later Northern) Railway from Toronto to Georgian Bay (it reached Collingwood in 1855) ushered in the lumber era as detailed by that great Simcoe County historian, Andrew Hunter.

The abundance of virgin timber naturally led to Collingwood having a number of sawmills in those pioneer days, but the largest one that occupied the largest amount of downtown waterfront real estate (as the waterfront along First Street then existed) was known to locals as "The Big Mill". Located at the foot of Pine and First Streets [First was also once known as Front St.], it is said to have been originally built in 1870 (but see below) by

Hotchkiss, Peckham & Co. and is shown on the 1875 *Bird's Eye View of Collingwood* whereon the mill property stretches all the way from Smith's Wharf at the foot of Hurontario St. over to Birch St., a distance of four blocks. This was a time when the waterfront looked very different to what it does today. Long before the Collingwood Shipyard and its predecessor, the Queen's Drydock, had ever been thought of, the area occupied by these industries was originally all water with the original shoreline coming very close up to First/Huron Streets before landfilling began to change the shore. The Big Mill played its part in creating Collingwood's waterfront land, much of which would eventually be the site of the Collingwood Shipyard property to the west of Hurontario St.

John Nettleton, the tailor, who came to Collingwood in July 1857 recorded in his reminiscences of those pioneer days that,

Where all that made land is on the lake front, where the shipyard and the furniture factory now is, was water. That part east of Hurontario Street was filled in by the railway company and the Dry Dock Co. The west side of Hurontario was filled in by slabs, sawdust and other refuse from Hotchkiss and Peckham's sawmill, which was built near the foot of Pine Street. This mill was the first great industry located in town and employed a great many men. They ran the mill day and night for some time and also built the largest sailing vessel on the lakes to carry their lumber. It had a capacity of one million feet.

John Nettleton was referring to when the Morrill family of boat builders were contracted to build a large tow barge, the *Lewis Hotchkiss*, for shipping lumber. Mr. Lewis Hotchkiss (1806-1887), the vessel's namesake, was from Birmingham, Connecticut. This wooden barge, 210 feet long, 40 feet across, and 13 feet deep, was constructed on that original shoreline on Huron St. about where the Main Office of the Collingwood Shipyard used to stand. When it came time to launch the barge in September 1870, it refused to

budge. Tugs tried to pull it off its building berth without success. Several days later there was a rise in the water level and it finally managed to get off dry land. The *Hotchkiss* was lost in a storm on Lake Huron west of Goderich around the end of August 1891.

With regard to waste from the sawmill being used to create more land at what would, years later in 1910, become the ship building berth at the foot of Hurontario St., Reg Hawman, in his memories of Collingwood's industrial past recorded in the local history book *Reflections*, stated in the section on the sawmills,

Here's an interesting aside on logs—about 1946 the Collingwood Shipyard had let a contract to "Intrusion Pre Pact". This company was engaged in reinforcing the east side of the present launching slope and they excavated to several feet depth adjacent to the wall. Many large, perfectly preserved white pine logs were unearthed, well below the reach of any insects or grubs that feed on logs.

Reg was referring to the west wall of Drydock #2 which, in 1959, became simply known as the Launch Basin. This reinforcing work was, no doubt, anticipating the post-World War II advent of much larger, longer and heavier ships being built on the man-made land beside Drydock #2 and this concrete wall, originally built in 1909, would have to bear the massive weight of a new generation of ships as it supported the building berth. On September 2, 1909 during construction of Drydock #2 the Barrie *Northern Advance* reported that the west wall was "a substantial cement structure" and it must have been considered quite adequate in 1909 at a time when ships like the mighty *Hochelaga* at 640 feet long, launched in 1949, and even longer ones of 730-740 feet in length had not even been thought of.

Another potential source of material for the landfill that extended the shoreline north of the corner of Hurontario and First Streets and the Toner & Gregory sawmill in the 1880's could be the rubble leftover from

Collingwood's Great Fire of September 1881. There were a number of brick buildings destroyed in that fire in the first block of Hurontario St., in particular, the 4-storey building of the Long brothers which left a huge pile of debris when it "collapsed like a house of cards". There is a distinct possibility that the nearest, most convenient place to haul the wreckage from the Great Fire was to the harbour waterfront just west of Hurontario St. including what would become much of the Shipyard property west of that intersection many years later.

In addition to new land created by wood waste from the Big Mill, starting in 1898 more land was created along the industrial waterfront by the C. S. Boone Dredging and Construction Company. Boone dredges deepened and improved the Collingwood harbour for over 30 years. From the introductory page of a 2018 publication *The History of Dredging Collingwood Harbour & Shipyards* by Greg McGroarty we learn that,

The silt and rubble dredged from the Collingwood Harbour was deposited in specific chosen locations, enlarging the inner harbour's land size and developing future building sites.

Boone's dredges deepened not only the harbour in general, but also the Hurontario Street Slip to enable the launching of steel hulls such as the barge *Agawa* (Hull #2) and the freighter *Midland King* (Hull #4) in 1902 and 1903, respectively, while the original 1883 drydock at the foot of St. Paul St. was being enlarged. These ships were built on the eastern edge of the Hurontario Street Slip and launched in a westward direction years before the Slip was turned into Drydock #2 (late 1909). The land with the buried pine logs from the 19th Century became a shipbuilding berth along the west side of Drydock #2 in the spring of 1910 and this is the spot where, in modern times, huge ships were launched in an easterly direction into the "Launch Basin" at the foot of Hurontario St., the former drydock. It's interesting how history repeats: the former Hurontario Street Slip was

turned into a drydock in 1909 for 50 years, then it was lengthened and decommissioned as a drydock (1959) and turned into a launch basin for St. Lawrence Seaway-size ships, and since the Shipyard's closing in 1986, it has reverted to being the Hurontario Street Slip. Where massive ships were built, there are now condos on that manmade land.

The Big Mill changed owners a couple of times. Hotchkiss, Peckham & Co. were succeeded by A. M. Dodge & Co., and they, in turn, were succeeded by Toner & Gregory. The *Simcoe County Archeological Management Plan, Appendix D* had this to say about the sawmill (note the different dates and names),

Hotchkiss, Peckham: This steam powered mill operated on leased land (Lot 44, Concession 9, Nottawasaga) between 1867 and 1869. The land was purchased by Hotchkiss & Peckham in 1869, and operated under various managers until 1903. The site contained the mill (88 x 145 in size) and 85 foot brick smokestack, six boilers, three engines and mill workers' dwellings. By 1871-72 the mill produced 15,000,000 board feet, some of which was destined for South America. The business was known as "The Collingwood Mills". It later became The Collingwood Lumber Company, and eventually the Georgian Bay Lumber Co. Shingle cutting machinery was installed at the mill in July 1895. In May 1882 an abandoned side-wheeler named the Algoma was sunk in the harbour and turned into a slab dock at the mill. Operations ceased in 1903.

The *Algoma* had its moment in history when it played a role in national unity by carrying troops from Collingwood to Fort William (Thunder Bay) on their way to quell the 1870 Red River Rebellion in Manitoba. As for the abandoned steamer being sunk as a slab dock at the foot of Maple St., our old friend David Williams from the Huron Institute recorded that this wooden steamer was "out of commission about 1872" and that after being stripped (of superstructure), the wreck was towed to the west side of

Collingwood harbour. At the time of the Old Boys Reunion of 1903, there was an open air concert by the band of the 48th Highlanders who played on the slab dock at the foot of Maple St. If this is in fact referring to the *Algoma*, that sunken wooden hull may still be there today under the extensive landfill that took place in the 1960's.

Those of you familiar with the Shipyard's Shipwrights building that was located near the Yard's Pine Street Gate will appreciate the amount of landfill that took place over the years. The Shipwright's building was originally the wooden boat building shop of W. Watts & Sons, Boat Builders. It first stood near the east side of the Hurontario St. slip, but as the Shipyard expanded and built more brick buildings, the Watts shop was floated around to the spot where former Shipyard workers remember it being in the 1960's. At one time in the early 1900's, the doors at the north end of this building at its new location opened right out onto the water that had been the log booming ground of the sawmill and the finished boats were launched directly out of those doors. As more land was "made" with the help of the Boone dredges and as the shoreline moved farther north, the finished wooden boats were hauled out the now-extra distance to the water's edge by horses. The Watts workshop (not to be confused with the Watts lifeboat storage building now on Heritage Drive) was sold to the Collingwood Shipyard by Fred Watts during the Second World War. A photo of the Toner & Gregory sawmill shows some of the wooden boats (on land) built by the Watts family when the two businesses were next door neighbours.

The 1887 *Jubilee History of Collingwood and Business Directory* gave the following description of the Toner & Gregory business:

TONER & GREGORY

The extensive lumber and coal trade now carried on by the above firm was begun in 1878 by W. T. Toner and E. R. Earl, in Greaves' Block. Mr. Toner subsequently took over the entire business, and in 1881 was joined by Mr. F.

B. Gregory. The office was then removed to the firm's premises on Second street, and this year the present neat structure in which they do business was erected. The firm carry on a big wholesale and retail trade in lumber of all kinds, and they are the principal coal dealers in town. They have gained public confidence by their upright dealings, and their business year by year assumes larger proportions. They are the only lumber dealers of any consequence in the Town, and owing to their fair prices do more business than the others combined.

Their display ad in the same publication stated,

WHOLESALE AND RETAIL DEALERS IN LUMBER, LATH, SHINGLES AND DRESSED LUMBER. COAL AND WOOD. W. T. Toner, F. B. Gregory

Seven years later in the 1894 *Board of Trade Report* the Toner & Gregory business was listed as,

THE BIG SAW MILL

Collingwood being situated near to the timber districts, is fairly supplied with saw mills, having three now in operation. The largest and the oldest, is known as the "Big Mill", and has a capacity of 100,000 feet per day. This mill is owned and run by Messrs. Toner & Gregory, who, in conjunction with the mill, own a large retail lumber yard where dimension stuff of all kinds may be obtained by order. The mill is situated on the lake shore at the foot of Maple and Pine streets, and their lumber yard is on the corner of Second and Pine streets. Messrs. Toner & Gregory also deal in coal extensively and supply most of the coal used in town. They import by cargo direct from the mines of Pennsylvania. The firm employ in the mill and otherwise upwards of 150 men.

Huge log booms were towed to Collingwood harbour for this mill as well as the other two alluded to above: one of them was in the northwest corner of the harbour near White's Bay operated (originally) by Kanady & Co. from

1872 to 1888. In 1894 it was known as “The New Mill at the North-west extremity of the town” operated by Robert Emerson. It became the Charlton Sawmill in 1900 and appears to have ceased production in 1914. Subsequently, like so many others, it burned down. The third sawmill at the time was the D.G. Cooper mill on the shoreline at the north end of Minnesota St. Like many other harbours around Georgian Bay there were a lot of logs floating in the harbour and large stacks of finished lumber on land. While the Toner & Gregory sawmill was demolished in 1903 and the land sold to the Town of Collingwood, the lumber, wood and coal business carried on. While all those businesses are long gone without a trace, Messrs. Toner & Gregory left a lasting legacy in their fine brick houses on the north side of Third St.

William Theodore Toner (1848-1913) and Frank Beers Gregory (1851-1923) were both from the United States and emigrated to Canada, Toner in 1862 and Gregory in 1868. They were sufficiently prosperous in their business to live in grand style on Third St. Their prosperity resulted in three houses next door to one another on the north side of Third St. (#’s 175, 185 and 199) which are known today as the “Toner & Gregory Houses”. William Toner lived in the house at #199 (corner of Third and Birch), his son William Francis lived at #175, and Frank Gregory’s house was between them at #185. I have a connection to one of these three houses since our Investment and Wealth Advisor at RBC Dominion Securities lives there and Pam and I have had a tour of the house. William T. Toner died very suddenly from a stroke at his place of business on First St. in May 1913. His son and Frank Gregory carried on. When my great aunt Vetta O’Brien enumerated for the 1921 Census, Toner’s son William F. Toner was still in the coal business. By 1923 *Vernon’s Directory* listed him as a traveling salesman. Frank Gregory died in February 1923 of pneumonia.

In 1922 Fred Embury Kimmerly (1874-1953) bought the coal and firewood business which was located on the north side of First St. just west of Pine St. The lumber yard from 1887 at Pine and Second Streets was gone some time prior to this because Toner & Gregory were listed as dealers of lumber, coal and wood at the corner of First and Pine by at least 1910. The coal sheds were located on a railway siding that ran behind Smart's Cannery, National Grocers, then crossed Pine St. to bring that Pennsylvania anthracite to the coal sheds. Fred Kimmerly was still active as a coal dealer in 1935 but by the time of the 1940 *Voters List*, he was retired at age 66. By the time of the 1945 *Voters List*, a different Fred (Fred Girdwood) owned this location and my parents bought wood and coal, and, later, stove oil, from Girdwoods at this location from 1946 onward when they bought their house on Ste. Marie St. (I still have a mental image of our wood and coal cook stove). Fred Kimmerly also owned the coal piles delivered by self-unloading ships at the harbour adjacent to the Sheer Leg Crane. The running of this aspect of his business passed to his secretary/bookkeeper, Sadie Houghton, the last owner of the coal dock when coal began to be gradually phased out after the natural gas pipeline reached Collingwood.

Collingwood's waterfront along both Huron and First Streets is unrecognizable today from how it looked not only a hundred and more years ago but also how it looked even in the 1950's. West of Hurontario St. the shoreline moved farther and farther north via landfill. To a lesser extent the shoreline east of Minnesota St. moved farther north as well as the original harbour inlet was filled in. A number of industries came and went along this shoreline. Wood and coal, the last vestige of the Toner & Gregory business, were replaced as fuels with heating oil which, in turn, was replaced by natural gas hidden in a pipeline in the ground. This led to the disappearance of the waterfront coal sheds and oil storage tanks serviced by the railway and the huge coal piles down at the harbour that arrived by ship. The Toner & Gregory Sawmill has been gone for nearly 120 years but the

homes of the Toner and Gregory families still stand proudly on Third Street, echoing Collingwood's younger days.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B. C.