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WASAGA BEACH
HISTORICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE
~ Enjoy the present, embrace the past ~

The History of Wasaga Beach

What comes to mind when you think of Wasaga Beach? Most say they first think of its natural attributes; the sun, the sand and our beautiful 14-mile freshwater beach, the longest in the world. But beyond its beauty, the story of our Town is a story of our people. To learn about Wasaga Beach, it is essential to travel back in time to learn about the people that shaped this Town – indigenous peoples, soldiers, loggers, fishermen, businesspeople and tourists of every type. There are so many interesting characters and events that have placed Wasaga Beach on the pages of international history. The story of our Town is one of a special landscape and how people interacted with that landscape over the past two centuries.

The first to settle here were of course, First Nations peoples. Wasaga Beach is situated on what was once the traditional land of the Anishinaabeg. The enduring presence of the First Nation Métis and Inuit people on this land is felt here, and as we move forward, we journey in the spirit of reconciliation and respect. Wasaga and its surrounding area was first occupied by the Algonquin First Nation, who gifted us with the words ‘Nottawa’ an Algonquin word meaning ‘Iroquois’, and ‘Saga’ meaning ‘mouth of the River’. These were the Indigenous peoples present in small groups throughout the British military presence in the early 1800’s. After a significant period of largely uninhabited solitude, the banks of the Nottawasaga River began to come alive with activity due to the War of 1812-14.

Upper Canada, being the most accessible and most unprotected part of the British Empire at the time, was drawn into the conflict between the United States and Great Britain. After several successful British skirmishes on the Great Lakes, the 1813 Battle of Lake Erie saw the capture of six British ships and resulted in the U.S taking command of the Upper Great Lakes. Only the British schooner ‘The Nancy’, a fur trading vessel, seconded into service during this conflict, remained unscathed. Fate would have it that the Nancy escaped being destroyed by the American ships because it happened to be away on a supply run at the time of the Lake Erie skirmish.

An American sailor named Captain Arthur Sinclair, heard that the Nancy was moored at the mouth of the Nottawasaga River and decided that the ship would be his next target. He commanded three vessels, The Niagara, The Tigress and The Scorpion, and came prepared with a force of 500 men and 24 cannons. However, Lieutenant Miller Worsley, suspecting that Sinclair would next direct his attention to the British supply ship, hurriedly built a block house about two miles from the river’s mouth, in order to shield the Nancy from the anticipated attack. On August 13, 1814, the three American ships sailing down the Nottawasaga River discovered the Nancy’s hiding place and she



was subsequently torched and sunk, leaving the resulting debris to block up the river and shut down the supply route. After the American ships left the scene, the surviving crew of the Nancy escaped by way of several small, handcrafted boats, eventually making their way on Lake Huron to Fort Mackinac.

For more than 100 years, the charred remains of the Nancy rested relatively undisturbed beneath the waters of the Nottawasaga River. Accounts of her fate were well known however, and in the 1920's Dr. F.J. Convoy began to search the river for the schooner's resting place. He eventually found the remains on the south side of what is now known as Nancy Island. The remains were excavated and housed in the first Nancy Island Museum, a rudimentary edifice which opened on August 14, 1925. Much later, in 1949, the remains of a British soldier were uncovered about two miles south of the mouth of the river. His body was then reinterred on Nancy Island with a special headstone marking the spot. The War ended shortly after the sinking of The Nancy, with the British keeping control of Upper Canada and the Upper Great Lakes. In 1816 a British fort was built approximately four miles south of the river mouth and was called Fort Nottawasaga or Schoonertown. In 1818 the British moved their military installation to Penetanguishene but left behind the storehouse near the mouth of the river so it could be used by provincial land surveyors to supply survey crews in the 1820's and 1830's.

Due to the abundance of large trees, the area became popular for logging. The Nottawasaga River was the sought-after route for logs to be transported to a number of mills that were located farther up the river, as well as across the bay to Collingwood. Logging was one of the few early activities that could take place all year round. Even in the winter months, loggers lived in temporary camps, cutting and trimming trees and hauling them by horse or oxen, to the river's edge. Commercial fishing was another small-scale activity that was taking place at the mouth of the river in the 1850's. A railway was eventually built joining Toronto, formerly known as York, and Georgian Bay, with construction beginning on the first section of the railway to Barrie in 1851. The extension of the railroad to Collingwood in 1855 had a major effect on the area that was to become Wasaga Beach, in that bigger logging camps began to spring up. Heavy logging went on through the 1850's and 60's. By the end of the 1870's however, the Wasaga Beach area was razed of many of its trees, and logging on a big scale then moved elsewhere. Up to this point, the area had been inhabited by native peoples, the British military and by logging companies. But no one had yet made it their permanent home. That is, not until John Van Vlack arrived.

In 1869 a man came along who was not only to make a home for his family in the area, but would also pave the way for a successful settlement. This man was John Van Vlack and he had the foresight to purchase 69 acres of land near the mouth of the Nottawasaga River and then build a village around himself! Van Vlack was an entrepreneur who managed, for the next few decades, to turn his hand to whatever came along. He ran a general store, was a commercial fisherman, built a sawmill, and was the first postmaster. He also had a hand in the building of the first bridge over the Nottawasaga River. A small village eventually grew around his property and by 1896, there was a population of 70 living at what by then was known simply as Van Vlack. In due course, a school and a hotel were also established. Most of the families in the Van Vlack settlement either fished or logged, with the surrounding area gradually developing small working farms.

The first official use of the name Wasaga Beach was introduced near the end of the 19th century, as up until then the area was only referred to as the top of Sunnidale Township. When the lots in the Township were subsequently subdivided, one was named Wasaga Beach, a derivative of Nottawasaga. Road and railway efficiency began to slowly improve and by the early 1900's Wasaga boasted a few cottages, the Ivandale Hotel on the river, and several hunting lodges. The beautiful stretch of beach and the area's close proximity to Toronto caused it to become the ideal location for holidays and family gatherings.



The start of our tourist industry and businesses being built on the beachfront began with the adventurous spirit of the McLean family. Their first endeavour was the completion of the historic Capstan Inn in 1911 followed by the building of the Dardanella Dance Hall in 1918 by their two sons, Hugh and Alexander. In time, other resorts, hotels and cottage courts began to appear and it was found necessary to replace the old wooden Van Vlack bridge over the river with a sturdier steel bridge in 1909. Thus, the summer tourist industry came to fruition in Wasaga Beach.

Another of Wasaga's early entrepreneurs was Charlie Eberhardt, who moved to the Beach around 1905. His business interests grew gradually over the years, with one enterprise expanding into another. He was a fisherman who caught fish for his family and sold the excess to neighbours and summer visitors. He built an icehouse on what is now River Road West, and hauled and cut ice in the winter months to sell during the busy summer tourist season. He also started making trips to Collingwood by boat to buy supplies, and then built a store to sell everything he brought back! In time he expanded the general store, built a second storey and began letting out rooms to tourists and year-round visitors. The top floor of the store eventually housed the students of the S.S. #14 Wasaga Beach School. The Eberhardt family also got into the transportation business, ferrying people up and down the river and across the bay from Wasaga to Collingwood. In later years, the family started a taxi service and also operated a miniature golf course.

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A permanent school was eventually established on land donated by Anabel Sage Mills in 1937 and stayed in operation until 1972. The school building then became the Wasaga Beach Municipal Office when the Town was incorporated in 1974. In the 1950's, a one room Flos school was located at the corner of Beck and Main Streets. Silvercrest, Byrnes Avenue, and Oxbow Park were some of the names of the Wasaga Beach schools that are now gone or repurposed. It is interesting that the three current elementary schools, Worsley, Birchview Dunes and St. Noel Chabanel, have names associated with Wasaga's rich history and natural attributes.

In the 1930's the sandy, flat surface of Wasaga Beach was a natural runway for many small planes, and on August 8, 1934, an occurrence of great national importance made the headlines. The first successful overseas flight between Canada and England was completed by two Canadian pilots, James Ayling and Leonard Reid in their plane, The Trail of the Caribou. A stone cairn commemorating the flight can be found at the entrance to the Nancy Island Historic Site. Wasaga's long, hard packed beach was also the perfect location for motorcycle racing at that time. These races were significant events in Canada in that they brought many top American riders to our area. The races ran until 1950, with some gaps due to the competitor's participation in WW2, when new safety and insurance requirements caused their cancellation.

The community continued to grow in size, and during this time local residents began to build their homes further inland, away from the high winds, blowing sand from the beachfront and the harsh winter elements. Neighbourhoods began to spring up on Mosley St, Van Vlack Road (now River Road East) and Golf Course Road. There were many families who turned their hands to entrepreneurial endeavours such as the operation of cottage courts, hotels, restaurants, taverns, campgrounds and general stores, adding to the infinite variety of life



in Wasaga Beach. Hotels like the Wasaga Inn, the Hiawatha Hotel, the Breakers and the Allistonia, and later, the Nancy Villa and Dyconia were just some of the popular resorts of the day that brought many tourists to our sandy shores.

In 1938 a group of local residents and cottagers grouped together to form the Wasaga Beach Chamber of Commerce whose concerns and goals, besides promoting local businesses, included traffic problems, control of campers, dredging of the river, paving of highways and restocking the river with fish. The Chamber continues today and continues to promote and protect the interests and commerce of the Wasaga Beach business community with a focus on advocacy, education and networking.

Locals and seasonal visitors also appreciated the many activities available in Wasaga, and a round of golf at the Wasaga Golf and Country Club (renamed Marlwood) or an afternoon at Playland Park were enjoyed by all. In the late 30's, the two Conacher brothers took a segue from the National Hockey League and built a 9-hole golf course with a small trailer for a clubhouse. By the 1950's the existing clubhouse with a full dining room and bar was built. The golf course has gone through considerable design changes over the years and is still considered to be a great way to spend an afternoon. Playland Park, established in 1932 by William (Bull) Fielding, included a ferris wheel, merry-go-round, roller coaster, bowling alley and arcade, and was the high point of any visit to Wasaga's main end. The sale of the property in the late 80's brought an end to the Park, but amusement rides still operate for a few weeks every year and the location is also the site of many events, all promoting tourism in Wasaga Beach.

During the Second World War, Wasaga Beach became a popular holiday spot for many, including soldiers on leave from Camp Borden. More and more cottage courts were built and the 'Main End' area got a reputation for being the place to be during the summer months. Soldiers their families and other tourists, sometimes over 100,000 on weekends, enjoyed the midway rides, movie theatre, bowling and dancing during the warm, sunny weather. Over the years, many of these weekend visitors would eventually return to build summer cottages that later, would become their permanent homes. As Wasaga grew larger, a Police Village was created in 1940 with a Council made up of trustees. The area was further designated an Improvement District in 1946, followed by an incorporated Village in 1949.

As the Province of Ontario had more resources on hand than the Town, a plan was developed in the late 50's to have the government take control of the beachfront. By 1959, the beachfront was officially known as a Crown Beach, with manned lifeguard towers, change huts, washrooms and parking areas. Also, thanks to provincial funding, a new bridge was constructed in 1961. Changes continued to occur, and during the 60's the Department of Lands and Forests acquired a seven-mile strip of beachfront and as a result, many properties were expropriated, with the buildings being sold or moved to a different location. For safety and environmental reasons, the Province prohibited all vehicles from being driven along the Beach beginning in 1973. The 1970's brought a pedestrian mall to the closed off main end as well as a new bridge further up the river on land purchased from the Wasaga Beach Chamber of Commerce. The bridge was christened Schoonertown and crossed the river where Fort Nottawasaga once stood. In time, municipal sewer and water were provided and many new subdivisions were developed.

The formation of service clubs in Wasaga Beach was a strong indication that the Town was turning from a summer resort location into a year-round community. The oldest is the Wasaga Beach Lions Club that began in 1963, followed by the Kinsman Club in 1972. Like the Lions and Kinsman Clubs, the Rotary Club, founded here in 1984, continue to enhance the well being of the community through charitable works and fundraising events.

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The Wasaga Beach Public Library had its beginnings in 1967 when a number of local volunteers recognized the need for such a facility. It began as a book exchange and opened with 1200 books, 900 on loan from the Simcoe County Library and the rest donated by local residents. A Library Board was formed in 1968 and in 1972 the book exchange became a public library and was incorporated into the Ontario Library System.

After annexing Oakview Beach, and Sunnidale Township in 1966, Wasaga Beach officially became a Town in 1974, with it's borders expanding from Nottawasaga, Sunnidale and Flos. The population stood at 4,034, a dramatic increase from 1965 when only 500 people were permanent residents. Wasaga Beach is divided into sections, with the beaches numbered 1 to 6 from east to west with public park areas, most with parking and washroom facilities. Beaches 2 to 4 benefit from some shade trees, bike trails, and lots of sandy beachfront. Beaches 3 to 6 see many visitors during the summer months as they boast seasonal waterfront cottages and a stretch of Shore Lane, which is ideal for jogging, biking. Beach 1 is the most popular with the tourists, having bars, beach themed shops and fast food restaurants, and is the most visited section of the Town. There are also two additional beaches nearby, New Wasaga and Allenwood, that are separated from the main beaches by the river.

The ensuing decades brought many more changes and improvements to our area. The Wasaga Stars Arena, Oakview Community Centre (now the RecPlex and YMCA), the Wasaga Beach Sports Park and Fernbrook Centre and over the years the arrival of the big box stores such as the Real Canadian Superstore and Shoppers Drug Mart, the many franchise restaurants, and Stonebridge Town Centre have all been a welcome boon to our economy.

On November 30, 2007, a major fire destroyed 90% of the buildings along the pedestrian mall in Beach Area 1, with most of the seasonal businesses being affected. Nearly 100 firefighters from surrounding areas battled the blaze for hours but the ensuing destruction resulted in almost 5 million dollars in damages. Despite the fire, the beach and many of the remaining businesses reopened the following summer. In 2008 an entertainment dome was created, intended as a temporary structure until future development commenced. In 2011 a storm destroyed the dome's exterior cover and it was removed the following year.

The Wasaga Beach of today is very different from the Wasaga Beach of over one hundred years ago. Without question, the biggest change is its transformation into a year-round community.

Today the Town boasts more than 21,000 permanent residents and 16,000 seasonal and part-time residents. And yet, much about our Town remains the same. Its freshwater beach, the view across the bay, and the flowing Nottawasaga River are all timeless, all constant in their beauty and the pleasure they bring to those who live here or visit. Wasaga's world class hospitality remains unchanged as well. Remaining too is the spirit of Wasaga Beach; hardy, entrepreneurial, vibrant, inclusive and always welcoming.

Wasaga Beach remains a very special place.

For more information please contact e-mail us at wbhac2020@gmail.com

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