

History of the
Village of
Mooretown
1800 – 1900

By

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(Note: original spellings and grammar have been transcribed as written)

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What was his name? I do not know his name.

I only know he heard God's voice, and came:

Brought all he loved across the sea,

To live and work for God and me.

Felled the ungracious oak;

Dragged from the soil, with horrid toil

With vigor tilled the rugged countryside,

And in the end, without memorial, died.

No blaring trumpet sounded out his fame.

He lived-he died; and now we ask his name.

The thrice-gnarled roots, and stubborn rock.

Fortunately for us we know the name of our first [European] settler. The first [European settler] to settle permanently anywhere on the east bank of the St. Clair River from Lake Huron to Lake St. Clair was John Courtney. In 1800 he chose a farm which afterwards became Lot 30, River Front, one half mile north of where the Village of Moore came into being fifty years later. His son John, born in 1802, was the first [child of a European settler] born in the Township of Moore. This son and his sons and his grandsons were identified with the progress of the village in later years. For many years the only neighbours the Courtneys had were the [Indigenous peoples] of the forest. So isolated were they that to obtain supplies he had to paddle a canoe to Detroit for them. Shortly after a French squatter came to Lot 41, where he lived the life of a recluse till late in the 40's. Another French settler came to Lot 30 and about 1815 James Bâby arrived and established a home on Lot 35. In the course of time he became owner of Lots 33, 34 and 36 also. In 1885 Mr. Bâby married Miss Betsy Henderson and it is owing to the enterprise of their son, James F. Bâby, Jr., that a village developed in this locality. Before the village was begun James Bâby, Sr., was engaged in many enterprises. He did a large business in exporting timber. He built a dock as a port of call for boats. He kept a store, and in that store a Post Office was established in Feb. 1837, the first one in Lambton County, excepting the one at Sarnia which was established at the same time. This store and Post Office were in a log building which stood for more than one hundred years, its last sphere of usefulness being as a garage.

The amount of mail passing through the P.O. in the early days seems to have been limited. John Geikie, a resident here in the 40's, wrote a book entitled "Adventures in Canada." In it he said "the Post Office was in a store kept by a French Canadian and was limited enough in its arrangements. I remember taking a letter one day a little later than was right, it appeared. 'The mail is made up,' said the P.M. 'and it is against the law to open it, once it is sealed; but I suppose I may as well oblige a friend.' So saying, he took down a piece of brown paper from the shelf, cut around some seals which were on the back of it, and exposed 'the mail,' which I found consisted of a single letter. Mine was presently laid peacefully beside the other, and I hope I did not make the bundle too heavy for the mailboy's saddle bags."

In 1852 James Bâby, Jr., built a sawmill on the river bank at the end of the sixth concession or Bâby's Line as it was commonly called. He had been given the farm, Lot No. 36 by his father. In 1853 he built a grist mill beside the sawmill. His timber business was so extensive the River road would be piled with white oak logs from the 6th concession to Sutherland's ready for export. Vessels three abreast would be tied at his dock waiting to be loaded with lumber, staves and cordwood, and also products of the grist mill. During the Crimean war he exported square timber to England. A great deal of this was not paid for. Mr. Bâby had a similar experience during the civil war and as a consequence suffered reverses and closed out his business and moved to Sarnia, where he engaged in the transportation business, inaugurating the first steamship line between Sarnia and Wallaceburg.

George Leslie became the owner of the mills, and in 1870 they were bought by William Brown. As the timber supply was dwindling Mr. Brown demolished the sawmill and replaced it with a brick oatmeal mill. Upon his death these mills were operated for many years by his son William, Jr. The brick mill was destroyed by fire but the grist mill stood till 1938 when it was sold and dismantled. Some of the interior beams were of walnut and the partitions of dressed pine.

Early in the 50's James F. Bâby surveyed a part of his farm into village lots. From the 6th concession south is known as the Bâby survey. Mrs. Bâby was a daughter of Capt. Wright and most of the streets are named after members of the Wright family. The River Road is St. Clair street. Then Poultney, Emily, Elizabeth, and Sophia. The 6th concession is William street after Captain Wright, then St. James and Napoleon. Napoleon street is also connected to the Wrights, as Captain Wright, who belonged to the Royal Navy, had been stationed at St. Helena guarding Napoleon. About 1860 John Stewart surveyed a part of Lot 37 into village lots. The first street north is McDonald and the next Victoria.

Thus was the Village of Moore launched upon its career. Being the only business place to serve the south half of the township and as far east as the Enniskillen Townline, in a few years it became a very thriving place, the population reaching six hundred or more. Besides operating the mills, James F. Bâby built a store on the corner where the Davis house now stands. It was not long before other business places were operating and doing extensive trade.

In those days most articles were handmade and the shops here manufactured the goods as well as selling them.

In 1858 Nelson Bowen built a waggon shop. Buggies were also made and the first top buggy sold west of London was assembled in this shop. One workman, Bruce Simpson, who learned his trade at Bowen's, in after years became a foreman in the Fisher Body Works in Detroit. Mitchel Bazo had a shoe shop. Alex Watson and George Tremell each had a saddler's shop. Gerdan Cronkhite and John Sutherland were carpenters and cabinet makers. They also made coffins, of solid walnut, at a cost of five and six dollars. Charles McKelvey built a large store on the corner of River Road and William street. It was afterwards operated by Phillips & McKinnon and then by McKinnon & Campbell. Other storekeepers were Courtney, Winchester, Armour, Brooks, McIntyre and Raymond Bâby.

In those days packaged goods were as unheard of as germs, and boxes and barrels stood open to dust and flies, and whatever else might happen to drop into them. The passageways of McKinnon's store were crowded from one end to the other with barrels containing flour, sugar, syrup, molasses, soda crackers, and even cranberries. Raisins and currants came in large boxes and were sold by the pound. This was truly a department store, as, besides everything in the grocery line, there was also kept in stock chinaware, glassware, dry goods, boots and shoes and some line of hardware.

Dales kept a drug store, Richard Brightwell a butcher shop and Humphrey a bakery. John Morrison operated a tailor shop. C. F. Noyle had a furniture and undertaking business. Flewelling ran a planing mill and Doan a cooper shop. Richard McDonald operated a cheese factory with Gilbert Trumpour, the cheesemaker. John McRae owned a woollen mill where wool was carded and cloth and blankets woven. It was later turned into a grist mill under the management of McRae & Cunningham. Mrs. Miller, Mrs. Bolton, and Mrs. Joe Fisher each had a millinery store and Mrs. Spence did dressmaking. In 1862 Josiah Smith built an oil refinery on water lots N.O.P. The oil was brought from Oil Springs by waggon or sleigh and stored in underground tanks on the lot across the street, now the salt block, and pumped as needed to the refinery. On the expectation that the business would expand greatly, several schemes were advanced for building a plank road from Moore to Oil Springs, but they did not materialize. The planing mill, cheese factory, woollen mill, grist and saw mills, Whitney's hotel, and the oil refinery were all on the river bank west of the road.

For many years the extensive import and export business of the village was carried on by boat. Besides the many vessels which carried freight, large passenger ships called at the docks of Moore. Some of these were the Dart, Ruby, Forrester and Reindeer, the latter two being American ships, and during the civil war men in blue uniforms of the Northern army could be seen upon their decks. The Milton D. Ward, J. C. Clark and Hiawatha were others which made this a port of call. In 1886 the Erie & Huron R.R. was opened for traffic, and shipping by boat gradually declined, till it disappeared entirely. While the salt block operated, vessels called

at their dock to take on salt, but when that business was removed boat traffic to the village was at an end.

The Octavia, a sailing vessel, was built on the water front, and operated by John S. Nesbit, and the Tyler and a tug, the James Mayhew, were owned and operated by Capt. Israel Mayhew.

During the 50's Peter Beaton operated a ferry, a row boat, between Moore and St. Clair, Mich. Later a steam ferry was put in service and a customs office opened on Bâby's dock at the foot of St. James street. The first customs officer was Capt. Wm. Gurd who was succeeded by Mr. Cowan.

The first hotel in the village was built and operated by Joseph Lincoln about 1854. In a few years it was taken over by John Courtney and later by Dolman. It stood on the south side of William street between St. Clair and Poultney streets. Charles Reilly built a large hotel on the corner of William and Emily streets. In its later years it was run by Mayhew. Whiting had a hotel on St. Clair street next to the mills. Besides the hotels several grocery stores held a licence to sell liquor. These were issued by the township council and in 1858 a petition was presented to the council signed by Mrs. Cronkhite and other ladies of Mooretown and vicinity urging the suppression of the sale of liquor in all places except the taverns and inns. The petition was granted and acted upon. The amount of liquor sold by two or three hotels may be judged by the fact that the supply of one for a winter would be 50 barrels.

In the face of these facts it is surprising that it was not until 1873 that the need for a lockup was considered. In 1872 the Canada Southern R.R. was built, and terminated at the river a mile south of Mooretown. The next year a petition was addressed to the council by Wm. P. Vidal, Rev. Dr. Armstrong and many others, setting forth that owing to the proximity of the railroad there was a likelihood of an influx of undesirable characters, and it was therefore advisable to have a lock-up erected. This was built by Andrew Miller at a contract price of \$548 and \$25 for incidentals. Evidently those incarcerated did not enjoy their lodgings, for a very frequent item in the township treasurer's account was payment to James Richmond for a new lock on the Mooretown jail. One hundred dollars was paid to Charles Reilly for the site and if the building were ever removed, the land was to revert to the original owner. After standing, a picturesque landmark for sixty-five years, it was demolished and the brick sold.

As early as 1858 or before, an Orange Lodge was organized in the village, of which David Cronkhite was Master, George N. Kilbreath, Deputy Master, and David Johnston, Secretary. In 1873 a Masonic Lodge was organized. The charter members were J. A. Sumerville (M.D.), Master; Wm. Abernathy, George Stewart, John Courtney, David Armstrong, John McRae, Adam Courtney, Wm. P. Vidal, James G. Nesbit, John S. Nesbit.

The village was the headquarters for the medical supply of most of the township. Dr. Kellog was the first one to settle here. He was succeeded, in time, by Doctors Gamble, Poussette, Wright, Summerville, Oliver, Rourk, Anderson, Bowman, Wilkinson, Bray and J. J. P.

Armstrong. The first telephone line in the township was erected by Dr. J. J. P. Armstrong, and extended from his office in the village to Joseph Payne's residence on the 8th concession.

In 1862, a petition was sent by the township council to the Postmaster General to establish a daily mail service both ways between Moore and Sarnia. The mail then was carried by stage until the Erie & Huron R.R. was built in 1886, when it came by train. The official name of the Post Office was Moore but the station was named Mooretown. The two names were in use until 1906 when the name of the P. O. was changed to Mooretown. The first postmaster was James Bâby, Sr., from 1837 till 1853. It was then moved into the village and kept by John Butler till 1856 when Wm. McPherson took it over till 1866. He was succeeded by John Morrison who held the office for forty-four years. Today mail comes and goes four times a day and news from the war is heard over the radio every hour. During the Crimean war Richard Brightwell, Sr., and George Stockdale, Sr., subscribed together for the London (Eng.) News. When it arrived the two couples would sit up all night reading the war news, which was then six weeks old.

In 1866, owing to the possibility of Fenian raids from the United States, the formation of a company of infantry at Moore, to do mounted duty when required, was ordered by Military Headquarters. This was No. 3 Company and a few months later a second Company, No. 6, was ordered. The officers of No. 3 Company were Capt. Thomas O. Bridgewater, Lieut. Geo. Stewart, Ensign Duncan Cunningham. Of No. 6 Company, Capt. Robert Fleck, Lieut. John Lewis, Ensign James Cruickshank. These companies patrolled the river front from Sarnia to Sombra in 1866 and in 1870. They also saw service during the Grand Trunk strike. Lieut. Stewart rose to the rank of major. Lieut. Lewis became captain and Ensigns Cunningham and Cruickshank, lieutenants. Capt. Wm. Abernathy was also an officer. A medal was issued to all who served during the Fenian raids, with a bar to those who saw service during both periods. The last of these veterans passed away in Mooretown in 1939 in the person of George Dale who had served as a bugler.

These companies, known at first as the Mooretown Mounted Infantry later became attached to the 1st Hussars, a cavalry regiment with headquarters at St. Thomas. C. Squadron, when stationed in Moore was considered the banner squadron of the 1st Hussars. Until it was disbanded about 1912 the ranks of this squadron were filled by succeeding generations of young farmers of the township. This uniform was dark blue plentifully decorated with gold braid. The cap was a very small pill-box affair which had to be kept on by a strap under the chin. It was a gala sight to see the Volunteers, as they were called. With a sword clanking at the side and mounted on a spirited horse, there was some glamour to a soldier's life in those days.

The village seemed to be military minded, as even the young women were given a course of training. Capt. Abernathy trained a company in all the exercises of the militia but brooms were used instead of guns. They practised on the "common" and were called the Broom Brigade.

One commodity which furnished the village with a great deal of business was wood. The surrounding country was densely covered with all kinds of hardwood. A great deal of this was exported in the form of cord wood, square timber and lumber. The steam boats used wood for fuel and some was sold for local use. Wood was cheap in those days. A bill of goods bought in Bâby's store in 1860 amounted to \$12. It was paid for in cord wood and required eighteen cords to make up the amount. The size of some of the timber may be judged by the fact that, when an elm tree was cut on Lot 37, a grown man lay across the stump, with his head at the edge on one side, his feet did not reach the end of the other.

Charles Reilly carried on such an extensive business in wood that he had twenty-five teams drawing it from his farms on the 4th and 8th concessions. This was exported by ship from his own dock. He also owned a wood yard on a back street where the farmers rented space to pile their wood until it was sold. James Leanord was also engaged in the food [sic – wood?] business.

When the Canada Southern R.R. was opened for traffic in 1872, and the Village of Courtright was started on its way only a mile from Moore, and Brigden seven miles to the east, was in a position to serve the eastern half of the township, Moore's best days were over. Many business men went to one or the other of these towns. Some of the business places and also the houses were moved away. Bowen's waggon shop was moved to Petrolia.

In 1886 the Erie & Huron R.R. was built from Chatham to Sarnia and as it passed through the village it gave the community a new lease on life. Dan McKinnon operated the big store, which had a millinery shop attached, with Mrs. Rossie as manager. Other storekeepers were Mrs. Gilman, Mrs. Humphrey, Bushsa, Alair, and John McRae.

A salt block was built on Poultney street by Rev. Dr. Armstrong and Wm. Brown, with John Chambers as foreman. Later it was taken over by Steinhoff & Gordon of Wallaceburg with F. Chambers foreman. John Butler and John Scobie were other owners until a Mr. Leach of Richmond, Mich., took control and N. A. Leach was manager for many years.

Another salt block was built at the north end of town on the river bank. Successive operators were Fred Webster, Kittermaster & J. J. Carter, Israel Mayhew and John Doherty.

When Whiting's hotel on St. Clair street burned down, he opened another on William street beside the R.R. platform. By this time the advantages of the village as a summer resort were recognized. The hotel and cottages along the river were patronized by visitors from as far away as Pittsburg, who came to enjoy the refreshing breezes and the beautiful scenery of the St. Clair River.

Of the original buildings but few remain. Richmond's blacksmith shop, which was operated for many years by Joseph Heskil [sic – Haskill] is now Morrison's service station. Winchester's store, which was built by John Bolton is now operated by J. J. Hillier. Courtney's store is now Innisfail cottage. The Congregational Church is now the Rand house. The first

building to house the Post Office after it came to the village is Mrs. M. Tremell's kitchen. Brightwell's butcher shop is now a summer cottage, Moorerest.

In the early days of the village, a school was built on William street opposite to the present one. A tall belfry stood in front of the school from which the bell was rung at the various school hours. John Cowan was the first teacher, and was succeeded by Capt. Bridgewater, John Lewis, John Linton, David Moshier, George McIntyre, Ezra Powell, Harry Trott, ---- Rosewarren, Arthur Marsh, ----- Brown, Henry Clinkman, Archie Brebner, ----- Chrysler, Maud Brightwell, Mary Forbes, Fred Clysdale, Isabell Currie. Assistant teachers were: Jennie McRae, Tillie Johnston, Martha Coyle, Agnes Tanner, Miss Stout.

The present school building was erected for a township hall in 1867, but was never used for that purpose.

Before there was any sign of a village in this locality a church was built. Rev. Archibald Geikie, a Congregational minister from Edinborough, who had bought the farm on the north side of the road from Andrew Little, began holding services in his barn, until his friends in Scotland sent £100 for the erection of a church. Richard Brightwell Sr. contributed \$100 to the fund. The church was built in 1847 in the cemetery plot that Mr. Geikie had set aside for the purpose. After the departure of Mr. Geikie, this church was used by the Presbyterians from 1856 till 1890 when a new one was erected on St. James street.

In 1863 the Anglican Church was built on the corner of Poultney and Napoleon streets. The ground was given by Mrs. James F. Bâby, who also laid the corner stone, in a ceremony which included a procession from Mrs. Bâby's residence to the church site. This church was destroyed by fire in 1918 and the present one erected.

About 1860 a Methodist Church was built on William street east of the school. When, ten or twelve years later a church was opened at Courtright this one was closed and sold.

Of the early residents of the village who grew up here or attended this school many have held important positions in other parts of Canada or the United States. Alex Winchester became a Presbyterian minister, serving as a missionary in China and as the first missionary to the Chinese in Vancouver, B.C. Ezra Powell was a Methodist minister and took a prominent part in temperance work, being a member of the Dominion Alliance. George McIntyre after teaching school for a few years graduated in medicine which he practised in North Dakota, Minneapolis, and in California. Arthur Bolton was a doctor at the Soo and at Gladwin, Mich. Dr. J. J. P. Armstrong served his home community for many years before going to Arizona. Wallace Courtney was a doctor in Detroit. Dr. Adeline (Gamble) Gurd practiced in Ann Arbor, Mich., and was a Professor in the medical school of the University. She was also a member of the State and American Medical Associations. Wm. D. McPherson was a lawyer in Toronto and while a member of the Legislature held the portfolio of Provincial Secretary. S. A. Armstrong practised law in Sarnia and in Toronto and was at one time deputy to the Provincial Secretary. Alex Cunningham who learned the trade of carpenter and cabinet maker in the village, became

superintendent of the Pulman car works for the Wabash R.R. in Toledo, Ohio. Duncan Cunningham who was partner in McRae's mill, owned a farm of eight hundred acres in North Dakota and was a member of the State Legislature. James, John, Duncan and Alex McRae operated a wholesale and retail business in stationery and office supplies in Prince Rupert, B.C. Isaac Tremell was a teacher for years and then a telegraph operator on the C.N.R. in Western Ontario. Robert Bolton is a successful farmer a few miles from the village. George Watson was Commissioner of Telephones for Manitoba and introduced the dial system there. Charles Watson was manager of a C.C.C. camp at Fort Henry, Vir. John Morrison was a mail carrier in Brandon, Man. John Brightwell conducts a wholesale meat business in Detroit. Will McRae was engineer at the powerhouse of the first electric street railway line in Detroit. William Noyle was a brick mason in Flint, Mich.

James Hadden was an instructor at the School for Deaf and Dumb at Belleville. He was also a gifted artist and won an award for art in Paris, France. W.H. Anderson is a druggist in Newcastle, Ont. Arthur German conducted a plumbing business in Detroit. Bert Allaire is mail clerk on the Canadian National R.R. Sam S. Trumpour is an optometrist in Detroit. Hal Brown is on the staff of the Saskatoon Star-Phoenix.

Those who followed a seafaring life and became captains were James W. Bâby, Charles Dale, Harry Dale, Fred Dale, Walter Linton, Robert Alexander, Clarence Albinson.

Of the young women, several followed a nursing career. Emily Courtney, Jennie Morrison, Ann Bolton and Sarah Bolton (Mrs. Meyers), were engaged in Red Cross work in the schools of numerous southern cities. Grace Watson, who obtained the degree of B.Sc. and M.A. at Columbia University, is now instructor of nurses at Jersey City hospital. Clara Morrison held the position of private secretary in Detroit. Jessie Morrison was engaged in social service work in Detroit. Edith, Mahala, and Maud Brightwell were teachers in the county. Agnes McRae taught school in Idaho. Hattie McKinnon was engaged in the real estate business in Detroit.

[photo caption] - Mooretown is still a summer resort, but instead of transient visitors, city dwellers own summer homes here where they may spend the weekends or holidays the whole season throughout.

Nothing has been said about the social life of the village in the early days, but there is no one left now to tell about it. We only know that it was gay and lively. When Mrs. Dr. Oliver was interviewed on her ninetieth birthday, she told about living in Mooretown and said; "O, but those were the happy days."

It is hoped that this history may serve to remind former residents of the village who may read it, of other happy days when their youthful years were spent in the little village beside the St. Clair River, the river which it has been said, is the bluest in the world, the river on whose proud waters sail the largest fresh water vessels in the world; the river of which even the poet's pen fails in describing its beauty.

*“There is no river like our own St. Clair,
Go where you will, with it, no other can compare.
Its sparkling, rippling waves are Heaven’s own blue;
’Tis ever restless, changing in its view.
No poet’s song, with justice, can declare
The full glory of our wonderful St. Clair.”*