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A Revised Account of Simcoe's Exploration of the Forks

Marvin L. Simner

On February 2, 1793, Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe left Newark (today known as Niagara-on-the-Lake) on a month long overland journey to Detroit. The purpose of his journey was to make a detailed inspection of the British position on the western frontier of Upper Canada in anticipation of an American attack (Mombourquette, 1992). Throughout the trip Simcoe was accompanied by Major Edward Baker Littlehales who recorded the journey in his daily diary, and Lieutenant David W. Smith, Acting Surveyor General of Upper Canada. On March 2nd, during the return trip, Simcoe stopped at the Forks of the Thames to explore the possibility of establishing a capital for Upper Canada. Littlehales' description of the events that took place on March 2nd not only indicated the Governor's reaction to this location, but also provided an account of the general topography of the area that existed at the time.

We struck the Thames at one end of a low flat island enveloped with shrubs and trees; the rapidity and strength of the current were such as to have forced a channel though the main land, being a peninsula, and to have formed the island. We walked over a rich meadow, and at its extremity came to the forks of the river. The Governor wished to examine this situation and its environs, and we therefore remained here all day. He judged it to be a situation eminently calculated for the metropolis of all Canada...a pinery upon an adjacent high knoll, and other timber on the heights, well calculated for the erection of public buildings...(Scadding, 1889, reprinted in 1968, p. 12).

This description by Littlehales is frequently cited and it is not uncommon to find that the area described is the region now referred to as the Coves. For example, one of the earliest statements of this nature appeared in the 1897 issue of Illustrated London, Ontario Canada where the author claimed that "Here we have at once a description and an explanation of the coves" (p. 10). More recently Poulton (2004, p. 14) claimed that Littlehales' remarks provide "the first description of the Coves." By far the most detailed linkage with the Coves, however, appeared in a 1938 article in the London Old Boys' Review.

No old-timer in London need be reminded that the water-course which the (Simcoe) party encountered was one of the Coves in the southern part of the City and that it was across the old rifle range property that the party moved in coming to the place where the two branches meet and then continue in one main stream toward Lake St. Clair (p. 21).

The difficulty with these accounts is that no mention is made of the far more specific description of this portion of the trip by Lieutenant Smith. As Acting Surveyor General, Smith's daily records of the journey appeared in the form of surveyor's notes and therefore, were much more precise than Littlehales' statements, which were written in prose. Perhaps because Smith's account makes for less interesting reading, his notes are rarely mentioned. From my review of the notes, however, I believe the emphasis on the Coves that stems from Littlehales' version of the journey might be in error.

Instead, a more likely island could be the one mentioned in Smith's notes at 8:37 a.m. on March 2nd, 1793. The following quotation is from these notes which were reprinted in an article by R. M. Lewis (1952, p. 15-22). According to the second paragraph in the notes the island in question might be the one that once was located on the northwest branch of the Thames in an area now part of Harris Park.

8:37 a.m. Struck the Fork – Halted and determined to encamp. The Plain which seems suitable for Corn, on the North side of the River, below and adjoining the Fork, appears to be of a Triangular figure, the greatest breadth at the Forks being about a quarter of a mile, and its greatest length next to the woods about two miles perhaps more. The River has made efforts to go through the angular part of this Plain adjoining the fork, and a Gully remains testimonial of the

Circumstance; it is probable also this Plain may have been overflowed, but I am of opinion it is not so.

On the North West Branch there is a low Island, very close to the main Fork. The Stream nearest the main and adjoining the Island, might afford perhaps the Seat for a Mill and in the swell of the Banks adjoining, is a small flat, say 4 or 5 acres, and some inferior ones, above this is a handsome commanding pine, which would afford a pleasant situation for a Villa.

About one mile above the Forks, on the North West Branch, is a fine Run of Water from the height of the Land, which promises to afford a good mill Seat - on each side of this Creek is a Pinery - the thickest and largest of the Pines are beyond the Creek.

Rationale

To understand the rationale behind this revised account it is helpful to view two closely related maps of the forks. The first map, reproduced at right with permission from the Western Map Library (see Plate 1), was compiled by McNiff and Jones around 1795 from field notes by A. Jones. This map is useful because it not only contains a rough outline of the route followed by Simcoe on March 2nd and March 3rd but also shows the location of the "Triangular figure" mentioned in Smith's notes (see the 1st paragraph above).

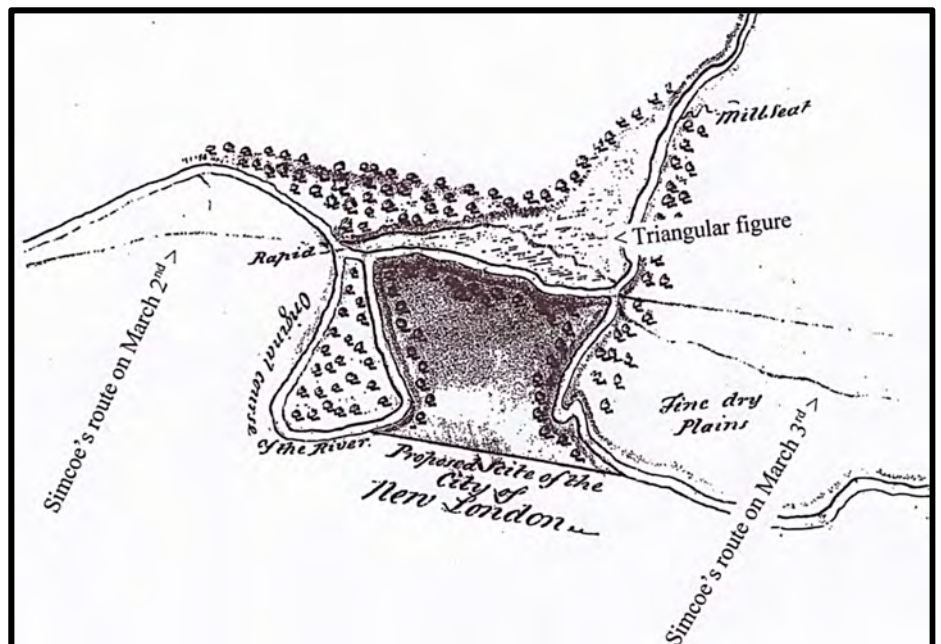


Plate 1

The second map, drawn around 1840 and reproduced below, also with permission from the Western Map Library (see Plate 2), contains the Coves and a small low island on the northwest branch that is probably the one mentioned in Smith's notes but is not apparent on the 1795 map. While the reason for the absence of this island on the 1795 map is unclear, it may have resulted from flooding at the time Jones compiled his notes which would have made the island either difficult to see or of little importance to record. Added to this second map is a more precise rendition of Simcoe's overall route based on the material and times recorded by Smith.

With these two maps in mind, I believe there is sufficient evidence to suggest that during the daylight hours of March 2nd, 1793, the party may have explored the forks, not from the Coves but from the northern-most point on the low island identified by Smith as being on the northwest branch of the Thames. There are several reasons for suggesting that this might be the case. First, it would explain the sighting of a "fine Run of Water from the height of the Land (about one mile above the forks) which promises to afford a good mill Seat," mentioned in the 3rd paragraph of Smith's notes and shown on the map in Plate 1. Unless the party was at this location, it is unlikely that they would have been able to see this body of water. Second,

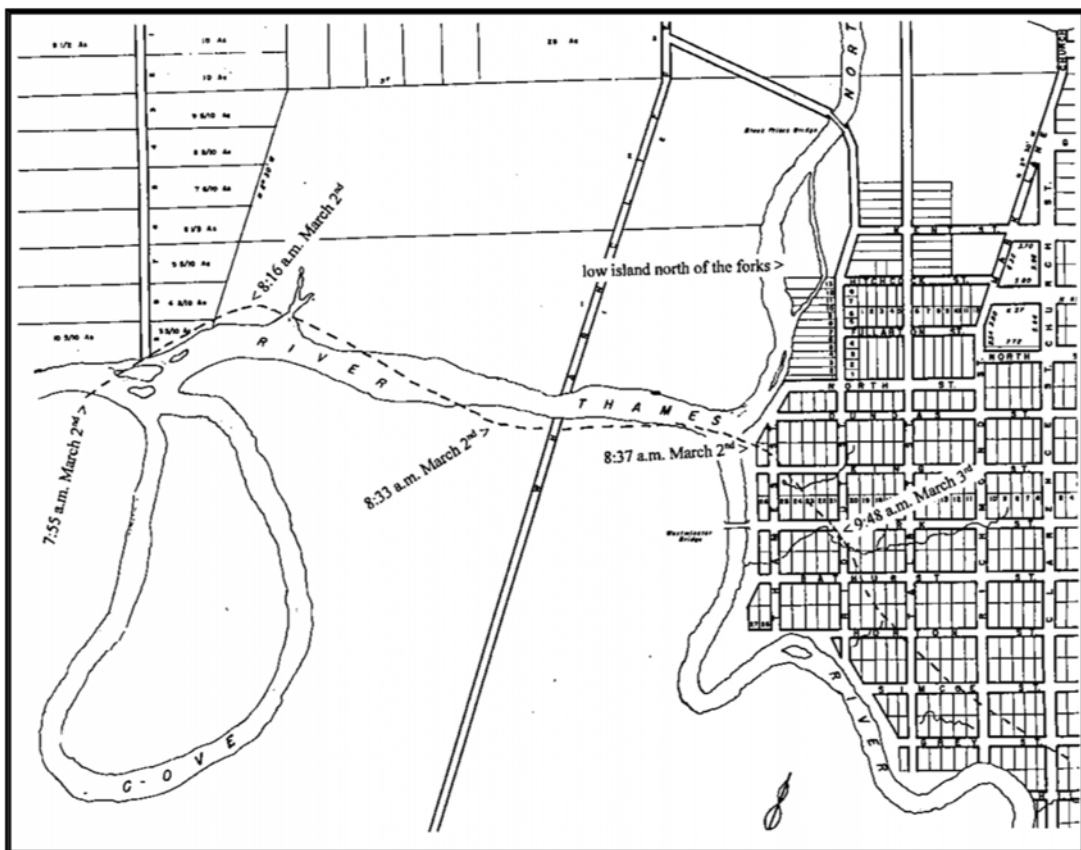


Plate 2

Littlehales' description in the first sentence of his account could as easily apply to this low island as to the Coves. Third, the "channel" in Littlehales' account might also be the "stream nearest the main and adjoining the Island" mentioned by Smith as shown on the 1840 map. Fourth, Littlehales' reference to their walk "over a rich meadow, and at its extremity came to the forks of the river," fits more readily with the topography of the island on the northwest branch than with the Coves because the extreme end of the Coves is nowhere near the forks, yet the extreme southern end of this island is very close to the forks. Finally, it is very clear from Smith's notes that Simcoe spent very little time examining the Coves. As shown on the 1840 map, the first reference in Smith's notes to the area near the Coves occurred at 7:55 a.m. on March 2nd, 1793, the party then crossed the river to the north side of the Thames around 8:16 a.m. and reached the forks at 8:37 a.m. Since there is no further reference to this area in these notes, it would seem that Simcoe would have devoted less than 30 minutes to this region. Moreover, the route the party took on March 3rd following their departure from the forks would have placed Simcoe at a considerable distance from the Coves.

In essence, it would seem from both Smith's and Littlehales' descriptions, the party may have walked south from the northern-most point on an island which is now part of Harris Park to reach the forks. Parenthetically, it is also possible that the location of the villa, mentioned by Smith, could be just above Harris Park where Eldon House now stands, and the "Seat for a Mill" also could be in Harris Park where the Blackfriars Grist Mill once stood (see the 3rd paragraph in Smith's notes).

Addendum

Before leaving this topic there is one additional point concerning the Coves worth addressing. On the 1795 map (see plate 1) there is an area between the Coves and the south branch of the river referred to as the "Proposed

Site of the City of New London." To understand the reason for placing the proposed site here, rather than at the forks, which was Simcoe's ultimate choice, it is helpful to remember that Simcoe was very concerned with the need to obtain a location that would be militarily defensible against an invasion from the United States. Based on Smith's notes at least some of the high ground between the south branch and the Coves was similar in elevation to the high ground at the forks.

On the South East Branch, from the fork, is a strip of Flat of about 2 Acres wide, below the rise of the Hill, which cannot, I think be less than one Hundred feet high. On the South side of the River, below & adjoining the fork is also high Land of about 100 feet above the water...

Thus, by placing a fortified capital on the high ground above the southeast branch, in what is now Wortley Village, this would have made the capital as resistant to attack as if it had been placed on the high ground above the forks. In other words, it is possible that both locations may have been equally favoured for defensive purposes by Simcoe as a future site for the proposed capital of Upper Canada.

A question that remains, though, is why this area was initially selected over the area above the forks. While the reason for Simcoe's initial choice is not entirely certain, it could have resulted from an issue concerning property rights. The area to the south of the Thames, which included this region, had been purchased from the Chippawa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi Nations in 1790 (Armstrong, 1986). Thus the region between the south branch and the Coves was Crown land when Simcoe arrived at the forks in 1793. At that time, however, the area north of the Thames, and therefore the area above the forks, still resided in Native hands. In fact, it wasn't until about 1795 that a detailed survey of this northern region was conducted

which then served as the basis for eventual land negotiations with the Natives (see Surrender Document No. 6, *Indian Treaties and Surrenders*, 1981, Vol. 1, p. 17-19).

With this survey in hand, an agreement between the Crown and the Chippawa Nation to purchase this northern reach of land, which now included the forks, was subsequently concluded on September 7, 1796. Although it cannot be stated for certain, it is possible that, to maintain good relations with the Natives, Simcoe may have considered it improper to place on a map constructed around 1795, "The Proposed Site for the City of New London" on land the Crown did not own at the time.

It is also worth mentioning that Simcoe eventually set aside 3,850 acres on the newly acquired property immediately north of the

forks as Crown Reserve land "for the site of the future provincial capital" (Armstrong, 1986, p. 21). If he truly preferred the site south of the Thames for his proposed capital, presumably he would have set aside this acreage here instead of waiting for the land north of the forks to become available. Moreover, he would have known, as the result of his journey, that this southern location would have been less defensible following an invasion than the area above the forks, because any future supplies of arms, ammunition, and food shipped from the east would have had to cross the south branch of the Thames to reach this southern location. Hence, by selecting an area between the two branches and above the forks for his future capital, Simcoe automatically avoided this difficulty.

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