

The Breakaway

By Dan Buchanan

**Revised for Presentation at
Hilton Hall Heritage Centre
Sunday, October 19, 2014**

**On The Occasion of the Dedication of
The Breakaway Historical Plaque**

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The Story of "The Breakaway"

The story of "The Breakaway" is recognized by many as an important piece of local lore in the communities of Hilton, Orland and Codrington. Many times while growing up on a farm at Codrington we drove through the valley of Breakaway Creek and my grandfather, Lloyd Ames, would describe in dramatic terms how the water rushed down the creek uprooting trees and dislodging boulders. We clearly identified this valley as "The Breakaway".

I also recall a play about "The Breakaway". It was written by Ona Hazelwood and was staged by the Codrington Women's Institute in the basement of the Codrington United Church to the delight of all attending. The story is certainly part of local lore.

In recent years I have done a lot of genealogy research on the families that settled in the area as well as work with other folks to present more local history to the community. As a result, my computer and cabinets have many files on the story of The Breakaway. This writing is an attempt to bring together all the information we can find about it, including several previous articles, the family tree information for those who were affected and official documents of the time like census and land registry records.

On January 1, 2012 we celebrated the 160th Anniversary of the creation of Brighton Township. Legislation that was passed at Toronto during 1851 led to the formation of the new township on January 1, 1852, centred around the growing village of Brighton. The situation was very unusual, combining the east half of Cramahe Township and the west half of Murray Township to form three townships that were relatively similar in size and population. The Breakaway is one more important event we can mark with a 160th Anniversary, because it happened just a few months later on April 21, 1852.

There are several very interesting personal interest stories inside the larger story of The Breakaway. One of them drips with tragedy and fate. Apparently one of the men who died in the flood, Jacob Herrington, was not supposed to be working in the mill that night. Joseph Adams, the regular worker in Lewis Shearer's mill, should have been working there but he made an arrangement with Jacob Herrington to take his place, apparently so he could attend a card game. However, the two young men had no inkling of the devastating event that was just hours in the future. Joseph Adams would attend his card game and Jacob Herrington would go to work at the mill that night. The result would be a widow and eight orphans.

Another interesting story relates to a survivor of The Breakaway. George Montgomery was working at the second saw mill on the creek when the flood swept through. Unlike the two men who were overwhelmed by the flood in the first mill, he managed to cling to a beam and lived to tell a whopper of a story to his grandkids.

Then there is the story of sixteen-year-old Richard Fennell who awoke the next morning totally unaware that anything unusual had happened. Then he looked outside his bedroom window and saw that there was no water in the pleasant little lake which, in living memory, had covered several acres beside the family farm house. One can imagine his consternation and fear until the events of the night were fully explained.

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The Flood

The Breakaway happened late in the evening of April 21, 1852, a Wednesday night. Heavy rain had fallen for several days and this combined with the late snow-melt to swell the creeks and turn the roads to muck. A little northwest of Hilton a small lake experienced much higher water levels than normal, putting lots of stress on the gravel banks that held it back.

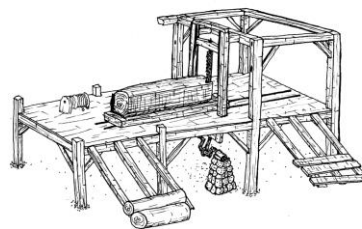
Hilton Lake was formed by retreating glaciers more than 10,000 years ago. As the global climate changed, the southern edge of the mile-thick ice sheets that covered this part of the world retreated north, dumping piles of gravel. One such gravel ridge formed a dam across a natural watercourse, blocking the flow to the east and backing up the water in a small lake. It was less than a mile across and only a dozen feet deep so folks paid little attention to it.

However, on this night, with all the added pressure of rain and snowmelt, the dam gave way and the water of the lake burst through. It was not a large lake but millions of gallons of water cascaded down the creek bed to the east, funnelled by the steep, high banks surrounding the creek along most of its path. The results were devastating.

The greatest tragedy of the night was the death of two men of the community. Lewis Shearer and Jacob Herrington were working in the first mill. Both were killed in the deluge. There were no houses on the creek but two saw mills had been built at strategic locations on the creek in order to generate power for sawing lumber.

The first saw mill, owned by Lewis Shearer, was located just east of Number 30 Highway. Lewis Shearer was the owner of Lot 36 on the Third Concession and a short section of the creek ran through the northwest corner of his property. It was an ideal location for a saw mill. Word has it that there was a 100-foot dam across the creek which would have been a major undertaking in those days. A waterwheel would have captured the force of the water through a mechanism of gears and levers to lift and lower an upright saw blade.

The saw mill itself would likely have been a very simple structure, maybe just a platform on posts, similar to this drawing. It may have included a roof to keep off the weather. Logs formed ramps on each end for rolling logs up to the platform and then for sliding the cut lumber down to the ground where it would be loaded onto a wagon. While we can't say for sure, it may be possible that a saw mill like this would be constructed each spring and taken down in the fall.



The 1851 Census records show that there were nineteen saw mills operating in Brighton Township. Some may have been larger than this but many of them were small installations that were put in place by members of a family to take advantage of free water power on their property. In all cases, however, the work was hard and dangerous, even without the occasional flood.

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Lewis Shearer had come from the US as a young man, married Sarah Morrow in 1833 and by 1852 they had a family of eight children. They lived in a house toward the south end of the property close to the village of Hilton. A young Englishman named Joseph Adams was his right-hand man at the mill. We can expect that Lewis Shearer was intent on squeezing all the profits he could from the enterprise and he saw the high demand for lumber and the high water levels as allies in this pursuit. Of course, the high water levels may also have been an enemy which Lewis Shearer was determined to defeat in order to keep his saw mill operating. Whatever the actual reason, the two men were working at the saw mill well into the dark hours of that fateful Wednesday night.



Segment of Brighton Township County Atlas Map of 1878 showing area between Hilton and Newcombs Mills (Orland). Hilton Lake is at upper left, identified as swamp land. The creek flows north east to Cole Creek. Shearer and Simpson saw mills are shown on the creek.

The Thorne family was also involved in The Breakaway. Edmund Thorne owned Lot 2, Concession 5 and Breakaway Creek ran through the far north end of the property. In today's terms, that is the land on the immediate east side of the Hilton Township Hall and extending north. Edmund Thorne had come from England and married Amelia Richmond in the early 1830s. One of their sons, George W. Thorne, married Ruth Loomis and carried on farming on the family homestead. We have word from Gordon Thorne, grandson of Edmund, that his grandfather had been riding back from the Hilton Store at the time of the flood, heard the roar and managed to gather his family on a hill to watch as the flood swept by destroying everything in its path. He also recalls digging logs out of the sand in the valley for many decades after the disaster.

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The water tore down the valley and destroyed the Shearer mill with no warning. The mill and the dam supporting it were completely washed away. It was reported that they found the two men the next day buried in the sand and debris some distance down the creek.

The second mill on the creek was owned and operated by John W. Simpson, who owned the southeast quarter of Lot 34 in the Fourth Concession. This was about a mile down the creek from the Shearer mill which was arranged in a similar way between steep banks with a dam to produce water power. John W. Simpson was a son of William Simpson, brother of Obediah Simpson who we celebrate as the first settler at Brighton. He had married Hannah Fennell and there were four children living with them in a house just down the creek from the mill but perched up on a slight rise to one side.

A wall of churning water rushed down the creek, tearing up trees and rocks and hurtling them like missiles at whatever happened to be in the way and John W. Simpson's saw mill was in the way. Mr. Simpson was not in the mill when the flood hit but George Montgomery and his crew were working as usual. Most of the workers heard the roar of the water racing toward them and managed to scramble up the bank of the creek to the Simpson house. However, George Montgomery was not so lucky and was swept up in the flood.

George Montgomery would survive the flood and was able to spin a pretty good tale for the rest of his long life. He was part of the well-known Montgomery family that had settled to the east of the Simpson property at Lot 30 of the Fourth Concession. He had probably worked routinely for John W. Simpson since the mill was easy walking distance and he could supplement income from the farm with hard cash from the mill. At the time of the flood, he was 30 years old and was married to Lucinda Herrington, a sister of Jacob Herrington, one of the two men who perished when the Shearer mill was destroyed. They had a family of six youngsters at the time.

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Before The Breakaway

The Breakaway happened at a time of significant change and development in Brighton Township. You have to think that the folks living there at the time would have been excited about their prospects. The changes began in earnest in 1849 with the welcome victory of the Reformers led by Robert Baldwin and Hippolyte LaFontaine. Much important legislation was enacted in 1850 and 1851 which would provide the foundation for Ontario as we know it. The Corporations Act made each town and township into a corporate entity, able to manage its finances with new tools and capabilities. The Elections Act improved the fairness of elections, reducing the impact of money, liquor and violence in all elections, right down to the municipal level. The Universities Act made secondary education secular, removing the monopoly of the Anglican Church on education. And there was much more.

In Britain, reform was the trend as well. The repeal of the Corn Laws eventually resulted in a reduction in tariffs which was a boon to the farmers, merchants, lumbermen and schooner captains of Upper Canada. Settlement of the area around Brighton had peaked during the 1830s and 1840s and the good land had been taken. Many land owners were anxious to grow more wheat which brought a good price but in order to do that they had to clear more of their land. Lower tariffs and high demand in the US meant that lumber dealers could sell as much product as they could load into schooners at Presqu'île Bay. It was a very prosperous time for the people of Brighton and area.

However, one major downside to all this activity was that the transportation system was old and inadequate to meet growing demand. The Old Percy Road had served as the main north-south transportation route from Brighton into the north concessions and on to Norham from early in the 1800s. There were many bad spots on this route, highlighted by The Three Brothers, a series of three hills where the Percy Road dropped from the plateau north of Hilton into the valley of Cole Creek, west of present-day Orland. As late as the 1930s this was known as a major obstacle where the men had to get out and push to get up the hill. It was not ideal for teamster wagons drawing lumber to Brighton.



The newly minted Brighton Township had the right structure to support the growth of the community and the prosperity of its citizens. The Village of Brighton had been growing as a commercial and trade centre supporting the concessions to the north. It was ideally located beside Presqu'île Bay, the best natural harbour on Lake Ontario at a time when lake schooners were in their heyday.

Traffic had increased dramatically but the old road was still the old road. A more serviceable transportation facility was needed. It needed to have a more central route up the middle of the new township along with a smoother and straighter surface to speed up traffic flow. The saw mill owners up the township and the lumber dealers in Brighton would have been singing the same tune; farmers growing wheat and merchants in town would have agreed. A new road was needed, and soon.

Looking back on this time, we need to remember that governments did not tax the people very much so they did not have money to do major projects like road building, especially in small communities. Before

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the 1850s, financing of public projects was based very much on the favour of a few rich folks and what positions they or their family members held in government. However, after the Corporations Act was passed, small municipalities, like Brighton Township, could borrow money and make contracts with private consortiums to accomplish large projects. They could better manage their own resources and respond more quickly to local needs. People in the Brighton area would benefit mightily from this change.

In addition, a very important event was being planned at the time of The Breakaway. Just a few months before, on January 1, 1852, Brighton Township had been created by legislation which meant that there needed to be an election – the first one for Brighton Township. Elections were usually held in the summer in those days so by late in April the Wards had likely been established and the polling places reserved. Lots of planning and discussion would have been happening to make sure the elections went off without a hitch. Best laid plans; you never know what's coming around the next bend in the road.

After The Breakaway

The People

The Breakaway left death and destruction in its path. Two men of the Hilton community were killed leaving widows and young children to cope without a father and breadwinner. There was no insurance or pension to rely on in those days. Families rallied around and the community pitched in to help. The Shearer family was not large but Sarah was a Morrow so we can expect she had lots of help from the sizeable Morrow clan around Hilton. She was left with eight children, the oldest being eighteen. She had the house, property and farm but had lost the mill which had probably been the family's main source of income. Six years after the death of her first husband, Sarah married Josiah Hazard who was a widower with seven children of his own. In the 1861 Census Josiah Hazard is shown with his wife Sarah and five of Sarah's children with the surname Shearer.

The unlucky Jacob Herrington left a widow and several orphans on the night of The Breakaway. His wife, Sarah (Parliament) is not evident in census records after the event but several of his children married and lived in the area. There has been confusion over which of the Herrington brothers was identified as the second man killed in The Breakaway. Recent information confirms that it was, in fact, Jacob. The "smoking gun" supporting this is a report from a Herrington family picnic held at Presqu'île point on July 1, 1935 in which Thomas Mikel, a relative of the Herrington clan, stated clearly that Jacob Herrington had died when the mill dam broke through and carried two men to their deaths.

George Montgomery was also caught up in The Breakaway but was more fortunate. He was working in the Simpson mill farther down the creek and was able to escape the fury of the water and debris. At the time, he was thirty one years old with a family of six. His wife was Lucinda Herrington, sister of Jacob Herrington who died in the Shearer mill on the night of The Breakaway.

There have been many renditions of what happened at the time of The Breakaway and every generation has the opportunity to dramatize it as they see fit. What we do know for sure is that George Montgomery was working in John Simpson's saw mill when the water cascaded down the creek. It is likely that the force of the flood had been reduced a bit by the distance it had travelled from the lake,

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around a few curves in the creek, blasting over the Shearer mill and extending down the long straight stretch that would eventually take it to Cole Creek. Yes, it was called Cole Creek then, only later renamed to Cold Creek.

What is also certain is that George Montgomery had one whopper of a story to tell for the rest of his life. We can imagine how the details of the story may have evolved for dramatic effect over time, always keeping the basic facts straight – mentioning how lucky he had been because two men had died in another mill that night.

Another fellow came away from The Breakaway thanking his lucky stars. Joseph Adams had been scheduled to work in the Shearer mill that night but avoided death by making an arrangement with Jacob Herrington to work in his place. The story is that there was a card game he wanted to attend. Considering the events of that night, we can only imagine the torment he must have carried through his life thinking how close he had come to death and how through his actions, another man died.

Joseph Adams was married soon after the events of April 21, 1852 and he raised a family of seven children, mostly living in Brighton Village. We see his name in local affairs just a few years later when he contracted with the Township of Brighton to build the Township Hall at Hilton. Brighton Village had separated from Brighton Township in 1859 and the township needed a meeting place for Council. Joseph Adams had developed into a skilled stone mason and the results can be seen in one of our best heritage buildings, there on Chatten Road where it now operates as The Hilton Hall Heritage Centre.

In addition, Joseph and his sons, William and Joseph, worked as stone masons and brick makers in the Village of Brighton through the later 1800s. The family lived in Stamford Township, Welland County for a time, appearing in the 1871 Census for Stamford Township, probably engaged in a building contract. He was back in Brighton for the 1881 Census.

The Roads

Another casualty of The Breakaway was a section of The Old Percy Road. The road had skirted the east side of the lake, proceeding over and around the gravel bank that gave way to cause the great flood. Since the early decades of the 1800s this had been the main north-south route in the area. By the early 1850s the community was anxious to have a better road. There had been talk of another route but nothing had come of it.

The immediate result of The Breakaway was that travellers had to find detours. Concession roads and back lanes came into service so that wagons and horses could avoid the muck and devastation near the old lake. The next step was to move ahead and build a new road. They wasted no time. A consortium of private investors offered to build the road and Brighton Township Council agreed. The Corporations Act of 1850 gave municipalities much better tools and options for financing local improvements and it came in very handy in a situation that the people of the day likely felt was an emergency.

At the same time, a second consortium of investors made arrangements to build a very large commercial wharf at the bottom of Centre Street, which went all the way to the Bay in those days. The wharf was 60 rods long and had a two-storey building at the end of it along with a large warehouse on the shore. These two consortiums and the consequent construction of the road and the wharf

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represented deliberate and co-ordinated plans to provide the best possible transportation facilities for the movement of volumes of lumber and wheat from the northern concessions to Presqu'ile Bay and onto the dozens of schooners that plied Lake Ontario. Soon after, the wharf was purchased by William Quick so the people of Brighton came to know it as "Quick's Wharf".

In the spring of 1853 work began on the new road, starting with Harbour Street from the bottom of Centre Street, east to the Butler Mills area then turning up Prince Edward Street and north into the township. The work went on for three years and by 1856 the road had passed through Codrington and extended all the way to Mallory's Corners, what we would call today the Warkworth/Penitentiary Road. It would join with a road from Campbellford to complete "The Brighton and Seymour Gravel Road". The name came from the fact that it ran through Brighton and Seymour Townships. The word "Gravel" was very important because the road was built using gravel, a method only recently established in Upper Canada. Brighton Township was well positioned to use this method since there was a large and easily accessible supply of gravel in the area. Compared to earlier roads it would be a much more stable and consistent road, allowing efficient travel all year round.

This improvement was critical to the new township. The economy was booming at this time for many reasons. Most of the land had been settled by this time and folks were trying to clear the trees so they could grow wheat which was a very good cash crop at that time. At the same time, towns and cities were growing fast across Lake Ontario which meant that the demand for lumber was very high. To top it off, tariffs on products like lumber had been reduced significantly allowing lumber merchants in Brighton to sell at good prices in New York State. In the summer of 1853 the four wharfs operating on Presqu'ile Bay would handle almost six million linear feet of lumber representing the peak of the lumber business in the Brighton area.

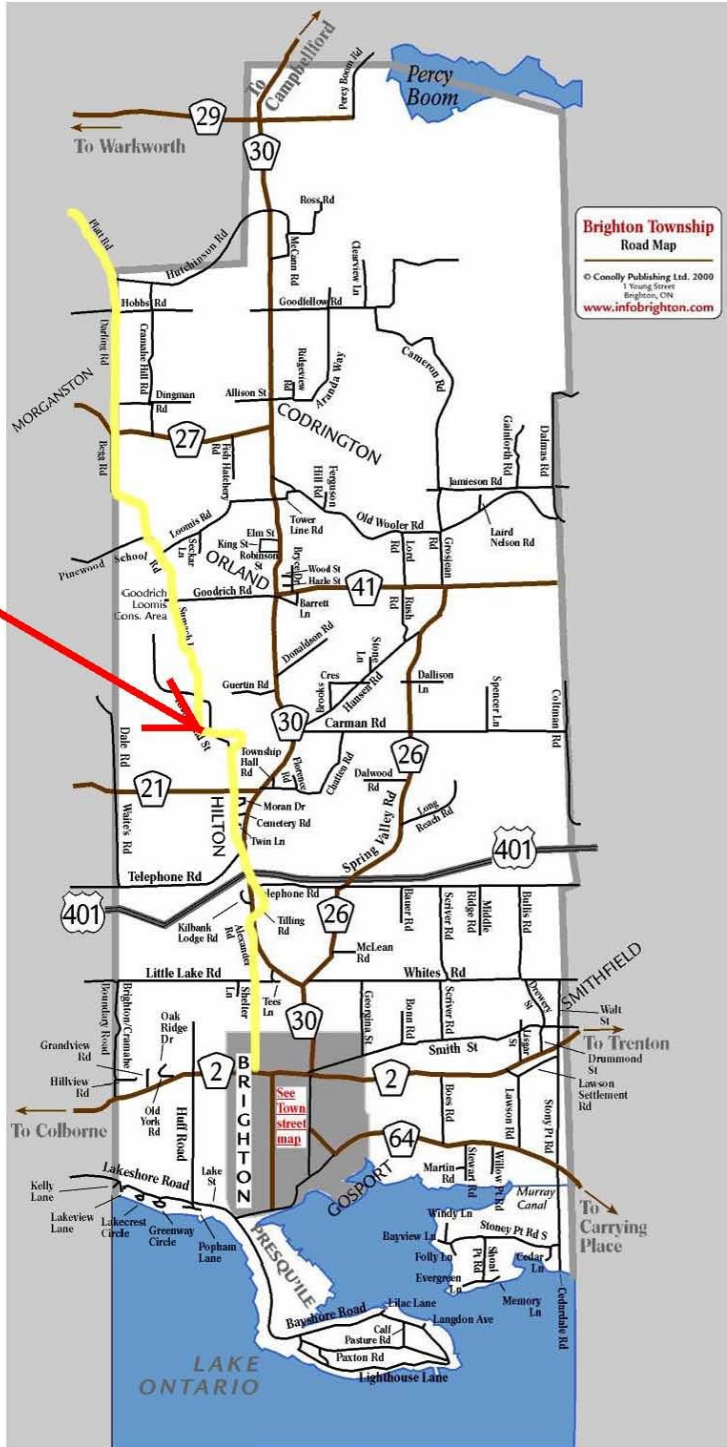
All of this meant that lots of fellows were employed as teamsters drawing wagon loads of wheat and lumber down from the upper concessions, through Brighton to line up on Ontario Street waiting to unload onto schooners on Presqu'ile Bay. The Breakaway would have slowed this flow of traffic but not stopped it. Later, when the new road was available, it would take a lot less time to get from Codrington to Presqu'ile and the ride would have been much more comfortable.

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The Breakaway and the Roads

Hilton Lake north west of Hilton Broke its banks April 21, 1852 & destroyed 2 mills down Creek to east

The Old Percy Road (Yellow) was damaged. There had been talk about the need for a modern road up the middle of the new Brighton Township to improve travel conditions.



In 1853 work began on the Brighton and Seymour Gravel Road from Presqu'ile, finished in 1856 to the Warkworth Road and eventually to Campbellford.

The new road was straighter with fewer hills, making travel much easier. Gravel was a great improvement. Roads could be used all seasons.