

Southampton

For thousands of years the area around the Saugeen River was a fertile valley favourable to human habitation. In particular, the mouth of the Saugeen has been home to the Chippewas of Saugeen First Nations and their ancestors. European influence first arrived with the Jesuit Fathers who established two missions in Bruce County. The Mission of St. Peter and St. Paul is believed to have been located near the mouth of the Saugeen River. After the Missionaries arrived, fur traders soon came into the area. During the excavation of the Victoria St. Bridge, a Cross of Lorraine was found, believed to be from 1773-1809. The cross has the stamp of Robert Cruikshank an Irish settler in Montreal who manufactured silver ornaments, which were distributed to the North West Company and to other traders. Pierre Pich established a trading post on the South side of the Saugeen River in 1818. In 1822, surveyor Henry Bayfield noted the presence of Indian traders at the mouth of the Saugeen River.

Artist Paul Kane visited the area in 1846. He wrote, The Indian village of Saugeen, meaning the mouth of the river contains about two hundred inhabitants (Ojibways). It is the site of a former battleground between the Ojibways as usually pronounced or Chippawas, and the Mohawks. Of this, the mounds erected over the slain afford abundant evidence in the protrusion of the bones through the surface of the ground (Roots and Branches, 18). Ruins of fur trading forts, continued to exist at Southampton until the early 20th Century. A few years after Kane's visit, town plans were laid out in 1851. Surveyor R. Lynn P.L.S., was instructed to strike a plot at the mouth of the Saugeen.

One of the first settlers to move into Southampton was Capt. John Spence, a fisherman whose house still stands today. During the early years of European settlement, the town south of the Saugeen River was known by two names, Saugeen and Southampton. It was known as the former by the Post Office and the Custom's House, both opening in 1851, and the later as Southampton, by Crown Lands Department. The town was named after Southampton in Hampshire, England in the expectation that this new Southampton would also become a great port. Southampton was incorporated as a town on July 24, 1858 by an act of parliament so it could compete with Walkerton in the hope of becoming the county town.

In the early years, supplies were brought from Goderich on sailing vessels. A report from the town as it was in its first year of incorporation reports that there were thirty houses, three businesses and weekly mail. The Chantry Island Lighthouse was completed in 1859 to serve the community of sailors and fishermen.

In 1904, with a population of 2,400 in the summer months, Southampton was made into a town, with A. E. Belcher elected the first mayor in 1905. The town hall was built in 1910.

The harbour was also improved after designation as a town; the break wall was built to stop the formation of a sandbar across the mouth of the river. Saugeen Memorial

Hospital was built in 1947 with two additions made in 1967 and 1979. It serves a population of over 15,000 in the surrounding communities and townships.

Southampton has a very rich cultural heritage. The Old Public School, built in 1878, served the community of Southampton for 76 years until G.C. Huston Public School was built in 1954. The 1878 Public School was given to the County of Bruce for use as a County Museum. Today the museum has expanded with a new three-story addition, opening in September 2005.

The Southampton Art School opened in 1958 to develop and maintain a center for the arts in the region. Now it has over 800 students and has classes from March to November. There is an abundant sports and recreation history in Southampton involving clubs such as The Tennis Club, Lawn Bowling and the Snowmobile Club. The present day Coliseum and Curling Club was built in 1977. Today the building is busy with hockey, rollerblading/skating, curling, broomball, concerts and dances.

Source - supplied by the Bruce County Museum & Cultural Centre