

Port Elgin

The first known human settlement within Port Elgin's town limits was a Huron and Petun First Nations community, established around 1340. The Nodwell Indian Site was named after the farmer who plowed and discovered what was originally believed to be a campsite. Excavated in 1971, the site contained twelve long houses and a double palisade. It is believed the site was home to 500 people. The village was only occupied for a brief period of time, approximately 20 years.

When European settlement began, Lachlin (Loch Buie) McLean was one of the first to arrive in Port Elgin as a squatter. He built a shanty north of present day Market St. This early dwelling later turned into a tavern where settlers of surrounding townships could rest on the way up to Southampton. In 1852, George Butchart built a dam and sawmill (that would now be inside town limits). Soon after that, a grist mill was constructed. A group of men, mostly of German decent, settled the farm lots which they then wished to have surveyed into town lots.

In 1855, Port Elgin contained seven houses of which two were taverns. The first pier was built in 1857 helping increase trade, especially with Goderich and Southampton. Within the first years of settlement, there was a wagon maker, blacksmith, sawmill, brick maker, woolen mill and one doctor.

In 1873, the village was incorporated, and the arrival of the train brought more trade and people. In that year, the town was home to 941 people.

Port Elgin has been affected by war, as with every community across Canada and the World. In 1866, many local men volunteered in response to fear of Fenian attacks in Southwestern Ontario. Again, in the Riel Rebellion and the Boer War, Port Elgin men were involved in conflict. In World War One and Two, over twenty-five men from Port Elgin lost their lives.

The first wood frame public school was built in 1854. In the next twenty years, population increased and a new brick school was needed in 1875. Over the years, many changes have occurred in the elementary school system and today Port Elgin has three primary schools; Northport Elementary, St. Joseph's Catholic and Saugeen Central.

The Port Elgin Library was built in 1908 with assistance from the Carnegie Fund to promote literacy and education. A secondary school was needed in 1889 to serve those who wanted to continue their education. A high school was built on Goderich Street in 1939 with additions made in the late sixties. This building is now renovated into apartments and businesses. Saugeen District Secondary School (SDSS) was built on Gustavus Street in 1975. SDSS shares space with the Port Elgin Centennial Pool used for the area's aquatic activities. Sports have continued to build local pride and identity throughout the ages.

Lacrosse was a popular sport in the early years of the town but after WW1, hockey became more popular. The Bricker Street Arena was originally used as a roller-skating rink in the 1880's until it was remodeled to accommodate an ice surface. It became the town arena in the 1940's. The Saugeen Shores Community Complex (a.k.a. The Plex) at the north side of town was completed in the late 1990's and houses the present hockey arena and town offices. Behind The Plex, there is newly constructed BMX track and Skate Park. Other areas of recreation include various music societies and brass bands. One of the first was a female brass band established in the 1880's.

Port Elgin has always been a tourist destination. Evidence of this started in the 1880's with passenger boats largely from the U.S. visiting this area. Tourism continues today in Port Elgin as one of the town's main industries. Thousands of visitors come to the area for year-round recreation and to participate in festivals such as Pumpkifest and its famous Antique and Classic Car Show or the Canadian Big Band Festival. The town was named after James Bruce, Eighth Earl of Elgin and Kincardine, who was Governor General of Canada from 1846 to 1854.

Source - supplied by the Bruce County Museum & Cultural Centre