

The Chemung Portage

Grant Karcich

Today there are several walking trails and bikeways in the downtown Peterborough area, including portions of the Trans-Canada Trail, the Parkway Trail, and the Rotary Greenway Trail. Two hundred years ago, however, when there was no city on the banks of the Otonabee River, the main pathway in the area was the Chemung Portage, which stretched from the Otonabee to Chemung Lake, a distance of 12 miles.

Chemung Road is a remnant of the former Chemung Portage. It stretches from Parkhill Road West in the south to Bridgenorth on Lake Chemung. However, the original Portage deviated slightly from the present-day road and also continued south of Parkhill Road to the banks of the Otonabee. To recreate the original route, the early survey maps of Smith and Monaghan Townships were used. On these maps we find that over most of the Portage's length its course was to the east of the present Chemung Road. The exception to this route occurs in the north end of the Portage where it veers a few hundred yards to the west of Chemung Road, a kilometer or so near to where it intersects with Chemung Lake.

Plotting the original Portage route south of Parkhill Road can be determined by comparing early and present day township maps. The maps indicated that the Portage intersected Parkhill Road to the east of Chemung Road, between Alymer Street and Benson Avenue. South of Parkhill the Portage ran somewhere near Union Street and through Victoria Park ending on the banks of the Otonabee River north of Millennium Park. It ended on the river approximately between

Simcoe and Hunter Streets. The original route of the trail can be traced by the existing historical records, and the dating of the trail, can only be traced indirectly via the archaeological record.

The Chemung Portage continued to be used well into the modern era by the Mississauga band at Chemung Lake. Before the existence of the contemporary Chemung Road, the roadway was known as the Communications Road and funneled English and Irish settlers into the interior. Theberge (1982: 48-49) describes how in 1831 a portion of the Communications Road extended across on the winter ice of Chemung Lake to the Mississauga village on the opposite shore from the Portage. A summer camp existed on the east side of Communications Road where the Mississauga women made baskets. By the 1830's it is highly unlikely that the Mississauga were still traveling to their spring fishing camps at the mouth of the Ganaraska River on Lake Ontario.



Figures 19.1 The original Chemung Portage ran to the west of where Champlain and Communications Roads meet.

The use of the Chemung Portage down to Rice Lake probably came to an end with the coming of the European settlers. By the 1820s the game in these areas had been depleted and the Chemung Portage ceased to be a navigation route to the Mississauga fishing grounds on Lake Ontario. Richardson (1944: 25-26) writes that the "trail was the original of the East Gravel or Peterborough Road and was used up to 1819" along the Ganaraska Portage. In May 1819 Thomas Ward and several others, including Adam Scott and John Edmison, came up the Otonabee River by watercraft and landed where downtown Peterborough is today. Ward

have been awarded 400 acres of land on lots 11 and 12 in Smith Township, near the end of the Chemung Portage where Bridgenorth is found today. In the spring of 1819, Edmison and Ward blazed the trees along the Chemung Portage up to Chemung Lake, which began the alteration of the original portage route. Suveyors and others that followed continued to use theblazed trail that evolved into the modernChemong Road.

The Chemung Portage is clearly depicted on the early British maps of Ontario and appears on the Collin's map of 1790. Johan Jost Herkimer is reported to have been the first European inhabitant in Peterborough County. Herkimer was a fur trader who built a trading post on the north shore of Rice Lake in 1793 (Davidson 1970);he would have been familiar with the Chemung Portage and he had extensive contacts with the local people through his first wife who was a Mississauga woman. Herkimer had a previous trading post at the mouth of the Ganaraska River and the end of the Ganaraska Trail, which linked Rice Lake to Lake Ontario. Herkimer presumably built his trading posts at locations where he could intercept the Mississauga as they traveled between Chemung Lake and Lake Ontario.



Figure 19.2 Chemung Lake at one end of the Chemung Portage.



Figure 19.3 Near Millennium Park the Chemung Portage connected with the Otonabee River

The Mississauga band at Chemung Lake traveled down to their traditional fishing spot at the mouth of the Ganaraska River annually. They are reported to have been fishing in this area in 1785. The use of these fishing grounds probably extend further back in time. The Chemung Portage from Chemung Lake to Lake Ontario is the shortest distance between these locations, making it most likely that the Mississauga traveled over this Portage in the late 1700s and early 1800s in order to by-pass the numerous rapids on the Otonabee and Trent Rivers. The Mississauga are known to have congregated at spring and later at fall fishing camps, each of which may have included over a hundred individuals (Thoms 2004). The annual spring and fall visits would have allowed them to fish for different aquatic species when they became available. After the fall fishing season was complete, the Mississauga from Chemung Lake would return to their family hunting territories scattered throughout the interior beyond the Kawartha Lakes.

The Chemung Portage certainly predates the first Europeans that settled in the Peterborough area. The trail was also likely in existence when Samuel de Champlain made his historic trek from Huronia to the head of Lake Ontario and back in 1615. Evidence for the Chemung Portage in the prehistoric period is speculative, but a strong case can be made for its existence dating back to the

Middle Woodland period. The Brock Street burial, near the trail's connection with the Otonabee River, is an indication that prehistoric people frequently traveled in the area of the trail. Pat Dibb's article in this volume provides a radiocarbon date of 1310 \pm 40 BP or AD 655-780 for Brock Street burial.

One significant aspect of the Chemung Portage is that it links two distinct regions. The trail and the Otonabee River connect the upper Kawartha Lakes with lower Rice Lake and the Trent River. This lower region is well known for its Middle Woodland burial mounds, while the Kawartha Lakes have been home to pre-1600 Iroquoian villages and Archaic burial sites, such as Jacob Island on Pigeon Lake. According to James Conolly (2014), Jacob Island's chronology falls into several periods. He identifies a Late Archaic component radiocarbon (dated to 4150 \pm 30 BP), a Terminal Archaic component (dated to 3180 \pm 30 BP, 3160 \pm 30 BP, 4310 \pm 40), and an Early Late Woodland component (dated to 1140 \pm 3040 BP and 975-1120 BP).

Radiocarbon dates for burial mound sites (Dougherty 2003) on Rice Lake and the Trent River cluster within the Middle Woodland: LeVesconte Mound (A.D. 780 \pm 95, A.D. 120, and A.D. 230 \pm 50), Serpent Mounds (58 B.C. \pm 150 and A.D. 302 \pm 150), and East Sugar Island (A.D. 60 \pm 120). These dates suggest a continuous occupation during a broad time period within the Middle Woodland. Combined with the Jacob Island site, the data indicates that the region was occupied during the Late Archaic to Middle Woodland.

A common feature shared by the Jacob Island and the Middle Woodland burial mounds near Rice Lake is that all are located on promontories adjacent to wetlands and very near to the navigation routes. The Middle Woodland mounds are believed to be located on sites populated by bands of around 100 individuals during the spring through to the fall seasons and near fishing and wild rice resources. Inland Middle Woodland sites show that these people hunted in smaller family units during the winter months.

