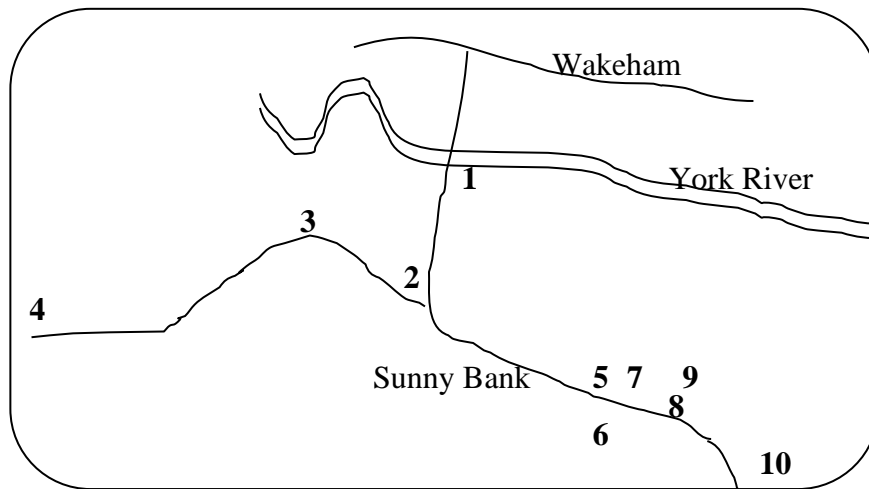


Sunny Bank, Our Ancestral Home
By Andrew Patterson (1995)

Chapter 2

Let's Get Acquainted



As we stand here on the bridge [see map above #1] overlooking the York River we can look eastward down the river toward Gaspé, where well over two centuries ago, John Paterson paddled to his homestead on the bank of the river just west of the bridge with his young family. For more than a century, canoes provided the only means of transportation in and out of Sunny Bank.

Standing here in the springtime gazing into the still waters below the bridge, one can often see several Atlantic salmon at a time. These range in weight from four to forty pounds. These same waters are frequented in summer by swimmers, especially thrill-seekers who leap from the bridge for the excitement of falling 15 feet into the deep clear water below. Westward we look up the York River. Its source is some 100 km away, near the town of Murdochville which was built around the copper mine discovered in 1921 by the Miller brothers of Sunny Bank.

The question of why John would have chosen such a formidable site as the new home for his family remains a mystery. However, there are several suppositions which may help answer that question. First, family tradition says that he was from Scotland, and it is very likely the highlands. The Scottish Highlands were themselves a desolate region where eking out a living was next to impossible. Only the toughest could survive there, and after the Battle of Culloden in 1745 the British wiped out most of those who did. He would have undoubtedly welcomed the chance to start a new life. Secondly, it is very likely that there were a few acres of cleared land just above the York Bridge which had been used by the French for farming. This would have made an ideal location for his first home. Finally, family tradition states that John was in Wolfe's Army. If indeed this was the case, John may have made his first visit to Gaspé during the raids on the Gaspé coast, and chosen this spot well in advance.

In any case this is where John settled in about 1764. This tiny portion of an alluvial plain along a globally insignificant York River has accumulated an incredible history in a span of a mere two and a half centuries since his arrival. In 1899 the name Sunny Bank was given to the post office which opened in upper York. A year later it was moved into the house at 19 rue Sunny Bank, which is presently my home. Residents from the west end of Sunny Bank to the Mill Brook received their mail at this office. In 1967 the Sunny Bank Post Office closed its doors, but the name has remained. On this walk (or drive) we will view the area that became known as Sunny Bank, and home to hundreds of John's descendants.

Leaving the river, and heading south we pass a garage recently owned by the local entrepreneur, Bobby McGregor, and built in the early 1980's by Wayne Patterson. A right turn onto Sunny Bank Street leads us into the most densely populated area. Houses are often three layers deep because children and grand-children built progressively closer to the road. Over half of Sunny Bank's population of almost 250 people live in the next kilometre.

Almost immediately to our right [#2] is the "Old Lane." This was the original road to Wakeham, until the re-construction of York Blvd. West in 1976. Since that time the old lane has been host to dozens of children playing street hockey, riding bikes and skate-boarding.

Right at the corner is the former site of Jean Grocery. It had also operated for many years as Miller Grocery, and before that it was Bruce & Ralph Patterson. It was initially opened by Wilson Miller at another location in the early 1950's. For the next few hundred metres there is a considerable mixture of old and modern houses. Approaching Philip's Turn [#3] we pass the former Kingdom Hall of Jehovah Witnesses, which has been converted into two apartments.

Passing Salon 80 we look straight ahead at "Philip's Hill," a glacial deposit remaining from the last ice age, and for many years a favorite sliding spot for young children. Another such deposit of gravel lies to the left, once referred to as the "Old Round Hill." Much of this hill has been removed and hauled away for gravel, leaving a water-filled depression where once lay a tree-covered knoll.

As the road swings left at Philip's Turn [#3] we move farther from the river. This sharp left turn was named after Philip Patterson, who resided nearby for many years. The area to the right is referred to as "The Islands." It is an area where large tracts of fertile land separated by hollows and creeks which fill to overflowing during the annual spring run-off. These islands were once used to keep sheep and cattle, and to make hay, when farming was an important way of life in Sunny Bank. Several hundred metres ahead on the right we pass the island lane, once heavily used by these farmers. Now it mainly serves children who enjoy rugged biking. Soon the road makes a slight curve to the right, and a couple of hundred metres farther it turns to gravel [#4], and fades into the forest. A left turn will lead up the "Big Hill" which handles a great deal of traffic during the fishing and hunting seasons. On this road one can reach many of Gaspé's finest trout lakes, as well as the St. John River, famous for its abundance of Atlantic salmon. If we continue straight, avoiding the "Big Hill," we travel past the Long Reach and continue following

the York River to the McDonald Block. This area once provided some of the finest deer hunting in the Gaspé area.

Next, we turn around, return to York Boulevard West, and turn right.

Initially we continue along the low-lying, flat portion of Sunny Bank for about a half kilometre. As we begin climbing, we notice the next landmark on our left, currently a red apartment building [#5]. This former school-house was constructed in two stages, the east half in 1935, and the rest in 1938, when a four-room structure was needed to house the ever-increasing number of youngsters in York. From 1938 until it closed in 1957, it was York's only school, with grades one to ten under the same roof. After that all students were bused to Gaspé High School, a more modern building serving the entire region with grades one to eleven.

As we continue eastward, the forested area to your right was the former site [#6] of the Gaspé Fish Hatchery. However, when it was seen that Mac's Brook couldn't supply the water needed, the hatchery was moved to its new location on the Mill Brook. Ambitious people may opt to take the trail through these woods where you can still find remains of old buildings and the former dam site.

Continuing along the highway we cross Mac's Brook, home to dozens of tiny brook trout. Few children grew up in Sunny Bank without trying to catch some of these, considered in childhood to be as great a prize as the famed Atlantic Salmon of the York River.

Next on your left is St. Andrew's Church [#7], which at the time of its construction in 1929 was the largest wooden framed church in the Province of Quebec. Its ability to seat almost 300 people is rarely needed today, with Sunday service attendance frequently fewer than fifty persons, although weddings and funerals sometimes fill it to capacity. Beyond the church is the St. Andrew's Cemetery which was consecrated in 1893, and has become the final resting place for hundreds of Gaspé residents.

Between the rink and the church lies an almost obscure road leading to a creek near the river. At the edge of the water lie the remains of a wharf once used each spring during the log drive on the York River. At water's edge one can feel alone in natural surroundings, detached from civilization, watching migratory birds feeding in the marshy tidal creeks.

Back on the main highway we head eastward through an area that was mainly wooded until recently. To our left is a large modern building, the York River Community Center [#8]. After many years of planning, it was only recently constructed by the Town of Gaspé. It serves the entire area for weddings, parties and meetings, with a capacity of just over 100 persons. Behind the hall is the York Rink [#9]. The rink was initially constructed by a group of volunteers in 1970, but has since moved a few hundred feet to the east on land purchased by the Town. Closing your eyes for just a few moments one can easily visualize dozens of laughing children playing shinny hockey, Sunday afternoon skating, with scores of people ranging in age from four to seventy-four, and winter carnivals with as many as 85 youngsters in costume.

If we continue eastward another few hundred metres, we arrive at the site of the former Gaspé Fish Hatchery [#10] which once raised hundreds of thousands of young salmon and trout annually, and employed almost a dozen people. At one time the fish hatchery even housed a small group of white-tail deer which entertained tourists and locals alike. Unfortunately, it was abandoned by the Quebec Government around the turn of the century, and fell to rack and ruin. Finally, serious flooding caused by the release of water from second lake practically destroyed the once beautiful, well kept tourist attraction. If one kept walking north past the hatchery ponds you would arrive at the York River where Sunny Bankers have hunted ducks and trapped muskrats for generations.

Such was the home chosen by our forefathers. Initially the population of Sunny Bank exploded, from 5 residents to well over 200 in the first century. Unfortunately, over the past century the main export has been our youth, largely due to the northern climate and lack of employment in the area. Besides, as residents age it becomes increasingly enticing to abandon our homeland to live closer to our children and grand-children. Currently only about 50% of Sunny Bank residents are descendants of the pioneers, and many of us are senior citizens!