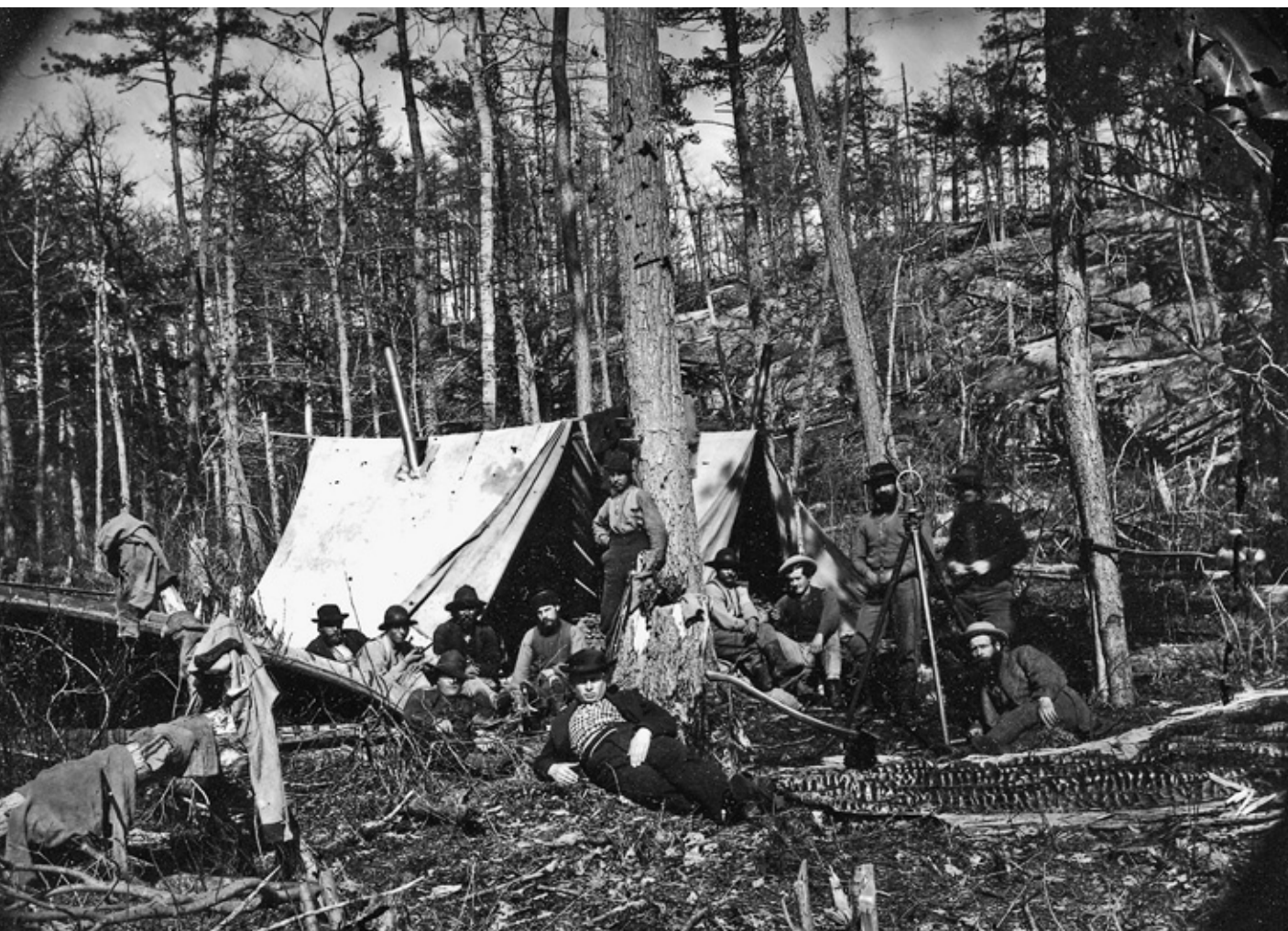


The Road to Nowhere 1852–1859



The Killing Work of Surveying

The Muskoka Road might never have come into being if the government had listened to surveyor James W. Bridgland. In 1852 Bridgland led a team from the Talbot River in Carden Township, through the southern part of Muskoka, and then on to Georgian Bay. His report to the Commissioner of Crown Lands almost vibrated with scorn as he pronounced the region “entirely unfitted as a whole, for agricultural purposes.”

But agricultural settlement was the priority of the day for the government of Canada West (Ontario). All the farmland had been taken up along the shores of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. From Kingston to Toronto, settlers were demanding the government open more land, more districts and more farm lots as families grew. A recent flood of European immigrants—one hundred thousand Irish arrived in 1847 alone—made this need urgent. So, the powers that were in the capital city of Québec looked north from Toronto and decided the area known as “the Ottawa-Huron tract” was the next logical place for colonization.

Stretching from the Ottawa River to Georgian Bay, and from Lake Nipissing to the northern boundaries of white settlement along Lake Ontario, these “wild lands,” as the government called them, were dominated by forests. Untouched for eons, punctuated by lakes and a network of rivers, the mighty forests seemed to promise that rich loam covered the region. In fact, for the most part, sandy or stony soil lay in a thin layer over the impenetrable bedrock of the Canadian Shield.

Although familiar to natives and fur traders for centuries,

FACING PAGE Members of W.R. Beatty’s survey crew take a brief respite from their work in the bush near Parry Sound in 1870. Early Muskoka Road surveyors faced terrain just as rugged in southern Muskoka. *D.F. Macdonald / Archives of Ontario*



Early map of Upper Canada showing the limited knowledge of the Ottawa-Huron tract at the time of Bridgland's survey. John Carthew's line, one of Bridgland's references, was an extension of the line between the Home and Newcastle districts. *Upper Canada, with Parts of New York, Pennsylvania and Michigan*. Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, 1832.

the Ottawa-Huron tract had barely been seen by white explorers until the time of Bridgland's survey. Among very few others, Champlain had paddled along the eastern shores of Georgian Bay in about 1615. John Graves Simcoe canoed through Lake Couchiching in 1793, and in 1829 Alexander Sherriff led an expedition from the Ottawa River to Penetanguishene. Eight years later David Thompson explored from Lake Huron to the Ottawa River.

The native Ojibwa used the area from Muskoka to Lake Nipissing for hunting and trapping. But aside from a small village

at Obajewanung (Port Carling), even the natives lived outside the district: at Rama to the south; on Christian Island and its neighbours near Penetanguishene; and along the shores of Georgian Bay.

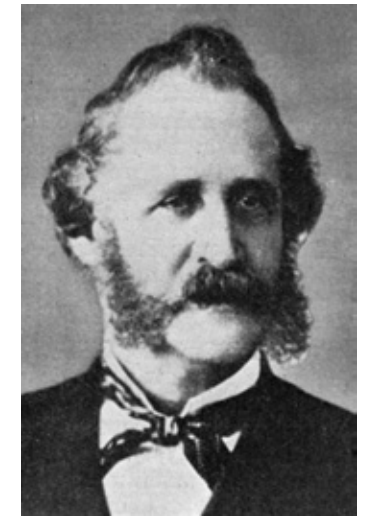
The white population of Upper Canada lived in a slender strip of land along the north shore of Lake Ontario, in the Niagara Peninsula and the London area, and in few pockets near Bytown (Ottawa.) Most of the settlers were either Loyalists dislocated by the American War of Independence, or immigrants from the British Isles, over half of these being Irish. They numbered about one million strong at the time of Bridgland's survey, and the boundaries of settlement in mid-nineteenth century Ontario could no longer hold them.

In the spring of 1852, Bridgland arrived in Orillia with instructions to survey Carden Township for division into settlement lots. This area lies just to the northeast of Lake Simcoe. He was to travel northwest from the Talbot River to the Muskoka River, then due west to Lake Muskoka, and finally southwest to Georgian Bay, to see if a road was viable from the mouth of the Musquash River to a point just south of present-day Bracebridge.

Thirty-five-year-old James Bridgland had seven years experience surveying in Upper Canada. He was quite familiar with the obligations of a surveyor's contract. He had to provide an overall report of his findings, plus a set of field notes and a daily diary of the expedition. His field notes had to include maps and written descriptions of the flora, fauna and geology of the area, the direction and depth of rivers, the location of lakes, and the types of trees and soil. The government would use these reports as the basis for its decisions about when, how—or if—to open this unknown district.

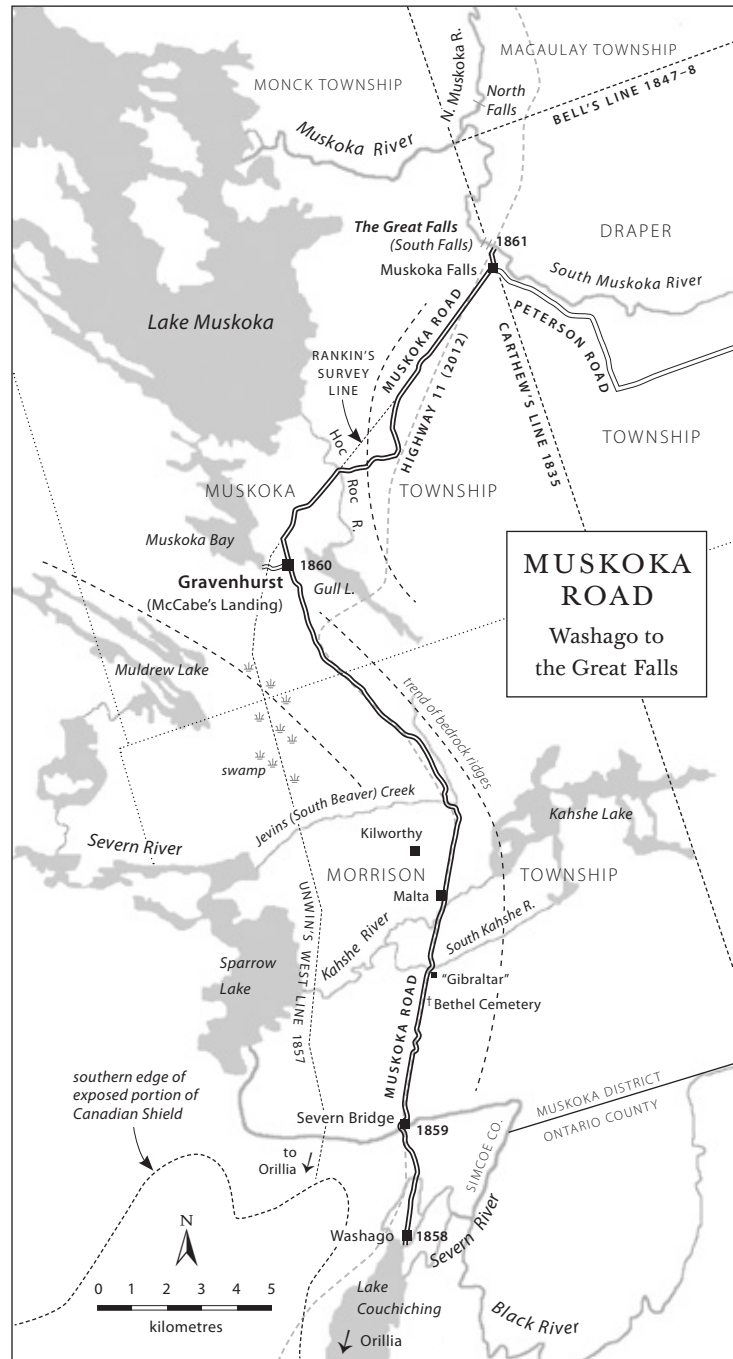
On May 20, 1852, Bridgland assembled his team of two chainmen and four axemen from Orillia, as well as five "half-breeds" from Penetanguishene, chosen because they were natives of the area and used to its conditions. After surveying Carden Township, they headed out from the Talbot River near present-day Kirkfield towards the south branch of the Muskoka River.

If you draw a line on a map between these two points, the dis-



James Bridgland (1817-1880) was born in York (Toronto) and qualified as a surveyor in 1844. He and future Muskoka Road surveyor John Stoughton Dennis attended Victoria College in Cobourg, one of Canada's earliest degree-granting universities. Bridgland also apprenticed to Dennis and in 1849 married Dennis's younger sister, Maria.

Bridgland was easily the most blunt and descriptive of the surveyors in Muskoka. He took over responsibility for the colonization roads in Canada West from David Gibson, after Gibson's death in 1864. He also completed significant survey work in the townships of Mornington, Kincardine, Carden, and on Rama Island. *Association of Ontario Land Surveyors*



tance measures over fifty kilometres—which is a tough enough hike when you have to carry all your food, shelter and equipment in leather packs. But Bridgland's team could not travel along that straight line. Between the Talbot and the Muskoka are almost a dozen other rivers, all flowing southwest towards Georgian Bay and across the team's path. They had to cross each one. After crossing, they'd unpack the cargo, hoist up the old skiff and the several canoes they had brought with them, and walk to the next river to repeat the process.

Several times, as provisions ran low, Bridgland sent men back to Orillia to fetch more food. One two-man team was gone nineteen days. Meanwhile, the provisions dwindled to a small quantity of flour and some corn meal for the eleven men continuing with the survey. A desperate Bridgland sent six men south across the Severn River to the native settlement in Rama to get food before the whole team mutinied.

Bridgland had only two previous survey lines to use as references. One had been laid for 125 kilometres in a slightly northeasterly direction by Lieutenant John Carthew in 1835. It ran

MEASURING UP

The subject of *Muskoka's Main Street* straddles two eras of official measuring systems in Canada. The people who built the colonization road in the 1800s used the Imperial system. They gauged distances using chains, links, miles and feet; calculated settlers' properties in acres; and measured weight in pounds or bushels. Those travelling the road today follow the metric system. They measure distance in metres and kilometres; own properties measured in hectares; and compute weight using kilograms.

To respect quoted historical reports and diaries, chains, miles,

pounds and bushels are presented throughout the book, with a translation to metric immediately following the historic measurement. Outside of quotations, measurements are presented in metric only.

Measurement of agricultural produce is tricky. Depending on whether you're measuring peas, potatoes, turnips or wheat, the conversion factor from bushels to kilograms is different. All the census reports from the nineteenth century used bushels; for ease of reading, only the metric equivalent is presented, based on the appropriate conversion factor.

Here is a quick conversion chart for the measurements used in the book:

- 1 chain = 66 feet = 20.1 metres
- 1 link = 7.92 inches = 20.1 centimetres
- 1 mile = 1.61 kilometres
- 1 foot = 0.305 metres
- 1 pound = 0.455 kilograms
- 1 acre = 0.405 hectares
- 1 bushel potatoes = 54 pounds = 24.5 kilograms
- 1 bushel turnips = 50 pounds = 22.7 kilograms



GUNTER'S CHAIN

The surveyor's chain used by the nineteenth-century Muskoka Road surveyors had been in use since 1620, when it was introduced in England by clergyman and mathematician Edmund Gunter. His invention allowed plots of land to be accurately surveyed and plotted for commercial and legal purposes, long before the development of more sophisticated instruments.

Although the dimensions of a chain seem to make no sense—sixty-six feet long and made up of one hundred links, each exactly 7.92 inches—Gunter actually synthesized

two incompatible systems: the traditional English system of land measurement, based on the number four; and the newly introduced system of decimals based on the number ten. The traditional system involved a unit of distance called a *rod*, *pole* or *perch*, which is 16.5 feet long. So, to make his system compatible with this older system, Gunter made his chains four rods long. Four rods equal sixty-six feet.

Although no longer in widespread use as a system of measurement, the chain survives in England, both as the length of a cricket pitch

and a location identifier for railways. A railway bridge is said to be 12M63ch—twelve miles and sixty-three chains—from the origin of the line. In Canada and the United States, the chain is still used in agriculture. Measuring wheels with a circumference of 0.1 chains are used to measure rectangular fields. You multiply the number of turns of one of these wheels for each of two adjacent sides of a field and then divide by one thousand to get the area in acres. *Photo: Association of Ontario Land Surveyors*

between the modern townships of Morrison and Ryde all the way to the Parry Sound district. The other—Bell's Line—intersected Carthew's line at the junction of the north and south branches of the Muskoka River, near today's town of Bracebridge. It ran 130 kilometres east to the Madawaska River. Beyond these two references, Bridgland had nothing other than his "circumferentor" (compass) to assist him.

In an era well before global positioning systems and lasers, "running a survey line" meant using a chain made of iron or steel wire to mark a boundary or define where a road should go. Called a "Gunter's chain" after its inventor, the chain was sixty-six feet long, and was divided into one hundred links of exactly 7.92 inches each.

A surveyor set his circumferentor on a pole or tripod (earlier surveyors had also used flat rocks or tree stumps) and took a sighting along the intended line. His axemen cut away obstructing trees—something they had to do a lot more often in Muskoka

This early compass, called a circumferentor, was used by the Muskoka Road's nineteenth-century surveyors. *Association of Ontario Land Surveyors*



FACING PAGE An excerpt from James Bridgland's "Survey Report January 31, 1853" of his 1852 survey of the Muskoka region. Page after page, he warns of "extremely rocky and broken" land containing "rock-girdled swamps," and says that the entire district is mostly "the most barren and rugged region of rocks." He did note the "peculiarity... of a vale or belt of the richest soil covered with the best timber." Easily the most descriptive of the surveyors, Bridgland might also have been the most accurate. *Archives of Ontario*

than in areas to the south. One chainman held the first link of the chain over the stake at the starting point. The second chainman carried the chain, opening up the links and keeping the chain taut, to a point determined by the surveyor as precisely correct. The surveyor then signalled for a stake to be driven into the ground at that point. The team advanced to the stake and repeated the process many times to the required end point, sometimes—as with Bridgland's survey—hundreds of kilometres away. Meanwhile, the "explorers" on the team investigated the terrain on either side of the line and provided information about the topography of the land there.

James Bridgland learned quickly that May and June in Victoria County and Muskoka are the very worst months to explore the woodlands. "Very warm," his diary entry for May 28 states. "Flies very bad." By the next day, four men were unable to work—one was completely blinded by swollen black fly bites—plus they got drenched in a heavy thunderstorm. Two days later, another man deserted, declaring he could no longer suffer the flies.

"He was much swollen," Bridgland admitted in his diary. "At night the men grew sulky and mutinous, especially the half-breeds upon whose steadfastness I had counted with absolute certainty. I found upon secret enquiries nearly all but my chainers were resolved to leave."

He made a deal with the men that if they'd stick it out until he had run the exploration line just a bit further, he'd suspend the survey and return sometime later when the black flies were not so bad.

Two days later, on June 2, a hot day with the flies even worse, they returned to Orillia. Here Bridgland made plans to return mid-July, which he did, with a new team of nine men. The July expedition was tormented with dysentery, lack of food, desertions and what Bridgland called the "killing work of packing over these rocks."

Rocks, cliffs, boulders and ridges; these are the hallmarks of the Muskoka region and were the curse of every surveyor who tried to drive a stake into the ground here. In 112 days, from May to October, Bridgland found nothing but land that

12.
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in the exploration.
Westward, from hence
to Muskoka Lake, and thence
southward, and westward,
around the Lakes conn-
ected with the river, the
country is, in general, still
more barren, and unprom-
ising; an exception of rare
occurrence, and of brief con-
tinuance, scarcely redeeming
the whole from the character
of absolute, and universal
sterility. — I have alluded
in a former Report to a

13.
small belt of good land, wind-
ing for a distance of some
four or five miles in an ec-
centric direction, near the
great Muskoka Lake, crossed
by the most exploration line,
and again met upon the se-
cond mile of the south west line.
After rounding the south-
ern extremity of the great
Lake, and proceeding west-
ward, the agricultural pros-
pect is still worse; the coun-
try being composed almost
wholly, of rocky ridges, and
small lakes; and is in gen-

he called extremely rocky and broken. There was nowhere, he said, that even a small township could be established. Westward from Lake Muskoka, the country was even more barren and unpromising. He warned about its absolute and universal sterility, and concluded that it would be impossible to build a road between Georgian Bay and the site of present-day Bracebridge. He was right. There is still no direct road there today.

But his report came too late. By the time he wrote it in January 1853, the government had already acted on the few other surveyor's reports it had, which were much more optimistic about the territory's potential for agriculture. William Lyon Mackenzie—the representative for Haldimand County and the



Surveyor Robert Bell. He laid a significant east-west survey line in 1848 that stretched between a point near modern-day Bracebridge and the Madawaska River. “Bell’s Line” was a key reference point for decades. *Association of Ontario Land Surveyors*

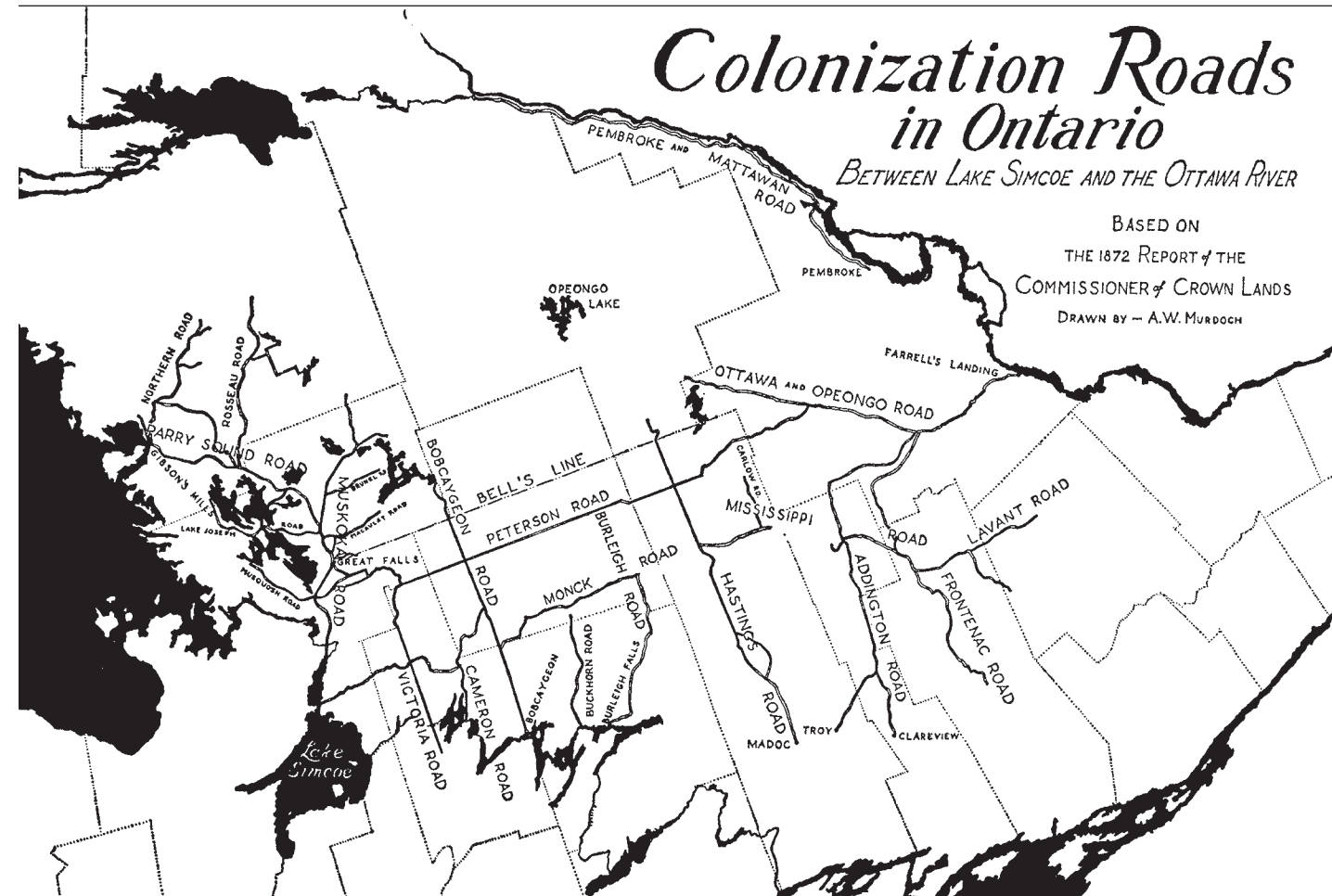
grandfather of future Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King—had already introduced a resolution in the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada. It called for a survey of the Ottawa-Huron Tract so the territory could be colonized. As part of this decision, the government launched an ambitious plan for a network of roadways. The so-called “colonization roads” would be key to bringing settlers in, and would also support the logging industry, which was already nibbling around the edges of the Ottawa-Huron tract from the west, east and south.

The Opeongo, the Hastings and the Pembroke–Mattawan roads were among the first to be surveyed. And despite Bridgeland’s blunt report, next came the Muskoka Colonization Road. This road would actually live on to be one of the few successful roads in the network. Yet, when it was first conceived and built, it was truly the road to nowhere.

Hacked Out of Wilderness

The original plan called for the Muskoka Road to end at Great Falls (South Falls) on the south branch of the Muskoka River. This decision was probably influenced by surveyor Robert Bell. During his 1847 expedition, which resulted in the creation of Bell’s Line, he chose this location as the site for a future town. Surveyors often did this, as they were usually the first people on site in any new location being opened for settlement. Town sites tended to be located where road lines met waterways, especially rivers with waterfalls. These provided a source of power for sawmills and grist mills, so important for settlers. As Bell noted in his report to the Commissioner of Crown Lands, “I chose a site for a town at the Great Falls on the Muskako [sic] River. The water power afforded by the Falls is very great.”

Although a terminus point had been defined, at first it was not clear where the road should actually start. So, in October 1856, the government sent twenty-eight-year-old Provincial Land Surveyor Charles Unwin to run two trial lines. One line



was to start from Atherley on the east side of Lake Couchiching, and the other from Orillia on the west side. Each line was to terminate at Great Falls. Unwin’s job was to decide which side of Lake Couchiching was better for a road.

When he got to Orillia, Unwin found a boom town of over two hundred people, with plenty of construction jobs. The thriving local economy made it difficult for him to find men for his survey team. Construction paid better too, and as a result, he couldn’t find any men to work for him. Men could make

The network of colonization roads in the Ottawa-Huron tract. The Muskoka Road was the fourth to be surveyed and started in this network. *From MUSKOKA AND HALIBURTON 1615–1875 © The Champlain Society. Reprinted with permission.*