

On Saturday, June 27, 1959 at 3 p.m., a provincial historical plaque commemorating Chief William Yellowhead was unveiled in Couchiching Beach Park on Tecumseh Street in Orillia, Ontario.

This is one in a series of plaques being erected throughout the province by the Department of Travel and Publicity, on the advice of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario (now the Ontario Heritage Trust).

The unveiling ceremony was sponsored by the Orillia Chamber of Commerce; Mr. John Spencer, president, was the program chair. Speakers included: Mr. W.H. Cranston, chairman of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board; His Worship A.J. Truman, Mayor of Orillia; Mr. William McEacheran, chairman of the Orillia Parks Board; Mr. Lloyd Letherby, MPP; Mr. J.A. Coutts, president of the Huronia Historic Sites and Tourist Association; Chief I.J. Douglas of the Rama Indian Reserve; and Chief C.L. Bigcanoe of the Georgina Island Indian Reserve. The plaque was unveiled by Mr. Joseph Yellowhead, a descendant of Chief William Yellowhead.

The plaque reads:

CHIEF WILLIAM YELLOWHEAD

Born about 1769, Yellowhead (Musquakie) served with the British during the War of 1812. Named chief of the Deer tribe of the Chippewa (Ojibwa) Indians in 1816, he settled with his band at the site of Orillia in 1830 in accordance with lieutenant-Governor Colborne's plan for gathering nomadic tribes on reserves. Pressure from white settlers forced the Indians to relinquish their land and Yellowhead's band moved to Rama in 1838-1839. It is believed that the Muskoka District, which embraced his hunting grounds, was named after this greatly respected chief who died in 1864 and was buried in St. James' churchyard, Orillia.

Historical background

William Yellowhead, known also by his First Nations name Musquakie¹, was born about 1769. The exact place and date of his birth have never been definitely established, but a notation in the records of St. James' Church at Orillia made at the time of burial states that he was 95 years old.

Musquakie was the son of Chief William Yellowhead the elder, the principal chief of the Deer Tribe of the Ojibwa. Before western Europeans penetrated the upper Great Lakes region, the Ojibwa roamed the land north of Lakes Huron and Superior. One of the earliest reported meetings between white men and the Ojibwa took place in 1640. The indigenous people are described in the Jesuit Relations (*Relations des jésuites*) of that year as the "People of the Sault." It is possible that the French explorer Jean Nicolet (c. 1598-1642) had met them during his journey to the Sault Ste. Marie area in 1634-35,

but there is no contemporary record of such a meeting. The Ojibwa were relatively friendly toward the French, who frequently visited their region during the 17th and early 18th centuries.

In the 1700s, following the decline of Iroquois power, the Ojibwa and their kinsmen, the Mississaugas, moved southward towards Lake Ontario. After the British conquest of Canada, the Ojibwa maintained good terms with the British administration. The Ojibwa peoples were highly regarded by Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe. In a letter to Lord Dorchester, Simcoe stated that:

"... these people deserve the utmost attention; unlike the Five Nations, they do not look up to any persons but the King's officers or subjects, nor is their power to be slighted since, though they are not numerous themselves in this part of the country, they can draw to a head very formidable numbers."

The good relations established in the early years of British rule in Canada helped place the colony in a stronger position to face the American attacks during the War of 1812. The Ojibwa immediately rallied to support the Crown under the leadership of the elder Chief Yellowhead. They fought with British and Canadian militia forces in many engagements during the war and presented a stiff resistance during the American attack on York (now Toronto) in April 1813. It is believed that the elder Chief Yellowhead was severely wounded in the defence of York and that his son Musquakie – also present at York – was appointed principal chief of the Deer Tribe.

In 1818, several Ojibwa chiefs including Musquakie gave up 1,592,000 acres (644,261 hectares) of land in the Georgian Bay/Lake Simcoe area to the Crown in exchange for a perpetual annuity. The Ojibwa continued to use their hunting grounds around Lake Simcoe after the treaty. In 1828, Sir John Colborne was appointed Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada and, in 1830, Colborne persuaded the nomadic communities of the Lakes Huron and Simcoe areas to settle on reserve lands at The Narrows (now Orillia).

Western European settlement was proceeding rapidly and land was required to accommodate the great influx of immigrants into the province. In accordance with this plan, a strip of land between Coldwater and Orillia was designated by the government as a reserve for several Ojibwa bands, including one led by Yellowhead. A road was built and land provided for the First Nations peoples along its route. Yellowhead and his followers settled in the vicinity of Orillia, and a house that stood there until the early 1950s was built for his use. Unfortunately, some western European settlers infiltrated the First Nations region, and friction arose between the two groups. Moreover, the influx of settlers and associated development spoiled the First Nations hunting grounds in the immediate vicinity. Although farming had been initiated on the reserve under the guidance of the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, T.G. Anderson, the aboriginal people had not entirely given up their dependence on the traditional hunt. Despite Yellowhead's personal popularity, the Ojibwa were compelled to relinquish the lands allotted to them in 1830, and were relocated to more remote reserves, such as Rama and Beausoleil Island.

Chief Yellowhead and his band moved from Orillia to Rama during late 1838 and early 1839. Musquakie spent the remainder of his life there. A devout Christian, he was highly respected and admired by all who knew him. It was largely through his efforts and those of his father that the loyalty of the Ojibwa to the British Crown was preserved. When he died in 1864, he was buried in the churchyard at St. James' Orillia, Anglican Church. Although no monument remains to mark the exact site of his grave, it is thought to be near the main door of the church.

A more permanent memorial does, however, remain in the name of the Muskoka District of Ontario. It is generally believed that this region was named after Musquakie, since the area comprised part of his recognized hunting grounds.



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¹ Also Mayawassino and Waisawindebay.