Old Perth Road, Mississippi Mills, Ontario

Research compiled by Linda Hamilton for the Mississippi Mills Heritage Committee in
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The history of the settlement of Canada is bound up in the history of its roads, rivers, and railways. The Old Perth Road is one of several roads in Lanark County that were built specifically so settlers in new communities would have access to the military settlement of Perth. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Perth was the largest and most important town in the area, so settlers also used it as a starting point to reach their new land. As a supply and travel route to Perth, the Old Perth Road was essential in opening up what is now Mississippi Mills to settlement. Many different people used this road in its time including farmers, doctors, preachers, travellers, salesmen, officials, and school children. The Old Perth Road is a reminder of the early struggle to settle and cultivate the land.

Geographical Boundaries (within Mississippi Mills): Old Perth Road, for the purposes of delineating it as a *cultural heritage landscape* within Mississippi Mills, is as follows:

      i)   south west from Ramsay Concession 8 to Tatlock Road, roughly parallel to Wolf Grove Road;

      ii)   South of Tatlock Road to Forest Road;

      iii)   South of Forest Road, being an unmaintained section running to Ramsay Concession 1.

    a. The road can be described as a Quarter Session Road and fits within the definition of a common and public highway under the Municipal Act.

With the exception of 2(iii) above, Old Perth Road is a two-lane gravel road. There are no side barriers or bridges. It is hilly and very narrow in spots as it winds through the countryside. It is partially unmaintained in winter and is not a standard width road.

History:

Ramsay township was opened up for settlement in 1821. Newly arrived families from Scotland, England, and Ireland travelled by water and land to reach Perth or Lanark and moved on to choose their land plots from there. Because there was no easy water access from Perth to the "Falls on the Mississippi" (Carleton Place, Almonte, Pakenham), roads had to be built. The Perth Road was first laid out by Josias Richey, the Government Deputy Surveyor, as a road from Kingston to Pakenham through Perth. According to Howard Brown in Lanark Legacy, the Perth road follows a Precambrian Ridge that runs through what was then known as Wolf's Grove. This geographical feature created a natural trail that was likely a native travel route long before the settlement of the area. Since it traversed diagonally across concession and lot lines, this road cut through many private lots, in some cases dividing farms in two. I do not believe, however, that it was a "forced road" in the traditional sense, since it was laid out before settlement occurred. As in many other parts of the country, farmers and land owners would have had to work on the road as a consequence of living in the area. Under the direction of the "pathmaster", men had to provide two days' labour on local roads and landowners were responsible for up to four days depending on the value of their land. The job of making and maintaining a road before the advent of heavy equipment was very difficult. Before it was logged, this area was heavily wooded with massive trees that were prone to falling over in heavy winds, blocking the roadway. Pulling stumps was also a massive job. This is a road that was built and maintained by local settlers for their own use and benefit. The hard work and determination of these people is inspiring.

Originally the Old Perth Road was just a swath cut into the trees to allow the passage of wagons and sleighs in Winter. Early travel on the road was difficult and almost impossible at some times of year.

Although it should have taken a day's journey to reach Perth from Shipman's Mills in the early part of the 19th century, sometimes it could take much longer. In a letter to Hamnett Pinhey in 1827, Henry Le Lievre (the famous Second of William Lyon in the Last Duel) wrote about the terrible state of the Perth Road as he travelled to Shipman's Mills (Almonte). It was almost impassable in spots and he had to take down fences and remove many windfall trees. The journey took him much longer than he expected. By the time the Rideau Canal was completed (1832) the Perth Road was a fairly well developed roadway with inns along the way.

By the 1830's the Eastern portion of the Perth Road had split into two roads. One road went from Innisville past Wolf's Grove, to Bennies Corners and Pakenham. This is now named the Upper Perth Road. The Old Perth Road split off at Ferguson's Falls (what is now Boyd's Road), through Boyd's Settlement on the banks of the Mississippi Lake, and on to Shipman's Mills (now Almonte). The road would have joined up with the Ninth Line of Ramsay which was the main North/South artery from Carleton Place to Pakenham (now County Road 29). From within Almonte, Old Perth Road was likely accessed from what is now Perth Street.

By the 1850's key travel routes such as the Old Perth Road were improved by being planked with pine, which was in abundant supply at the time. Plank roads helped for a time but eventually the wood rotted and the road became nearly impassible especially in Spring as the snow was melting into mud. By the 1870s many roads were stoned to allow easier travel for increased traffic. Later in the 1800's private companies took on the work of upgrading and maintaining the roads in this area. They installed toll gates to recoup their expenses. Roads to Perth would have been especially lucrative due to the heavy traffic of everything from foot travellers to coaches to livestock.

Because this was an important travel and transport route during the early part of Ramsay's settlement, the Old Perth Road has many beautiful original farm houses, barns, fences and log buildings along its path. The first settlers to any area chose land plots with good access to a road so they could travel and obtain goods easily. The farms along the Old Perth Road are probably some of the first to be settled in this area. Since the establishment of the Brockville-Ottawa railway from Brockville through Smith's Falls to Chalk River in the 1850's, the Old Perth Road's importance as a travel and transport route diminished dramatically. With the later widening and paving of what is now Wolf Grove Road, the Old Perth road fell into almost total disuse. Parts of it are not maintained at all in the Winter. Because of this, the road remains almost frozen in time. Many essential arteries from the past were built ever larger as the demands of traffic grow, going from farm roads to highways and losing some of their rural charm in the process. The Old Perth Road is a wonderful example of a significant historical road that has not been modernized at all.

Landmarks: A one room schoolhouse (now a private home) stood at 935 Old Perth Road. It was the SS#2 Ramsay and was built in 1909.
Ramsay Town Hall was at the Eighth Line and Old Perth Road (Carleton County Atlas). Before Almonte was incorporated, this was the centre of municipal affairs in the area.

Modern Uses: Today the Old Perth Road is used by the people living along it, bicyclists, runners, and tourists wishing to see authentic rural landscapes.

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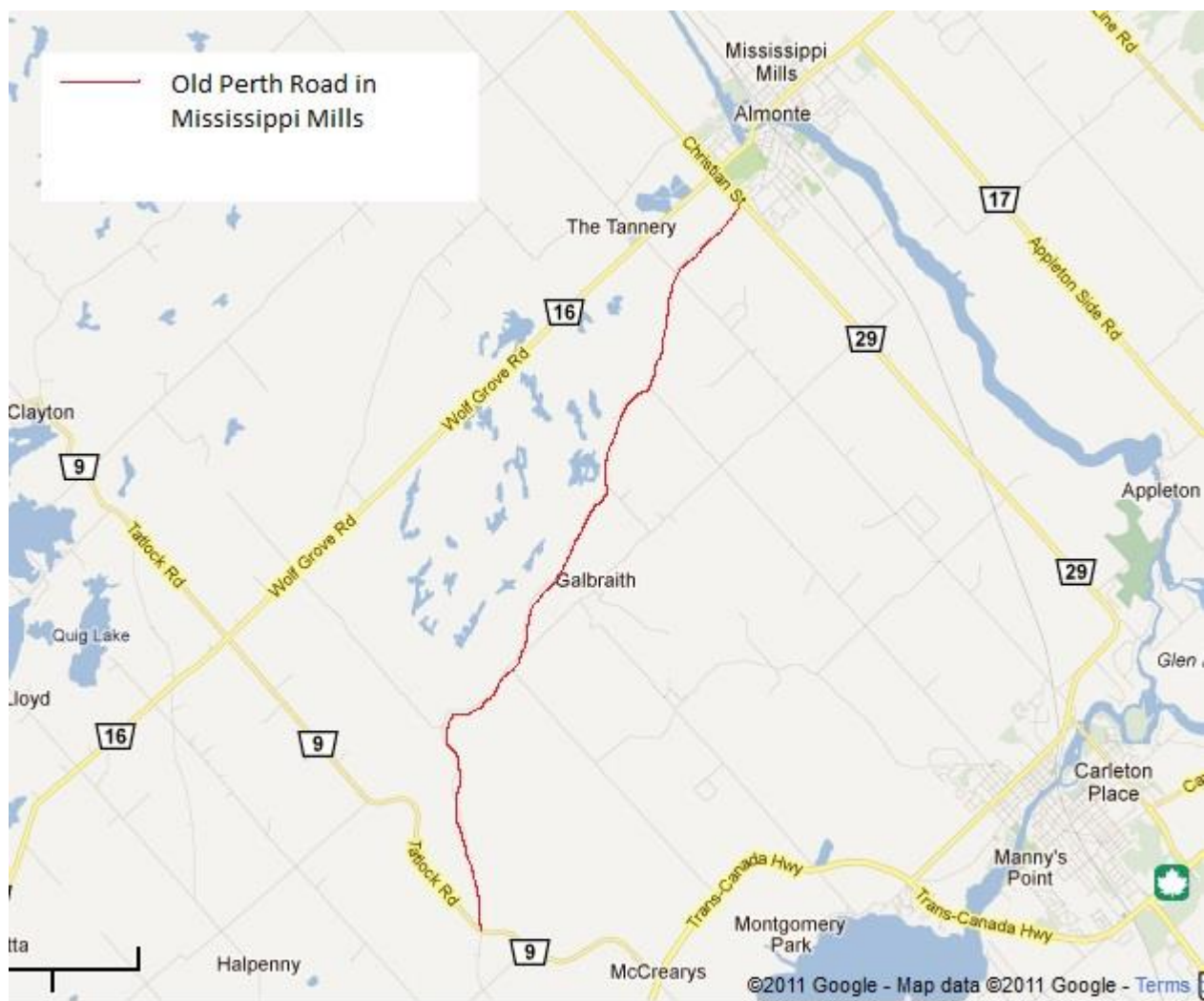
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From Lanark County Atlas, c.1880