

## A Brief History of the Town of Huntsville, Ontario

*Compiled by Teri Souter, Manager of Arts, Culture & Heritage - July 25, 2016*

**Huntsville, Ontario** is located at 45.3269° N, 79.2168° W in the District of Muskoka, Province of Ontario, Canada. Geographically, this area is known for its hundreds of freshwater lakes and granite outcroppings.



***Above: Lancelot point, found locally, estimated to be 7,000 years old. Original in Muskoka Museum; copy in Algonquin Park Museum.***

“**Huntsville** (Canada 2011 Census population 19,056) is the largest town in the [Muskoka Region](#) of [Ontario, Canada](#). It is located 215 kilometres (134 mi) north of [Toronto](#) and 130 kilometres (81 mi) south of [North Bay](#).

Huntsville is located in the hilly terrain of the [Canadian Shield](#) and is dotted with many lakes. Due to its natural beauty and abundant natural resources Huntsville is known as a major tourist destination drawing people from around the world. [The Toronto Star](#) ranked the town the #1 place to take a summer trip in 2011.

Huntsville also acts as a western gateway to [Algonquin Provincial Park](#) and was host to the [36th G8 summit](#) in June 2010. Motto: Touch the Past, Embrace the Future (*Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*)”

*“Incredible though it seems, Precambrian outcrops that are part of today’s Muskoka landscape have survived, almost unchanged, since before there was life on land. It is this ancient permanence that gives the Canadian Shield a spiritual quality, sometimes described as a metaphysical force.” TED RANNIE, M.Sc. (from *Huntsville: With Spirit and Resolve*, S. Pryke, Fox Meadow Creations, 2000, p. 13)*

The original people of this land were the Anishinaabe, or in the English language, Ojibway, also known as Chippewa. Traditionally Algonquin speaking people, “the good people” were generally peace-loving woodlands inhabitants with advanced social, governance, trade and family structures. Women could be chiefs and “twin spirited” people were cherished for their differences. Huntsville supports inclusivity.



*The "Look Out", Huntsville, June 24, 2016*

Settlers who arrived when area was opened for European settlement under the authority of the "Free Grants and Homestead Act" of Ontario in February 1868 were primarily subjects of the British Empire, which at that time spanned the globe. Because settlement of Huntsville occurred relatively recently in human social history, we have many well-documented narrative accounts of the generosity of First People toward the newcomers, helping them to learn the waterways; the flora; the fauna; and coexisting in their new and sometimes harsh environment. This racial tolerance appeared to be reciprocated, for the most part, in the

early days when people needed each other to survive.

Especially important were deer, berries, and maple syrup to the early settlers for sustenance. These are still abundant. Much of the free grant land proved to be impossible to farm, yet the area continued to grow as settlers embraced the tourism industry, and the restorative nature of the place.

Narrative accounts of Huntsville's early settlement also reflect the more constricting social mores, classism, sexism and racism predominant at the time of Canadian confederation and into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as was common in the Victorian era in most of Upper Canada.

Huntsville's founder George Hunt was born on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1830, on the Mediterranean island of Corfu. The Hunt family moved to Sorel, Quebec, where George joined the British militia and attained the rank of Captain.

When Captain Hunt heard about the free land grant, he had a vision of creating a commercial and manufacturing centre and a tourist paradise. Hunt came to this area on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1869, to choose his piece of the free land grant. After registering his choice in Bracebridge, Hunt's first task was to build a log shanty, clear some land and plant some crops. This was begun on what is now the northwest corner of John and Main Streets.

Captain Hunt worked tirelessly to help his neighbours and promote his dream. Huntsville residents lobbied tirelessly for rail service to their community, and their efforts were rewarded in 1886. This same year Huntsville was officially incorporated as a village, named after its first official Post Master, Captain George Hunt. Unfortunately, Hunt did not live to see this, as he died of pneumonia on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1882.



***Captain George Hunt, founder of Huntsville, c. 1870***

In 1894 Huntsville's downtown core suffered a great fire; from that day forward, downtown buildings had to be made of brick. Today, these add greatly to Huntsville's quaint charm. Another result of the great fire was the determination that "rose from the ashes" and an attitude of "spirit and resolve" which remains prevalent in Huntsville's culture today.

Huntsville's main industries were in the early days were lumber and leather, which used the plentiful hemlock bark in the tanning process. Huntsville's tannery boasted the internationally acclaimed and award winning Anglo Canadian Leather Company brass band.



Then tannery manager, American industrialist C.O. Shaw, imported cheap labour for his operations primarily from Italy, as these workers could often play classical instruments and music. Due to this work force, Huntsville had one of the Province's first pasta factories on Main Street. Today, Huntsville still boasts excellence in local musicians and music appreciation. A quirky town, for certain.

Huntsville has long appreciated its heritage, with the formation of the Muskoka Museum in 1958, which morphed into Muskoka Pioneer Village in the 1970s and today is known as Muskoka Heritage Place. This collection boasts a green acreage oasis, museums, a living working crossroads pioneer village and an operational narrow gauge steam train.



**Anglo-Canadian Leather Company Band at Canadian National Exhibition, 1923**

Huntsville is also a key sporting and arts community, with a proud heritage of excellence in many disciplines, especially lacrosse. Some famous locals in sports and arts are: Jack Bionda, Roy MacGregor, Dara Howell, Hawksley Workman.

Resorts and tourism are the main industry, and this has grown from early settlers opening their homes as guest houses to make ends meet, and to satisfy a need for accommodation for hunters, fishermen, and those seeking the tonic effect of clean, crisp air as prescribed by doctors, especially to tuberculosis patients in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**Above: Chief John Bigwin, right and unknown man, Main Street, Huntsville, at Huntsville's 50th anniversary, 1936.**

**Below: Mayor Sydney Avery, with paper, centre; and Chief John Bigwin, right; with unidentified men, Town Hall steps, Huntsville 50th anniversary, 1936.**



In 2010, Huntsville hosted the G8 from June 25 to 27. On June 21, National Aboriginal Day, just prior, the Town of Huntsville, Chippewas of Rama and Wasauksing First Nation hosted a Unity Powwow to “prepare the earth for the leaders’ arrival”. This was a unique and sensitive partnership. Despite what happened that year at the G20 in Toronto, Huntsville’s event was one of the most peaceful on record.

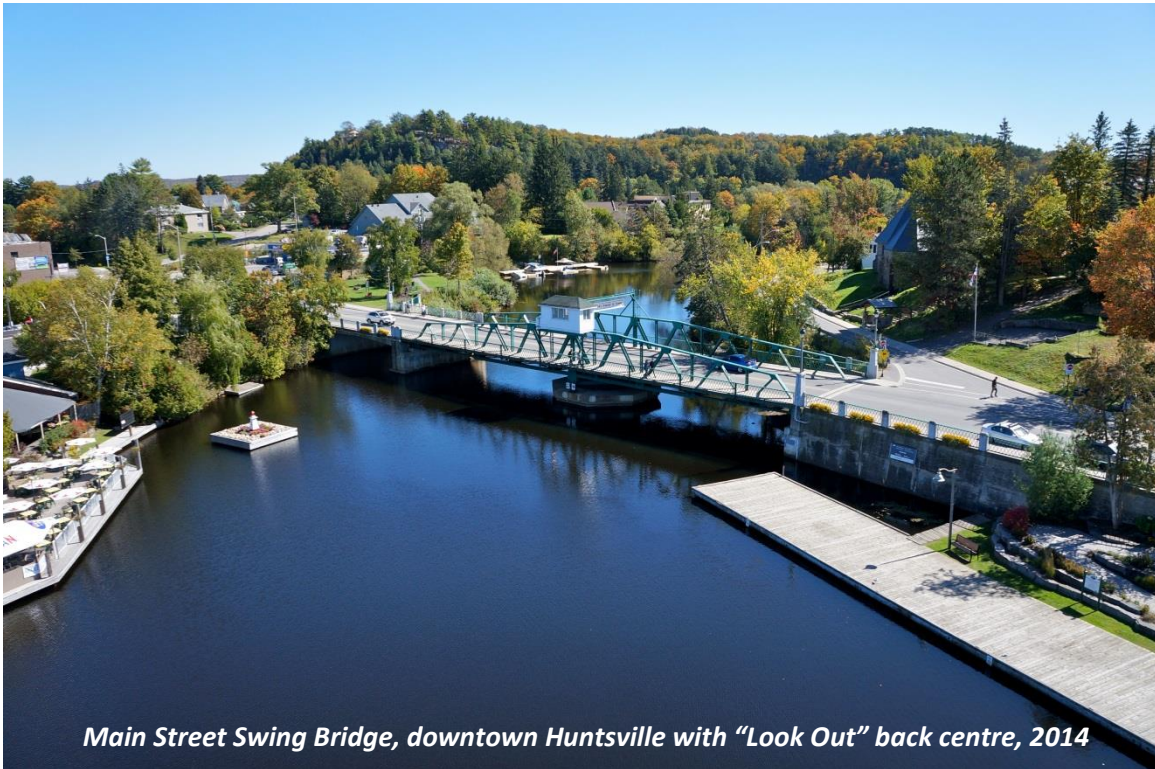


**Left: Huntsville's Town Hall in 2016, with a statue of Tom Thomson and an overturned canoe, remains a focal and proud point of the historic downtown.**

Local residents are very engaged in community, politics and volunteering for the myriad of international and local events across sport and art disciplines.

Huntsville is a vibrant place!

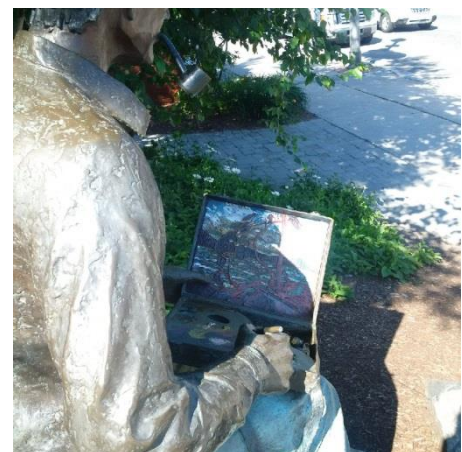
The Huntsville and Algonquin Park areas inspired quintessential Canadian icons of art such as Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven. The elements that inspire are still here.



*Main Street Swing Bridge, downtown Huntsville with "Look Out" back centre, 2014*

#### Key Messages:

- Acknowledge First People – generosity, spirit of inclusivity
- Water – paddle/canoe
- Hunt
  - Village Founder's name and hunting/fishing
  - Horn – hunting and/or music
- Arts – paintbrush – Tom Thomson painted here
- Natural elements that inspire
- Culture - "With Spirit and Resolve"
- Heritage/History – engaged populace
- Sports – Lacrosse stick
- Environment – lakes, rocks, trees
- Vibrant – creative, resilient



*Close up of Tom Thomson statue, Civic Square, Huntsville*

#### Resources:

1. Huntsville: With Spirit and Resolve, Susan Pryke, Fox Meadow Creations, Huntsville©2000, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Muskoka Books, 2010
2. Guide Book & Atlas of Muskoka Parry Sound Districts, 1879, 2<sup>nd</sup> Offset Edition, 1972, Richardson, Bond & Wright, Ltd. Owen Sound