

Loyalist Vignettes and Sketches

The United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada 1984

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John Alexander Vail 1795-1859

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Just off the ridge of land that runs from Annan to Balaclava during the spring of 1823, the silence of the wilderness was broke by a big, heavily bearded man. John Alexander Vail was searching for an hospitable piece of land on which to settle. A battle-tested veteran of the War of 1812 and the son of Peter Vail, a sergeant in the Prince of Wales American Regiment during the Revolution, John had built his own birch bark canoe at York and paddled alone along the Indian waterways from Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay.

From 1823 to 1825 John lived and hunted in the green land of 'Bluewater Country' and fished its waters. He built a log house on a protected cove in St. Vincent Township. The house of elm timbers nearly two feet square was of key and lock construction with nary a nail. John then paddled back to York, probably carrying a load of precious furs, and returned the same year with his wife and family. For ten years the Vails were the only white family in the area. The nearest place to procure provisions was at Red Mills on Yonge Street in Muddy York, a distance of more than a hundred miles, seventy-five of which had no road. In 1834 the surveying of St. Vincent Township began and other settlers moved in.

In 1835 John obtained a United Empire Loyalist petition to locate on lot 40, concession 12 in St. Vincent. He placed it in the hands of a man named Price Mallory. At that time land was obtainable at four shillings an acre. It was not until several years later, after Mallory's death, that John found that Mallory had used the claim as his own. John had no right to his land. He got legal help and again applied for his petition at the original price, but when the reply came back in 1847 the price had risen to eight shillings an acre. He refused to pay the eight shillings and went to some of his neighbours who wrote letters on his behalf. It was not until 1850 the he was granted the petition to his land at five shillings an acre. By this time he had a barn, a house, a cooper's shop and a weaving shop in addition to several other buildings, as well as a thriving orchard. Fifteen years had elapsed since he had petitioned for his claim.

John and Harnah Vail raised a family of eight children and many descendants of this stalwart couple still live in the area. Vail's Point was taken over by the government in 1942 as a firing range and the silence is now broken, not by the sound of a paddle held by a big, heavily bearded man looking for a peaceful place to raise a family, but by guns.