

Munsee Delaware and the Thames River 1780-1795

The community of Munsee Delaware is located southwest of London, Ontario. It is located on the Thames River near the present village of Muncey and the town of Delaware.

Since the late stages of the American Revolution, there has been a Munsee (Delaware) presence in Ontario. Early settlements occurred along the Grand River and the Thames River. This essay provides a short history of the Munsee Delaware community using sources outside of the community. These include German missionaries, British military officials, surveyors and contemporary researcher.

The Munsee people originally lived in an area close to the Hudson River, near present day New York City. They were part of a larger group known as the Lunaapeew which included both the Munsee and Unami peoples. The Lunaapeew were named the Delaware most likely by English colonists after the colony of the same name. After many years of conflicts with colonists and broken treaties from several European countries, the Munsee people, following the rivers of colonies of New York and Pennsylvania moved Northwest toward the Great Lakes.

By 1783, a large group (over 500) of Munsee people were living in villages along the Niagara River (Kjellberg, p11). Around the same time, the census of Indigenous peoples living along the Grand showed more than 100 Munsee people. By the end of the year this number was more than 400, as more Munsee people came across the Niagara River (Kjellberg, p13). Between 1783 and 1785, nearly one third of the Munsee population at the Grand River moved west. This may have been in part to more Haudenosaunee people taking up land along the Grand River (Kjellberg, p14).

The chosen location on the Thames River for settlement had advantages. It offered some distance from the Haudenosaunee with whom the Munsee had an uneasy relationship since the early 1700s. The surrounding land along the river was flat and suitable for farming, much like previous Delaware villages along the Susquehanna and Delaware Rivers. The Thames provided a link to Detroit, a major trading centre. The neighbouring Chippewa people were allies in previous conflicts with European powers.

When this group of Munsee people came to the Thames River in 1785, they established four villages along both sides of the river. There was an upper village located near the present village of Muncey, Ontario. A middle village existed between the upper and lower villages. There was a lower village located near the present location of the reserve. The fourth village was located on the south side of the river, along the path to Lake Erie (present day town of Port Stanley). Another important communication link, a path to Detroit, went through the Munsee villages.

Records from Europeans about the Munsee settlement during this time period exist and come from different perspectives. In March 1791, Moravian missionary David Zeisberger wrote about

the "Monseys on the Thames", after they had visited the Moravian Delaware near present day Windsor, Ontario "These Monsey came from Niagara some years ago. (Kjellberg, p16)." When Zeisberger established a Moravian mission at Fairfield (near Thamesville, Ontario), the Munsee community "sent a canoe full of corn (Moravians in Upper Canada, p9)."

These records support the presence of the Munsee communities prior to the establishment of the Moravian Delaware community in 1792. Clearing land and building sustainable corn fields was a long process over a number of years to a point where surplus could be shared or traded. It seems reasonable that the Munsee villages had been in existence for several years prior to 1792 in order to support the Moravian mission with corn (Kjellberg p16-17).

In early 1793, the upper village (near present day Muncey, Ontario) was visited by Governor John Graves Simcoe. Starting out from Newark (Niagara on the Lake, Ontario) Simcoe and a small group of military personnel travelled west towards Detroit. Among the group was Major Edward Littlehales. On February 15th, 1793 Littlehales recorded in his journal,

"We breakfasted at the Delaware Indian Village, having walked on the ice of the La Tranche (Thames) for 5 or 6 miles; here we were cordially received by the Chiefs of that nation, and regaled with eggs and venison. The Delaware castle is pleasantly situated upon the banks of the Thames; the meadows at the bottom are cleared to some extent, and in Summer planted with corn (Littlehales, p9)."

After Simcoe had completed his visit at Detroit, his party travelled back up the Thames River, staying again at the upper Munsee village. On February 27th 1793, Littlehales wrote,

"We continued our journey, and reached the Delaware village. Since chiefs, returning from their hunts, were assembled to congratulate the governor on his return and brought presents of venison etc. In the evening they danced-a ceremony they never dispense with when any of the King's officers of rank visit their villages (Littlehales P11)."

Beginning in 1792, the British government commissioned surveyor Patrick McNiff to map the Thames river and land surrounding. This was the beginning of planning the settlement of Southern Ontario for settlers. The resulting survey produced two detailed maps of the Thames River.

The map drawn by Mrs. Simcoe shows the route that her husband John Graves Simcoe took in 1793 showing the Munsee (Delaware) village where his party stopped.

Published in 1795, the first survey map shows three Munsee (Delaware) villages in the Thames as well as the position of the corn fields. In addition, the road to the Moravian village is recorded as is the road to Kettle Creek and Lake Erie.

A second map produced around the same time shows the Munsee (Delaware) village across the Thames river as being larger than the other two. This was confirmed in testimony by former residents of this village recorded in the early 1870s.

The third survey map (credited to Patrick McNiff, Augustus Jones and Governor Simcoe) confirms the location of the corn fields as well as a fourth Munsee (Delaware) village.

For all maps, there is a distinct absence of contemporary villages, towns and cities as well as transportation routes associated with a modern map of the area. European settlement of the area post dates Munsee settlement on the Thames River.

Sources

Kjellberg, E. (1985). *Seeking Shelter. Canadian Delaware Ethnohistory and Migration* (Doctoral dissertation).

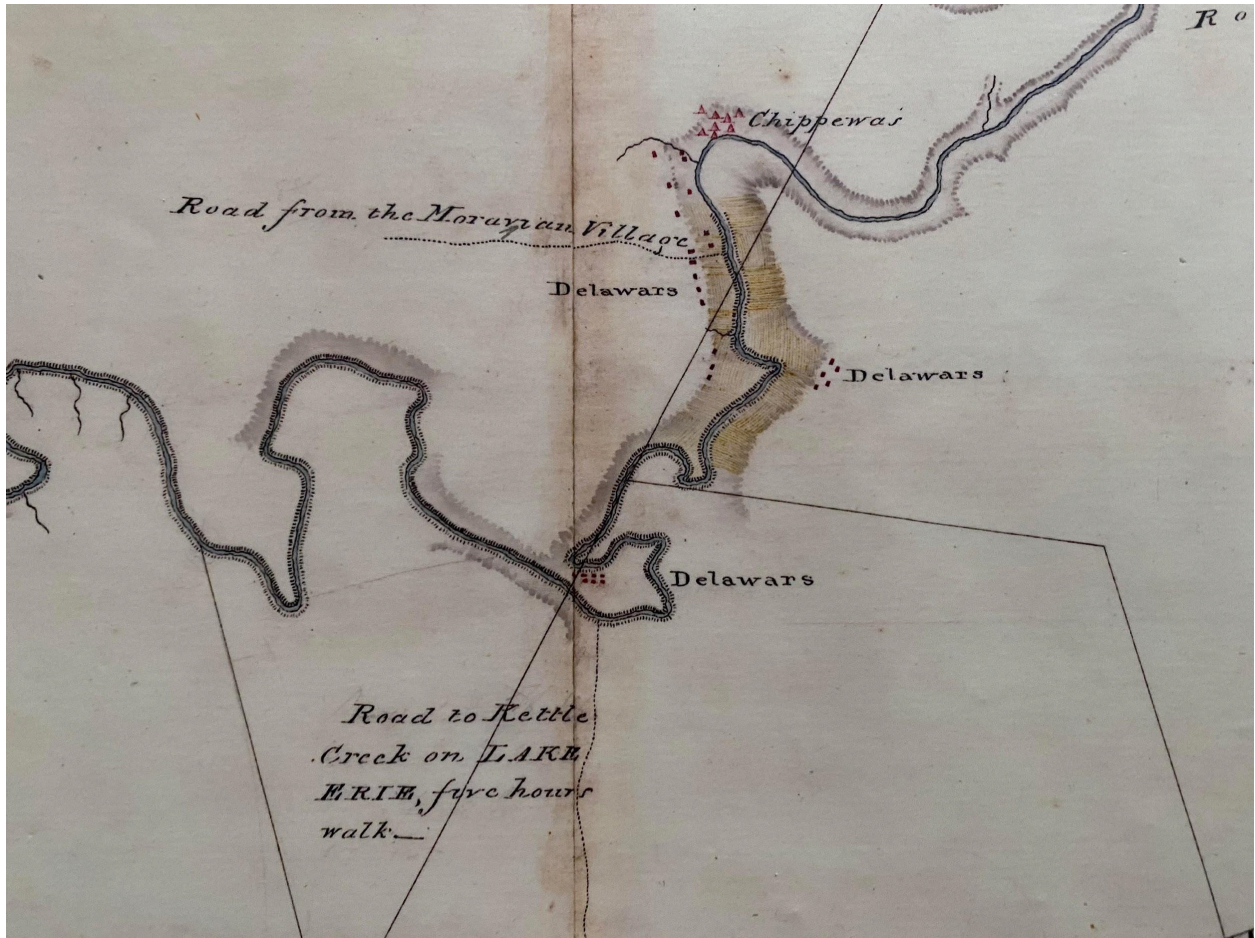
Littlehales, E. B., & Scadding, H. (1889). Journal written by Edward Baker Littlehales.

Moravians in Upper Canada The Diary of the Indian Mission of Fairfield on the Thames 1792 - 1813 Published by Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1999

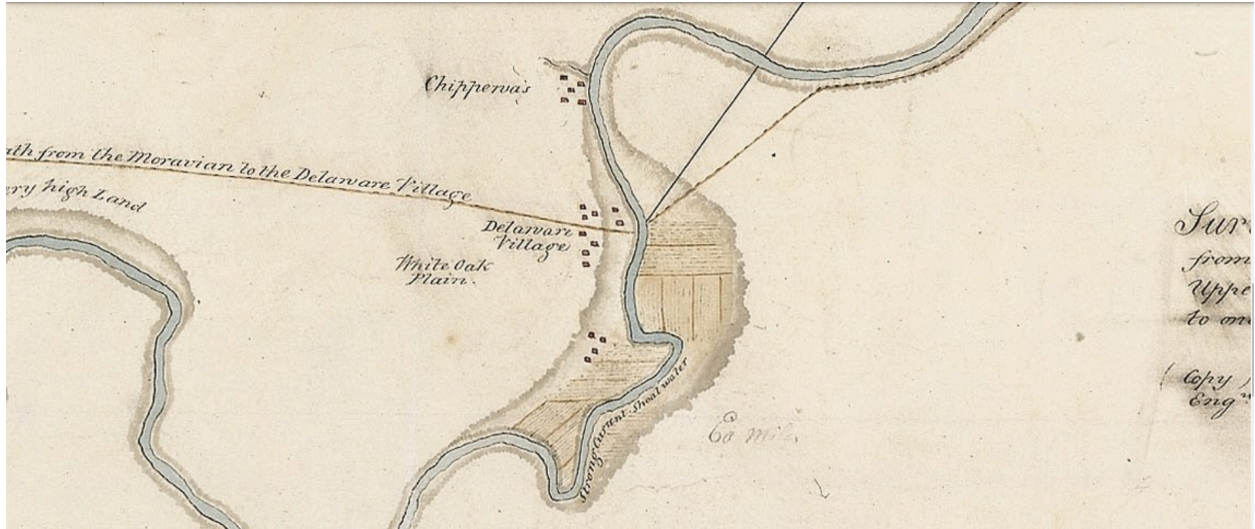
Plan of the River Thames from the Upper Forks to its entrance into Lake St Clair, November 7th, 1795

Survey of the River La Tranche or Thames from its entrance or confluence with Lake St. Clair to the Upper Forks, 1795

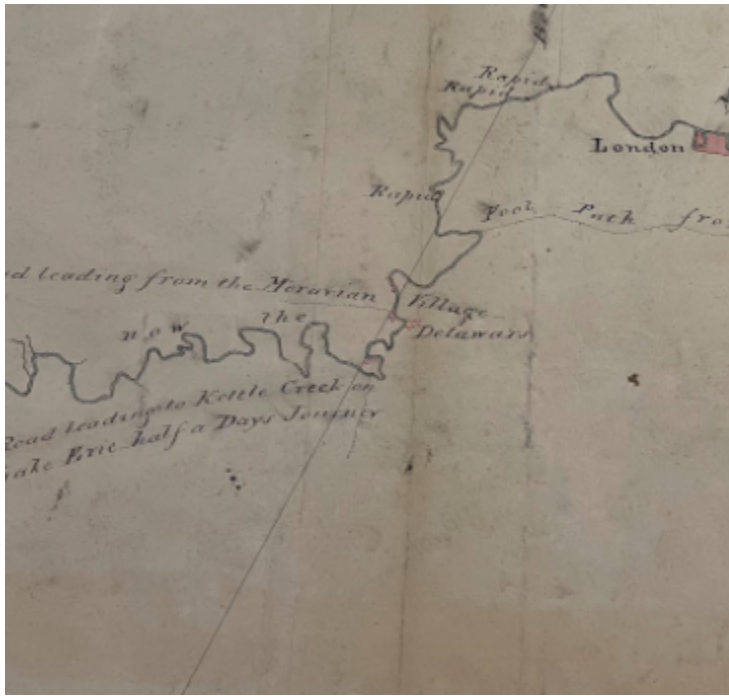
Outline of Governor Simcoe's Route from Niagara to Detroit 1793 (From a Drawing by Lieutenant Pilkington, copied by Mrs. Simcoe.)



Source: Plan of the River Thames from the Upper Forks to its entrance into Lake St Clair



Source: Survey of the River La Tranche or Thames from its entrance or confluence with Lake St. Clair to the Upper Forks



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