

The History of Pictou – Part 1

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Pictou, as was the rest of the Atlantic provinces, was the domain of the Mi'kmaq nation. The first Europeans arrived aboard the Betsey from the thirteen colonies in 1767. Six families settled what came to be known as the Philadelphia Land Grant, among whose signatories were Benjamin Franklin.

The grant was escheated in 1770 and wound up in the hands of Walter Patterson, previously a Judge in the Province of Maryland and then Governor of Prince Edward Island.

In 1773, the first wave of Scottish emigrants arrived aboard the Ship Hector. Ruthlessly misinformed regarding the state of the settlement, they were heartbroken at the sight that met their eyes. From the vessel, all they could see was a handful of impoverished shelters and the unbroken descent of the virgin forest to the shoreline.

Thirty three families and 25 single men disembarked from the Hector, dismayed but determined to succeed. The Highlanders, some of whom had survived the Battle of Culloden, were a tenacious lot who pitted themselves against the cruel climate and hard environment they encountered.

With the help of the Mi'kmaq's, they were able to live through their first winter and prepare for the work of creating a community in the wilderness. Before a meager existence could be coaxed from the soil, the land had to be cleared, and laborious, dangerous and time consuming task.

What at first appeared to be an almost unsurmountable hardship quickly became the first economic base of the community. Squared pine timbers were in great demand to be used as masts for British men-of-war vessels. This primary exploitation of the environment and a naturally sheltered harbour soon established the town as an important port second only to Halifax.