

Surveying in the 1800s

By Susan Parker

Surveying in the nineteenth century was no easy task. While modern surveying tools include scanners and drones, in the nineteenth century surveyors were limited to basic tools like chains. A standard chain was sixty-six feet long and contained one hundred links. Chains allowed for a common measurement until steel tapes become more commercialized by the end of the century.

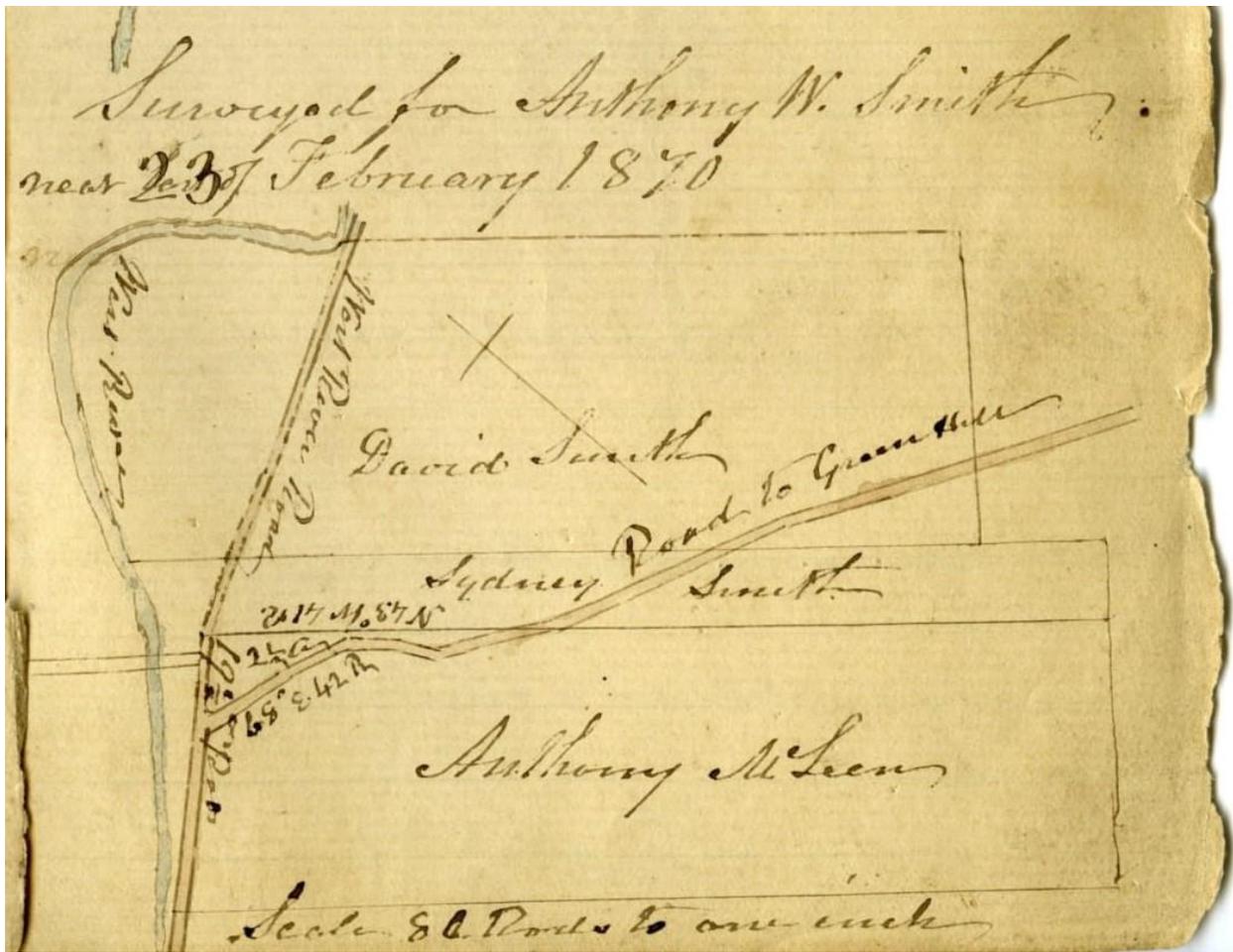
The work of surveyors was important to measure land for deeds, grants, wills, boundary disputes, and especially the building of roads and railroads. For those tracing your ancestor's properties, you may also find references to landmarks, such as a brook or tree, or to the properties of neighbours. Some local surveyors included Albert McKean Alexander W. McBean, Samuel Copeland, George Hattie, James Holmes, and Ebenezer McLeod.

Examining a surveying notebook from the 1860s and 1870s shows the range of reasons that someone may call upon a surveyor. The book belonged to Ebenezer McLeod of West River and contains dozens of maps and property descriptions (a digital copy of the book is available for free on Haggis, McCulloch Centre's online archives system). On one occasion in April 1867, a line dispute between David McKenzie and Alexander Munroe brought Ebenezer to Roger's Hill. Measuring in rods and links, Ebenezer worked with fellow surveyor George Hattie to settle the issue.

Several of Ebenezer's maps include information about early landowners and roads. Often they included names of forgotten paths, such as Botany Bay Road, or the shaping of roads we know today along Greenhill, West River, and Durham. Ebenezer's book also includes the division of land between siblings and parents, demonstrating important genealogical information.

On the map included here, Ebenezer completed a survey for Anthony W. Smith of West River around the 23rd of February 1870. The roads include West River Road (now West River East Side Road) and Greenhill Road, with land divided between David Smith, Sydney Smith, and Anthony M'Lean. Later on in the notebook, Ebenezer lists the measurements of each parcel, the degrees of angles, and important landmarks (trees, brooks, the West River). This is an example of a division between family, connecting David and Sydney. It can also help locate the family's farms and mill locations, information that is often lost without the help of maps. The Smiths were one of the first families in the West River area, first settling in Prince Edward Island before coming to Pictou around 1776. They feature prominently through Ebenezer's notebook as the family spread out across both sides of the West River.

These surveying maps can be used as a tool to locate family connections, trace deeds, and see the changes in land and roads, including roads no longer in use or since renamed. They provide a snapshot of history and communities of the past.



Page from Ebenezer McLeod's surveying book