

PORTER ADAMS AND GRAPE-GROWING IN NIAGARA

In my last article I examined the oft-repeated claim that the father of Canadian winemaking is Johann Schiller, who is said to have established Canada's first commercial winery in 1811, using wild grapes growing near his farm in Toronto Township. It turns out that there is very little basis for this claim. As it happens, Schiller is not the only "pioneer" celebrated in books and articles about the Canadian grape and wine industry. Another is Porter Adams, who according to Percy Rowe in *The Wines of Canada*, published in 1970, is "honoured by grape-growers" as the first person in Ontario "to systematically plant and cultivate vines." This, says Rowe, was in Niagara Township in 1857.

If this seems rather late in the day, bear in mind that the Ontario grape and wine industry did not really get going until after mid-century. There were no doubt Loyalist and other settlers who were making wine for domestic use, having acquired the art back in the American colonies or in Europe (indeed Schiller may have been one of them), and there were also those who cultivated grapes on a small scale, but significant development did not begin until the late 1850s.

Grape- and Fruit-Growing before Adams

Hard evidence of winemaking in Upper Canada and the first decade of Canada West is almost completely lacking, but there is definite proof of grape-growing. Some of the first references, as stated in my last article, appear in the damage claims submitted by farmers and other landowners following the War of 1812. Thus Thomas Merritt of Grantham claimed for the loss of "grape vines," and Robert Kerr of Niagara sought compensation for the destruction of "four vineyards." While neither states why he was growing grapes, the very fact that they submitted claims indicates some measure of cultivation.

Further evidence comes from Robert Gourlay's *Statistical Account of Upper Canada*, published in 1822 and incorporating the results of a detailed township questionnaire survey conducted in 1817. Question number 9 (out of a total of 31) asked about "the general character of the soil and surface," and one short sentence in the response from Louth Township speaks volumes. It reads, "Grapes have succeeded well in the Niagara District." The sentence comes just after a list of the various fruits grown in the township, "apples, pears, peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums, cherries, gooseberries, raspberries, and currants." The juxtaposition of fruit and grapes is appropriate, for as grape-growing emerged during the first half of the 19th century it was very much a part of the developing fruit industry.

Prior to the War of 1812 the predominant crop in the Niagara Peninsula was wheat, but the trend thereafter was towards diversification. One aspect of this was fruit-growing, which already had something of a history in the area. In 1793 Elizabeth Simcoe wrote from Navy Hall, "We have 30 large May Duke Cherry trees behind the house & 3 standard Peach trees" — these had presumably been planted earlier by the military — and by the turn of the 19th century many farmers had established orchards. This is very evident from the 1812 war claims, where the destruction of orchards was a common complaint. In addition to his vines, Merritt lost 30 apple trees, 20 each of cherry and peach trees, plus apricot, plum and quince trees, while Kerr lost "a large nursery of grafted and inoculated [sic] fruit trees of all descriptions," among them 6 varieties of plums, 11 of peaches, and 12 of apples.

Similar losses are recorded in other claims. Ralfe Clench of Niagara sought compensation for 70 "large healthy bearing [apple] trees, [of which] almost the whole were the best of grafted fruit, and there was not an apple tree among them [that was not] choice." People like Clench were clearly engaged in serious fruit-growing, but it was on a small scale and probably intended mainly for local consumption. Though some may have shipped fruit to York, Kingston and elsewhere, the distance to major centres of population, the rudimentary transportation facilities, and the fact that much business was still conducted by barter, hindered serious commercial ventures.

But fruit-growing continued to increase in importance, and with it the cultivation of grapes. There are many indications of this, among them the emergence of professional nurserymen such as William Custead, whose land in Toronto Township lay just three miles east of what had been Johann Schiller's homestead. In 1827 he published an 18-page catalogue featuring many types of fruit and ornamental trees, plus eight varieties of grape vines — Early White, Boston Sweet Water, Bland's Virginia, Isabella, White's Sweet Water, Jersey, Black Frontenac and French Chocolate. To facilitate ordering he engaged agents throughout Upper Canada, including ones at Queenston and Niagara. In 1839 acquiring nursery stock locally became even easier when Chauncey Beadle founded the St. Catharines Nursery; his first catalogue, dated 1841, featured grape vines selling for 25¢ each.

The same period saw a number of important developments in the promotion of agriculture, among them the establishment of markets (the very first at Niagara in 1817), fairs (including an annual province-wide exhibition in 1846), periodicals (for example, *The Canadian Agriculturist* in 1849) and

societies (such as the Fruit Growers Association in 1859). These provide a clear picture of the ever-increasing importance of fruit-growing (and with it grape cultivation), as evidenced by lectures delivered at society meetings, articles in newspapers and magazines, and competitions at fairs and exhibitions.

Porter Adams

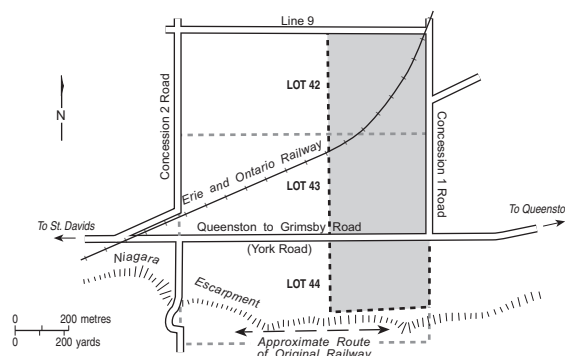
The fruit-growing industry received a major boost in 1853-55 with the completion of the Great Western Railway from the Niagara River (at what became Clifton) through Hamilton to Toronto and Windsor. This provided easier access to major markets, and by the late 1850s a number of Niagara Peninsula farmers were growing fruit for sale. The same decade also saw the start of commercial grape-growing and winemaking, and this brings us to Porter Adams.

Percy Rowe's claim that Adams (full name Elias Porter Adams) was "the first to systematically plant and cultivate vines" in Ontario is repeated in one form or another by other writers (though far fewer, it must be said, than espouse Johann Schiller as the father of winemaking). He is said to have set up his vineyard in 1857, on Spring Farm — the former Secord Farm — roughly midway between St. Davids and Queenston. As has already been pointed out, many others had planted grapes before this, but the key word here is "systematically," suggesting that his was a commercial operation. That, certainly, is what is implied, if not stated explicitly, in what others have written about Adams. Several add that by the 1860s he was shipping grapes across Lake Ontario to the Toronto market.

William Rannie devotes much space to Porter Adams in his 1978 book *Wines of Ontario*. While granting that the claim made for Adams even appears in government publications, he voices skepticism. This may be one of those things that "everybody knows," he says, but there is a dearth of "positive substantiation." Rannie then raises an important question with the claim, which is that in 1857, when Adams is supposed to have planted his vineyard, he was only 13 years old! (Family genealogies suggest that he was even younger — just 11.)

Further research brings up another major problem. According to registry office records Adams did not buy the land in question until almost a quarter of a century later, in 1883. His purchase of 83 acres, 38 perches included the eastern parts of Niagara Township lots 42 and 43 on the north side of the Queenston to Grimsby Road (today's York Road) and a portion of lot 44 on the south. Originally the land had belonged to David Secord, who had been granted several hundred acres after the American Revolutionary War. Over time his land was subdivided and sold, including portions severed in the 1830s and '50s for successive routes of the Erie and Ontario Railroad linking Chippawa and Queenston, and later Niagara.

In the instrument of sale dated May 31, 1883 Adams is identified as a yeoman from Louth Township, and the "vendor" as a group of six men headed by Lucius Oille of St. Catharines. They had bought the land the previous year from the sons of the late David Thorburn, who had owned the property since 1861, and before that it had belonged to Queenston merchant Job Chubbuck. (Rannie and others say that Adams obtained the land from his grandfather George, but they are incorrect.)



Porter Adams' land in Niagara Township in about 1900

Porter Adams clearly did not establish a vineyard on this land in 1857, for he was much too young at the time and he did not acquire the property until 1883. Which invites the question, how could such a misconception come about? Ironically perhaps, it originates in one of the government publications mentioned by Rannie. There were two, both issued as Ontario Department of Agriculture research bulletins: *The Grape Growing Industry in the Niagara Peninsula*, by T.B. Revett, published in 1912, and *The Grape in Ontario*, by F.M. Clement, published in 1916.

In a brief opening historical review, Revett names several grape-growing pioneers from the 1850s and '60s. The very first is Adams, of whom he says, "About 1857 some grapes were planted on a farm belonging to Mr. Porter Adams, situated in Niagara Township." Four years later Clement repeats the names, but what he says about Adams differs in one key respect, "The first record of planting that has been brought to the attention of the writers is that of the small area set out on the farm now owned by Mr. Porter Adams, at Queenston, in the Township of Niagara, in the year 1857."

The key difference is the phrase "now owned." Presumably Revett did not intend to say that Adams planted grapes in 1857, but his wording gave that impression. Clement expressed himself more carefully, but by then it was too late. The claim that Adams was the first person in Ontario to plant grapes was public, and has been accepted uncritically by many other writers since. Of course, Porter Adams may indeed have grown grapes on his land, which he held from 1883 till his death in 1921, but not in 1857. If anyone grew grapes in 1857, it would have been the owner at the time, Job Chubbuck, but this may be impossible to prove.

Postscript to Porter

If there is no basis for the Porter Adams claim, there is ample supporting evidence for some of the other grape-growers mentioned by Revett and Clement, and for others besides. Indeed, the late 1850s and early '60s saw a big rise in the numbers involved in the nascent grape and wine industry. Not surprisingly, there was considerable variation in what they were doing. Some operated on a limited scale, while others were more ambitious, though the work was rarely more than a sideline for anyone. Some were just growing table grapes (the main market at the time), while others were fermenting wine. There was also a great deal of experimentation with different grape varieties — the Concord, which was to dominate the industry well into the 20th century, was introduced about 1850 — and there was much debate on the relative merits of cultivating grapes under glass (with or without artificial heat) as opposed to growing them outdoors.

One of the earliest commercial grape-growers was William Haskins of Hamilton, a self-described amateur whose full-time job was manager of the city waterworks. In 1880 he reported to the Ontario Agricultural Commission that he had planted grapes 21 or 22 years before, which could mean as early as 1858. In 1862, according to Revett and Clement, William H. Read of Louth Township planted three acres of Concord, Delaware and Hartford Prolific grapes. But he must have already been growing grapes, for he won three prizes for grapes at the 15th Exhibition of the Provincial Agricultural Association held in Hamilton in 1860.

Another prizewinner, for the best four clusters of black grapes “grown in open air,” was John C. Kilborne of Beamsville. (Second was J.G. Keefer of Thorold — not normally considered grape and wine country.) Kilborne was a regular exhibitor at these events, and may have been growing grapes since the mid-1850s. He was also making wine, and in an 1860 letter to the *Canadian Agriculturist* he says, “The wine sells in this locality for one dollar and three quarters per gallon, and would probably bring more if we asked it, at all events it is worth four times as much as the miserable stuff generally sold by our merchants under the name of wine.” He adds that in 1857 “four or five barrels of wine were grown from a single vine in one season in the Township of Grimsby,” but it is not clear if he was the vintner.

In these circumstances it is next to impossible to identify any one person as the first to grow grapes or to make wine commercially. Having said that, there is one name that does stand out, that of William Whitney Kitchen, of Grimsby, who without question went much further than most. His grandfather, also named William, was among the earliest settlers of Grimsby and Clinton Townships, and by 1790 had established saw and grist mills on the 30 Mile Creek. William Whitney himself was born in 1824 in Dumfries Township, just north of today's Brantford.

He evidently spent time in the United States, for he came to Grimsby from Iowa in 1858. That same year his father Charles bought about 90 acres of land just west of the present downtown, located mainly in township lot 12 in concession 1, extending north from what is now Main Street West to Lake Ontario. This is where William began to farm. The Great Western Railway bisected the property; to the north he established the Grimsby Thoroughbred Shorthorn Stock Farm, and to the south the Grimsby Fruit Farm, which he planted with trees and vines in 1859. In 1867 he bought the land from his father. And he prospered, the best indication of this being the unusually detailed depiction of his property on the Grimsby town map of 1876 in H.R. Page's *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the Counties of Lincoln & Welland*. In defiance of standard cartographic practice, the map is tantamount to an advertisement for Kitchen (and besides, it sits opposite a page devoted solely to pictures extolling his cattle).

This would not have come cheap. Nor would the full-page advertisement he took out in the 1866 *Canadian Almanac* promoting his wine — winner of many awards at provincial exhibitions, “a pure article, good for medicinal purposes ... sold by most of the principal chemists in Canada East and West,” and “in use by some hundreds of churches, for sacramental services.” Curiously, there is no mention of consuming wine for its own sake, though local newspaper advertisements commencing in 1867 do add that “it is sent everywhere to private families and to hotel-keepers.” By this time he had for sale 20,000 gallons of wine, port and sherry (at \$2.50 a gallon, less 25¢ for orders of 10 gallons or more), plus 80,000 grape vines.

Conclusion

William Kitchen, who died in Rochester in 1909, was clearly a very significant figure in the early history of the grape and wine industry in the Niagara Peninsula, if not in Ontario and Canada. But given what we have learned about Schiller and Adams, we must not get carried away. We know a fair bit about Kitchen, but there may be others in the Peninsula, yet to be identified, who were doing similar things. Such people certainly existed elsewhere in the province, and one in particular must be mentioned. This is Justin De Courtenay, who during the 1860s was manager of the Clair House vineyards in Cooksville (on land that had originally belonged to Schiller). De Courtenay was without question an immensely important figure, in some respects much more so than Kitchen. For proof I refer you to “Justin De Courtenay and the Birth of the Ontario Wine Industry,” a forthcoming article in *Ontario History* by Richard Jarrell, and essential reading for anyone interested in the topic.

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