

# The Hamlets of Austin

By Serge Wagner, Local Heritage Council

Colonization on the territory of Austin began in 1793, closely followed by the appearance of small hamlets. Most have since vanished and are now forgotten. The story of these small settlements is featured in a series of articles.

## Head of the Bay: The Hamlet That Wasn't

As Nicholas Austin and his Associates settle on the shores of Gibraltar Point and the vicinity in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, one of the first orders of business is to find streams on which to build grist and saw mills, as mills are essential for self-sufficiency and usually spur the development of hamlets.

On the Powell brook, the steepest grade is located some distance away from the lakeshore. Associate Alexander Thompson erects a first mill there, which becomes the heart of a first hamlet – Thompson Mills – centered around its grist and saw mills.

The brook has a lesser grade near the mouth of Lake Memphremagog, at the head of Sargent's Bay. From 1820, a dam, a few mills (a carding mill and a cloth dressing mill) and a potashery are built. The potashery provides the local population with a means to dispose of the wood ashes produced by land clearing and animal husbandry. A sawmill, a blacksmith's shop and a store are also established nearby.

By 1851, even as a post office opens its doors, the locality is already in decline. The farmers are moving away from sheep farming and the mills no longer fulfill their needs. The brook's low rate of flow does not justify new constructions and its banks are too steep for agriculture. As a result, the population shifts toward Peasley Corner and Thompson Mills close by, or to the valley of the Missisquoi River in the township's interior, spurring the growth of the new hamlets of South Bolton, Bolton Centre and Bolton Forest. Meanwhile, other hamlets in the regions grow into veritable villages: Georgeville, and especially Outlet-Magog, excised from Bolton Township in 1849.

Head of the Bay (or Bayhead, as it is also referred to) loses some of its identity when, in 1861, the post office is renamed East Bolton and its school is moved to Peasley Corner. By 1863, only eight buildings remain, including a store, a blacksmith's shop (and post office) and a boot and shoe shop. The mills and the potashery have closed.

There follow two periods of optimism. The first arises from the township's short-lived mining boom of 1865, in which the landing plays a role. Hopes that a train and a grand station would materialize on the shore of Lake Memphremagog fuel the second, inspiring trader Alexander Sargent to build an inn for passengers of the train which, in the end, would never come.

Progressively, both entrepreneurs and population migrate toward more promising hamlets or to the United States. As early as 1866, the mills have gone to decay and historian Cyrus Thomas characterises the hamlet as "inconsiderable". The *coup de grâce* comes in 1878, when the post office is removed to Peasley Corner.



Picnicking on Sargent's Bay, Lake Memphremagog

For some years, Bayhead, renamed Sargent's Landing, serves as a landing pier for the seasonal residents who travel by steamer, but this picturesque role is also eventually redirected to Knowlton's Landing and Bryant's Landing.

Paradoxically, the failure of Head of the Bay has contributed to preserve this magnificent rural haven from which a parcel, the Powell Brook Natural Reserve, was established just recently.

Main Sources: Thomas 1866, Archéotec 2012, Harrington 1864, Bullock 1926, Booth 1966, Kesteman 2001, Brome County Museum.

