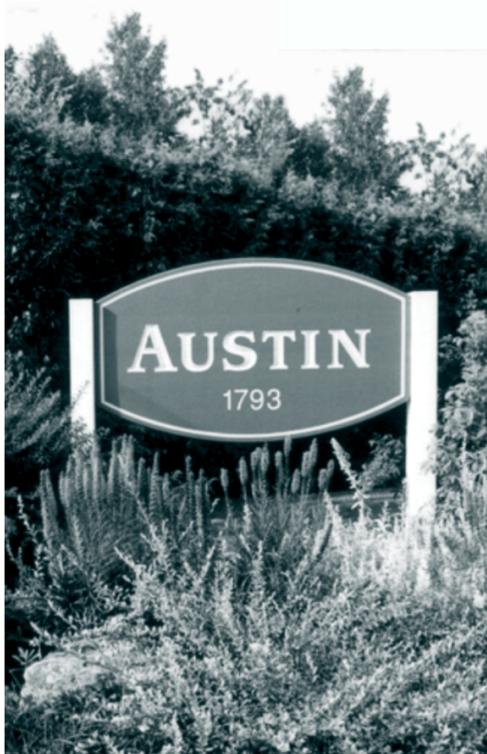


A History of Bolton Township and the Municipality of Austin

Adaptation of a presentation
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Université de Sherbrooke, at St. Augustine
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The Beginning

The history of Austin, which began officially in the late 1930s, can best be understood as part of the history of Bolton Township. Before, it was part of the Municipality of East Bolton, itself the result of an earlier territorial division. In the beginning, Bolton was the only municipality in the Township of Bolton, created in the 1840s within the cadastral limits of the township, granted in 1797. Because the Sutton Mountain chain made it difficult to manage the municipality, it was divided in 1876 into two separate municipalities, East Bolton and West Bolton. The three stages in the division of the original territory were: the granting of Bolton in 1797, the creation of East Bolton in 1876 and of Austin in the late 1930s.

The history of Bolton Township is closely tied to its geography. Lake Memphremagog forms one boundary. Two ridges, part of the Sutton-Orford mountains, cross the township's north-south axis, and between them lies the glacial valley of the North Missisquoi from Silver Lake to Mansonville. Most of the region is unsuitable for agriculture, but it is rich in forestry and mineral resources.

Methodist church



The Topography

It is interesting to note that in this context, where mountain ranges made the movement of people and goods difficult, the part of Bolton Township today occupied by the Municipality of Austin found itself in a fortunate position because of its proximity to the lake. (Think of the difficulties of getting from Bolton to the Montreal lowlands in the early days. Travel through the Sutton Mountains by way of the Bolton Pass only became possible in the 1830s.) As for the north-central part of the township, it is made up of wetlands, mountains and lakes, including Orford and Trousers, and as a result the link between Bolton Centre and Eastman was not completed until around 1860.

The inevitable conclusion is that Bolton was probably destined to be rendered asunder, because the obstacles posed by mountains and wetlands did not encourage the inhabitants to gather.

The Lake

Austin enjoyed the benefits of its proximity to Lake Memphremagog. Both obstacle and means of communication in earlier days, the lake has always been the region's centre of gravity. Until 1854, its two shorelines united the townships of Bolton and Hatley (or Stanstead) in a single county, represented by a single elected member of the legislature. The county took in the municipalities of Magog, Hatley and Georgeville, the administrative centre and site of the first land registry office, which benefited from a crossing point. From the beginning of settlement, the two lakesides were served by a horse-drawn ferry (*Copp's Ferry*) which plied the waters between Georgeville and Knowlton's Landing. At that time, the stagecoach that provided the link between Stanstead and Montreal used the ferry; in winter, it made the crossing by sleigh over the frozen lake.

The opening of a steamship line linking Newport to Magog in the 1850s solidified the Georgeville - Knowlton's Landing route as the crossing point for the stagecoach. However, in 1854, Bolton was attached to Brome County, which meant it was grouped with Brome, Potton, Sutton and Farnham. When the railway arrived, Bolton Centre and South Bolton were linked to Mansonville and Newport to the south, and to Eastman in the north. Around 1930, the arrival of the automobile signalled the end of the steamships. Now the lake was seen as an obstacle since a driver would have to take a long detour to get from one side to the other. But with the creation of the MRC Memphremagog in 1980, the lake once again assumed its role as a centre of interest for nature, tourism and the environment, and Austin found itself once again psychologically oriented towards the lake.

Nicholas Austin

Austin was named for Nicholas Austin, the first settler to make his home on the shores of Lake Memphremagog. Born in New England in 1736, he was a member of the Society of Friends (or Quakers, as they were called). He was a Loyalist who left his home in New Hampshire during the American Revolution to come to Canada. According to some sources, he headed north through uninhabited Vermont on foot in 1783 (some say 1791), to finally reach the future site of Newport. There he bought a canoe from the Indians to continue his explorations. Lured by the western shoreline of the lake, he began to systematically explore the area. He was particularly struck by the beauty and potential of a promontory of land today called Gibraltar Point. He asked the authorities for some land, built a cabin near a portage site used by the Indians and began to clear the land.

At this time, the government refused to give concessions to individuals, preferring to grant most of the land in each township to established groups with a leader who would assume the responsibility of the various costs. Nicholas Austin therefore sought letters patent on behalf of his 54 associates for the lots in Bolton Township. In February 1792, Governor Clarke authorized the cession of properties in the new townships. Once the townships were surveyed, Austin realized that he had been clearing land outside of the Bolton line, in Potton Township. This explains why some authors contend that Austin first cleared a spot in the forest near Vale Perkins. Whether or not this is the case, he chose to settle in Bolton Township and it was the hilly sides of Gibraltar Point on which he had set his heart.

In the winter of 1793, Nicholas Austin returned to New Hampshire to bring back his wife and children, along with furniture and provisions on three sleighs pulled by oxen. Thus in 1794, 1795 and 1796 he and the members of his family, along with other American colonists, became the first settlers in the township.

Monument dedicated to the memory of Nicholas Austin



Villages and Hamlets

There is no doubt that the present territory of Austin corresponds to the earliest settlement of the Township of Bolton by American pioneers. It included several small concentrations of human settlers, which would lead eventually to the creation of, if not villages, small hamlets.

The village of Austin itself is situated on a property cleared in 1794 by Mark Randall, who came from Rye, New Hampshire. It was occupied by Moses Peasley a year or two later, which explains why the existing intersection was known as Peasley's Corner. (It would later take the name of the post office, East Bolton, then finally Austin.)

Jeremiah Page settled near the lake around 1795. In 1798, Simon Wading from Hanover, New Hampshire also settled on the lake-front. He operated the ferry that linked the west shore of the lake with the eastern shore in Georgeville.

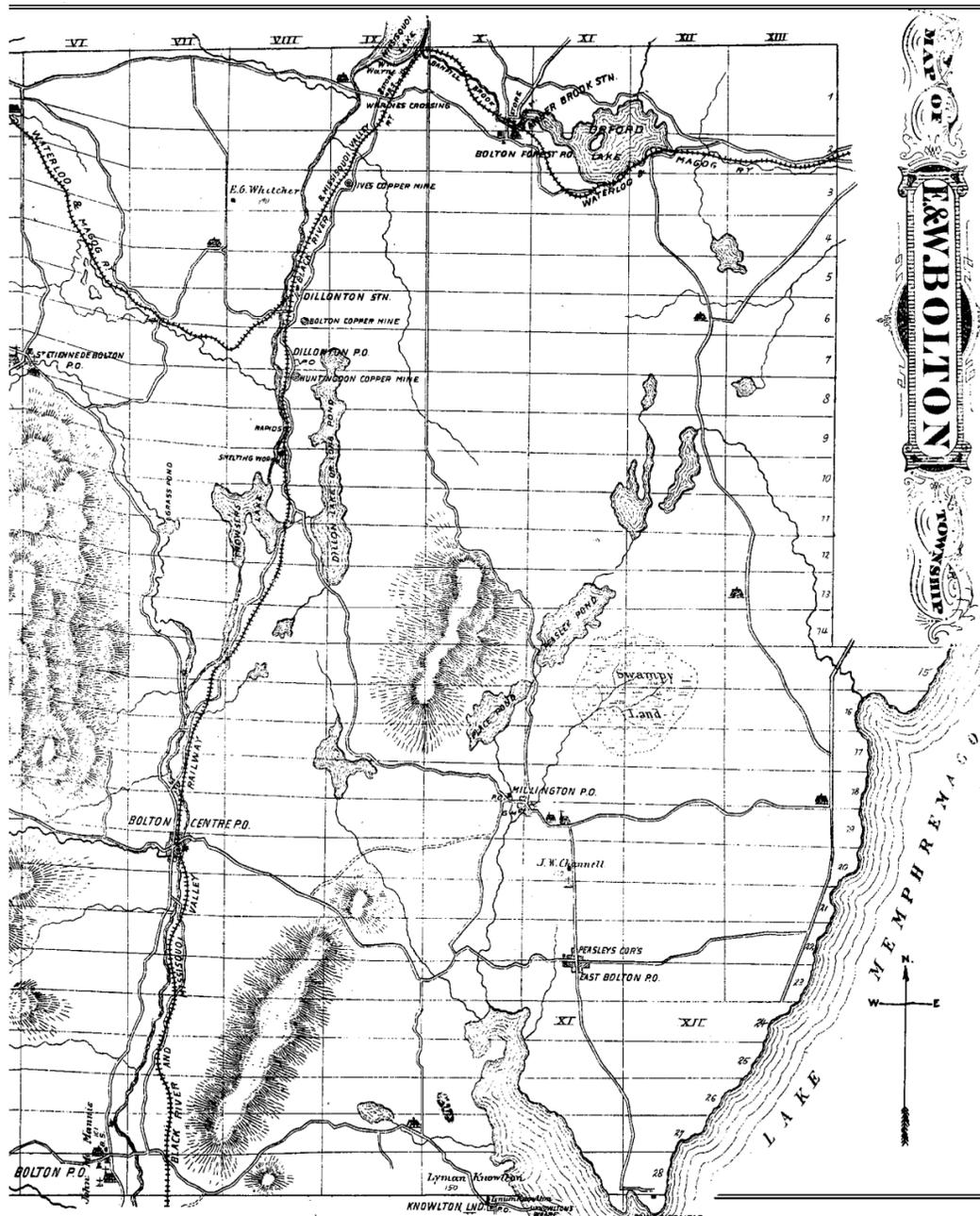
In 1865, two churches were built at the present intersection of the village: an Anglican church, which was sold to the Roman Catholics around 1914, and a Methodist church, which was relocated on a private property on the shores of the lake around 1970.

Coming down the main road, which used to be much more winding, we come to a stream that flows from the chain of lakes and ponds extending all along North Road into the bay. From 1820 on, flour mills were built along this stream; later, a wool carding mill and a fulling mill, a sawmill (in 1828), and a general store run by John Austin (in 1841) were also constructed. This second hamlet, called Head of the Bay, had a larger population and a more important role than Peasley's Corner. Alexander Sargent continued his business there in the 1850s, giving his name to Sargent's Bay. In 1852, the East Bolton post office was established there.

During this same period, two Loyalists, Fredrick and Christopher Bryant, built a wharf on Lake Memphremagog for the *Mountain Maid*, the first steamboat to ply the waters of the lake, between Newport and Magog. From there, a stagecoach served Bolton Centre (formerly called Kimbolton), Brill, Frost Village and Waterloo. Later the boats began to call more frequently at Knowlton's Landing, which was served by the stagecoach that went through the Bolton Pass and on to Montreal. The little hamlet called Head of the Bay became less and less active and the activity turned towards the village of Peasley's Corners, bringing with it the post office that eventually gave its name to the municipality.

In 1794, a couple of kilometres north of the present intersection in Austin, another associate of Nicholas Austin, Alexander Thompson, a Scot who had immigrated to Vermont, established himself. In 1796, he constructed the first watermill in the Township of Bolton, comprising a sawmill and a flour mill - traces of which remain visible to this day - situated on a waterfall on Powell Brook. To reach it, the early settlers had to follow a small path cut through the woods, carrying the wheat to be ground into flour on their backs.

In 1825, the Thompson family built the first church in Bolton, and the following year, the first school was built right next to this Methodist church. This marked the birth of a small hamlet of craftsmen, first called Thompson's Hill, then Millington, and then East Bolton (the name of the post office established there during the 1870s). In 1842, David Taylor opened the first store in Millington. He settled on a nearby piece of land that would stay in his family for more than a century and a half. His father, Daniel Taylor (son of Daniel Taylor, Sr., who was one of the first associates of Nicholas Austin) died at the age of 83. His body rests in a little cemetery situated just before the hamlet, and on his tombstone is written, "He read the Bible 43 times".



East Bolton Post Office 1901-1911



Remains of Thompson's Mill



In 1864, another Taylor, Ernest, gave his first sermon in the little Methodist church at the age of 16. He went on to preach there for more than 50 years. (He was also the author of a book titled *History of Brome County*, which is to this day a treasury of information for historians.) The church, which eventually fell into disuse, was finally demolished in the 1930s. A cairn bears witness to its passing.

To the north of the present territory of Austin, near Orford Lake, long cut-off from the southern part of the municipality, a small settlement emerged, which became the hamlet known as Bolton Forest (post office, 1865). The pioneer families in this area were the Perdues, Phyfields and Shonyos.

Divisions

In its earliest days, Bolton Township was one of the largest in the Eastern Townships, having been extended by the surveyors beyond the 13th range, or concession road, towards the outlet of Lake Memphremagog. At that time, the entire part of what is now Magog north of the Magog River was attached to Bolton, while the part south of the river belonged to Hatley Township. This explains how it came about that Nicholas Austin might have occupied the site of present-day Magog, where he would have set up the first mill on a part of the stone dam built by the Abenaki Indians to catch fish.

The history of Bolton is marked by the cutting up and amputation of its territory. In 1849, the north-east part of the Township (formerly lots 14 to 20), those nearest to the present site of Magog, and the west part of Hatley Township were detached from their respective townships to make the new township of Magog. This was Bolton's first amputation, and it was not to be the last.

In 1876, the four ranges at the extreme western edge of the township became the municipality of West Bolton. In 1888, the territory of Eastman was removed from Bolton and became a municipality. The remainder of the territory of East Bolton, criss-crossed by natural obstacles, would eventually be cut up into several parts:

- the valley of the north tributary of the Missisquoi River which runs north-south around the villages of Bolton Centre and South Bolton;
- the western shore of Lake Memphremagog, from Bryant's Landing to Austin and to Knowlton's Landing; and
- the northern sector around Eastman, Bolton Forest and a settlement called Dillonton, which only started to develop after 1872, when copper mining began. These various territorial divisions explain the slowness and difficulty with which Bolton developed.

Demography

In 1803, when the first official census of the Eastern Townships was taken, the entire population of Bolton Township was 373 habitants. Nine years later, it had risen to 800 persons (as a result of the increasing numbers of American colonists who were arriving). Around 1850, the population reached 2,000 and, at the time of the division of West Bolton and East Bolton in 1876, it had reached 3,000, largely as a result of the development of the mining and forestry industries. When the territory was divided, East Bolton itself had 2,306 inhabitants. In the following century, this population, divided between East Bolton, Austin, St-Étienne, St-Benoît-du-Lac and Eastman, experienced demographic stagnation, even decline, as the 1981 census set the population at 2,300.

There are a number of reasons to explain the slow pace of development in Bolton Township. One was related to the ownership of property. After receiving a land grant from the government, most of Nicholas Austin's associates were reluctant to meet their obligations. On their own, they divided the lots held in common into 54 small lots, without surveying them, and there erected buildings and fences. Many of them never even set foot in the township and eventually sold their lots to speculators, claiming in bad faith that they owned them. The confusion stemming from these transactions prevented farmers of good faith from settling for a long time. The lack of clarity in land titles lasted until the government brought in a law in 1857 to repurchase the rights from speculators and set up a commission to check the deeds of residents.

Other natural obstacles divided the township. The entire north-east part of the township, from Mount Orford, is made up of foothills, lakes and wetlands; in fact, it is a region ill-suited to land-clearing and settlement. In the area of Bolton, there were extensive forests and copper mines. During the first geological studies in the Eastern Townships, British geologist Logan was the first to locate the copper veins that ran along the Missisquoi River between Bolton Centre and Eastman. In the 1860s, three mines were opened (the orange remnants of which are still to be seen from Route 245 near Eastman): the Ives Copper Mine, Bolton Copper Mine, and the main mine, Huntingdon Copper Mine north of Trousers Lake. Stimulated by the increase in the price of copper during the American War of Independence, the operation of these mines brought the railway to Bolton Township, which had remained somewhat marginalized.

The Railroads

In 1860, the Stanstead, Shefford and Chambly Railway line, from St-Jean-sur-Richelieu, ended at Waterloo. The member of parliament from Shefford, L. S. Huntingdon, who had an interest in the mines, had the rail line extended to the mines at Dillonton. The line was not, properly speaking, a railway line, but rather a private track for the mine because Huntingdon, for reasons of economy, did not purchase locomotives. The cars to carry the ore were pulled by horses to Waterloo, where they were sent on to the United States. At this time, ten tons of ore were produced every day, and the local mines and sawmills employed more than 300 persons.

It was The Honorable A.B. Foster of Waterloo and the merchants of Magog who, in association with shareholders of the Vermont Central Railway, built a real railroad in 1878, the Waterloo & Magog Railway, which brought Bolton Township out of its geographically-induced isolation and enhanced the value of its mineral and forest wealth. In 1885, this line was extended to reach Sherbrooke. It was also Senator Foster who had another line built between 1878 and 1912, the Orford Mountain Railway, this time running north-south from Windsor to Newport, Vermont. Both these lines were eventually bought by the Canadian Pacific Railway.

The Turning Point

When the Depression occurred in 1929, agricultural and forestry activity in the region was severely hit, and the Township of Bolton, which had already experienced a demographic exodus during the preceding half-century, suffered a series of blows. Statistics show that between 1881 and 1931, the municipalities of West Bolton and East Bolton lost nearly a quarter of their population. In 1936, the Orford Mountain Railway, the only railway serving the township was taken out of service, and the tracks were taken up between Eastman and Highwater. At this time the municipality of East Bolton which had both English-speaking and French-speaking citizens was also cut in three: the parish of St-Étienne in the north-west; Austin, which was the part nearest to Lake Memphremagog; and East Bolton, the central part of the township corresponding to the Missisquoi Valley. The municipalities of Austin and East Bolton were basically sundered along the axis created by the 9th and 10th ranges.

St-Benoît-du-Lac

The Municipality of Austin surrounds the tiny municipality of St-Benoît-du-Lac, a case unique in Quebec. The abbey with its lands constitutes an independent municipality, of which the leader of the order is also the mayor. The origins of the abbey date from 1912, when the Benedictine monks were chased out of France by laws hostile to religious congregations. Initially, the priory of St-Benoît was nothing more than a farm. The few religious émigrés from France formed a very small religious community, which was weakened in 1914 when their prior drowned in Lake Memphremagog. Nevertheless, the community held on and in the 1930s was strengthened by the arrival of Dom Bellot, a Benedictine from France who made his name as one of the great architects of sacred art. He was responsible for the creation of a new, more modern and more sober architectural style, using a variety of materials and colours. The Abbaye St-Benoît-du-Lac is truly his Canadian masterpiece, serving as inspiration to many Quebec architects for the construction of religious buildings.

Yesterday and Today

We can only understand the history of Austin by looking at the first territorial division into townships, and the subsequent subdivisions. The forces of separation were considerable. Both geography and the rugged terrain played their part, as did, perhaps, the feeling of “separateness” felt by both French and English communities in the 1930s. Today, there are a record number of municipalities in the historical territory of Bolton Township, as it was in 1797, including Magog, the Canton de Magog, Austin, St-Benoît-du-Lac, East Bolton, Eastman, St-Etienne-de-Bolton and West Bolton.

The Municipality of Austin continues to be oriented to the lake. As its first settler Nicholas Austin surely imagined, Austin today has an enviable location on the shores of Lake Memphremagog and Sargent’s Bay, which it shares with its neighbours. The town and surrounding area are being rediscovered by a new type of pioneer: the seasonal-residential visitors. But that is another story – one for future historians to interpret...



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