



Driving the Danforth Road... a film by John A. Brebner

Draft History

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"Driving the Danforth Road" is my signature film project for 2020 - 2022.

It features a summer drive-through, along as much of Danforth's Road that can be ascertained, starting in Bath, at the site of the former Finkle's Tavern, and carrying on west through Prince Edward County to Trenton.

A historical narrative, archival maps, documents and photographs will add information to this educational drive through the history of a long-past era.

Today we drive from Kingston to Toronto on a four-lane highway that takes an easy three hours, far less than the (at least) three days a similar trip would have taken in 1800.

While details about Asa Danforth and his road are available online:

<http://www.transportsourcebook.ca/waterloo-historical-society/yr1919-early-roads-and-transportation.php>

<https://thewalrus.ca/a-taste-of-treason/>

there is surprisingly very little information on the actual route that this pioneering road followed.

In 1795 Danforth won the contract to build a road from the Thames River to Toronto. Paid \$90/mile, his work was evidently satisfactory, because he was awarded the further contract to extend the road to the Trent River. In June 1799, he began this new project. The road was to be 33 feet wide, with 16 feet cut to the ground. Reports suggest that while the road reached Port Hope by December of 1799, and was declared "good" for use in the middle of winter, but an "impassable mud pit" during the wet summers.

It should be noted that at best Danforth was a land speculator, and eager to take advantage of new lands being offered in Upper Canada. Nothing in available histories suggest he was either an engineer, or a road builder. But he seemed to have gained the ear of Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe, who may have been blinded by the idea that roads were necessary to get more Loyalist settlers from the United States into Upper Canada after the Revolutionary War.

https://books.google.ca/books?id=ji02AQAAMAAJ&pg=RA2-PA135&lpg=RA2-PA135&dq=asa+danforth+simcoe+road+1800&source=bl&ots=mHJBp_sVPg&sig=ACfU3U0JK34s_S9MKxf0see4jKfXuxkd4Q&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwikosTfpntAhWjQjABHeqWB0Y4FBDoATAQegQICRAC#v=onepage&q=asa%20danforth%20simcoe%20road%201800&f=false

Simcoe was not expecting a flood of land speculators!

Started in 1799 from York (Toronto) the road connected the nascent settlements along the Lake Ontario shore, arriving in at the mouth of the Trent in Trenton in 1800. That proved to be the easy part!

Danforth secured the second part of his contract from Simcoe in 1800 to continue the road through Prince Edward County, across to Glenora and Adolphustown and on to Bath, where it would connect with the existing road, perhaps one of the earliest (c. 1793) in Canada West, from Bath to Kingston.

But Danforth was having financial problems. He was only paid in instalments, and only after inspection of his work by government officials. Without getting into too many details here, Danforth returned to New York state to recruit more

labourers, and was immediately placed in prison by his principal creditor, Timothy Green in Syracuse, But by signing a concession of judgement, for an amount far larger that he actually owed, he was able to return to Ontario to complete his roadworks.

This would be a more difficult task than the first section of just over 100 miles (170 km) to Trenton. Most of Prince Edward County, especially in the west, was still untamed wilderness. The logistics of bringing a workforce and materiel to begin construction of such a major project were staggering.

For the most part, only by keeping the roadway near Lake Ontario, using local materials when possible, bringing supplies in by boat in the summer and sleigh over frozen Lake Ontario in the winter, made such a daunting task possible.

The good news was that limestone rubble and gravel were easily found along the shores of Lake Ontario, and lumber of all sorts was in abundance.

Labourers were another problem. There were none in Upper Canada, and had to be recruited from New York state.

Danforth was authorized to recommend as many as forty men for land grants of 200 acres, in return for their help in building his road. But that too, was fraught with controversy.

http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/danforth_asa_6E.html

When Asa Danforth's Road reached from Glenora into Adolphustown in 1800, he had reached a settlement that was the first in the area and an already established community of both Loyalists and Quakers from New York State.

After breaking trails through the heavily forested Prince Edward County, this last part of his road was probably the easiest. There were some rudimentary trails along Lake Ontario from Adolphustown to Bath, connecting those early pioneers. In addition, this path presented fewer logistical issues having neither hilly terrain nor marshland.

For the most part, the road followed what is now Highway 33, with (at least) one exception just east of Adolphustown. Here the road looped south on what is now Bayshore Drive, down to the lake, along the lakeshore and back to Highway 33. It should be remembered that the first settlers usually chose lands that fronted on the water, as that really was the only access they had in their early pioneer years; in the summer by rudimentary batteaux and canoes and in the winter over the ice in sleighs. Passage by sleigh from Adolphustown to Napanee, Picton and east to Kingston was relatively smooth and easy during the three winter months when Lake Ontario was solidly frozen, even in the late 18th century years of early settlement.

The "Public Roads Act" of 1793 required every settler to open a road across their lands for a quarter of a mile, in addition to clearing five acres and erecting a house.

<http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/about/mto-100/index.shtml#before1916>

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/roads-and-highways>

It made sense to Danforth to piggy-back on these already-cleared roads for his project. For every four adjacent settlers, he had an already-blazed trail and new-found mile of road already prepared!

Danforth was able to take advantage of that already-cleared land to lay out his road, and that would have been a factor in determining his route.

In 1818 citizens of Adolphustown (led by Thomas Cook) petitioned the Ontario government to build a shortcut to bypass the Bayshore "loop" which wasn't in the best state of repair!

<https://archive.org/details/reportofdepartme10onta/page/18/mode/2up>

Providing access across the "back-40" of your land for a public road was not ideal for the settler. A road could be laid out along a concession line, without using and dividing good farmland. He much preferred that public access pass by his

home and farm buildings on the front of his lot to be of maximum benefit for his own use and commerce, not to mention just being able to see who was passing by, and making sure they were not “up to no-good!”

One of the “markers” that I used in determining a course for the Danforth Road, was locating all original graveyards extant along each possible route. It made sense, that being able to transport the recently deceased to their final resting place needed a passable road. And in many areas in Prince Edward County, where a more direct route might have been suggested, after further research I discovered that Danforth’s road did indeed pass by the already-established cemeteries. Remember that many of the original pioneers had been uprooted from the Colonies in their advancing years, and often did not survive long in their new Canadian homes. By the time Danforth appeared on the scene, many had already lived there for over fifteen years and more than a few had died, and been laid to rest in newly-established graveyards.

A good example of this is the road passing west through Wellington. While today’s Highway 33 west of Wellington would seem to be a logical place to build a road, looking at the cemeteries north of Wellington, and of course, on what is now the Danforth Road suggests that as an alternate route. So Danforth’s road turned north on Consecon Street, past the Wellington Cemetery, and on to the now-named Danforth Road, through Niles Corners, connecting again at Highway 33 just south of the village of Hillier, passing by at least four cemeteries and many homesteads that had been established prior to 1800.

I don’t know that the average settler had much, if any, say in the routing of the road. My feeling is that Danforth took his cues from the man paying his salary - Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe, who had a number of friends and allies in Hastings and Prince Edward Counties (early pioneers Asa Weller and Robert Young owned properties across the road from each other in Carrying Place), and I suspect that they may have planned the route to accommodate and benefit their inns and hostelries that were springing up in that area, as well as to facilitate commercial trading in their own interests.

Once the Provincial Archives reopen, I hope to validate these claims!

A politician in those days was not the “arms-length” parliamentarian disinterested in provincial business and personal benefit that is expected today!

Simcoe had directed Danforth to include the Quaker settlements in the Stinson Block of Hillier Township. There are a couple of possible routes between Hillier and Consecon that might have facilitated that request. But that remains for a future article, or to be revealed in my film!

As for Simcoe, he returned to England in 1797, to be replaced by Peter Russell, who had less patience with Danforth.

And the fate of the road? It soon fell into disuse because a lack of maintenance. And by 1817, the route from Kingston to Belleville (along what is now Highway 2), avoiding Prince Edward County and its ferry restrictions, had become a reality, being joined by a new military road from Bath to Napanee in 1813 that bypassed Adolphustown completely. It should also be noted that these inland roads greatly reduced the dangers to moving troops along Danforth’s original shoreline route, that were so very exposed to a naval attack from Lake Ontario, a liability during the War of 1812.

And in a final irony, Highway 33 is now known as the “Loyalist Parkway”, despite Asa Danforth and his father being such staunch supporters of American independence during the Revolutionary War!

That only adds to the mystery of how Asa Danforth gained that road contract from Simcoe in the first place, who has been quoted as saying that Asa’s father was “the most virulent enemy of Great Britain in that Country.”

I suspect young Asa had more than a touch of “snake oil salesman” in his blood!

What happened to Asa Danforth? He left Ontario with monies owed to him, and returned to Syracuse, where once again he was incarcerated for debt. Last reported in New York in 1821, he was on the run from yet another group of creditors. There are no records after 1821; it is supposed that he died in or near New York in 1821.

I have researched the genealogy of Asa Danforth's family, their revolutionary adventures and pioneering businesses in the salt business in the early settlement of Syracuse, New York:

http://www.friendsofsandbanks.org/pec_genealogies/dan188468.pdf

If one of your readers could add to the images or histories of Danforth's Road in Adolphustown or Prince Edward County, I'd be delighted to hear from you! There is always a place in my film for a personal video interview for any local historian with a tale, and I have a soft spot for "before and after images" that would illustrate the Danforth Road route.

I expect the film to be in final editing by late summer, 2022, with a release date of early 2023. I hope to have the premier showing in Adolphustown in the spring of 2023.

