

Bronte's Origins

Boats have not only sailed out of Bronte Harbour for almost two centuries, but many have been designed, built, repaired or modified in or near this little harbour.

On earlier maps and charts, Bronte Creek was officially the Twelve Mile Creek, being twelve miles from what was deemed the head of Lake Ontario. When the Crown (government) negotiated with the native people for the land from Burlington Bay to the mouth of the Etobicoke Creek, they left the areas around the mouths of the three Creeks including the Twelve (Bronte) and the Sixteen (Oakville) as native reserves.

About 12 years later, the native people gave up their rights in return for the promise of houses near the Credit River mouth. In 1826 the lands on either side of the creek were first auctioned off in two large parcels, but their purchasers, unlike William Chisholm at the Sixteen Mile, did not develop them. The lands on either side of the mouth of the creek were surveyed in 1834 and a townsite laid out. There were six ranges of lots with the smaller lots near the waterfront and larger lots farther inland. The northern boundary followed the Concession line, which is now Rebecca Street. The other boundaries were named East Street and West Street, as they remain today.

Settlers needed lumber and grist mills and a harbour deep enough to ship goods in and out. The mouth of the creek was very shallow. A man named S.B. Harrison, who had political connections, arrived and built a mill. He managed to spearhead a public company to deepen the creek entrance and build piers on both sides, with a lighthouse on the east pier. (The Bronte Harbor Company used the U.S. spelling, Harbor, on their public shares, which sold for 12 pounds 10 shillings per share.) By 1856 the harbour was open for business and the Bronte Harbor Company was collecting shipping tolls.

Two sawmills supplied plenty of wood for Bronte shipyards in the mid 1800's. Two-masted schooners, initially for the grain and lumber trades, were built in Bronte and Oakville by Melachton Simpson. They were christened such names as Peerless and Flying Cloud. In 1858 a large grist mill opened. Although built beside the creek, it was powered by steam, one of the first in Upper Canada.

The sudden drop in the grain trade and the coming of rail transportation greatly reduced the commercial and passenger shipping out of small harbours like Bronte. When the commercial schooner trade slowed down, men came ashore and brought their woodworking skills. Some built boats, some built houses, some built both. In the later 1800's Lem Dorland and Dalton McDonald built smaller two-masted boats for the fishing trade. These were variations on the mackinaw boat that was popular on the great lakes at the time. Dalton also designed and built a series of small flat-bottom schooner-rigged vessels for the Stonehooking trade. In all, he built about 30 boats. The village blacksmith also had an important role in the shipbuilding trade. At his forge he fashioned and repaired the metal bolts, chainplates and other fixtures that were needed on the boats.

Before the end of the century, large freight carriers on the Great Lakes began converting to steam. Piles of firewood had to be ready for the hungry boilers, and trails of smoke billowed across the horizon. Most sailors liked the feel of working the sailing ships, but ironically the sailors' union probably accelerated their demise. The newly-formed union demanded a minimum wage of \$1.50 to work on full-rigged sailing ships. The owners may have seen this as a reason to do away with the tall masts and sails. Many vessels were de-masted and turned into tow-barges to be towed around the lakes by tugboats. Gasoline engines appeared on Bronte fishing boats around the turn of the century and gradually replaced wind power. At first the boat owner took out one mast, but kept one for backup. As the engines became more reliable, the second mast was removed and conversion was completed. Fishing was always a hazardous business, and not being totally dependent on the wind reduced the danger to some extent. Thus the graceful days of sail disappeared from Bronte. The annual fishermen's regatta switched from sail to power boat races. In the summers when the fish were fewer, a few Bronte men continued to find work under sail crewing for wealthy Oakville or Toronto yacht owners. In Bronte, sails finally returned with the advent of the Bronte Harbour Yacht Club, just over 100 years from 1856 when the harbour first opened for business.