

# Ruminations on a “fisherman’s path”

## Land as palimpsest

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*Palimpsest: “1. a piece of writing material or manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for other writing. 2. a place, experience, etc. in which something new is superimposed over traces of something preceding it. [Latin: palimpsestus from Greek palimpsestos from palin again + psetos rubbed smooth]” (Barber 1047).*

For the past several years, I have been doing research on a Black pioneer settlement in Artemesia Township, in Grey County, Ontario. Until recently, this historic settlement was rendered marginal to the dominant pioneer narrative as it was told by local residents in their tourist publications, museum, and local histories. My work, and that of other invested and concerned historical and cultural workers, has attempted to reinsert this community into the local narrative about the area’s history. I base this paper on the premise that while the present is presumed to always overwrite the past, the past “always shows through the surface of the present” (Gunn 236).

I have organized this paper somewhat like a palimpsest, presenting layers of information that cover and uncover, reveal and hide. The term “palimpsest” has often been used as a conceptual tool for understanding the layering and overwriting of history and culture, not only in archaeology, but also in cities, architecture, archives (see Gunn; Thomas; Daniel and Levi), and on the land. My ruminations, here—essentially a reflective revisiting of my recent research—attempts to juxtapose layers of the past and present, the dominant and the marginalized, in a way that hopefully disrupts the very idea of a single, final narrative about this historic settlement.

My parents bought land along the Old Durham Road in Artemesia Township, Grey County, in the mid-1960s. The three adjacent 50-acre lots slope gently down to and across the Saugeen River. We learned from a neighbour that our land had once belonged to a “Black preacher”<sup>1</sup> and that in the nineteenth century “Queen Victoria” had

given the land to “Black slaves” coming up from the United States. This small scrap of oral history stood in for this ‘disappeared’<sup>2</sup> settlement until 1990, when the community gathered to commemorate the small burial ground that had served the Black settlers from about 1850 to the 1880s. The burial ground, now registered as a cemetery, is the only formal marking of this historic community, which had been sidelined in the history books, and generally side-stepped and denied by local people. The White settlers, mostly from Scotland and Ireland, are known as the area’s “true pioneers,” even though on this particular stretch of the Old Durham Road the very first settlers were Black.

On one of our three lots there is what we call “the fisherman’s path,” an informal but well-trodden trail from the old road down to the river. My parents explained that while we owned the land on either side of the river, we did not own the river, and that the public had access to the river through our property, because the path had been in use for a long time. We were quite used to going for walks along the river and on the “fisherman’s path” and meeting the fly “fishermen” coming and going from the river.

I believe that “fishermen” are protective of their favourite fishing spots, and so, over the 50+ year period that my family has owned this land, we have never been plagued by what might be termed ‘over-use.’ The “fishermen” do not leave garbage or beer bottles. They do not linger or picnic. I would say that there are now significantly fewer “fishermen” than there were when I was a child. Perhaps they neglected to tell their children where they fished. Or



Old planked foot bridge. Photograph by Naomi Norquay.

perhaps there are fewer people willing to venture down a closed and growing-in road to find an unmarked path to a river that cannot be seen from the highway.

### **Moment 1**

About 40 years ago, some beavers decided to build a home close to the path, where two small streams conjoined on their way down to the river. They built a dam that blocked both streams and created an enormous pond that flooded the path. Their food source was a tall stand of poplar trees through which the path wound its way to the flood plain. The beaver pond meant that anyone trying to use the path down to the river had to make a detour along the edge of the dam and pick up the path where it continued on the riverside of this seemingly spontaneous habitat. We did not mind. The pond froze in the

winter, and we enjoyed watching steam rise off the beaver mound on the very cold days. At some point the food was gone and the beavers moved on. Apparently, our neighbour, who had a pond of his own, was anxious to keep the beavers out, as their dam-building might cause the pond to overflow its banks and the berm to give way. Without our permission, and likely without knowing that the beavers were no longer there, he blew up the dam, just where the two streams joined forces. We were not present when this happened, but the devastation we found suggested something of the force of the water rushing out. The water pulled the topsoil away, cedar trees were toppled, and right on the path, where the soil had been stripped, an old wooden planked footbridge came into view. I do not know who might have put it there, but it had been hidden from view by the topsoil and then the water, until the dam was blown out. In this uncovering, something of the path’s history had been revealed.

### Moment 2

A couple of years ago, the South Grey Museum in the nearby village of Flesherton was given the professional papers of a retired archaeologist who lived in the community. Among his papers was a report written in 1989 about an archaeological survey he had undertaken in 1984 to “document and locate prehistoric archaeological sites discovered by landowners and farmers throughout the townships of Glenelg and Artemesia, Grey County” (Gray). The archaeologist accompanied local farmers to the sites where they had discovered “prehistoric” [sic] artefacts identified as “scrapers” and “points.” One of the sites appears to be just about where the “fisherman’s path” meets the Saugeen River. The report reads:

The site was accidentally discovered in July of 1984 by Mr. Calvin Hutchenson [sic].<sup>3</sup> Calvin had been fishing along the Saugeen River approximately one kilometre upstream from his home in Priceville. Along the western bank on a low lying flood plain, he spotted what looked like the

light-coloured edge of a clam shell. Upon closer examination a beautifully worked white quartzite projectile point was unearthed. (Gray 9)

The report includes this description of the “fisherman’s path”:

Access: Drive south on the Old Durham Road, off of highway #4, just east of the village of Priceville. When the road turns to the east (approx. 100 metres from the highway), drive down old wagon road to the right and park. Walk south, down the hill to the Saugeen River . . . Present Owner: Unknown. (Gray 10)

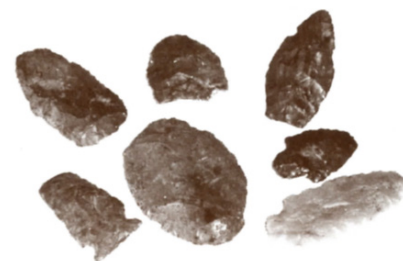
The point, now known as the “Hutchenson Point,” is in the possession of the “fisherman” who found it. The archaeologist placed it tentatively in “the Late Archaic Period” and concluded: “[s]ince the point was found on a low lying flood plain it may suggest that it had been carried downstream and deposited by flood waters or was simply a point that missed its mark” (Gray 9). Mr. Hutchinson’s artifact collection was included in the township’s local history, published in 1986. The image on the right appears in the opening chapter, “Ancient Artemesia” (Hubbert 6). The “Hutchenson Point” is the artefact in the bottom right-hand corner.

### Moment 3

In 1848–49, the Artemesia portion of what is now known as the Durham Road was surveyed by David Gibson. Gibson’s field notebooks from that survey are in the Toronto Archives and are available for scrutiny. A couple of summers ago, I spent some time with them, gingerly turning their pages. Gibson provided descriptive notes for each lot he surveyed along the future road. I had been hopeful that I might find reports of squatters in his notes, that is: people living on unsurveyed land, carving out subsistence amidst the towering forests that then dominated the landscape. Artemesia Township was part of treaty lands surrendered to the British government in 1818 by the Chippewa Nation (Marsh). It was not open for settlement

until after the Durham Road and the Toronto Sydenham Road were surveyed in 1848–49. Oral history suggests that before the area was opened for settlement, Black people may have squatted on the land—thereby sedimenting the claim that they arrived “first.” According to government policy, surveyors were compelled to report any squatters they came across. I found no evidence of squatters in Gibson’s field notes or his report.

I was disappointed that no squatters were reported. However, I was very keen to learn how he described the three lots that my family purchased in 1966. His descriptions were quite similar to the rest of his notes, with one exception. His note for Lot 9—our middle lot—starts with this notation: “old cutting trappers [sic] line; Hem[lock] ridge; Run to S[outh] E[ast] spring water; Maple Bush & Elm descending to the South” (Gibson 9). The place he is describing overlaps the “fisherman’s path.”



Artifacts found in Artemesia Township  
by C. Hutchinson and R. Corbett.

“Hutchenson Point” (bottom right)  
(Hubbert 6).

### Discussion

There is no way to set these moments in any kind of “correct” temporal linearity. While the actual events they concern—the point finding its resting place, the surveyor surveying the road and noting the trapper’s line, the beaver dam blow-out revealing a very old cedar footbridge—did occur in linear time, viewing them through that lens ignores the ways in which history and history-making rely on socio-political, cultural, and ideological underpinnings, which change over time. History is discour-



The presence of an “old cutting trapper’s [sic] line,” in an 1848 report, might indicate that the beavers—and other mammals who live near the river—had long been a resource for human beings. I recall that, up until the late 1970s, my father allowed a man from Priceville to set his trapline in the vicinity of the path, during the winter months. I am guessing that the man approached my father and asked permission to set traplines, because he had done so before. Prior to my family owning the land, it had been jointly owned by two local farming families. Since it was hilly and swampy, they had not used it for farming. Although the land had been cleared and farmed by a Black settler, by the 1960s it was fast filling up with hawthorns, chokecherries, wild apple trees, swamp willow, and cedar. It was a perfect habitat for beavers and other river-based mammals: a good place for a trapline. It was an ideal place to stalk and spear game for survival. It was a good place to find a “Late Archaic Period” point that “missed its mark” (Gray 9). The beavers and their habitat might be understood as standing in for the waves of human presence and intervention. Their age-old cycle of habitat-making holds in place the forgotten, left out, and denied histories.

### *Land as Palimpsest*

I was initially drawn to the concept of land as palimpsest because my evolving understanding has been shaped by the scraping away of narratives. This scraping away has largely been land-based, as I have tried to connect the land to the history in ways that challenge the

dominant White settler narrative. It has relied on archival and oral history research (see, for example, Norquay and Garramone; Norquay), as well as family stories, my own memory work, and a lifetime of walking and working the land. As I have tried to do here, I constantly juxtapose these research methods and their findings, creating my own layers of documentation. As I have scraped away ‘versions of the past,’ I have had to create new narratives. The evidences presented here suggest that while, historically speaking, narratives of “White pioneers” rubbed out and replaced the narratives of “Black pioneers,” and narratives of colonization rubbed out and replaced narratives of First Nations peoples, these narratives all compete for our attention and allegiance at the same time. These layerings are neither discrete nor bounded. Rather, they interrupt and disrupt each other.

This approach to the area’s histories has been helpful in reassuring dubious White settler descendants that their history still “matters,” and is still valid, and that re-inserting Black pioneer and First Nations history into the historical narrative of the area does not undo their history. Imagining that the “fisherman’s path” has been used since time immemorial reminds all settler descendants that their tenure and entitlement resulted from a forced displacement of First Nations people, that they were not “first,” and that the land they ripped open for settlement was not “vacant.” The ‘evidences’ I have ‘uncovered’ and discussed here illustrate the ways in which all the histories of this land are always present. This has been, at least

for me, the value of considering the land as palimpsest.

A palimpsest might be understood as a “dialectic between memory and forgetting” (Thomas 6). Remembering and forgetting participate simultaneously, as scraping away and overwriting do the never-ending work of privileging one history over another. But the dominant history only partially obscures that which it has rubbed out. As prior writings on ancient pieces of velum eventually make their presence known as shadows beneath their successors, so too do the traces of prior inhabitants of the land along what is now known as the Old Durham Road. These traces—these revelations—require our informed imagination. However, once they capture our attention, we must also have the desire to question and challenge the rubbing out and the overwriting. Foremost in our work must be the practice of preservation—not only of what is uncovered, but also of that which did the covering—the overwriting—the land as palimpsest, always, already.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All words appearing in quotation marks indicate common usage in conversation. “Black preacher,” “fisherman’s path,” “Queen Victoria,” “slaves,” etc. all belong to this narrative inheritance.

<sup>2</sup> I am deliberately using the verb ‘disappear’ in the transitive form, in reference to the term used for victims of political persecution in Latin America (los desaparecidos, ‘the disappeared ones’). I do this in order to suggest the deliberate nature of the acts of disappearance that made this community invisible in most historical accounts. See Appiah and Gates 175.

<sup>3</sup> “Hutchenson” is incorrect. The name should read “Hutchinson.”

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