



# Newcastle Village and District Historical Society

NEWSLETTER 154 • WINTER 2025



**Newcastle United Church- Bessie Stephenson's Sunday School Class Circa 1952**

## Bessie Stephenson- from farm girl to the village nurse

**By Myno Van Dyke**

On February 9, 1994, the Newcastle Village & District Historical Society decided to videotape one of local resident, Bessie Mildred Stephenson. The interviewer was Patricia "Pat" Macdonnell (former President and Archivist for NVDHS) and operating the video camera was Ron Locke (also a former President and Board member for many years). Also present for the interview was Mrs. Lena Graham and it appears the interview was done at her home. In this video, Bessie outlines her fascinating life story.

Bessie Mildred Clark was born in 1910 at the Clark family farm on the north side of Baseline Road (now called Metcalf Street) in Bond Head. The 100-acre farm located on the east side of the railway tracks was previously a "Crown Deed" so her family (great-grandfather Latham Clark) were the first owners. Her

father was Charles Merkley Clark, son of Robert Clark, one of the founders of the Durham Woolen Manufacturing in Newcastle. He was born in 1876 and died fairly young at the age of 60 in 1936. Bessie's mother was Bertha Edith Broad, daughter of James Broad and Hannah C. Walbridge. She was born in 1879 and died in 1969, at the age of 90.

Bessie and her 8 siblings were all brought into this world by their neighbour, Dr. Alfred Farncomb. He would often walk over to the Clark farm and look after their various medical needs. Bessie said that Dr. Farncomb would often be paid with hay instead of money.

Their neighbours to the west were the Jose family. In a 2008 NVDHS newsletter, Francis Jose wrote a story about railway accidents at the Metcalf Street CNR crossing and one of those stories involved Bessie. The Clark and Jose families were not only neighbours but related through the Walbridge family.

*"When Bessie Clark was a small child, about two years old, her mother walked over to help my Grandmother Jose prepare meals for the threshing crew, leaving Bessie with other members of the family. Bessie decided later to follow her mother, however, by the time she got out to the end of the long lane, she got tired and sat down on a rail and went to sleep. Soon, a westbound freight train came along and was unable to stop before reaching her. One of the engine crew climbed out on the side of the locomotive and was able to get to the cow catcher on the front of the engine and pick up Bessie as the train was stopping. He then took the child to the nearest home and bawled out my grandmother for not looking after her children." ~Francis Jose*

Bessie started attending Newcastle Public School when she was 6 years old and walked there and back each day, usually with her siblings. Occasionally she could get a ride with Dr. Farncomb in his horse and buggy. In the winter there were horses pulling sleds to get blocks of ice down at Lake Ontario and the children would be able to hop on there for ride.

Bessie explained that there were three rooms in the "Public School" on the main level and three rooms in "High School" on the upper level. When she was a student there, they only used two rooms on each floor. When she first attended, the principal was John Bradley and soon after Cecil Cannon took over as principal. To move to the High School, you had to pass an entrance exam. Bessie noted that when Cecil Cannon was principal "everyone went upstairs."

When asked about what chores she did as a child on the Clark farm, Bessie recalled that although there were 9 children in the family, only the older ones were tasked with specific duties. At least one of the girls helped their mother prepare meals and do various household tasks.

They also worked in the barn, milking cows and getting the straw bedding ready for the cattle to use at night. When it was dark, they used lanterns in the barn. She said her father liked to have one of the children accompany him and hold the lantern while he did various things in the evening.

Bessie said that as she got older, they would go to the Community Hall on Saturday nights and watch movies there. Harvey Britton would operate the projector and set up the movies and it cost 25 cents. She also went to "Alexandria Hall" (now 71 King Ave. West) and saw plays there. Often, they would be put on by the St. George's Anglican Church. She recalls that "General Jackson" would wear black paint and played a "negro." One of their

teachers, Hattie Mason, started a "Harmonica Band" and two of her sisters joined. When Bessie was a bit older she would go to the Community Hall to play basketball. Apparently, this happened in the basement of the Hall and was set up just for "fun" and not competitive play.

Their farm was busy, as her mother Bertha ran a butter-making business at the farm. She made about 60 pounds of butter a week and sold it to the public. The butter was put into large ceramic crocks and the business was called "Maple Leaf Dairy" Bertha's children helped and she had one employee, Daisy Garrod. Daisy was married to John "Jack" Garrod who also worked on their farm before he took on the job of caretaker of the Newcastle Community Hall as well as Police Chief. Daisy would also help at the Community Hall, counting the silverware after events to make sure it was all there. The Garrods were married on the Clark farm.

After Bessie finished school in Newcastle, she went to Belleville in 1927 and took a secretarial course at the Ontario Business College there. She stayed with her aunt in Belleville and when she finished the course in 1928, she was unable to find any work, so she decided to apply for nursing jobs in Belleville and Bowmanville. The applications were all done by mail in those days and soon after, her parents got a letter from Bowmanville Hospital advising that she had been accepted. This was a shock to her parents as they did not know she had applied for these jobs. Her mother sent a letter to her in Belleville and on February 19, 1930, she returned home to start her training at Bowmanville Hospital.

She remained there for 3 years and said she only missed a half day because of a "bad throat". To get her Registered Nursing Certificate she had to take a further 6 months of training in a larger hospital and she chose



Bessie's mother Bertha made and sold butter, which was stored in these crocks.

Toronto Western Hospital. After completing her certificate, she worked "off and on" at Bowmanville for a while and then worked 5 years at Port Hope Hospital.

In 1936, her father, Merkley Clark passed away at age 60. Her brothers, Arthur and Lewis stayed working on the farm.

Around the start of World War II, she heard about an opening at the Bowmanville Boy's Training School, started working there and stayed there until the school was closed and turned into a German prisoner-of-war camp (Camp 30). She said she enjoyed working there. She then had a choice to make; she could join the Canadian Army as a nurse or go the "Girl's Training School" in Galt, Ontario. She chose the job in Galt but found that it was not nearly as enjoyable as the Boy's Training School. She stayed there for about 18 months.

During her training in Bowmanville, she started seeing a young man she knew as a neighbour, Lloyd Stephenson. They were married in June 1942 and first lived in a cottage at Bowmanville West Beach for a few months until Lloyd was called up for military service. Bessie went back to the farm until Lloyd returned from his military service.

They moved into Newcastle and Lloyd got a job at General Motors in Oshawa. They lived at 106 King Avenue East (where the Newcastle Griddle Restaurant is now). Her brother Lewis Clark stayed on the farm until it was sold to the Sikma family, who still own it today. Lewis moved to another farm that he owned nearby (the Couch Farm) and then later retired to the Lakeshore Road between Port Hope and Bond Head.



Bessie and Lloyd Stephenson's home at 106 King Ave. E., which is now the Newcastle Griddle.

Lloyd and Bessie had two children, Nancy and James. Bessie worked as a nurse at Wick's Nursing Home on Mill Street South and also became the nurse/receptionist" for Dr. Witzel and later had the same job with Dr. Miklos for 20 years. She was active at Newcastle United Church as a Sunday School teacher as well as in the Women's Missionary Society/United Church Women's group there. She was a member of the Newcastle Horticultural Society and the Newcastle Village & District Historical Society.

Bessie was known as a caring person who spent many nights visiting and helping people with health issues in the village. She passed away on August 23, 1996, in her 86<sup>th</sup> year. Hazel Crago wrote about Bessie in her "Newcastle News" column in the Canadian Statesman newspaper a few days after Bessie passed away. *"Along with raising two children, Bessie went about the village and area practicing the dedicated life of the nurse she was. Spending the night with the sick and elderly was a common occurrence."* Her husband, Lloyd passed away in 2004. They are buried at the Bond Head Cemetery.

We shouldn't forget that we wouldn't have this story about this wonderful lady, if it hadn't been for the brave actions of that train engineer who scooped Bessie off of the railway tracks in 1912...

*Note: Bessie's daughter Nancy passed away on January 12, 2025, just as this newsletter was being edited. Our sympathies to her brother Jim and family.*

**STEPHENSON** - Bessie Mildred. At her home in Newcastle on Friday, August 23, 1996 in her 86th year. Bessie (Clark) beloved wife of Lloyd Stephenson. Loved mother of Nancy, James Stephenson and his wife Joyce. Proud grandmother of Merridy, Diana, Mathew, Adam and 2 great-grandchildren J.L. and Ashley. Dear sister of Mrs. Raye Delvin, Mrs. Catherine Tomlinson, Mrs. Eileen Reid, Arthur Clark and the late Myrtle Little, Lewis Clark and May Burley. Friends were able to call at the Morris Funeral Chapel, 4 Division St., Bowmanville, on Sunday from 2 - 4 and 7 - 9 p.m. Funeral service was held in Newcastle United Church on Monday at 1 p.m. Interment Bond Head Cemetery, Newcastle. Donations to Newcastle United Church Sunday School Building Fund would be gratefully appreciated.



Belmont Farm, c 1879 painting by Edward Scope Shrapnel, commissioned by Samuel Wilmot. Incorrectly labelled "Fish Hatchery, New Castle, New Brunswick, it was in fact Wilmot's farm and fish hatchery as it appeared in 1879. The house on the hill is the original clapboard Belmont, which burned down in 1896. (note: from a few surviving photos of the original house, it is clear that it wasn't quite as grand as depicted in either this painting or the Beldon Atlas.) The house was rebuilt by 1898, in brick on the original foundations.

## Local Heroes – Part 2

By Brian Wilson & Paddy Duncan

*We continue this series with this question: Can the residents of a small village community make a significant, positive contribution to the world? We think they can – consider these various Newcastle and district residents:*

### Samuel Wilmot

Major Samuel Street Wilmot, born in New York state in 1773, was a member of a family of United Empire Loyalist settlers who had moved to New Brunswick after the American Revolution. He moved to York, in Upper Canada in 1797 and became a land surveyor, working with John Stegman. Samuel married Stegman's daughter Mary in 1800. When Stegman died suddenly in 1804 aboard the HMS Speedy when it sank near Presqu'ile, Samuel took over his commission under Governor John Graves Simcoe's administration. He was responsible for the surveying of large parts of Upper Canada, including Toronto Township (now part of Mississauga) Trafalgar and Halton counties, the first part of Reach Township (now Port Perry), Clarke and Darlington Townships, and

the road from Toronto to Kingston, and from Toronto to Niagara.

During this time, he became aware of the land Wabakinine and his people visited in Clarke for the plentiful salmon run each fall. Wabakinine and the other chiefs had ceded this land in the treaty of 1792, though hunting and fishing rights for the indigenous people were to be preserved.

Samuel Wilmot purchased 400 acres of land from John Hartwell in 1816, and around 1820 built his home "Belmont" on what was to become known as Wilmot Creek.

It's possible that he may have supplemented his farming income by salting, drying and preserving the salmon, which could be sold easily both in Canada and the United States. It was a valuable commodity, free for the taking, though even as early as 1798, there was some recognition that overfishing was depleting the salmon population. A bill to preserve the salmon was introduced in the parliament of Upper Canada, though not passed until 1807.

We don't really know much about the Anishinaabe reaction to Wilmot or other settlers taking salmon; there was no confrontation or violence reported in official

records or in letters or journals, though local legends suggest a skirmish in 1842 between locals, and the commercial anglers and First Nations people over the salmon. In many other places around Upper Canada, indigenous hunters and fishermen had been denied access to the waterways, often at gunpoint.

Samuel's son, also named Samuel, was born in 1822 at Belmont Farm, one of nine children, and the youngest of five siblings who survived to adulthood. He attended Upper Canada College at King and Simcoe Streets in the Town of York as a boarder from 1830 when it opened, until 1834.

His father had served in the Parliament of Upper Canada, in the 1820s, and in 1850, Samuel became active in local politics. When his brother Allan was elected the first Reeve of Clarke Township, Samuel was appointed Clerk, a position he held for four years.

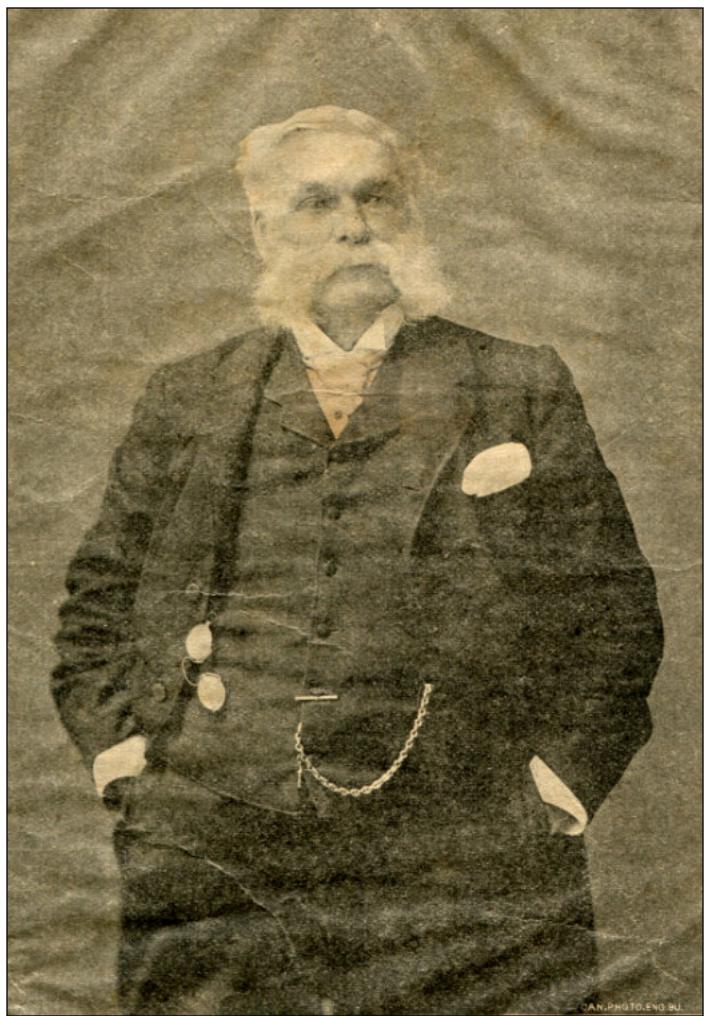
After his father died in 1856, he took over the management of the farm while carrying on a general merchandising business in Newcastle. He also served as Agent for Bank of Toronto & Provincial Insurance Co, Newcastle, as well as Clerk of Division Court & Issuer of Marriage Licences. In 1859, he was elected Deputy Reeve of Clarke Township and in 1861, as a councillor for Clarke Township. In 1869 he was again elected Deputy Reeve, and in 1871-1878 as Reeve.

Samuel Wilmot witnessed a huge decrease in the number of salmon as he grew up. The population of Upper Canada had doubled between 1830 and 1833 – and the growth of commercial fisheries had expanded as well. The growing population resulted in the expansion of agriculture and requisite deforestation, the building of dams for mills, the building of canals and increased industrialization.

None of these developments were good for the salmon and by 1835, the declines in Atlantic salmon fish stocks in Lake Ontario were first officially reported. 1835 was also the first year with a reliable report of sea lamprey in Lake Ontario – they were to become a menace to all the larger fish species in the lake.

In 1857, the Federal Fisheries Act was passed, providing for leases of commercial fishing locations and encouragement for the artificial propagation of fish, as well as recognizing the dangers of pollution. In that same year, the local fisheries superintendent reported the disappearance of salmon from the Moira, Trent and Salmon Rivers. By 1865, the salmon were on the brink of extinction in Lake Ontario.

Very concerned by what he saw, Samuel Wilmot established an experimental hatchery in the basement



Samuel Wilmot

of Belmont House in the mid-1860s, with a large trough and spring water piped in to simulate stream conditions. In 1866 he moved the operation out of his basement into a small building on the banks of the creek, where the water could run through the building, and spawned 15,000 salmon. In 1867 he received funding from the federal government to upgrade his operations to a much larger facility and leased it. His hatchery became the first government-sponsored fish hatchery in North America, and salmon eggs and fry were sold in both Canada and the US. In 1876, the hatchery produced 1.5 million salmon fry.

From the Illustrated Historical Atlas of the Counties of Northumberland and Durham Ont. Beldon Atlas:

*The great Dominion Fish Hatchery Establishment situated near Newcastle Ontario is deserving of special mention as a new national industry and one likely to become in its development of the first importance to the Dominion. From a very small beginning, originating with Mr. Samuel Wilmot, that Fishery established at Newcastle has assumed large proportions on the edge of the stream, near Mr. Wilmot's residence, the building, a long low structure, is situated,*

called the "Reception House." (top left of drawing) Here a permanent weir is thrown across the stream, which prevents the upward passage of the salmon.

Being thus stopped in their progress up the main channel, they are attracted by the rapid outflow of the water coming through the 'reception house' and rushing up the current they pass an ingeniously contrived triangle wire and become entrapped within the house, where they are kept confined until they become ripe for spawning. From this building the stream runs downwards a distance of some two miles to Lake Ontario. There are several nurseries and retaining ponds. In some of the latter the parent salmon are retained for a while to recuperate after the exhaustion produced by spawning; others as nurseries, in which the young fry are kept for a time just after they are hatched out, and have absorbed the umbilical sac."

The atlas goes on to describe the harvesting, fertilizing and incubation of the salmon eggs in some detail.

The hatchery endured several attacks from poachers and disgruntled fishermen in the last 1860s and early 1870s - including one arson attempt. None of the damage caused significantly impacted the hatchery operations.

In 1868 Wilmot was appointed to the Department of Marine and Fisheries as fish overseer, and in 1876 he was made superintendent of Fish Culture, a position he held until his retirement in 1895.

In the 1870s, Wilmot opened the hatchery to the general public, offering tours and a show and tell on fish reproduction. He also set up a natural history museum, with tanks of aquatic creatures and several mounted specimens, including a moose and a 600-pound tuna.

Wilmot oversaw the construction and management of 15 fish hatcheries across Canada, with millions of fish fry being released annually, including salmon, other native



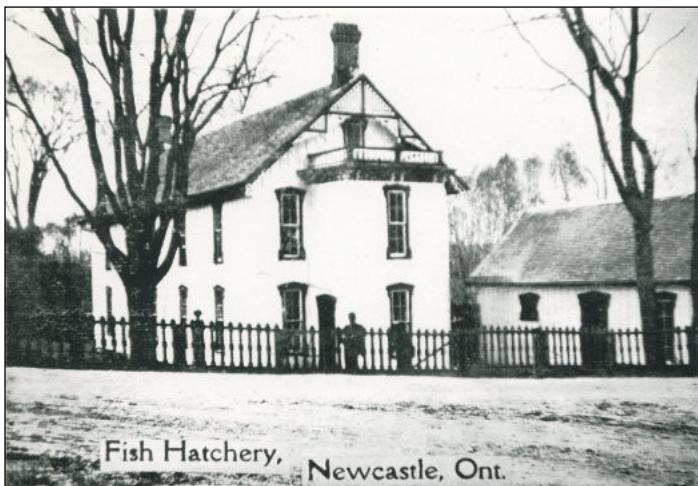
Illustration from Beldon Atlas of the "Great Dominion Fish Hatchery Establishment" showing the Reception House and the ponds for the salmon.

species and non-natives including rainbow trout, common carp, and Chinook salmon.

There was a widely held belief that fish stocking could counterbalance the effects of pollution, overfishing and loss of spawning grounds. Fish stocking practices were derived from a standard agricultural framework. Put fish in – get fish back, was the prevailing logic.

During the 30 years he led fish culture in Canada, Wilmot released millions of Atlantic salmon fry into Lake Ontario, and his efforts seemed to pay off initially, but to his alarm, after a few years the salmon population again declined, and by 1881, very few adult salmon were observed, and by 1896, they were officially declared extirpated.

Wilmot had observed the pollution of the salmon spawning grounds by the mills – millers often disposed of chaff and sawdust in their millponds - and the general



An old postcard showing the two storey hatchery building with the second floor housing the natural history museum.



Belmont House, 1890s prior to the fire in 1896. Samuel Wilmot can be seen at the rear middle-right, wearing dark suit and hat.

degradation of the tributaries from land clearing and subsequent erosion. These were major contributing factors in the decline of fish populations, but later research indicates that some hatchery practices, such as mixing locally adapted populations across streams, and harvesting eggs from the wild salmon also played a role in the lack of success and may in fact have hastened the demise of the Atlantic salmon in Lake Ontario.

While Samuel Wilmot's hatchery program to restore the Atlantic salmon population in Lake Ontario ultimately ended in failure, he had a large impact on the development of fish hatchery apparatus and techniques which were widely copied across North America, and he won medals for his equipment in France and London in 1872 and 1883.

He also recognized the importance of environmental change and degradation and had argued that the hatchery program should only be considered an adjunct to strict enforcement of a system of close seasons allowing the natural reproduction of fish populations.

While the complexity of ecological balance (and the role of genetics) was clearly not fully understood as it related to fish populations, by the late 1800s, environmental awareness had grown as people became more concerned about the impact of industrialization, deforestation and widespread agriculture on the land and water. Wilmot's concerns were shared by many other influential people, such as the painter John James Audubon, John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, writers Henry Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the American President, Theodore Roosevelt. Canada unfortunately lagged well behind the US in recognizing the importance of conservation and didn't enact effective protections until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite Wilmot's and other's efforts.

The fish hatchery at Belmont continued operating until 1914, fifteen years after Samuel's death in 1899. Little remains now, other than Belmont House (under renovation) and the commemorative historical plaque at Highway 2 and Wilmot Creek, but Samuel Wilmot's influence on fish culture and environmental awareness is indelible.

## Blasts from the past - NVDHS newsletter winter 1997

**1902**

**As 1899 came to an end, Dr Farncomb sold his drug business to William Scobell of Bowmanville.**

**NEWCASTLE  
DRUG STORE**  
**We Take Eggs  
As Cash For  
WALLPAPER**

At first the "new" drug store was advertised as "SCOBELL & FARNCOMB, of Newcastle, Ontario, but by 1902 it was advertised as THE NEWCASTLE DRUG STORE, and was said to be the best place to buy Wall Paper and Paints - *the latest American and English patterns - the very shade and design to make your home beautiful.*"

Dr Farncomb, no longer the village druggist, and needing an office, leased rooms in the Parker block - formerly occupied by the Times Office. F.B. Lovekin moved his office from the Parker block to the Barfett block.

THE NEWCASTLE DRUG STORE was where Becker's Milk is today. James Parker's "block" was the 2<sup>nd</sup> building next to the IGA corner - James Parker was a Newcastle shoemaker for 40 years. The Barfett block was next to Parker's. Robert Barfett, (probably the son of Newcastle harness maker John Barfett) took over Miller's dry goods and groceries at this location in about 1883.

Mr Scobell the new druggist, needing a home in Newcastle, moved in with Mr Davison the school principal - and had hired Arthur Rowland as an assistant at the drug store. In mid March John Pool had started work on repairing the Walbridge house getting it ready for Mr Scobell who moved his furniture in shortly thereafter.

A Mr John A Polkinghorne had taken over the Music Hall - above THE DRUG STORE - and he contradicted statements circulating in the village that scenery had been removed from the Music Hall. He claimed that only a few "old frames" had been removed. He also stated that the Hall would be furnished with up-to-date modern chairs, which would be a great improvement. The changes would be "*highly appreciated by all the citizens.*"

# The Story of Our Yesterdays

By Sher Leetooze

Some people will be shovelling snow this winter, while some of us on the Society's board of directors will be busy with our noses in the files pulling out interesting bits of history for our latest endeavour; "Victorian Newcastle," a book about our village during the reign of Queen Victoria 1837 – 1901.

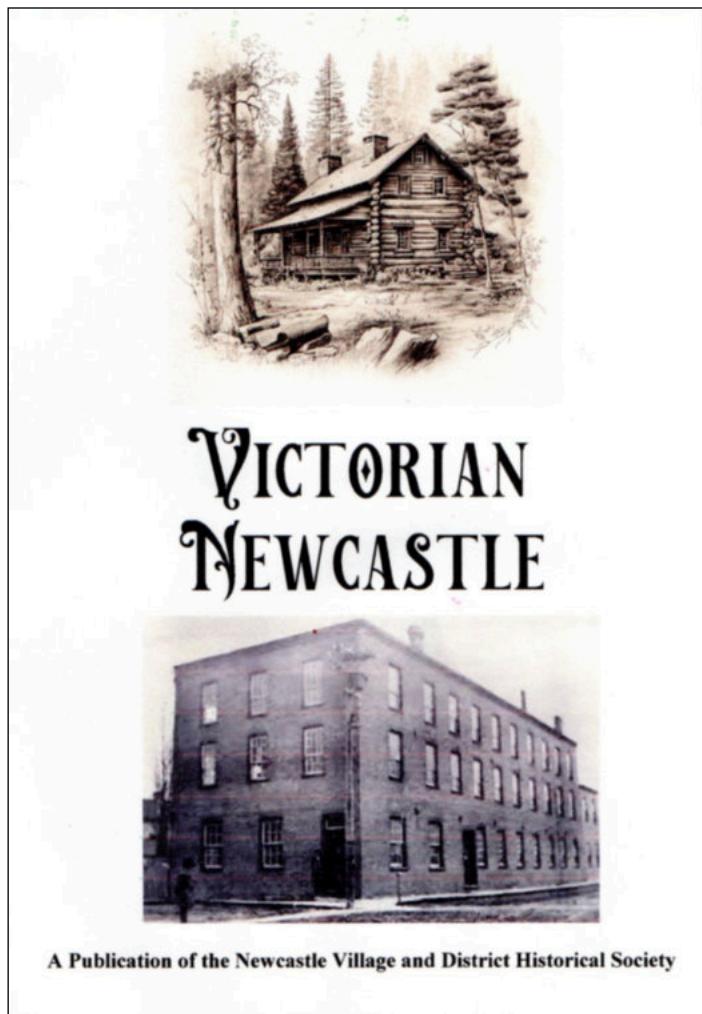
As the Victorian era began, a tavern in the wilderness became the nucleus and beginning of the Village of Newcastle. Over the next 70 years people arrived, a village grew, and history that affected not only the local area, but Ontario, the whole of Canada and beyond was made. The Massey family, put the village on the world map and into the history books with their farm implements, but there were many others too, and we plan on telling you their stories as we work through the decades and perhaps find the answer to what made this village so special that it produced so many well-known Canadians.

Each decade added new names to the list of famous people. But finding information on those early residents can be tricky. The beginning of the Victorian era was also the beginning of serious immigration to this area. Before that, the land had been doled out to Loyalists and their children, most of whom never set foot on their property. There wasn't a lot of need for record keeping, and so there is limited documentation to help us tell the story of our beginnings.

NVDHS files are filled with documents, photos and newspaper clippings for the later Victorian years; so much so that it will be difficult to decide which bits to put in the book - each person who came here contributed to the evolving mosaic, and many events reshaped the face of Newcastle. Which events and people played pivotal roles?

By sitting down and reading everything we can lay our hands on about our village in order to develop a well-rounded perspective of our place in history, we have come to a new appreciation of that history, why our work is valuable and why the Historical Society is so important to today's story of our yesterdays.

We are fortunate to have had some very dedicated members over the years. Some of their work is now published, such as *Out of the Mists*, by Helen Schmid and Sid Rutherford, and some is in the form of unpublished documents researched and compiled by former members including the late Leslie Wilson, Mabel Goode and Pat Macdonnell. All of it will help form a wonderful foundation for our book with material from donated



A Publication of the Newcastle Village and District Historical Society

scrapbooks, and photos from our archives, including the recently donated Jack Gordon collection.

We will keep you posted on our progress - it won't happen overnight, but we hope to have the book finished and available for purchase this year. As always, donations to the Society to assist in our mission to preserve and promote Newcastle's cultural heritage are always welcome.

Save the date!

NVDHS Annual General Meeting  
Saturday, April 12, 2025, 11 a.m.  
Historical Room, Newcastle Community Hall

Followed by show & tell and lunch

# NVDHS in action...fall 2024



Judith Clapperton and James Breech speaking about Olive Wilmot at the NVDHS October 16 General Meeting



NVDHS Christmas Open House.

Photos: Paddy Duncan



NVDHS Remembrance Day presentations to Newcastle Public School classes - Nov. 8.



NVDHS Christmas Open House - December 17.

## Newcastle Village and District Historical Society

The Newcastle Village and District Historical Society was formed by a group of citizens in 1981 to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of the former Village of Newcastle and its immediate environs. Today, we have an extensive collection of artifacts, documents and photographs and offer help with research into the history of the area, including its businesses and families.

We are located in the former public library in the Newcastle Community Hall. We have permanent and special displays in the historical room and are open to the public twice a week. We are a registered charity, supported by our members, local sponsors and donors, with some additional assistance from the Town of Clarington and the Government of Canada (Canada Summer Jobs). We welcome all new members and donors!

20 King Avenue, Unit 3, Newcastle, Ontario, L1B 1H7  
Open: Tuesdays & Saturdays, 9:30 a.m. to noon  
Website: [newcastlehistorical.ca](http://newcastlehistorical.ca)  
Email: [info@newcastlehistorical.ca](mailto:info@newcastlehistorical.ca)

Individual, family and corporate memberships are available for \$15-30/year. Memberships may be purchased or renewed on our website, in person or by mail.