

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XI

8-16-89

No. 33

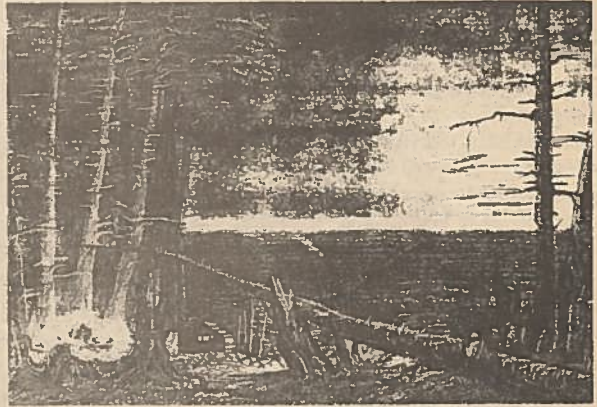
A FOREST ON LAKE ONTARIO

The W.H. Bartlett print shown here, an engraving entitled "A Forest on Lake Ontario" was published in 1838. It is an excellent and accurate illustration of our own landscape as it appeared when the area was first being settled. Photography first came into use around one hundred fifty years ago. Prior to that, illustrations either prints, drawings or paintings give us visual clues to the past. This print, once we study it, shows us a lot about the forest which covered our county. Just look at the immense size of the trees and stumps compared to the size of the three men in the lower right corner. Look too at the diminutive size of the log hut and primitive fence in comparison to the trees. And I might add that the subjects in this print are not out of proportion with one another. In the lower left corner we see a fire obviously lit to burn unwanted brush and wood. As the pioneers called it, virgin timber frames this "clearing" as a setting sun fades into the west over Ontario. Indeed, Lakeside Park could have looked like this in 1838.

From "Pioneer History of Orleans County" by Brad Thomas published in 1871 we find this account in Chapter VII: "Orleans County was originally covered with a heavy growth of trees. These had to be removed to open the soil to cultivation. This was commonly done by cutting the trees so as to leave a stump, two or three feet high. The felled timber lay upon the ground until it was dry, when fire was put in, and the whole field was burned over at once. The logs were then cut off at proper length, to be hauled together in heaps by oxen, and burned; and the ashes of the heaps collected and leached to make black salts and potash. The land being thus cleared of wood, the first crop was wheat, sown broadcast, and covered with earth by harrowing the ground with a triangular harrow, or drag.

"A field with the trees lying as they fell was called a "slashing," and sometimes a "clearing" or "fallow," as the work progressed!

From "Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase"



by O. Turner published in 1849 is found this poem by Alfred B. Street:

*"Through the deep wilderness, where scarce the sun
Can cast his darts, along the winding path
The Pioneer is treading. In his grasp
Is his keen axe, that wondrous instrument,*

*That like the talisman, transforms
Deserts to fields and cities. He has left
The home in which his early years were past,
And, led by hope, and full of restless strength,
Has plunged within the forest, there to plant
His destiny. Beside some rapid stream
He rears his log-built cabin. When the chains
Of winter fetter Nature, and no sound
Disturbs the echoes of the dreary woods,
Save when some stem cracks sharply
with the frost;*

*Then merrily rings his axe, and tree on tree
Crashes to earth; and when the long keen night
Mantles the wilderness in solemn gloom,
He sits beside his ruddy hearth, and hears
The fierce wolf snarling at the cabin door,
Or through the lowly casement sees his eye
Gleam like a burning coal."*

The authors here, Thomas and Street and the illustrator Bartlett were all much closer to the forest than we are. Their first hand accounts give us a true sense of life as it must have been in the forest.