

The Oak Orchard River history

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Historically speaking, Oak Orchard River played an important role in the settlement and development of Orleans County. This river winds its way from the Tonawanda Swamp northward to Lake Ontario. The only access to Orleans County before the canal was completed in 1825 was Ridge Road, which was an ancient Indian trail, or Lake Ontario ad Oak Orchard Harbor and River.

The first settlers came via the lake to settle near Oak Orchard Harbor in 1803. Oak Orchard River was so named for the great oak trees that grew along its banks. These were cut, squared and floated down to the harbor where they were loaded onto boats for shipment to English shipbuilders who used them for masts and timbers. As land was cleared during the first half of the 19th century, other trees were also cut and shipped out for lumber.

The main marketable product of the early settlers was potash obtained from burning wood as they cleared the land. Oak Orchard River provided the means to market the product as well as wheat, which was grown extensively by the early farmers once their land was cleared.

At one time, a bridge spanned the river at The Bridges, small sailing vessels or sloops could navigate up the river as far as the area known as Stillwater, where there was a store. At that place, the first bridge — long since gone — crossed the river. Nearby there is evidence of an Indian village



or encampment.

As time progressed, dams were erected to create water power for the milling of flour and for sawing lumber. Later, dams served to create reservoirs for the generation of electrical power.

In winter when the river froze over, ice was harvested for the preservation of perishable food supplies

during the warm months. Skating parties were also held at night during the 1800s, and cattails in the boarder marshes were burned to provide light and warmth for the skaters.

Indeed, Oak Orchard River has served not only for impact upon settlement, but also for its recreational advantages.

In more recent years, salmon and other fish have returned practically as they were when the first settlers arrived on the Oak Orchard scene.

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