

# 'Where is Home? New Brunswick Communities Past and Present.'

By Peter D. Murphy

The internet has made the world a much smaller place and, as a consequence, we genealogists have reaped enormous benefits. Sitting behind my laptop in Saint John, New Brunswick, I can search archival collections in places as far flung as France and Australia. The internet has made it possible to access a richness of data undreamed of by our predecessors. Yet, there is at least one way in which the internet has made our ancestors *less* accessible to us. Our world has become so small that it is now difficult, perhaps even impossible, to understand fully the degree to which the “local” once defined who and what one was. Most of our ancestors lived intensely “local” lives.

A newly acquired appreciation for the role of place in the lives of our ancestors can provide a hoist over many of the most challenging genealogical brick walls. Try to think as your ancestors thought. In order to do that, you will need to learn as much as possible about their local environments. If the subject of your search came from New Brunswick, you are in luck. A quick visit to the Provincial Archives’ website—<http://archives.gnb.ca/>—will give you immediate access to a new database entitled “Where is Home? New Brunswick Communities Past and Present.” For each of the 4710 New Brunswick communities included, precise geographical locations are noted, as are place name derivations and, in some instances, the highlights of the community’s history. Links are provided to 4784 land grant and other maps, to photographs of 489 of the communities (a total of 960 photos), and to approximately 600 documents about the founding, incorporation, or development of 144 of the communities. The entry for the Kings County community of Stewarton is typical:

Stewarton is 6.14 km NNW of Springfield, on the road to Cambridge-Narrows in Springfield Parish, Kings County. William Cromwell settled here about 1820. Included Cromwell. Post Office from 1859 to 1876 with George Cromwell as postmaster. In 1866 Cromwell was a farming settlement with about 30 families while in 1871 it had a population of 100. In 1866 Stewarton included Waterloo Settlement which had 3 families, also included the community of Ogilvie's. Post Office in Stewarton circa 1875-1958 with Alex Stewart as the first postmaster. In 1898 Stewarton was a farming settlement with 1 post office, 1 store, 1 grist and carding mill, 1 church and a population of 110. By the way, take a look at threshing time in Stewarton at <http://archives.gnb.ca/Exhibits/Communities/Details.aspx?culture=en-CA&community=3900> and click on IMAGES.

As the introduction to the collection points out “These are the communities, from the merest wayside clusters to our energetic little cities, where New Brunswickers have lived. They are the places where dreams were born, hopes sometimes dashed, where people engaged in the great human drama of living their lives.”

New Brunswick place names have been studied extensively, perhaps most notably by William Francis Ganong, 1864-1941, long time professor of Botany at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, and a native of the province. Drawing extensively on the work of Ganong and later scholars, the “Where is Home” database reveals the ethno-cultural wealth which the province’s place names enshrine. The collection

tells of the Aboriginal roots of names, of names brought from the Old Country by a host of immigrant groups who, proud of their new surroundings and perhaps not a little lonesome, invoked the ancient towns and regions from which they came. It tells of the influence of religion on the province’s community nomenclature, as evidenced by our 159 variations on the theme of Saint, and also of the occasional influence of nearby areas, as revealed by the 32 places in Madawaska County that have the French prefix “Rang des,” meaning “range of,” followed by a family name, as in Rang des Bourgoins. The practice comes from adjacent Quebec, where it was used to designate land grant settlements.

By situating every community in New Brunswick in the context of its county and civil parish, the “Where is Home” database provides a jumping off point for accessing relevant census records (all of which are organized by county and civil parish).

Historians take it as a truism that the good historian is the one who begins by asking good questions. The good

genealogist is the one who begins by asking regarding his or her ancestors, “Where was home.”