

# Cobourg, Ontario: Canada's Mason-Dixon Community



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# Introduction

*In the years following the Civil War:*

- Cobourg Ontario, emerged as one of the most popular resort communities in North America.
- A number of the seasonal Cobourg residents from the United States later constructed large mansions throughout the town and its environs.
- Cobourg remained a popular destination for both southern and northern U.S. families until the early decades of the 20th century.

# Cobourg, Ontario



# Research Questions

- What specific factors contributed to Cobourg's popularity with both southern and northern families from the United States?
- What types, if any, of economic and social relationships existed between the northern and southern U.S. families living in Cobourg?
- What types of economic and social relationships existed between the American families and Cobourg's permanent Canadian residents?
- What factors contributed to Cobourg's loss of favor as a summer residence for the Americans?

# Cobourg: Early History

- Cedar swamp
  - Originally avoided by settlers
- Early settlers (1797-1820's)
  - United Empire Loyalists
  - Retired fur traders
  - British "official class"
    - 'Half-pay' officers
- Strong military tradition

# Cobourg 1850-1865: Prosperity to Poverty

- 1850's: Prosperity
  - Town population=6000
    - Fifth largest center in the province and 'most important central Lake Ontario port'
  - 1856: Opening of the Grand Trunk Railway
- 1860's: Near Bankruptcy
  - Failure of the Cobourg to Peterborough Railway
  - Cost of town hall

# From Iron & Steel to Rest & Relaxation

- Late 1860's George K. Shoenberger & his Pittsburgh associates assume control of:
  - Marmora Iron Mines
    - 50 miles north of Cobourg
  - The Cobourg, Peterborough, and Marmora Railway and Mining Company
- The Pittsburgh industrialists use Cobourg as their Canadian base of operations
  - The industrialists begin bringing their families and friends with them on their “business” trips

# Establishment of American Summer Colony

- Colonel William Chambliss
  - Son-in-law of George K. Shoenberger
  - The “Ozone” tour
- Arlington Hotel
  - George Shoenberger & William Chambliss
- “Friends and family” in North and South



# Reasons for Cobourg's Popularity with Southern and Northern U.S. Families

- Southern families
  - Cool and hospitable climate
  - Not required to spend vacation money in the northern United States.
- Northern families
  - “High quality ozone”
  - Business interests (e.g., iron and coal)

# Additional Factors

- **Geographic Location**
  - Relatively close proximity to growing urban centers in the United States (e.g., Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Buffalo, Rochester)
- **Transportation infrastructure**
  - Readily accessible from the US via rail and water routes
    - *Ontario Car Ferry Company*: Ferries carried coal, other goods and passengers
- **Marketing**
- **Accommodations**

# Cobourg's US Visitors:

- **Wealthy**
  - Built large estates and often stayed from May until early September
  - The “American summer colony”
- **Middle and lower classes**
  - Weekend excursions (Early part of 20th century)
    - Cobourg visit normally lasted only a few hours

# Cobourg Summer Colony: From Hotels to Estates

- 1867-1880s
  - Activities slower paced than later decades
  - Activities hotel oriented
    - Most dances, 'hops' or soirees were in the hotel
    - Guests included prominent local and American families
- 1880's-1920's
  - Large estates built
  - Activities often "estate focused"

# Ontario Car Ferry in Cobourg Harbour [ca. 1919]



Source: Archives of Ontario, Item reference code C 285-1-0-0-140

# Economic Ties

- **Railroads**
  - Ontario Car Ferry Company
- **Infrastructure**
  - Hospital, roads, water system
- **Recreational facilities**
  - Cobourg Golf Club
- **Hotels & other tourist-related businesses**

# Social Ties

- Marriages between members of southern US families with members of northern US families
  - Marriages were highlights of the colony's summer season
- Marriages between Americans and Canadian families

# Social Events

- Plays
- Dances (e.g., *hops*)
- Band concerts (e.g., Shriners from New York state)
- Regattas
- Horse shows/races



# Twilight of the American Colony

- **World War I**
  - Major social and economic transitions in both Canada and the United States
- **Prohibition**
- **The Depression**
- **World War II**