

Presqu'ile: A Provincial Park for 50 Years

Looking back at the roots of Presqu'ile Provincial Park reveals not only the rich heritage of this park, but the system of Ontario Parks as a whole. As of 2001, Ontario's 280 provincial parks covered over 7.1 million hectares of land, equal in size to Nova Scotia's total landmass. With over 25 500 campsites, Ontario's provincial parks are visited by millions of campers and day-trippers from all across the world. Presqu'ile Provincial Park has been a part of this ever-growing system for fifty years. However, the story of Presqu'ile's beginnings as a park does not start in 1956, but in 1896.

The Presqu'ile peninsula has been presumably inhabited since 1796, with the arrival of the United Empire Loyalist family of Obediah Simpson. Presqu'ile was being used for mainly agricultural purposes until a July 31, 1896 article in the *Beauties of the Point* claimed that 'the beauties of the Point are not as fully known as they should be' and if some 'enterprising citizens' took over the property, a greater number of 'pleasure seekers would avail themselves of a season of rest.' In 1893, Algonquin National Park (now Provincial Park) was designed for light recreation and mainly resource management, as was Rondeau Provincial Park in 1894. The other original parks in the province were Quetico (1913), Long Point (1921), Presqu'ile (1922), and Ipperwash (1938); Sibley (Sleeping Giant), and Lake Superior were formed in 1944 during the war period. The initial days of the park system were much different from what we would expect today.

Parks initially appealed to the upper class interests, evident through the various resort hotels and lodges built in parks. In Algonquin, a railway was put in place from Toronto to service the increase in tourism to the lodges. Presqu'ile also experienced an increase in visitors and recreational opportunities. In 1905, the Presqu'ile Summer Hotel was opened up by Peter Covell. The hotel, located near the present day government dock, saw many visitors from the United States, mostly New York State. When it opened, the hotel had no running water, electricity or indoor plumbing, but it drew many people to Presqu'ile, where they enjoyed boating, swimming, live music and dancing.

To protect the excellent natural harbour and operate the lighthouse, the Presqu'ile peninsula had been under federal jurisdiction since 1871. The government opposed development at Presqu'ile, sighting the need to protect the forest that sheltered the harbour. However, with the

weakening of the schooner industry and growing public demand for holiday facilities, the authorities allowed land to be surveyed and leased for cottage lots and gave control of the peninsula to the province in 1920.

Realizing the popularity of automobiles and the benefits of the growing travel tourism industry, local residents petitioned the province to designate the peninsula as a park. In 1922, the Department of Lands and Forests (DLF) passed the Presqu'ile Park Act declaring 837 hectares of the peninsula a park. The federal government controlled 125 acres of land as a lighthouse keepers' reserve.

Though the government of Ontario already ran the existing six provincial parks, it did not want to assume the costs of developing Presqu'ile. Parks were not financially self-sufficient; in fact, the 1913 Parks Act allowed profits from logging, hunting and trapping in the park to be used to defray administrative costs. For example, Algonquin Park Rangers would trap beavers and sell their fur and in its early days, Rondeau raised and sold exotic birds and their eggs from its own aviary. Hence, much like the park created at Long Point in 1921, the obligation of running Presqu'ile fell on an appointed commission of five local men.

The Presqu'ile Park Commission was to manage the peninsula as parkland, a forest reserve and a health resort for the general public. They purchased farms, planted 90,000 trees, stocked the park with deer, maintained the camping areas, sold firewood and collected garbage. They also built a golf course and clubhouse near the present day Park Store to attract settlers to the peninsula. It was a challenge for the commission to serve the public as well as the close-knit community of leaseholders, who opposed the development of public facilities with their taxes.

After World War II, public demand increased for parks with picnic and camping facilities. The Presqu'ile Park Commission lacked the funding to cater to the public's needs and asked the Department of Lands and Forests to take control of the park in 1946. The provincial government recognized that, like Long Point, Presqu'ile was not meeting its original objectives of conservation and public recreation. After a tour of American parks in 1953, the minister of lands and forests also realized that Ontario was falling behind in providing public recreational facilities. He created a Division of Parks with the DLF and planned to expand the system of parklands within the province. The Parks



Presqu'ile Hotel: Built in 1905, the Presqu'ile Hotel drew many pleasure-seekers to the peninsula.

Act of 1954 designated Presqu'ile as a park within this provincial system, but it was still to be run by the commission. However, this decision was quickly reversed, eliminating the commission and assigning Presqu'ile its first Park Superintendent in 1956.

Dramatic changes came to Presqu'ile in 1957, when the land on the north shore of the peninsula was transferred to Brighton Township, interpretive programs were first offered, and a Park Museum was created at the current location of the Lighthouse Interpretive Centre. Further realization and appreciation of the natural heritage of Presqu'ile has occurred since then. In 1972, the Ministry of Natural Resources, formed out of the Department of Lands and Forests, reduced parking on Presqu'ile's beach from over 2000 down to 1200 and reduced campsite numbers from 800 sites to 400. Today, Presqu'ile is recognized as having provincially significant wetlands, being part of an Important Bird Area and

one of the most diverse parks in the province, as well as a great place to camp, swim, learn, hike, bike and skate. Now under the banner of Ontario Parks, a branch within the MNR, the goal for Ontario's provincial parks remains to protect significant natural, cultural, and recreational environments, while providing ample opportunities for visitors to participate in recreational activities.

In fifty years, Presqu'ile has come a long way from being a resort to a destination for camping, nature appreciation and outdoor recreation, but one thing hasn't changed: people love to come to Presqu'ile to enjoy the outdoors and the company of their family and friends. To help us celebrate our 50th anniversary we invite you to appreciate the wonderful treasure that is Presqu'ile: use our many trails, spend a night in our campgrounds, check out our visitor centres and attend our famed interpretive programs.

The last 50 years

1950s

1954- The Provincial Parks Act is introduced. All existing parks in Ontario are brought under a single authority. Three different types of park were created:

- I) Parks administered directly by the Department of Lands and Forests,
- II) Parks like Presqu'ile that will continue to be administered by previously established commissions;
- III) Smaller parks and picnic areas.

January 1, 1956- Presqu'ile's first Superintendent was appointed to administer the park, develop facilities, supervise, and act as a liaison between the Department and the 150 residents on the point.

March 28, 1957- Park lands along Presqu'ile Bay are transferred to Brighton Township.

November 1957- The lighthouse keeper's residence is purchased by Presqu'ile.
1957- The Presqu'ile Provincial Park nature interpretation program was initiated to introduce visitors to the park's many exceptional natural features.

July, 1959- The former lighthouse keeper's residence is renovated and expanded and opened to the public as the park's Visitor Centre.

1960s

1966- High Bluff and Gull Island designated as Wilderness areas under the

Wilderness Areas Act of 1959.

1970s

1972- The old Department of Lands and Forests is reorganized and renamed the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources.

1970's- Presqu'ile is designated as a Natural Environment Park. Beach parking facilities are reduced and the number of campsites is decreased to 400.

1980s

1988- The Friends of Presqu'ile Park is incorporated.

1990s

1993- Centennial of the Ontario Parks System.

2000s

2000- The Lighthouse Interpretive Center is opened. This facility guides visitors through the rich cultural history of the area. The original lighthouse keeper's cottage is incorporated into the building and now houses the theatre.

2004 - The Remembering Speedy Committee marks the 200th anniversary of the sinking of HMS Speedy off Presqu'ile with commemorative events, signage and publications.

2006 - Presqu'ile marks 50 years as a provincial park.



Atkins farm: The Atkins family farm at Calf Pasture was the last farm running on the peninsula when it became a provincial park. Jack Atkins worked for the park as a foreman, until his farmland was purchased by the park and he moved into Brighton.