

Asa Danforth Jr.: Land Speculator or Pioneer Engineer

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In 1792, Upper Canada was in its infancy, only eight years since the largest mass migration in the history of North America. Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe had opened the Colony in an attempt to accelerate settlement. Simcoe was convinced that there were pockets of Loyal Americans that would be drawn north with the promise of free land.¹

Simcoe assembled “Nominees” such as Asa Danforth Jr. to recruit these loyal subjects to townships in Upper Canada. Simcoe believed these settlers were tied by a desire to remain neighbours in their new home land as well as sharing common religious beliefs. In fact, these nominees or promoters were largely land speculators attempting to personally accumulate property and wealth.

Asa Danforth Jr. had been born in Brookfield Massachusetts in 1768, at the age of 20 moved cattle overland from Mayfield, Massachusetts to Onondaga in 1788 for his father Major Asa Danforth Sr.² Danforth Sr. was veteran of Continental Mass in the American Revolution³ and was largely responsible for pioneering Onondaga civilization. Danforth Jr. had settled at Salt Point where a daughter Amanda was born to him and his wife Olive (nee Langdon) in 1789. The child was this first white birth in Onondaga County.⁴

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¹ Gates, Lillian F. "Item Display." Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online.

² Gates, Lillian F. "Item Display." Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online.

³ *Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files*. Massachusetts: NARA Publication No. M804n.d.

⁴ Dwight H. Bruce, *Onondaga's Centennial*. Boston History Co., 1896, Vol. I, pp. 836-86

In 1794, Danforth's father was described by Lt. Governor Simcoe as "the most virulent enemy of Great Britain in that Country."⁵ Hence, the surprise when the when young Danforth appeared in the province in 1797 seeking the favour of the government. Danforth had cumulative debts speculating on land in New York State and saw Upper Canada as his opportunity to turn his fortune around. He would essentially roll the dice at double or nothing in an attempt to make his fortune and restore his name.

However, there was a misunderstanding of what was promised to these nominees. They were lead to believe that they were entitled to the outright grant of the township, giving they meet the number of settlers required.

In fact they were only to receive 1,200 acres. Following this misinterpretation, Simcoe became disillusioned with the township program and in May of 1796 declared many of the townships forfeited. All settlers within the townships were declared forfeited and required to submit proof of their claim before June 1, 1797. Danforth claimed to have helped 205 settlers in 4 different townships.⁶ With further investigation into the matter Simcoe learned that the nominees were land speculators rather than the loyal promoters he thought them to be.⁷ The nominee's settlers did little to improve the lands before moving on, and were recruiting to settlers who had already attained land and were not looking for more.⁸

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⁵ Gates, Lillian F. "Item Display." Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online.

⁶ Gates, Lillian F. "Item Display." Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online.

⁷ Edwards, Frank B. *The Smiling Wilderness*. N.p.: Camden House, 1984

⁸ Gates, Lillian F. "Item Display." Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online.

Simcoe's successor Peter Russell sought to re-engage the promoters and re-opened the townships in July of 1797. Under the new arrangement the promoters were entitled to 1200 acres if they became a resident of the Province. A number of the promoters or nominees were greatly outraged by this decision and banded together to legally contest the granting of townships that had already had been previously entrusted under the original program. The Executive Council deemed these legal actions improper and rescinded Danforth's grant of 1200 acres. Despite losing most of what he had acquired, Danforth remained in Upper Canada.⁹

The irony is that despite all his misfortune in land speculation, Danforth entered into contract in 1798 with President Peter Russell to construct a badly needed road from the Cataraqui Townships through Prince Edward County on to the provincial capital of York, ending at Ancaster.¹⁰ The executive council agreed to pay Danforth \$90 per mile as well as authorizing to him to identify forty men from New York state to work a labourers in exchange for 200 acre grants. Danforth had been frustrated as a promoter or nominee but was now optimistic that he could prosper as a road builder.

The road would be carved out heavy forest across swamp and streams. It would be a key to connecting the settlement along Lake Ontario from Kingston to York. Asa Danforth's contract allowed him to collect money in installments as sections of the road

⁹ Edwards, Frank B. *The Smiling Wilderness*. N.p.: Camden House, 1984

¹⁰ Taylor, Alan. *The Civil War of 1812*. Toronto: Random House of Canada Ltd., 2010.

were completed and inspected. ¹¹The task of carrying his debt and financing the building of the road was a constant strain and Danforth needed to make continuous progress to stay ahead of his creditors. ¹²

By late 1799 Danforth had completed all 106 miles of the project. Upon inspection, the road was deemed “Generally sound” with a few problems that would need correction in the spring at a "probable cost" of only \$125. The executive council took the hard line with Danforth withholding almost \$2000 until the spring repairs would be completed. The council also refused to grant the land promised to the forty labourers. In the end the government defrauded Danforth of what he was owed under the premise that all Americans were “tricksters”. ¹³ On another interesting note, fellow nominee William Berczy ¹⁴ a traveller who stayed at Henry Finkle's tavern, Ernesttown (present day Bath, Ontario), in April 1798, remarked that the road was "very good". The great road was blazed under the direction of Asa Danforth, the American from Salt Point, New York. In the Bay of Quinte area, the existing road along the lakeshore only had to be improved. By 1800, the road was completed to Ancaster. ¹⁵ Berczy may have been shielding his previous partner in crime, but one will never know for sure.

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¹¹ Gates, Lillian F. "Item Display." Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online.

¹² Edwards, Frank B. *The Smiling Wilderness*. N.p.: Camden House, 1984

¹³ Gates, Lillian F. "Item Display." Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online.

¹⁴ University of Toronto, 2000. "BERCZY, WILLIAM."

http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=2261.

¹⁵ Foster, Jane. *Bath, On the Bay of Qunite*. 1996.

Danforth was absent in the United States for a short time in 1800; it was here that he was jailed at a debtor. Upon his release and return to Canada he was given an extension and completed the road in December.

Another source describing The Danforth Road states “ the road was supposedly thirty-three feet wide with sixteen and one half feet cleared of trees and stumps and with no impossible hills.”¹⁶ In some places it seemed no more than a track through the forest. This view contradicted Williams Berczy’s comments.

Bitter about his treatment at the hands of the executive council and financially ruined, Danforth returned to New York City. There he consorted with his major creditor and political connections about the possibility of a Canadian rebellion. He was forced to lease out his Salt shares and continually borrow for financial upkeep.¹⁷ He returned hopeful in 1801, with a plan to overthrow the provincial government, but nothing came of it.

In the end, Asa Danforth Jr. personal ambition and its consequences overshadowed the legacy of the road that he constructed and that helped connect the Province and protect the Empire. He was last heard from in New York City in 1821, hiding from the sheriff and his road became overgrown and unused.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ashton, E.D Taylor. *On the Edge of History: Dorland's Creek and the Mills*. 1996.

¹⁷ Gates, Lillian F. "Item Display." Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online.

¹⁸ Gates, Lillian F. "Item Display." Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online.

Note: In Professor Alan Taylor's book The Civil War of 1812, the author shows an illustration (page 124) of the Danforth Road routed through Napanee, Ontario. I can assure the reader this is inaccurate. I spend my summers working at the United Empire Loyalist Heritage Centre & Park in Adolphustown, Ontario. There is an original part of the Danforth Road remaining, running through the east end of the park. The road passes the UEL Memorial and Cemetery where the first Loyalist settler, a child was buried June 17, 1784 and the original landing spot of Peter Van Alstine and his Company of Associated Loyalists. The original Danforth Road continued west to Glenora where a ferry connects Adolphustown to Prince Edward County. The ferry operation dates back to the late 1780's.

This is confirmed in On the Edge of History; The Danforth Road enters the county at Carrying Place from Brighton and followed an Indian trail through Ameliasburg Township, which at the time extended from the Bay of Quinte to Lake Ontario. It crossed Hallowell Township to the Bay of Quinte at Stone Mills (present day Glenora). Here it was linked by ferry to Adolphustown and followed the shore to Kingston.

Ashton, E.D Taylor. *On the Edge of History: Dorland's Creek and the Mills*. 1996.

Dwight H. Bruce, *Onondaga's Centennial*. Boston History Co., 1896, Vol. I, pp. 836-86

Edwards, Frank B. *The Smiling Wilderness*. N.p.: Camden House, 1984

Foster, Jane. *Bath, On the Bay of Qunite*. 1996.

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