

DOWKER ISLAND

By FRANCINE RANGER-SMITH

INTRODUCTION

Dowker Island is part of the Hochelaga Archipelago and the Îles Sainte-Geneviève and is situated on Lake Saint-Louis between the Island of Montreal and the Île Perrot. It is approximately 1.3 km long and 1km wide and located at 45°24'10''N / 73°53'40''W on the Lac Saint-Louis nautical chart (see exhibit #1).

I was interested in researching the history and the environmental aspects of Dowker Island and especially the present ownership of the island.

Most people who are familiar with Dowker Island are under the impression that it is classified as a “bird sanctuary” and is owned today by the Municipalité de Notre-Dame-de-l’Île-Perrot. In my research, I discovered that both aspects are incorrect.

I know Dowker Island very well, and probably better than most people in the west island. When I was young, I spent my school vacation on my grandfather’s island, the D’Aoust Island, which is located just beside Dowker Island. Dowker Island was owned at that time by my aunt and uncle. For my husband and I, the bay of Dowker was one of our favourite spots to anchor our sailboat. The bay is a safe anchorage only in a westerly wind, as we discovered on our first night at anchor in 1977; our anchor dragged and we almost beached the boat on the point of the island (where the ruins of the old stone house are).

I knew that my aunt Lucille Tardif and uncle Gérard Tardif owned Dowker Island in the 80’s because my cousin Paule Tardif had started to rebuild the old stone house on the island (a fire gutted the inside of the house in 1960). I was curious to know the history of the island and to know if my relatives still owned the island or if they had sold it.

THE HISTORY

Name of the island ⁽¹⁾

According to several official government documents of 1672 and also maps of Lake Saint-Louis compiled by cartographer Jacques Nicolas Bellin in 1744 and later on by cartographer L. Murray in 1763, the island was called Isle Sainte-Geneviève. Although it is not confirmed, some history books estimate that the explorer Samuel de Champlain named the island “Isle Sainte-Geneviève”. The French spelling of the word “île” in this era was “isle”. The island was renamed Dowker Island after Leslie Rose Dowker acquired the island in 1897.

Around 1670 ^{(1) (2)}

Jean Talon was “L’Intendant de la Nouvelle France”. The military rank “Intendant” was the highest and the most prestigious rank in the French army. [Editor’s note: Intendant was an administrative function, not a military rank. His duties were to oversee justice, finances and policing in the colony. The Intendant lacked any power over the military.]

Jean Talon named François-Marie Perrot as the governor of Ville Marie (former name of Montreal) in 1650's. Under the French regime, L'Intendant de la Nouvelle France could grant a large piece of land called a "seigneurie" to some elite individuals. On the 8th of November 1672, Jean Talon conceded a "seigneurie" to François-Marie Perrot.

The seigneurie of François-Marie Perrot was composed of several islands in the same area namely "Isle Sainte-Geneviève", "Isle Perrot", "Isles de la paix" and "Isle aux pins".

It is interesting to learn that, between the 10th of October and the 8th of November 1672, Jean Talon granted about 60 seigneuries to various nobles.

François-Marie Perrot never lived on his seigneurie (he preferred his life as a noble in his mansion in Ville Marie with 10 servants). In this era, when France granted a seigneurie to an individual, usually to a high-ranking officer, this individual was obligated to live on the seigneurie in order to develop its resources and increase the overall population of the colony.

As governor of Ville Marie, Perrot was exempt from the prescribed obligations of the seigneurie obligations; instead, he entrusted the seigneurie to one of his lieutenants, Antoine Lafresnaye De Brucy. De Brucy worked the land of the seigneurie but he also developed a very lucrative and secretive fur trading business on both "Isle Sainte-Geneviève" and "Isle Perrot". His fur trading business was illegal and discovered; he was arrested and almost hung in 1674.

1684 – 1800 Other owners of the seigneurie Isle Sainte-Geneviève ^{(1) (2)}

1684-1685 Sieur Charles Le Moyne

1703 - 1715 Sieur Joseph Trottier des Ruisseaux

1715 – 17?? Madame Cuillerier (wife of Joseph Trottier)

17?? Sieur Jean-Baptiste Leduc

1785 Sieur Thomas-Denis Soulange

1859 Abolishment of the "seigneurie" regime [Editor's note: The seigneurial system was formally abolished on December 18, 1854]

1887 – 1945 Leslie Rose Dowker ^{(3) (4) (5)}

Leslie Rose Dowker grew up in Ste-Anne-du-Bout-de-l'Île after his father, Lieutenant-Colonel George Dowker, moved to this area in the 1860's.

Leslie Rose Dowker acquired the island of Sainte-Geneviève in 1887. After purchasing the island, he built a stone house on the island. He would go to his island house during the weekends, both summer and winter, until his death in 1945.

Circa 1925, tree felling on Dowker Island during the winter was very extensive to provide the homes on the Lakeshore road with additional wood for heating.

Mr. Dowker loved his island and would trek back and forth in all weathers, even in winter. As reported in the book Baie d'Urfé 1686-1986 p. 65, after returning from his island on many early

winter days, Mr. Dowker would pull his lightweight boat (which he used to go back and forth to his island boat) behind him in case the thinning ice gave way as he came across to his right-of-way beside 20094 Lakeshore.

After Mr. Dowker passed away, his old stone house remained and deteriorated over the years until it was gutted by fire in 1960.

1956 – Lucille Tardif née Ranger

According to the 2011 records of the Municipalité de Notre-Dame-de-l'Île-Perrot ⁽⁶⁾, the owner of Île Dowker (Cadastre #2070497) is still my aunt Lucille Ranger née Tardif (although she has been deceased since 2004).

My aunt Lucille and my uncle Gérard Tardif purchased the island in 1956, probably from the heirs of Leslie Dowker.

The purchase of Dowker Island in 1956, as far as my research indicates, was a financial speculation by my uncle who was very involved politically with the Union Nationale (the party in power at the time in Quebec). My uncle knew that a bridge to connect the Trans-Canada Highway to Dorion/Vaudreuil via Dowker Island had been planned by the Quebec parliament and he was convinced that this bridge would cross on Dowker Island.

Plans to construct the Trans-Canada bridge via Dowker Island ⁽²⁾

(Illustration # 2: the proposed routing plans for the bridge and the bridge under construction)

There were four proposed route plans to connect the Trans-Canada Highway from the island of Montreal to Dorion, Vaudreuil or Valleyfield. Two of these route plans A1 and A2 (see illustration #2) would connect the Trans-Canada Highway with Dorion or Valleyfield via a bridge on Dowker Island. The route proposal for the bridge on Dowker Island was not selected.

Plan C was adopted via the Gallipeault Bridge to Dorion. The construction work of the bridge of plan C was in fact well underway (see illustration #2) in May 1960 but, with the provincial elections held in June 1960 and the defeat, in these elections, of the Union Nationale party by Jean Lesage's liberal party, the work was stopped and the bridge construction already accomplished was demolished. The work restarted in Aug 1962 with plan D via Îles aux Tourtes; the bridge was completed in 1966.

THE ENVIROMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE ISLAND

The houses on Dowker Island

In the 1980's, there were 2 buildings: a small summer cottage on the west side of the island and the stone walls of an old house on the northeast point of the island (the walls were the remains of the fire that gutted Lesley Rose Dowker's house in 1960).

The small summer cottage was demolished in the late 1980's.

In 1985, my cousin Paule Tardif started to rebuild the ruined stone house. We often went to anchor our boat in Dowker's bay and that summer, we saw many barges that were towed to the island and pulled-up on shore with building materials, roofing tiles, plumbing supplies, toilets, sinks, etc. (my cousin owns a property on the Lakeshore Rd; this is where the barges were loaded for delivery to the island. In fact, one of these barges is still on the property). Many construction workers worked on the house that summer of 1985. The ruins of the stone walls were used to build a two-storey house; the outside of the house was completed and the inside had all the walls and the supporting beams in place when a fire gutted the interior of the house.

After this second fire in 1985, just the stone walls remained standing. Since then, because there is very little mortar left between the stones, the walls are slowly collapsing (see photocopies of the ruins).

Dowker Island – A conservation zone

Dowker Island is often called a "bird sanctuary". In fact, it is not categorized as a bird sanctuary but it is officially declared a conservation area.

According to the records of the Municipalité de Notre-Dame-de-l'Île-Perrot ⁽⁶⁾, the island was zoned in 2007 as a "Conservation sans condition" (conservation without conditions), which forbids the construction of anything in the specified zone.

Prior to 2007, the island was zoned "Conservation avec conditions" (with conditions) which allows the construction of summerhouses. Since the Municipalité de Notre-Dame-de-l'Île-Perrot was very concerned that many cottages would be built thereby destroying the environmental aspects of the island, it modified the zoning.

Bird species, wildlife, fish

Dowker Island is without a doubt a paradise for bird watchers.

To know more about the birds on the island, I consulted Dr. David Bird, Director of the Avian Science & Conservation Centre of McGill University ⁽⁷⁾.

Dr. Bird graciously accepted to assist me in identifying the birds by sending me a comprehensive list of the various species that might be found on the island (see pamphlet "List of the birds of Montreal").

Wildlife is abundant on the island and would be similar to what we observe in the west island such as rodents, squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, ground hogs, raccoons, skunks, red foxes, muskrats, etc.

Fishing, both in the summer and in the winter, is a popular sport around the island. There's one spot on the west side of the island that consistently attracts several die-hard fishermen in the winter.

Camping, walking, hiking, bird watching, cross-country skiing, canoeing

Camping is not allowed on Dowker. The island is a popular destination for west island hikers, bird watchers, cross-country skiers, boaters. The ruins of the old stone house attract everyone.

Tragedy on Dowker Island

As reported in the Montreal Gazette ⁽⁸⁾, Rachel Wilkes, 33-year old American woman, was found on Sunday, January 23, 2011 frozen to death on the island where she had gone walking the previous day. Her body was found by a passer-by who was walking around the island. She was wearing only a lightweight jacket and running shoes when she was found and footprints in the snow lead police to believe she was walking on the island. There were no traces of violence. A marker in her memory was placed near the site where she was found. This site is now called "Rachel's Point".

REFERENCES

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4. http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM84A5_Ruines_sur_Ile_Dowker
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7. Dr. David Bird, Professor of Wildlife Biology, Department of Natural Resources, Director of the Avian Science & Conservation Centre, MacDonald Campus of McGill University.
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