In Our Founder's Footsteps

Reimagining Tillson's journey to launch Dereham Forge



(JEFF HELSDON PHOTO)

The sun rising over Long Point Bay is one thing that hasn't changed since Tillson left Normandale 200 years ago. The small fishing pier that stands today pales in comparison to the 300-foot pier that once stood there.



(JEFF HELSDON PHOTO)

The Union Hotel was built between 1827 and 1834 when the VanNorman forge made the town a busy place. Today, the hotel is a bed and breakfast and the population of the village isn't a lot different than it was in the mid-1800s.

JEFF HELSDON

Editor

Taking the 40-minute drive from Tillsonburg to Normandale today, it's hard to imagine what George Tillson went through when he walked the distance 200 years ago with an ox and cart in tow, or that Normandale was a bustling industrial centre in the day.

Normandale is now just a shadow of what it once was, its famed forge is gone and the landscape has changed. But what was it like to undertake a journey of that length? Annandale National Historic Site Curator Kate Bakos and I set out to recreate a portion of the journey from Normandale to Tillsonburg last month, walking from Normandale to Delhi.

Parking near the historic plaque that pays heed to Normandale and the Normandale blast furnace, I went for a quick walk down to the lake. A small pier used for fishing stands at the mouth of Potter's Creek where it enters Lake Erie. Today, the plaque and adjacent beach are a recent addition to Turkey Point Provincial Park.

Research that Kate supplied prior to the walk talked of a shipping pier 300 feet long, which was likely in that vicinity. It's likely the famed Normandale stoves were shipped from that pier.

Although hard to imagine today, Normandale was called the "principal industrial and commercial hub in all of western Upper Canada" in one of the papers I was supplied. The VanNorman brothers didn't actually found the town. Job Lodor was the first settler on the property shortly after 1800, building a distillery, mill, and two houses. Due to discrepancies with the Crown lease on the property, he abandoned it and Samuel Long opened his pottery business there. That enterprise was successful enough that the creek was named Potter's Creek.

Long's fate isn't known, but John Mason was the next on the property, and he started building a forge to take advantage of the bog iron in the area. He constructed a dam and waterwheel to power the bellows in his blast furnace. The plant was only partially completed when he died in 1819. Searching for buyers, his widow found Joseph VanNorman, who was heading a group of investors from New York that included George Tillson. The other partner, Hiram Capron, eventually founded the town of Paris, ON.

This is where the Tillson story begins. The group moved to the site of the furnace and worked on completing it. It wasn't fully operational until 1828, by which time George had struck out on his own.

In March 1825, George started his journey with everything he would need to establish his new enterprise in a two-wheeled wagon pulled behind a single ox. The wagon only had two wheels to allow pivoting around the stumps.

Kate and I chose to head from Normandale to Turkey Point Road, cross it, go north on Gibson Road to the First Concession, then west to the West Quarter Line, which we followed to Delhi. Research by Post columnist Laurel Beechey surmised Tillson followed a slightly different route, likely going north up what are now more travelled roads. We elected to stick to the roads with less traffic.

As we enjoyed the brisk weather on a September morning, I mentioned that George would have likely faced larger challenges undertaking his journey in March with snow on the ground or just melted. In addition, the roads were likely just trails cut through the woods, which were muddy in the spring.

Kate said Tillson was not one who kept meticulous diaries, so details of his journey are scant, including the weather. That's easy to understand, as in those days, survival would have been the priority. Even writing is something we take for granted, but it would have meant keeping paper dry and using a quill and ink in 1825. Laurel traced George's route by the few scant details of the people he visited along the way, and found where they lived from historical atlases.

Although she only started at the museum in Tillsonburg this spring, I quickly learn that Kate is a quick study and is fluent in all things Tillson. Although she came to the position with her most recent job being with the Mississauga of the Credit First Nation, and before that with the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Kate grew up outside Delhi, so she wasn't unfamiliar with Tillsonburg before starting the job. She can certainly relate to Stompin' Tom Connors famous line "My back still aches when I hear the word" from Tillsonburg, as she grew up on a tobacco farm before heading off to the University of Guelph.

As we headed north on Gibson Road, which is a gravel unmaintained road, I was hopeful of seeing deer or turkeys. I had to settle for finding tracks only, although one was from a big buck.

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Retracing George Tillson's footsteps 200 years later

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We discussed how this is different from George's journey when there would have been bears and wolves in the area, as well as deer and turkeys. I did remark that I would have rather dealt with the remote threat of bears or wolves than the more likely encounter with deer ticks carrying Lyme disease. Each time we hit the long roadside grass to avoid vehicles, we checked for ticks.

A while later, a squirrel darted across the road, being the first wildlife we had seen. A couple of squirrels later, I raised the possibility of whether Tillson would have shot squirrels for food. Kate was doubtful, saying he would want to preserve any gunpowder and ammunition he had. That did raise the question of what he would have eaten on such a journey, and jerky was the main candidate.

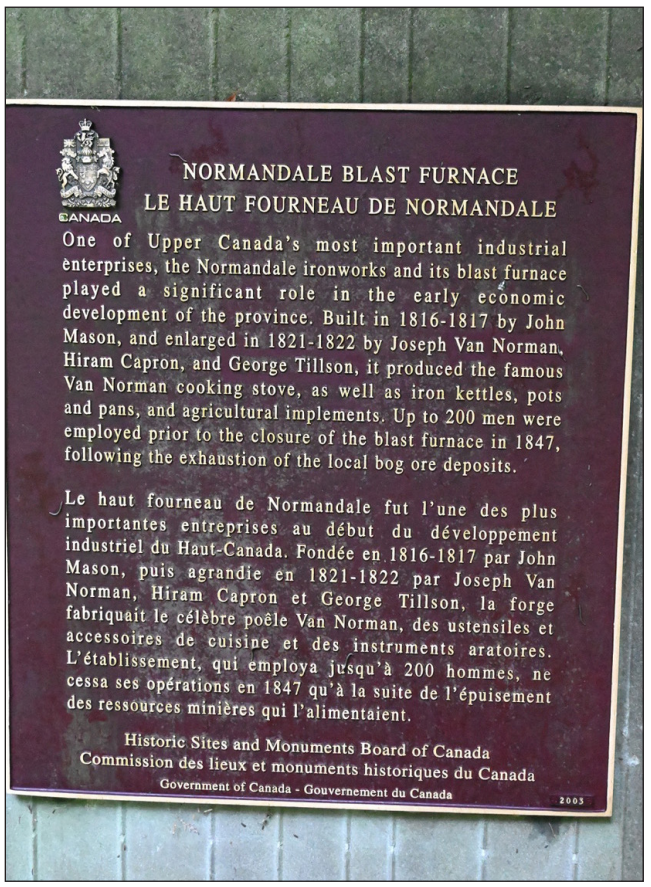
Although there are a few details about the journey George took in 1825, less is known about how he arrived at the site where he would start his town. His intention was to build a blast furnace in Tillsonburg, and bog iron was abundant in this area historically. George heard about bog iron deposits in the future site of the town that bore his name from an Indigenous worker in 1824. There are almost no details, but it is known he went on a scouting trip to the area that fall.

Since hearing about bog iron and its role in the settlement of Tillsonburg, I have always wondered more about it. I pondered whether they drain wetlands to create a bog underneath and how they know it's there.

No one I asked previously knew answers to that question. And since Kate didn't either, I turned to Google when I got home. Bog iron was key to early iron making and dates back to the second millennium BC. The Romans used it and there is evidence of bog iron production by the Vikings at L'Anse Aux Meadows in Newfoundland.

Bog iron is formed when water with iron deposits oxidizes in bogs. Its presence is denoted by dead grass in the area, and reddish-brown solutions or deposits on the surface, and sometimes is even lying on the ground. By pushing metal or wooden sticks in the ground, the presence of large deposits was confirmed.

The route we mapped out was 28 kilometres, and we left Normandale at 7:30 a.m. We knew the pace we were taking was faster than George would have moved. His journey took six days, and he overnighted with other settlers along the way.



(JEFF HELSDON PHOTO)

A Government of Canada historical plaque pays tribute to the VanNorman family and the partners in the company who went on to found Tillsonburg and Paris.

The profound sense of how life is different today emerged in our conversations as the journey progressed. After passing Courtland, George found his trail through the bush dwindled, and he had to cut his way through at some points. Pointing to an area beside the road with dense tree cover, I mentioned how tough it would be cutting a path through it. We debated if he would have used an axe or saw, and while I saw the value of a saw, Kate said only an axe was mentioned.

This hit home for me as my relatives settled along Highway 3 between Courtland and Delhi only 30 years after George's journey. Historical atlases indicate that my family's land was previously settled. Still, we lack information on the state of development of the road at that time or whether my ancestors had to clear the land.

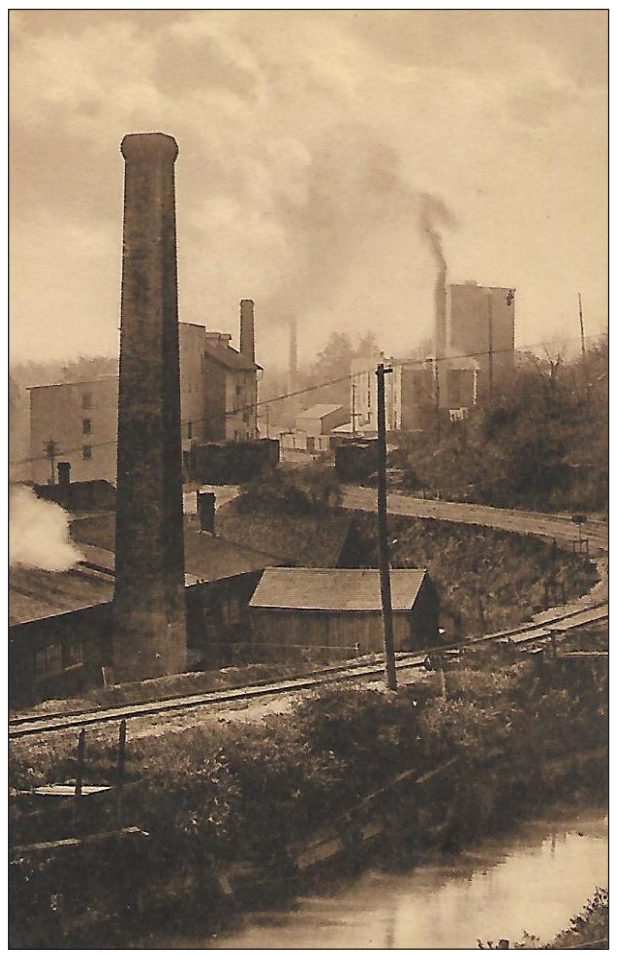
At about 18 or 20 kilometers, the older of our modern-day trekkers – me – started to get sore feet. As I lamented that it was likely worse for George, I learned something when Kate explained that pioneer shoes would have been hand-made to fit the wearer and may have actually been better. She also pointed out the softer ground would be easier on the legs and feet.

Looking at it in a modern context, the 28 km, or 39,000 steps, is about two-thirds of a marathon. This gave me a better appreciation for what these athletes endure.

As we discussed more about pioneer life, Kate shared that George had the log cabin he built on site up four logs high in the first day. Having cut down a tree and cleared the branches off it with a chainsaw, I struggled to imagine the enormity of felling enough logs to build walls four logs high when the trees needed to be cut by hand, branches cleared, logs notched, and then somehow moved into position by man and ox.

We were both taken aback when discussing that after George had his cabin built, he didn't send for his family for a year. Did this mean he didn't communicate with them that entire time? Did they even know if he was still alive? Remember, his wife Nancy was pregnant with E.D. when George left. E.D. was born four days after his father left.

As Highway 3 came into sight, about six hours later, both Kate and I agreed we preferred modern conveniences to pioneer life. Our journey was half of what Tillson undertook, and on a paved road as compared to a likely-muddy trail. And then when one considers George, Nancy and family walked to Normandale from New York, it makes us realize how good we have it.



(JASON PANKRATZ PHOTO)

The valley of the Big Otter Creek in Tillsonburg looked a lot different at the turn of the last century, being a hub of industrial activity. This shot is what one would have seen if standing at the back of the Oxford Street Tim Horton's parking lot and looking towards where The Mill restaurant stands today.

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