

CROSSING THE NOTTAWASAGA

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Abstract

How and where the Huron and Petun Indians crossed the Nottawasaga River were not recorded. Three possible crossing places are suggested.

Trois endroits possibles des traversées de la rivière Nottawasaga par les Indiens Huron et Petun sont examinés.

Introduction

Before the Dispersal of 1650, the Hurons lived to the east of the lower Nottawasaga River drainage, and the Petuns to the west. A land journey from one to the other necessarily included crossing the river. The French recorded a number of remarks about the difficulty of travelling in winter on the trails, but none about crossing rivers. Samuel de Champlain, Fathers Joseph le Caron, Joseph de la Roche Dailon, Jean de Brébeuf, Isaac Jogues, Charles Garnier, Pierre Pijart, Léonard Garreau, Noël Chabanel and Adrien Greslon, all crossed the river at least once, but none mentioned how or where the crossing was made. This may imply that crossing the Nottawasaga was easy and not particularly worth noting. It was not that somehow the travellers were unaware of the river. Maps drawn by three of them (Champlain, Brebeuf(?) and Bressani), show the river, sometimes in detail.

It was not until the report of the death of Father Noël Chabanel, in December 1649, on his way from the Petun to the Huron country, that the first and only mention occurs of a river that was to be crossed (JR35:149).

A number of statements were also made concerning the distances from points in the Huron country to the Petun. To use these to locate the Petun it is necessary to know where the river was crossed, because an inconveniently placed crossing may have added to the length of the journey.

In 1992, an all-season survey of the banks of the Nottawasaga River upstream from the mouth to the Old Portage Landing was commenced to locate possible fording places. During the subsequent winter, the river was observed to determine when and where it froze, and could be crossed on the ice. In total, three possible seasonally-determined crossing places were recognized.

The Early Maps

As mentioned, maps exist that are contemporary with the Huron and Petun Indians, and which show the Nottawasaga River, but none are in sufficient detail to show where the river was crossed.

One of the maps, "Hvronvm Explicata Tabvla", by Father Francesco Bressani (1657) appears to show the range of sand-dunes through which the river passes (Map 1 following), where the river would be very difficult to cross.

Nöel Chabanel

As noted, a river is mentioned in connection with Father Nöel Chabanel's overland journey from the Petun to the western Huron country. The account reads: "At daybreak, the Father .. found himself checked at the bank of a river, which crossed his path. A Huron (Petun) reported the circumstance, adding that he had passed him, in his canoe, on (to) this side of the stream" (JR35:149). This statement was in fact untrue, being mis-information designed to divert attention from what really happened to Chabanel. It might be questioned whether Chabanel would make himself wholly reliant for his crossing on the fortuitous availability of a friendly canoe, when he could have forded the river at a time and place of his own choosing. Nevertheless, the initial acceptance of the story carried with it the requirement that the unidentified river was wide enough to require a canoe to cross, and this in turn circumstantially suggests it was the Nottawasaga, the largest and only major river to be crossed on such a journey.

By what means and where Chabanel intended to cross the river, the trail that he followed led to the river at this point.

Father Arthur E. Jones, S.J.

Father Jones made the first scholarly reconstruction of Chabanel's journey to the river, which he identified as the Nottawasaga. By means of a map (Map 2, following) he suggested possible routes for Chabanel (F-G-H-I-L on the map), and the Iroquois whom he heard (A-B-C-D on the map), but cautioned these "are wholly hypothetical, and are to be accepted so far only as they explain more or less plausibly the text itself, and fit in with all the facts recorded (Jones 1903:114, 1909:236). Father Jones had at the time of writing not visited the area, and was clearly unaware of the dunes. The following comments are equally hypothetical even with benefit of hindsight.

The G-H-I portion of the route chosen for Father Chabanel is not likely, being on the western dune (locally called "Big Bertha", now much removed), where the river is between high, steep, unstable sand banks. The place given for Chabanel to reach the river at daybreak the next day, is where the river is widest and deepest (L). A canoe would certainly be required to cross at this point, unless the river was frozen, because the river here was indeed an "unfordable stream", even in daylight to an unhurried traveller.

However, no such impediment is proposed for the invading army of three hundred (JR35:107) Iroquois, who, Jones proposed, in a strange and enemy country, crossed the river twice on the same day, the second time returning in the dark of a winter midnight, burdened with reluctant captives and booty taken from the Petun town of Etharita, and perhaps some of their own wounded.

The place where Jones suggested the Iroquois crossed the river, as indicated on his map (Map

2 following, on which the Iroquois route is marked A-B-C-D), corresponds best to just north of the unmarked Lamont Creek junction, at point C close to Chabanel at point H. As with the placement of Chabanel at the same time, this is in the dunes and a least likely place to attempt a crossing, the river being inaccessible due to high, steep, unstable sand banks. Jones at the same time both espoused and rejected an alternative shore-side beach route (Jones 1903:113, 115, 116; 1909:following p.234, 236-9, 250-1, 260).

After passing from Chabanel's hearing, the Iroquois army and its captives are not heard from again until four years later when Father Simon le Moine visited them in New York and recovered some of the loot from Etharita (JR41:119-121). They had evidently returned home to New York as soon as they could. Their route home from Chabanel's vicinity is not known, except that they had not taken the most direct way, south from Etharita, presumably because this is where the Petun warriors were looking for them. Perhaps they first needed to return to their temporary base camp in Huronia (near Orillia ? Jones 1903:116, 1909:238) to prepare for the long southerly journey, and perhaps, in the dark, and in a strange enemy country, it was simplest to retrace their own steps until they felt safe from a reprisal attack. None of these possibilities necessarily required them to cross the river, only to be near enough to it that Chabanel, camped close by, could hear them (JR35:149). With Petun captives to guide them, they could have stayed south of the river and followed its curve to the south, crossing only lesser tributaries much further upstream, possibly using in part the "Trail (Tobacco Nation to Hurons)" which ran easterly across Sunnidale and Flos Townships, as reconstructed by A. F. Hunter (1907:29, map 3 following). That Chabanel's intended crossing place is near a trail which passes close to the crossing place is therefore a criterion in its identification.

Andrew F. Hunter

In 1907 A. F. Hunter published a report on the Indian remains in Flos, Vespra and a part of Sunnidale townships, in which he mentions two crossing places associated with two trails to the Petun.

The first of these trails was "of considerable importance passing from the Bear Nation, in Tiny Township, to the Tobacco Nation " (1907:27). Marked on his map, "Archaeological Map of Flos Township" (1907:29)(Map 3, following), this trail proceeded south-west from Tiny Township to reach the river at the Old Portage Upper Landing, where a crossing place is implied.

The second trail was "In the south side of the township .. a great trail leading from "Upper" Flos .. to the Tobacco Nation" (1907:27). Hunter also calls this the "great trail to the Tobacco Nation" and "the great Tobacco trail" (1907:26). Marked on his map "Trail (Tobacco Nation to Hurons)" (Map 3, following), this trail crossed the river far upstream from the survey area, in Concession 3 lot 22, although the text describes the location as "somewhere north of" the 3rd line of Flos, i.e. Concession 4. The trail continued west, then north-west, to reach the river once more opposite the Old Portage Upper Landing, and the implied crossing, and from there continues westerly to the Petun, inferentially on the south side of the unmarked "Big Bertha" dune.

From the Petun country the east-bound traveller on this trail would pass south of the dune range and approach the river beyond Lamont Creek at the Power Line Road, follow the southern bank

along a stretch of rapids until opposite the Old Portage Upper Landing. Here then, several options were available. To reach the eastern Hurons, the traveller continued on the trail, which, soon after passing near the crossing, turned south-easterly away from the river, to cross it much further up. Alternatively, to reach the Huron Bear, the traveller crossed the river at or near the Upper Landing to the north side, from which ran the Huron trail to the east, and the Old Portage trail to Schoonertown to the west. Precisely where Hunter believed the crossing point to be is not clear on the map, being obscured by the prominence Hunter gives to marking three adjacent archaeological sites as evidence of the trail and crossing. The text only mentions "the Rapids in Sunnidale, near to where the aborigines had the other crossing of the river" (1907:24). These "Rapids" are marked on the map, downstream from and close to the Old Portage Upper Landing. Hunter's crossing is surely meant to be either at the Old Portage Upper Landing, or very near. Yet the vicinity of the Landing itself would be an unlikely spot for a crossing, as here the water was deep enough to unload bateaux from upstream, before the shallows of the rapids further down. Hunter recorded that here the "river banks are low, and a good crossing place" (Royal Ontario Museum's Site Records, unpublished). Access to the river is of course essential to fording it, but so is shallow water. This is available close by, a short distance downstream, at the rapids, but there access becomes the problem.

Philip Cooke

Philip Cooke, of Wasaga Beach, has known this stretch of the river, and the archaeological sites along its banks, for most of his life. During 1974 and 1975, a number of professional archaeologists surveyed part of the river for archaeological sites, in connection with the creation of Wasaga Beach Provincial Park. Courtesy, as well as efficiency, requires any such survey to contact local people with intimate knowledge of the land, and the professionals soon found it worth their while to wait for young Philip to come home from school.

In 1990, Philip compiled his own archaeological survey of the lower Nottawasaga River, recording twenty archaeological sites between Schoonertown and the Old Portage upper landing. As the local resident expert, Philip was an essential part of our search team, and ably demonstrated the fordableness of the Nottawasaga River rapids just upstream from Lamont Creek by simply wading across the river and back several times. From this it was clear that any crossing place would be at rapids where the river was visibly and consistently shallow. The survey thereafter concentrated on the several stretches of rapids between the Oxbow and the Old Portage landing.

The Lower Nottawasaga River Crossings Survey

(Con.=Concession and Lot in Sunnidale Township, now Clearview Township)

Location [1]: The first set of rapids encountered upstream from the river mouth was at the end of Rapids Street (Con. 15, Lot 3). Here, erosion from the dunes upstream is building several islands, and fishermen are able to wade to the centre of the river. Nevertheless, the fishermen advised it is impossible to wade all the way across because of a narrow but deep channel. This location was therefore rejected.

Location [2]: A second rapids is just below the entry of Lamont Creek (Con. 14, Lot 4). It might be possible to cross here from water's edge to water's edge, but there are high, steep, unstable, sandy dune banks here which make access to the river difficult and inconvenient. It is also very near "Cooke's Crossing". This location was therefore rejected. It was noted that Lamont Creek would serve to guide the east-bound traveller from the Petun to the river at a point south of the dunes.

Location [3]: The third set of rapids is just upstream from the entry of Lamont Creek (Con. 14, Lot 4). Here, Philip Cooke demonstrated that the river could be waded across by means of a practical demonstration. The awed remainder of the survey crew thereupon dubbed the place "Cooke's Crossing". However, Philip himself cautioned us against any too-ready acceptance of the spot as a native crossing without considering that here might have stood the dam for Bernee's Mill, further downstream, and that the rubble footing which enabled him to cross the river might be the remains of the collapsed mill dam, rather than a natural feature present in Indian days. Evidence for this is that the crossing route is very specific as a raised underwater ridge, and when Philip stepped to one side he was immediately immersed to the neck. Even today, therefore, this crossing is open only to an experienced traveller.

The wisdom of this caution reminded us that as we have no means of knowing what changes have occurred in the river during the last three hundred years and more, the conclusions the survey might reach could not accurately include allowance for this major unknown factor. Applied to this location, it did seem probable that the underwater path across the river was indeed the collapsed mill dam, and even so, the water was uncomfortably deep. On the other hand the presence of ash and Indian pottery on the bank nearby indicated the Indians had used the area for some activity, perhaps drying clothing, perhaps fishing. Whether this could be determined by archaeologically excavating the deposit before it is entirely eroded away by repeated seasonal high water is unknown. Hunter suggested "at the rapids they had their ancient fish weirs" (1907:23).

Location [4]: A fourth set of rapids was encountered a thousand feet north of Cooke's Crossing (Con. 14, Lot 5). Here also there is a water-side archaeological site. However the river is much wider here, the water is turbulent with back-flow, and crossing here would have no advantage, the north side being dunes. The purpose of the site was therefore interpreted as fishing, and the location was rejected as a crossing.

Location [5]: This fifth and longest stretch of rapids is marked 'Rapids' by A. F. Hunter on his "Archaeological Map of Flos Township, with a small part of Sunnidale added .."). The map shows the route of the "Old Portage" from its Upper Landing to its lower terminus at "British Fort" (Schoonertown). Three archaeological sites are shown clustered in concession 14, lots 7, 8 and 9, of Sunnidale Township, but we had already determined that the presence of water-side Indian remains did not necessarily imply the site of a ford. As noted, A. F. Hunter marked a crossing place at or in the vicinity of the Old Portage Upper Landing, upstream from the rapids.

During our survey the rapids were found commencing opposite Power Line Road (Con. 14, Lot 7) and extending upstream to within a short distance of the Old Portage Upper Landing. For most of their length they are inaccessible because of steep banks, and for this reason rejected as unlikely crossing places.

Location [6]: At a point along the rapids, possibly at about the location of one of Hunter's archaeological sites (Con. 17, Lot 7), we were surprised to find graded ramp-paths down to the river on both the north and south sides. These, probably the work of lumber-men to facilitate horses reaching the river, mark shallows now much frequented by fishermen, one of whom demonstrated that he could easily wade across the river from one side to the other by doing so. The graded ramp up the north bank leads to a trail which follows the river back upstream to the Old Portage Upper Landing. The Old Portage trail itself can be reached by striking north inland. On the south side the ramp is oriented towards Hunter's archaeological sites. This place has obviously been used for many years to cross the river, and was accepted as the most obvious ford. The name "Upper Crossing" was applied to it. As it is only about 1,000 feet west of the Old Portage Upper Landing, it is accepted as the one intended by Hunter. It fits well with Hunter's trail, which may either lead to the crossing or continue by, as Hunter marked on his map (Map 3, following). The graded ramp on the south side is not in present use because it leads onto private residential property. A more direct but difficult path down the a steep and slippery bank has developed by fishermen, which perhaps replicates conditions in Indian times, and allows access only to careful foot traffic.

The Upper Crossing is somewhat shallower than Cooke's Crossing. On horseback a rider would not be wetted, but a person on foot might get uncomfortably wet, to about the middle of the body at present normal water levels. What the water levels were in Indian times, and how they varied seasonally, is not known. It is presumed that in times of high water, such as the spring run-off, the rapids disappeared, and the river could not then be crossed. Also unknown is the extent of erosional and other changes to the river banks since native occupation which might influence a crossing.

Location [7]: the upper landing of the Old Portage (Con. 14, lot 8) also shows traces of Indian use, but here the water is too deep to have been a ford.

The Winter Survey

The formation of ice in winter was monitored, with special attention to conditions on December 8, the anniversary of Noël Chabanel's intended crossing. By this date in 1992 there was snow, and a thin ice crust was beginning to extend from the banks throughout the survey area upstream from Schoonertown. However, above Schoonertown (Con. 16, Lot 5) the vigour and fluctuation of the water levels prevented the formation of reliable ice bridges at any time during the winter. Below Schoonertown, where the river is wide and placid, similar thin fringe shore-side ice had developed by December 8, 1992. By late December the ice was firm enough to walk on, and a traveller could cross the river on the ice here until spring break-up.

The implication of this observation is that the winter traveller would approach the river on the north side of the dune range, to reach the part of the river sufficiently frozen to cross safely. At other times of the year, to cross at either Cooke's Crossing or the Upper Crossing, the traveller approached the river on the south side of the dune range. This required a decision to be made about which approach route to use long before the river was reached, or a difficult adjustment would be necessary. This was somewhat easier on the north (Huron) side than the south (Petun) side.

The west-bound traveller who approached the lower river from the north, or Huron, side, in anticipation of finding it frozen, but finding the ice not safe to cross, could follow the river to the beginning of the dunes at Schoonertown, and then cross the dunes by means of the Old Portage route, to the Upper Crossing, a fairly direct route adding a distance from Schoonertown of somewhat less than two miles to the journey, but imposing no real inconvenience. By contrast, the east-bound traveller had to decide before reaching the dunes whether to pass north or south of them. If the north route was chosen, to access the river at Schoonertown, and this was found impractical, the journey back up-river, over the west-side ("Big Bertha") dune, to the Upper Crossing, could be more than twice as long as on the north side, if the loops of the river were followed. Crossing at Cooke's Crossing, if feasible, rather than at the Upper Crossing would save nearly a mile.

Conclusions

Winter crossing on the frozen ice downstream from Schoonertown was fairly reliable from late December, and the easiest way to cross. It may be assumed that Champlain crossed the river on the ice on his journey to and from the Petun in the winter of early 1616.

The river could be crossed at any time of year, except when the water levels were really high, at the Upper Crossing, and possibly, particularly at low water by an experienced traveller, also at Cooke's Crossing. The traveller would endure the discomfort of getting wet.

To avoid the difficulty of crossing the sand dunes that lay between the winter (Schoonertown down river) crossing and the Upper Crossing, the approaching traveller chose the appropriate trail while still distant from the river. For the east-bound traveller this meant following Lamont Creek most of the year when the river was not frozen.

It was not necessary for the Iroquois to cross the river on their return home, or for Father Chabanel to hear them.

At the time of year that Father Chabanel died (December 8, 1649) the river would not be sufficiently frozen to cross on the ice anywhere. Rather than chance that a friendly canoe might be conveniently available, Chabanel would more probably have taken the Lamont Creek route south of the dunes to attempt to ford the river, probably at the Upper Crossing.

In attempting to interpret conditions three and a half centuries ago, no adjustment could be made for unknown subsequent changes in climate, water fluctuations, seasonal water levels, erosion of river banks, etc.

Survey Crews

Many thanks go to Marjorie Clarkson, Philip Cooke, Bill Fox, Ella Kruse, Jim Shropshire and Charles Garrad, all of whom participated in the survey at different times.

Maps

Map 1 - part of "Hvronvm Explicata Tabvla" (Bressani 1657) showing the dunes.

Map 2 - part of "The Petun Country" (Jones 1903, 1909)

Map 3 - "Archaeological Map of Flos Township" (Hunter 1907)

Map 4 - "Nottawasaga River Crossings Survey Locations" (Garrad 1997)

Photographs

Photograph 1 - Philip Cooke wading across the Nottawasaga River at "Cooke's Crossing" on September 6, 1992

Photograph 2 - The Upper Crossing ice-free on December 8, 1992

Photograph 3 - Ice beginning to form along inner shore of the Oxbow, December 8, 1992

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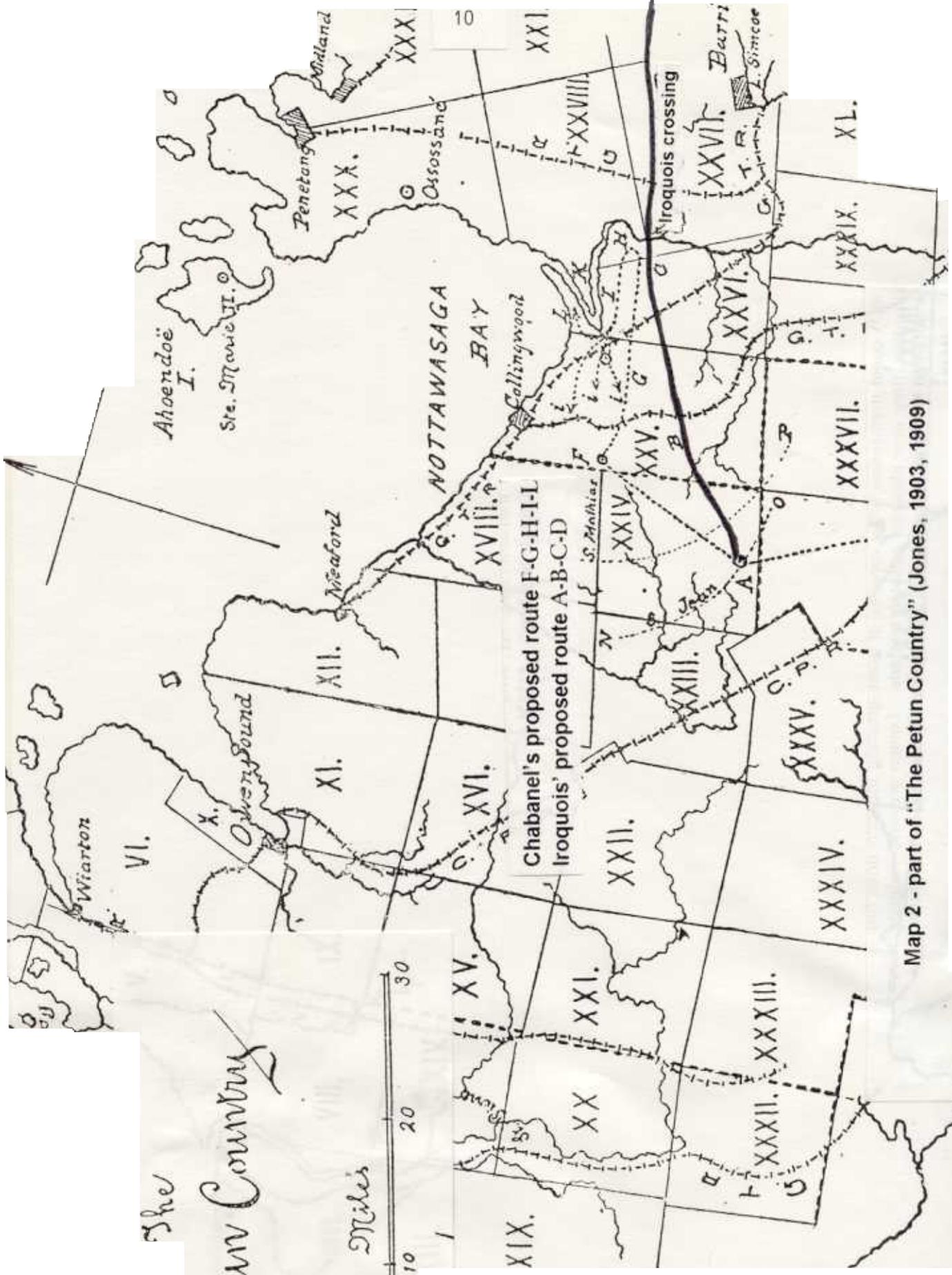
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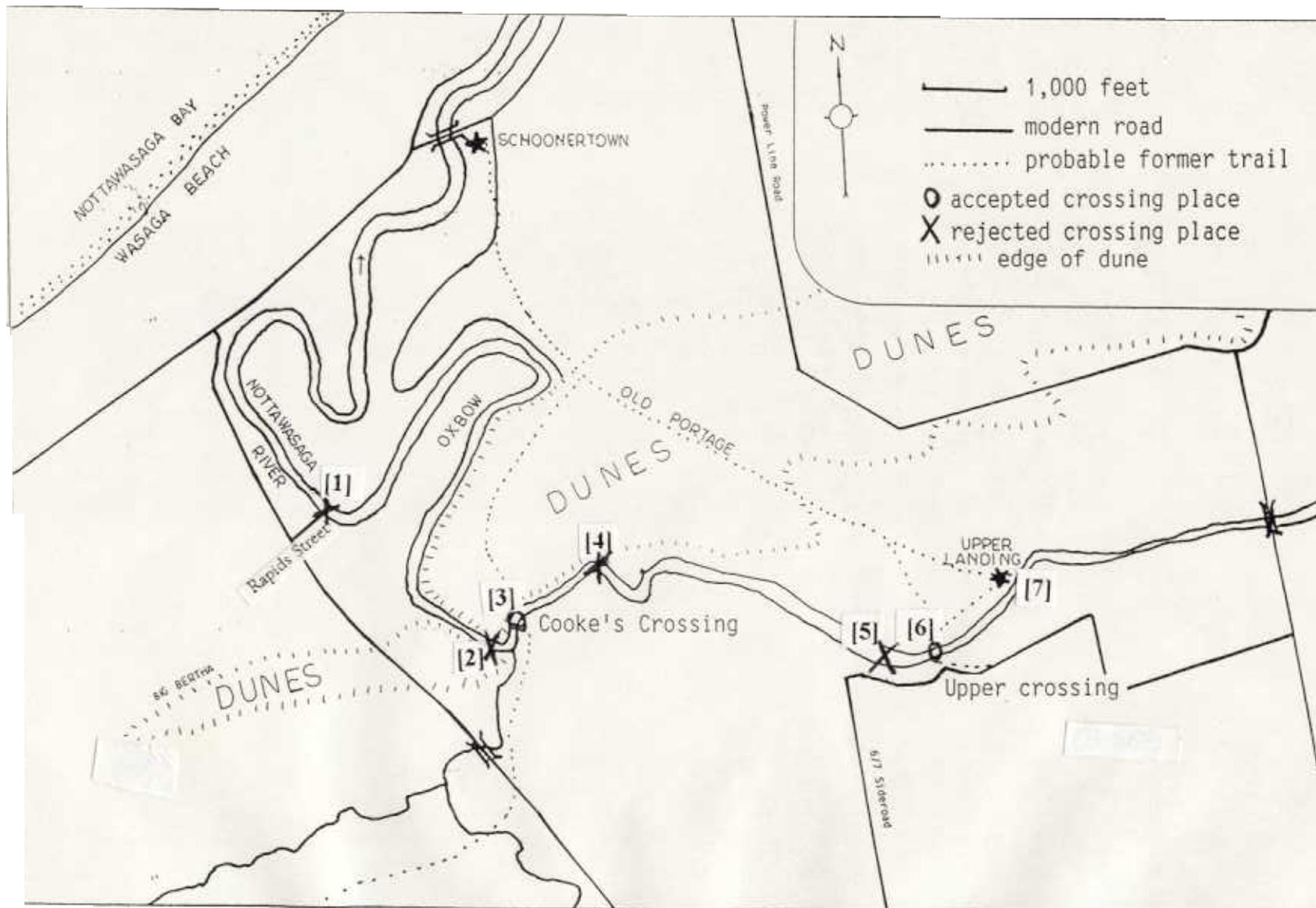
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The Petun Country

Miles



Map 2 - part of "The Petun Country" (Jones, 1903, 1909)



Map 4 - "Nottawasaga River Crossings Survey Locations" (Garrad 1997)

September 6, 1992

**Philip Cooke
wading across
the Nottawasaga
River at "Cooke's
Crossing"**



December 8, 1992

**The Upper
Crossing**

ice-free



December 8, 1992

**The Oxbow
Ice beginning to
form along inner
shore**

