

## Champlain's Portage from Muskrat Lake to the Ottawa River

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*A study of topographic maps and aerial photographs supports the accuracy of Champlain's records of camps and portage routes during his short trip in the Ottawa Valley. In 1613, Champlain travelled from a location near present-day Cobden on Muskrat Lake to Lower Allumette Lake, a widening of the Ottawa River near present-day Pembroke. The accuracy of Champlain's recorded distances and routes have been questioned. In the twentieth century, historians confused by Champlain's geographical and metric records came to erroneous published conclusions, which this study refutes.*

On the seventh day of June, 1613, Samuel de Champlain visited Algonquin villages and camps near the present-day communities of Cobden and Pembroke, Ontario (Figure 1). Champlain had portaged over a difficult route from a landing at the Ottawa River east of present-day Haley Station to the head of modern Muskrat Lake (Figures 1 and 2). Here he met a local Algonquin group led by Nibachis. Champlain named this lake Lac de Nibachis. Nibachis supplied guides for Champlain's visit with Chief Tessoüat, who was located at modern Lower Allumette Lake. Champlain recorded that his group canoed down Lac de Nibachis nearly seven leagues and then walked overland one league to Lower Allumette Lake, where he met Chief Tessoüat. Champlain was taken to an island that was not easily flooded and had strong rapids on both sides where Chief Tessoüat could defend his people if attacked by his enemies. Historians have concluded that Morrison Island, at the head of Lower Allumette Lake, is the most probable island that could fit Champlain's description (Figure 1). Champlain visited with Chief Tessoüat, and after some friendly discussions as well as some altercations, departed Tessoüat's place of residence on the tenth day of June, 1613. He was accompanied down the Ottawa River by a flotilla of 40 canoes loaded with merchandise (Biggar 1922-1936:2:277-299).

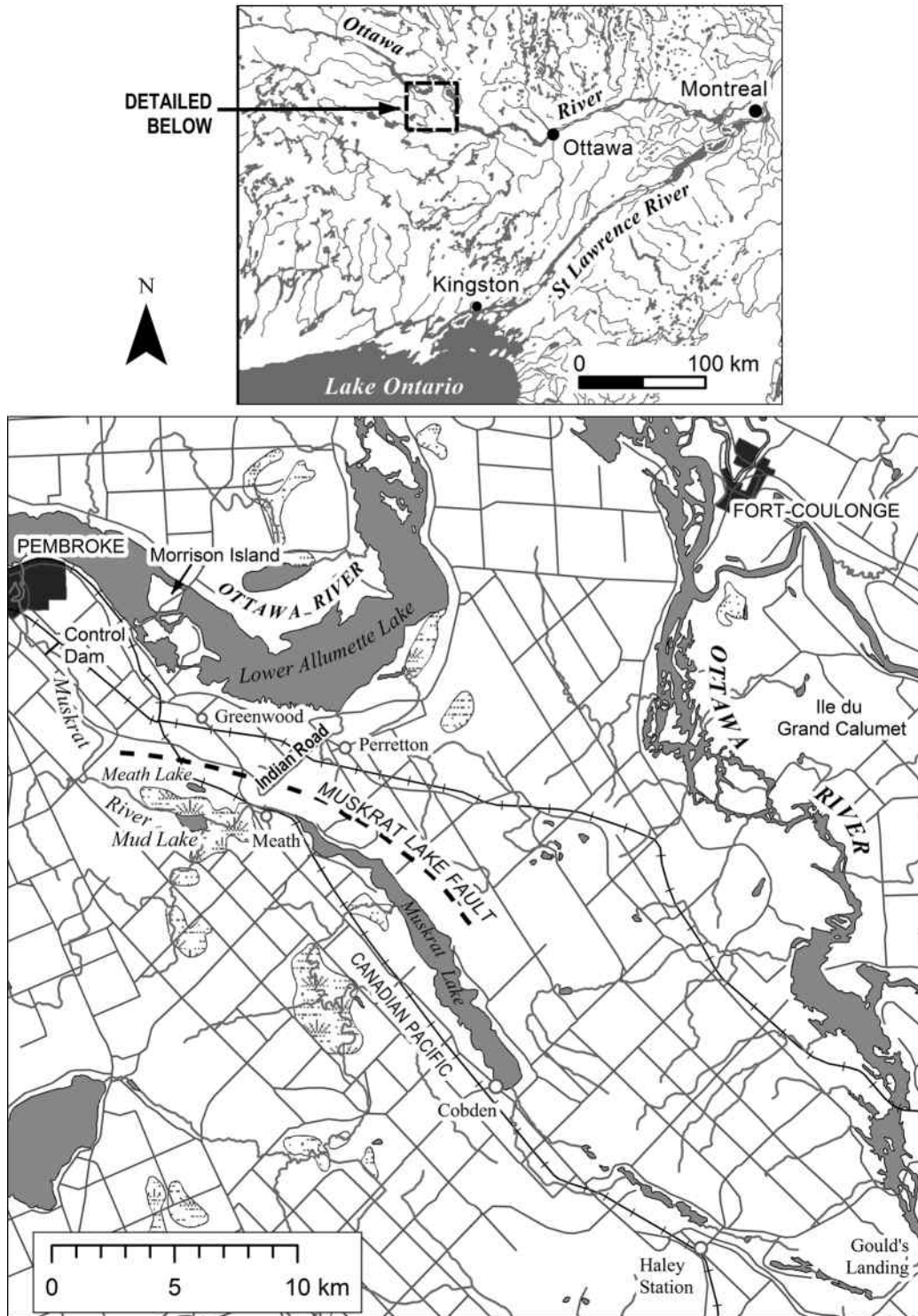
Samuel de Champlain's expedition, completed in 1613, was published by the year 1614. Champlain initiated his records of his second venture up the Ottawa River in 1615 by recalling his previous visit to Morrison Island:

...we again entered the river where I had been before, which leads to the Algonquins, a distance of eighty-nine leagues from the St. Louis rapid; and of that river I have given ample description and an account of my discoveries in my preceding book, printed in the year 1614. For that reason I shall not speak of it in this work but shall pursue my journey as far as the lake of the Algonquins,... [Biggar 1922-1936:3:36-37].

Experiences from later expeditions could not have modified Champlain's records published in 1614. By the time historians had studied Champlain's route to Morrison Island, changes in the landscape had complicated their research. During the twentieth century and more recently, the portage routes taken by Champlain, and the location of the Algonquin camps and villages he visited near Cobden and Lower Allumette Lake, have been debated (Kennedy 1970:79-80; Pendergast 1999:84-85; Swayze 2001:12).

### Historical Environment

By 1832-1836, concession and lot lines had been mostly laid out in Westmeath Township and a map of this work completed and submitted by J. McNaughton, Provincial Land Surveyor (Archives of Ontario 1836). Jason Gould built an improved road in 1849, from Gould's Landing to Cobden, bypassing the white-water



**Figure 1.** Area in Renfrew County visited by Champlain, June 1613 showing the road grid and other modern features, as depicted on 1:250,000 scale map sheet, and the location of the Muskrat Lake geological fault. Only features mentioned in text are labeled. Base map information: Natural Resources Canada (2001).

**Figure 2.** Part of Champlain's map of 1632; showing his route in 1613 from Fleuve Saint Laurent to the head of Muskrat Lake. His portage from the Ottawa River to Muskrat Lake is shown by a series of ovals. Reproduced from a limited facsimile edition of *Les Voyages de la Nouvelle France*, National Map Collection, National Archives of Canada (also reproduced in Bigger [1922-1936:Portfolio:Plate 10]).



of the Ottawa River below Calumet Island (Ile du Grand Calumet, Figure 1). Now passengers and freight could be transported more efficiently from Gould's Landing to Muskrat Lake at Cobden, and also on Gould's steamboats down the Muskrat River water route to near Pembroke. These steamboats were able to navigate from Cobden to near Pembroke where passengers boarded a stage coach to Pembroke (Kennedy 1970:19,143-145) (Figure 1).

Forest residue and other obstacles, such as beaver dams, would have been cleared from the Muskrat River, permitting the passage of Gould's steamboats. Transportation by steamboat could be interrupted in low-water periods because the Muskrat River has a low gradient and is prone to sudden changes in water levels. It does not maintain sufficient flow to assure water levels in some dry seasons (Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources 1990:2-4, 12).

The Muskrat River and the Muskrat Lake Fault posed a significant challenge to early overland traffic from Cobden to Pembroke (Figure 1). Primitive portage trails were redirected and widened between Cobden and Lower Allumette Lake to accommodate oxen-drawn sloops, wagons and lumbering equipment.

A passable Government Road had been constructed by 1855 between Ottawa and Pembroke and in 1876 the Canada Central Railroad, later the Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR), steamed into Pembroke (Price 1957:37, 51).

With a paucity of knowledge regarding archaeological sites or other data, historians had to assume the locations of Algonquin sites, trails, and previous water levels from reworked landscapes and the interpretation of early records. Samuel de Champlain's records have been of concern to historians as modern measurements in miles or kilometres do not easily equate with distances noted in French leagues (Heidenreich 1976:44-46).

#### *Archaeological and Historical Remains*

Samuel de Champlain described wooden structures on Morrison Island (Figure 1), which would not be found above ground today. Fires that swept through this area on both the island and mainland in the intervening centuries would have destroyed the cultural remains on the ground surface and burned vegetation to the water margins (*Perth Courier* 1856:3). High spring water-levels in Lower Allumette Lake would, perhaps, have dispersed or swept away archaeological materials. These natural events would make it difficult, today, to find evidence of seasonal sites such as Tessoüat's camp on the south bank of Lower Allumette Lake.

Champlain mentions the mortuary gifts of valuable tools such as axes, knives, kettles and awls on Tessoüat's island. Mr. J. L. Morris of Pembroke had recovered a collection of axes, awls and other artifacts found on Morrison Island,

which is mentioned in a footnote supporting Champlain's observations (Biggar 1922-1936:2:279-280).

Mrs. Carl Price and Clyde C. Kennedy noted three periods of occupation on this island:

The latest Indian people to camp there, who could well be the Algonquin met by Champlain, left pieces of pottery, stone tools and weapons, and glass trade beads. Also found at the site were pieces of brass trade pots and iron awls. [Price and Kennedy 1961:23]

### Champlain's Land League

Samuel de Champlain had a good compass set to the magnetic meridian and was very precise in its use and well prepared to correct his readings to true north (Heidenreich 1976:55). From Champlain's records, Heidenreich correctly identified his land routes, which the explorer measured in leagues. Heidenreich states that the Jesuit Fathers used the *lieue d'une heure*, about three statute miles (Heidenreich 1968:40), and comments on other leagues in use at the time and under which situations certain leagues were used. Champlain used a league that averaged 2.1 miles, or 3.4 km, during travel on inland routes (Heidenreich 1976:44-46). James Pendergast scaled a modern map over the 89-league route Champlain had traveled to the Kichesipirini on Morrison Island from near the Sault St. Louis and found that Champlain was using a league approximately equivalent to 2.3 to 2.4 statute miles (3.7 to 3.8 km) (Pendergast 1999:85).

### Champlain's Muskrat Lake Route

Champlain clearly declared they had canoed nearly seven leagues down Lac de Nibachis, then walked northeast one league over a pleasant landscape with well-beaten trails and found Chief Tessoüat's camp on a lake. The most common and convincing route known by historians indicated that Champlain was escorted, by canoe, to

the northern end of modern Muskrat Lake. From there the group portaged over Stoqua's Portage Road to Lower Allumette Lake near Perretton (Figures 1, 3 and 4). Supposition of this route was probably based on a map by J. L. Morris, which puts the end of Stoqua's Portage Road and Tessoüat's encampment near Perretton on Lower Allumette Lake (Figure 3; Biggar 1922-1936:2:Plate 11).

*Notes on the History of Renfrew County* only mentions that "The party paddled along Muskrat Lake to its northerly end, then portaged across to the widening of the Ottawa River now known as Lower Allumette Lake. There Champlain met Tessoüat" (Price and Kennedy 1961:21). Clyde C. Kennedy indicated on his map that Champlain traversed the same general land route from the north end of Muskrat Lake to Morrison Island as shown on the map by Morris (Kennedy 1970:72).

### Stoqua's Portage Road

Starting from the north end of Muskrat Lake, Stoqua's Portage Road to Perretton extends approximately northeast (Figures 3 and 4). The landing is about 15 km from the head of the marsh at the south end of Muskrat Lake. The road measures about 4.8 km in length, one *lieue d'une heure*, from the landing to Lower Allumette Lake at Perretton (Figure 1). This portage is also shown on J. McNaughton's map of 1832-1836 and could be the portage described by Champlain. Historians concluded in the early twentieth century that Stoqua's Portage Road, 4.8 km in length, would be an acceptable choice to satisfy Champlain's records (Figure 3).

### The Indian Road

Indian Road leads over the bedrock fault that was the genesis of Muskrat Lake and the Muskrat River channel (Figures 1 and 4). The original condition of this portage cannot be determined, as the roadway has been graded for modern traffic. The steep fault runs past Cobden, through Muskrat Lake, and continues northwest four kilometres south of Pembroke.

Modern Indian Road begins at the base of the fault where Highway 417 crosses the Muskrat

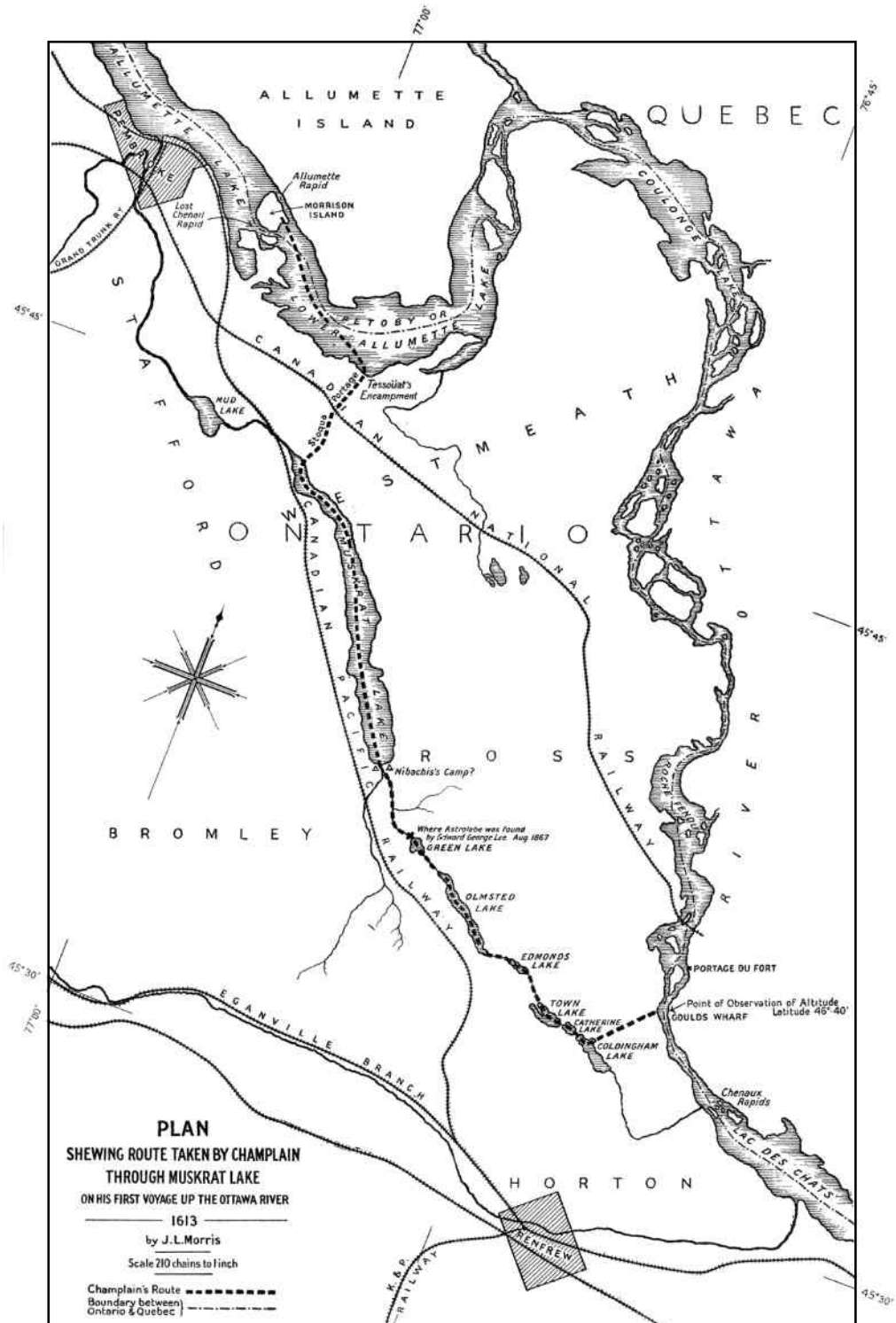
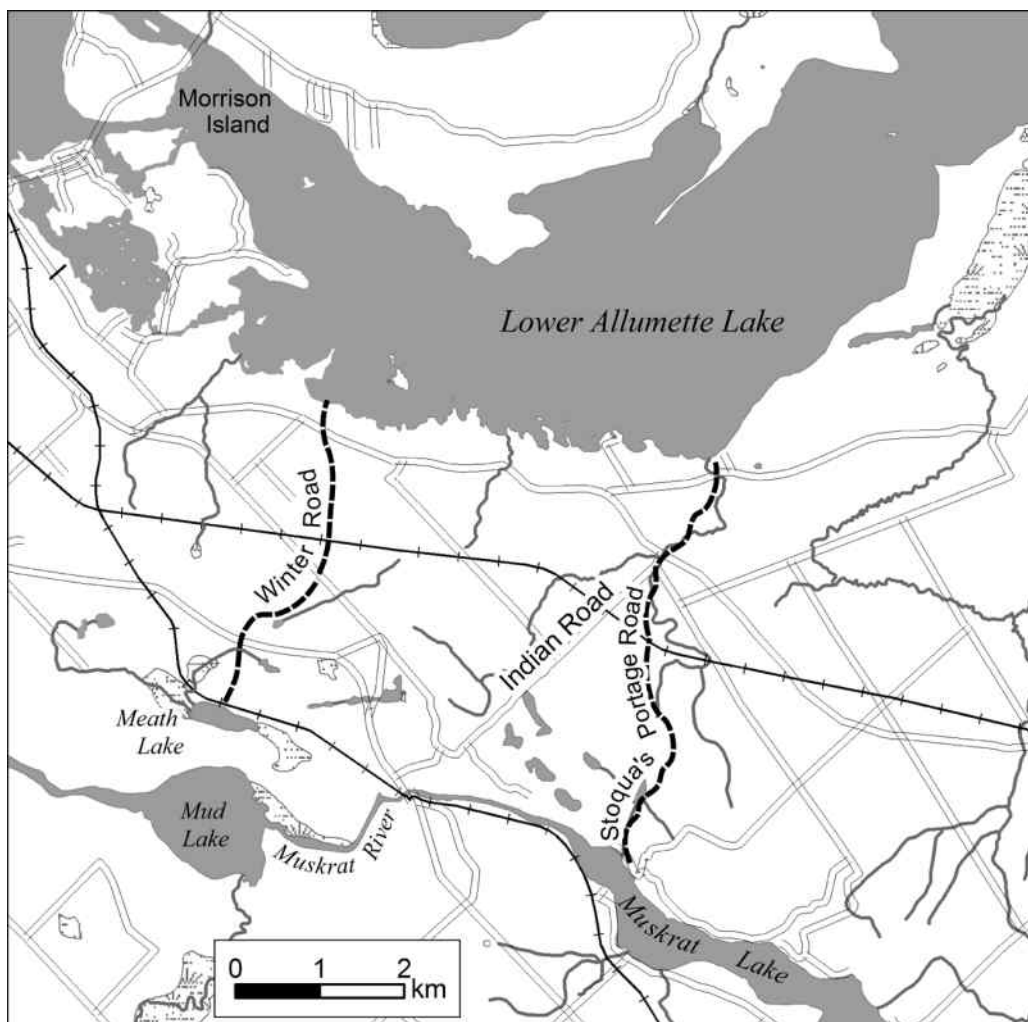


Figure 3. J.L. Morris' map of Champlain's route from near Gould's Wharf on the Ottawa River to Muskrat Lake, Stoua's Portage and Lower Allumette Lake (Biggar 1922-1936:2:Plate 11).



**Figure 4.** Part of Westmeath Township, Renfrew County, showing the locations of the Winter Road (coinciding with the proposed Meath Portage) and Stogua's Portage Road, from McNaughton's map of 1832 (Archives of Ontario 1836), when both roads existed between Mud Lake and Lower Allumette Lakes. Base map information: Natural Resources Canada (2001).

River. A branch road leading north to Greenwood and Pembroke from the top of the fault represents a wagon road. Indian Road continues as a straight rural road northeast to Perretton, in agreement with Samuel de Champlain's compass bearing. It also represents the north border of Lot 20, concessions A and B, of Westmeath Township. This straight rural road is not typical of a portage. It has, however, been an historic connection between the Muskrat River and Lower Allumette Lake. The portage entrance at Indian Road is downriver from Stogua's Portage Road, and 17 km from the head

of the marsh at modern Muskrat Lake. The entrance gradient is steep, rising from the Muskrat River at 124 m (amsl) to about 150 m (amsl).

The Indian Road location has remained an historic meeting point of transportation systems since the steamboat era of 1851. Freight transfer during periods of low water may have been the primary and historic purpose of this steep route. The Indian Road portage would be an efficient transfer point for freight coming down Muskrat Lake by steamboat from Cobden. During periods of very low water, it was necessary for steamboats to unload at

this portage near Meath. The freight was taken to Pembroke by wagon. The first bridge was of the swinging bridge type to allow the boats to proceed farther up the Muskrat River (Price 1957:37-38).

The Indian Road portage was probably used in the Champlain era and could hide unexplored trails leading toward Lower Allumette Lake. Indian Road landing does not agree with Champlain's recorded landing at six leagues when using the average 3.4 km inland league equivalent.

#### *Dimensions of Muskrat Lake*

Samuel de Champlain's recorded length of six or seven leagues for Lac de Nibachis, using the *petite lieue*, the average overland league equivalent of 3.4 km (Heidenreich 1976:44-46), does not agree with the length of modern Muskrat Lake. His measurements also do not agree with distances to any historically noted portage located at the northern end of modern Muskrat Lake. Neither the length of Muskrat Lake nor the 4.8 km length of Stoqua's Portage Road is consistent with a *petite lieue* of 3.4 km. There seems to be no support for Champlain's record of the length or width of Muskrat Lake, or for a distance of eight leagues to Tessouat's camp from the head of Muskrat Lake.

### **The Muskrat River Study**

In 1965, the County of Renfrew installed a control dam in the Muskrat River at Concession 1, Lot 11, in Pembroke Township (Figure 1). The dam was located about 12 km northwest of the Muskrat Lake outlet. The purpose of the dam was to conserve water. A subsequent Muskrat River study showed that water is held back by the low gradient below Mud Lake. The control dam in the Muskrat River raised and held water levels in Muskrat Lake at 123.29 m (amsl) during periods of sufficient flow. In July 1967, with the dam in operation, Muskrat Lake levels rose to 406.9 feet (124 m [amsl]). This higher stage could represent a typical water level during the spring season and a significant expansion to the 783 ha wetland and lakes (Ontario Ministry of Natural

Resources 1990:2, 12). Under natural conditions, before lumbering in the area, large trees fell into the Muskrat River, damming its slow, meandering course. Any significant obstruction in the river outlet north of Mud Lake would cause flooding in the upstream marshy reaches, making it easier and more convenient to travel by canoe from Muskrat and Mud Lakes into nearby Meath Lake (Figure 1). In spring flood, the Muskrat River wetland could have appeared to be two *petite lieue* wide. Under these conditions, Champlain likely would have considered it to be part of Lac de Nibachis.

#### *The Winter Road and Meath Lake*

A less obvious portage, the Winter Road, is shown on J. McNaughton's map, extending from Meath Lake to Lower Allumette Lake (Figure 4). This historical road could represent the one-league trail traversed by Champlain in 1613.

The Winter Road entrance at Meath Lake is about five kilometres downriver from the outlet of Muskrat Lake. It is shown crossing Mud and Meath Lakes to lower Allumette Lake near Greenwood on McNaughton's map of Westmeath Township, dated 1832. This could have been an earlier portage before settlers used it as a winter road from Lower Allumette Lake to the Muskrat River system, and is presented here as the Meath Portage. It would be difficult for vehicles to utilize this portage in summer because the approach to Meath Lake is hampered in the warmer months by the adjacent wetland. The Meath Portage entrance is not apparent when viewed from Mud Lake and would be difficult to approach except by canoe. Samuel de Champlain could easily have considered modern Muskrat, Mud and Meath Lakes, together with the Muskrat River wetland, as one body of water, which he named Lac de Nibachis. When in flood, this complex of lakes and wetland could appear to be one lake, particularly if the view of the muddy shoreline was obstructed by trees and tall reeds and the current was imperceptible in these lakes.

Champlain's group could have canoed past the entrance of Stoqua's Portage Road and down the Muskrat River into Mud and Meath Lakes. The distance from the marsh at the head of modern

Muskrat Lake to the Meath Portage entrance at Meath Lake by canoe is about 22 km when scaled on topographical maps. This distance includes the swampy areas at the head of these lakes, and the assumed circuitous canoe trip through Mud Lake into Meath Lake. A distance of 22 km is in close agreement with a distance of nearly seven leagues recorded by Champlain for the length of Lac de Nibachis (Biggar 1922-1936:2:277) when using the *petite lieue* average of 3.4 km (2.1 statute miles) (Heidenreich 1976:44-46), rather than the 4.8 km (3 statute miles) used previously by researchers.

The Meath Portage extends about 3.8 km from Meath Lake to Lower Allumette Lake. If higher water levels than present occurred in Lower Allumette Lake, as seems likely, the portage would have been shorter, consistent with a total length of 3.4 km, or one *petite lieue*, the distance recorded by Champlain for the overland trail from Lac de Nibachis to Tessoüat's encampment.

#### *The Meath Portage*

The Canadian Central Railroad was built in 1876 between steep hills rising to 145 m (amsl) at the entrance at Meath Lake (Figure 4). Preparatory construction work would have been necessary to make this route suitable for this railway that inclines from about 123 m (amsl) at Meath Lake to about 137 m (amsl), before declination toward Lower Allumette Lake. A portage trail possibly led through this route to the north before railroad construction. Other walking routes could also, however, have been chosen. Champlain stated that the trail to Lower Allumette Lake was to the northeast, not the route later taken by the railway. Tessoüat's camp was probably located on the involuted south shore of Lower Allumette Lake, east of the present-day location of Greenwood (Figure 1).

#### *Stoqua's Portage versus the Meath Portage*

Stoqua's Portage and the Meath Portage are both contenders as walking routes (Figure 4). There are, however, some important differences between them when each is considered from the point of view of Champlain's guides in 1613.

Stoqua's Portage Road would be convenient when canoeing from the head of Muskrat Lake

and portaging to Lower Allumette Lake. Near the location of present-day Perretton, however, it crosses the same stream twice. It is also longer than the Meath Portage. Low, wet areas of Stoqua's Portage Road may have been sufficient reason for Champlain's guides to avoid this route in favour of the Meath route, which was accessible by canoe through the surrounding wetland. Consideration of the destination may have been more important than the condition of the trail. The Meath route may have been deemed more suitable than Stoqua's Portage Road for an important visitor. The Meath Portage would have been convenient, enabling a short overland trip to an important destination well known to Champlain's guides. Tessoüat's abode on Morrison Island would fit such an important destination, located near the end of a 3.8-km route to the northeast.

The Winter Road used by early settlers was likely based on a portage route from Lower Allumette Lake to the Muskrat Lake wetland established sometime during the precontact era. This trail led directly to locations on the Ottawa River near Morrison Island, where both Middle Archaic period materials (5000-4000 B.P.) as well as contact period artifacts dating to the time of Champlain have been found (Clermont and Chapdelaine 1998). The Meath Portage could have been used for several thousand years, providing an efficient means of travel to exploit the excellent fishing in Lac de Nibachis. The 783-ha Muskrat River wetland is an important waterfowl breeding area where 17 species of cold and warm water fish have been recorded (Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources 1990:31). Samuel de Champlain stated that this lake is so "abundant in fish that all the local surrounding tribes do their fishing here" (Biggar 1922-1936:2:275).

#### **Conclusions**

Accepting the Meath Portage as the route from the head of Muskrat Lake to Lower Allumette Lake taken by Samuel de Champlain in 1613, and published in 1614, meets our expectations of his known cartographic ability. Distances equate well with the *petite lieue* as the league used by



Champlain and support his description of his visit to Muskrat Lake and Lower Allumette Lake. On the seventh day of June 1613, Champlain's Algonquin guides paddled down the length of modern Muskrat Lake and into the Muskrat River wetland. Because of spring flooding, Champlain considered Muskrat, Mud and Meath Lakes, including the adjacent wetland, to be one lake. From Mud Lake they entered Meath Lake, where they landed and walked over an easy portage route for a distance of 3.8 km, about one *petite lieue*, northeast to Lower Allumette Lake near Morrison Island.

Champlain estimated that Lac de Nibachis was seven leagues long, as it extended at the time one league beyond the Meath Portage. He estimated that this lake was two leagues wide, a perception which is reasonable considering the large size of the flooded wetland he witnessed. The Meath Portage entrance at Meath Lake is situated about 22 km, six *petite lieue*, by canoe, from the head of modern Muskrat Lake. The Meath route leads from Meath Lake one *petite lieue* to the northeast to Lower Allumette Lake. This was Samuel de Champlain's destination as determined by historians.

A coincidental match between *lieue d'une heure*, 4.8 km, and the length of Stoqua's Portage Road seemed to indicate to historians in the twentieth century a reasonable choice of route. They were unaware of the average 3.4-km, one-league equivalent that Samuel de Champlain was using on overland expeditions and were thus baffled by his perception of the length and breadth of Muskrat Lake. Stoqua's Portage Road, rather than the Meath route, came to be accepted, incorrectly, as being Champlain's portage route to Lower Allumette Lake.

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the author investigated the Muskrat River and wetland. My thanks to Ken Swayze for his study concerning the locations of Algonquin villages in his paper on Logos Land and his encouragement to pursue archaeological investigation of Champlain's route. My thanks also to Ian Badgley for his help in securing reference material. Typing and mapping were supported by Mary M. Croft. Maps and articles on the local forest fires were supplied by Jackie Patterson and May Prange of the Upper Ottawa Genealogy Group and the Champlain Trail and Pioneer Village Museum, Pembroke, Ontario. Terry McLeish, Ministry of Natural Resources, Pembroke, and David T. Croft provided access to Westmeath Township maps. Angela Woollam generously suggested structural changes and reviewed Canadian grammar. My appreciation to Dr. Jean-Luc Pilon, Archaeological Survey of Canada, for generously editing early drafts of this paper and his suggested additions, changes, and clarification. Andrew Stewart edited later drafts and assembled Figures 1 and 4 from digital spatial data available from the National Topographic Database.

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Une étude de cartes topographiques et de photos aériennes supporte la précision des camps et des portages enregistrés par Champlain lors de son court séjour dans la vallée de l'Outaouais. En 1613, Champlain débuta son voyage près de la communauté actuelle de Cobden sur le lac Muskrat pour se rendre au lac aux Allumettes, un élargissement de la rivière des Outaouais près de la ville actuelle de Pembroke. La précision des distances et des routes documentées par Champlain a été questionnée par des historiens du XXe siècle. Cette étude réfute les conclusions erronées qui ont été publiées par ces historiens confus par les records métriques et géographiques de Champlain.

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