

Alexander Rankin



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Gilmour, Rankin & Company Store

ALEXANDER RANKIN

CHAPTER I

Just as Francis Peabody and Joseph Cunard were important to the growth of Chatham, Alexander Rankin was the key to the history of Douglastown. Like Cunard, Rankin was to make his money from shipbuilding and the lumber industry.

Alexander Rankin was born in Fairly, Scotland on December 3, 1788. He was a short man with light-colored hair and skin. At a young age, he started working for Pollak, Gilmour and Company. This Scottish Company made most of its money from the lumber industry and shipbuilding. Many of Rankin's relatives worked for this company. At one time, the Company owned more ships than any other business in England. Many of their ships were built on the Miramichi.

At the beginning of the 1800's, the lumber industry was very important because ships were made of wood. At that time, there was a war in Europe between France and England. The English needed the highest trees to make ship masts. Many masts were destroyed when the ships fought at sea. For years, most of the masts that were needed had been cut from trees along the Saint John River. But, by the 1800's the best trees had been cut down. More masts were needed.

Lumbering companies began to send men to new places like the Miramichi. There were a large number of trees here that could be used for masts. There was also a lot of lumber close to the river. It was a great place for the lumbering industry to grow.

The Pollak, Gilmour and Company in Scotland sent Alexander Rankin and James Gilmour to the Miramichi. They arrived in the fall of 1812 to begin a new branch of the parent company. When they arrived, the river was iced over. Rankin and Gilmour had to walk from the mouth of the river to Chatham.

The two men spent the winter in Chatham. In the spring of 1813, they crossed the river to Rose Bank. Today Rose Bank is called Nordin and is about two miles upriver from Douglastown. By the summer of 1813, Rankin and Gilmour had moved to present-day Douglastown. They set up their business at the mouth of Hutchison's Brook. This brook is found in the center of Douglastown.

Rankin did not name the new village Douglastown. He called it Gretna Green, which is a Scottish name. Gretna Green was later renamed Douglastown. This was done to honour the Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick, Howard Douglas. Douglas visited the village in 1825 after the Great Miramichi Fire. He offered government help to rebuild the village. Today Douglastown still remembers the help given by Sir Howard Douglas.



Sir Howard Douglas

CHAPTER II

From the beginning, Rankin, Gilmour and Company did very well. Rankin brought many of his employees from Scotland. People already living here had fished for a living. Now they turned to the lumber industry. There was more money to be made in that business. Rankin worked hard and was very fair with his employees. The workers like him because of his just and kind ways.

The first job for his employees was to remove the trees from the land. Then they had to build places in which to live. Present-day Douglastown has examples of the company houses that were built. One example of the company houses is the “Seven Sisters”. The “Seven Sisters” are seven homes built side by side. These seven houses all looked the same. Over the years some changes have been made, but six of the Seven Sisters still stand.



The Seven Sisters



Gilmour, Rankin & Company Store

Next an office and a store were built. The store did a great business for years. It sold food like sugar and other goods that came from Europe by ship. Part of the walls of this store can still be seen near the shore of the Miramichi River.

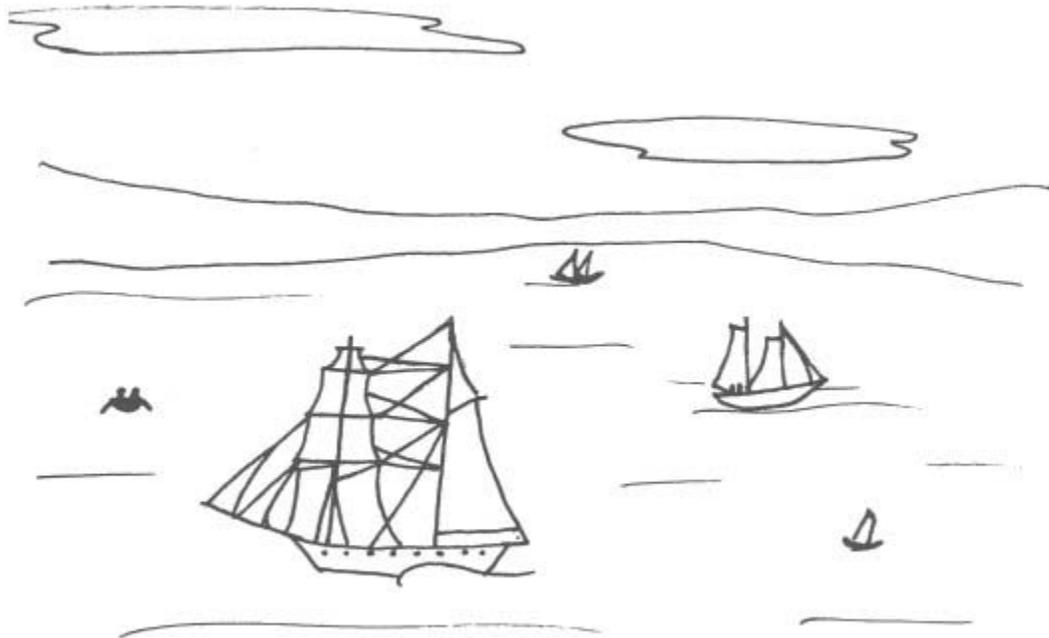
Rankin's first sawmill was downriver at Millbank. Millbank is below Chatham on the Douglastown side of the Miramichi. Later, a sawmill and a shipyard were built in Douglastown.

The lumbermen who worked for Rankin's company had no money. They got the food and clothes they needed at the Company store. Then they went into the woods from the fall to the spring. In the spring, they put the wood that they cut into the small brooks. This was how they got the wood to the mills on the Miramichi River. The lumber cut by the woodsmen was used to repay the company.

The Rankin Company did very well in these first years. The head office in Scotland was very happy. They began to send men to Douglastown to be trained in the business. Then these men were sent to the branch companies in other parts of Canada.

CHAPTER III

Problems began to grow for the Rankin Company when Joseph Cunard came to Chatham in 1820. Cunard was also in the lumbering and shipbuilding business. Arguments soon started over who owned the lumber on the Northwest Miramichi. These arguments were to continue for years and hurt the business of both companies.



Across the river from Chatham

D.M.

By 1825, the Miramichi had passed Saint John as New Brunswick's busiest port. Each year about three hundred ships loaded lumber at Miramichi ports. Rankin's business continued to grow quickly. But 1825 brought great hardship as well. That was the year of the Great Miramichi Fire.

Almost every building on the north side of the river burned in the fire. Rankin, as well, lost a lot of money through damage to his buildings. He lost well over one hundred thousand dollars. His home was one of the six buildings in Douglastown that did not burn. The Indians believed that his house wasn't destroyed because he was such a fair and kind man. Rankin opened his home to hundreds of people who had no place to stay after the fire. He also spent much of his own money helping people rebuilt their lives. As well, he was Chairman of the Relief Committee which helped get people through the first hard years of recovery.

Rankin's first home was badly burned in March 1837. March 31 was a cold and windy night. Much of the second story of the house was burned. But a fire truck, as well as many people from Douglastown and Chatham arrived. They saved most of the furnishings and other things that were on the ground floor.

Rankin rebuilt his home at the same place as his first one. In those days there were many parties at his home. People visiting the Miramichi often stayed there overnight. The main entry of the house faced the river. This flashy entry was later removed when the building became the Douglastown School. The stone gate that faced the road is now at the entryway to the Enclosure.

For years, Rankin's home was used as the Douglastown School. Then a new school was built and some people were afraid that the Rankin House would be torn down. Instead, it has been restored and serves as a historic monument of the Miramichi.



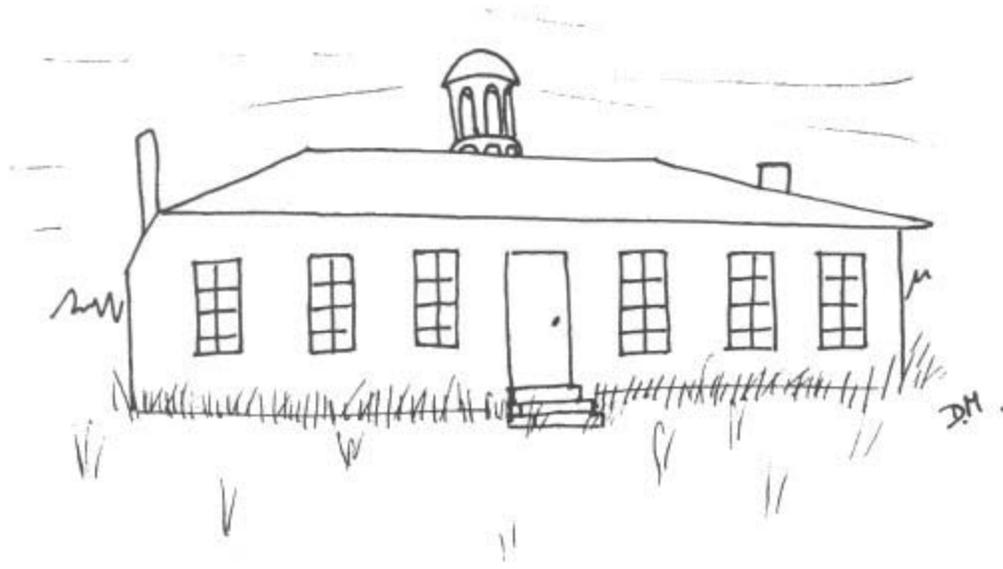
Home of Alexander Rankin

CHAPTER IV

Rankin knew that his business could be helped if he were in political life. In those years, Northumberland County sent only two elected men to the House of Assembly in Fredericton. Rankin was first elected in 1827. He was joined by John A. Street from Newcastle in 1833. Both these men were re-elected many times. This caused a problem because there was nobody elected from Chatham. They felt they were being left out. Soon the towns of Chatham, Newcastle and Douglastown were becoming enemies. Instead of working together, they were each going their own way. This really hurt the growth of the three towns.

Rankin used his political power to get the import building for Douglastown in 1827. An import building is a place where taxes are paid on goods coming into a country. Both Chatham and Newcastle wanted the import building. Later, in 1838, Joseph Cunard had this office moved to Chatham. That only helped to make him and Rankin more violent enemies.

All three towns also wanted the planned Marine Hospital. The Marine Hospital was to be used for people coming to the Miramichi by ship. These people often had diseases that could easily be passed on to others. Before the hospital was built, the sick people were treated in people's homes along the river. Once again, Rankin used his political strength to get the hospital for Douglastown. The hospital was built in 1830 when it closed for good. The Marine Hospital still stands today near the Rankin House.



Seaman's Hospital, built 1830

From the beginning, Rankin's Company had been partly owned by James Gilmour. But 1842 saw a world Depression which hurt their business. Gilmour thought the company was in deep trouble. He decided to sell his half of the business to Rankin. It was about this time that Rankin made Richard Hutchinson the manager of his company. When Rankin died, Hutchison became the owner of the company, which recovered nicely from the Depression. The Depression was not as kind to Joseph Cunard, however. Much to Rankin's pleasure, Cunard's business had been destroyed in 1848.

CHAPTER V

The continuing contests of power between Joseph Cunard of Chatham and Alexander Rankin of Douglastown grew stronger as the years passed. In the "Fighting Election" of 1843, there were three people trying to get elected, but only two openings. Rankin was a sure winner for one of these. Who would win the other? Would it be John Street of Newcastle, backed by Rankin, or John Williston of Chatham, supported by Cunard? It wasn't long until there was real trouble. Crowds as large as five hundred people fought in the streets. Windows were broken and many people were hurt in the fighting. At that time, voting was done publicly. This added to the problem because each side had their men at the voting stations. In the end John Street was elected.

Chatham still had no one in the government. The ties grew stronger between Newcastle and Douglastown in the years that followed. The problem of having nobody elected to the Legislative Assembly from Chatham soon ended. The government decided to elect four people for Northumberland County, instead of two. Still, the distrust between Chatham and Douglastown continued for many years.

Over the years, Rankin made many business trips to Scotland. In the spring of 1852, on one of these trips, he became sick. He died soon after. It took some time for the news of his death to reach the Miramichi. The news had to come by ship first to New York, then to Saint John, and lastly to Douglastown. Stores and businesses along the river closed for one day to honor him.

Rankin's body was laid to rest in Scotland where he died. But something had to be done by the people of the Miramichi who had come to love him. A special church service was held in Newcastle to honor him.

For forty years, Alexander Rankin had played an important part in the growth of the Miramichi. He greatly helped the lumbering and shipbuilding industries. He got people interested in farming. He improved education along the river. He caused the village of Douglastown to grow where nothing had been before. For all these reasons, Alexander Rankin should be thought of as a true leader in the history of the Miramichi.

WORD LIST

lumber

mast

industry

Acknowledgement:

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