

Get Your Irish On!

An Ontario region celebrates two centuries of Celtic settlement.

Written by Nancy Payne — Posted May 9, 2025



Children participate in Peterborough's annual St. Patrick's Day parade in the city's downtown.

PETERBOROUGH
EXAMINER

Six weeks crossing the ocean from Cork, Ireland, to Quebec City for people who'd mostly never set foot on a ship. Up the St. Lawrence to Montreal, followed by a 20-kilometre trudge to Lachine. By batteau and scow into what is now Ontario, to Prescott and then sweltering days in tents in Kingston. Back on the river to Cobourg, then a final, jolting 48-kilometre journey on barely passable backwoods roads, past Rice Lake on the way to Peterborough, then known as Scott's Plains.

The nearly 2,000 Irish immigrants on those nine ships must have despaired more than once on the way to their new life in Upper Canada. Led by Canadian Peter Robinson at the behest of the British government, the settlement project, as well as the lasting influence of those Irish settlers, is being commemorated throughout the central Ontario area where they arrived two centuries ago. That makes 2025 an excellent time to explore the region, but be sure to have a solid plan — people of Irish heritage from all over, including Ireland itself, are likely to swell attendance at the myriad special events coordinated by the Nine Ship:



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Although there are happenings all year (visit the excellent NineShips1825.com website for a full list), Aug. 1 through 10 is the focal point of the commemorations — including the Grand Irish Gathering at The Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough on Aug. 2. There are also Robinson-focused heritage walking tours of Peterborough (yes, it’s named after him, although it is increasingly also referred to by its name in Anishinaabemowin, Nogojiwanong). Tourists can also take advantage of bus trips to settlement areas such as Young’s Point, Douro and Ennismore, as well as to sites along the emigrants’ route. There are history talks, panel discussions, a play about the settlers at the locally popular outdoor 4th Line Theatre in nearby Cavan, a special Roman Catholic mass and music everywhere, pretty much all the time.

The beloved Downeyville Jamboree on Aug. 3 welcomes music lovers of all ages to the grounds of St. Luke’s Catholic Church in the heart of a village founded by the 1825 settlers, about half an hour northwest of Peterborough. Downeyville retains and celebrates its Irish heritage to an extent that would be hard to match outside the Emerald Isle.



The Canadian Canoe Museum’s “Living Traditions” exhibit.

JUSTEN
SOULE

While many Nine Ships events will be joyful, there’s also an understandably sombre note amid the harmony. “We didn’t want it to be just beer fests and hurling matches,” says Dennis Carter-Edwards, a retired research historian and Nine Ships board member. “We wanted it to be meaningful, and I think the program we’ve developed speaks to that.”

The journey was undoubtedly traumatic for the migrants, most of whom had likely never been more than a few kilometres from home. And the opportunity for them to own property themselves and live free from English oppression came at the expense of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe — even after they had helped many of the newcomers survive.

For instance, Robinson’s careful records



A silhouette of the city's namesake, Peter Robinson, circa 1830.

CITY OF TORONTO DIGITAL
ARCHIVES/ BALDWIN
COLLECTION OF CANADIANA.

of annual production from settlers' farms include yields of maple syrup and maple sugar — indicative of co-operation with the Indigenous peoples. "I'm sure they weren't tapping maple trees in Cork and area," Carter-Edwards says. "You really get the sense there was interaction and dialogue." Nine Ships organizers have invited members of Alderville, Curve Lake and Hiawatha First Nations to participate in any way they wish, or to refrain, as they prefer.

Everyone has something to learn from and appreciate at the bicentennial commemorations, the Nine Ships organizers stress. "There's a universal human story here about the challenges people face in adapting to a new world

and yet retaining the aspects of their culture they find meaningful while creating a better life for their kids," Carter-Edwards says. "Whether it's the Irish in 1825 or the Syrian refugees, they're looking for a new start."

An unexpected bonus for those drawn to Peterborough, Downeyville and other Irish inflected communities in the area to enjoy this year's events is the pleasure of discovering both the friendly people and gently rolling hills, rivers, lakes and farmland of east central Ontario.



An 1874 engraving published in the *Illustrated London News* shows Irish emigrants preparing to leave the Queenstown Harbour in County Cork, Ireland, for North America.

KAWARTHANOW.COM/PUBLIC
DOMAIN

As you drive the back roads, stop at historic cemeteries dating back centuries. Watch for the special signs indicating properties where descendants of the original Peter Robinson settlers still farm. Listen for the fiddle and bodhrán. Although people of many backgrounds live and work in Peterborough and the villages and fertile countryside around it, there's a ribbon of green weaving past and present together wherever you look.

IF YOU GO

To get a feel for what's in store, sign up for the *Downeyville Times* and Nine Ships e-newsletters (find them at nineships1825.com/newsletter). There is plenty to see and do in the Peterborough area — beyond the numerous Peter Robinson events.



Peterborough's Hunter Street East shuts down one lane of traffic each summer to allow cafés to set up sidewalk patios.

MUSEUMS: Besides the standout Canadian Canoe Museum — recently named one of the World's Greatest Places of 2025 by *Time* magazine — the Peterborough Museum and Archives and the local historical society's Hutchison House downtown are also worth visiting. Lang Pioneer Village Museum in nearby Keene highlights Michi Saagiig culture in its Aabnaabin Camp and explores the impact of settlement on local Anishinaabe. Take a picnic to the extensive grounds of the National Historic Site at the 120-year-old Peterborough lift lock on the Trent-Severn Waterway. Watching boats lock

through is always fascinating.

FOOD: Hunter Street East’s café district is a great place to discover affordable one-of-a-kind restaurants that the city’s residents love. Or stroll over to Charlotte Street and snack your way around the Saturday farmers’ market. In Downeyville, stop for excellent cupcakes, scones, breakfast sandwiches and more at Brouwer’s Bake Shop, but check before you go — like many family-run businesses in the area, it has limited hours.

CULTURE: Set aside time to visit Kinomagewapkong, the Teaching Rocks at Petroglyphs Provincial Park. While you’re in the Curve Lake First Nation area, be sure to browse the gallery rooms at the Whetung Ojibwa Centre. Want to end on a high note? Check the schedule for free concerts on Wednesdays and Saturdays, all summer long, at Musicfest in Del Crary Park, beside Little Lake, in downtown Peterborough.