



Ira B. Barton and "The Sun Worshippers" Painting

John A. Brebner, December 2015



Artist Ira B. Barton was born in 1820 at Demorestville to Samuel and Margaret Barton, who had come to the County from Massachusetts, likely as Loyalists. A self-taught and highly imaginative artist, he is considered an accomplished pre-confederation primitive painter. As the eldest of (at least) five children, Barton never married, and supplemented his painting income as clerk of Sophiasburgh Township. He died in Demorestville 6th February 1888.

It's worth noting that the Registrar of the Township at the time was Thomas B.C. Barton, Ira's brother, and also noted as a painter in the 1881 Prince Edward County census. Ira's father, a hatter by trade, did double duty as Township Clerk in the 1870s.

Portraying the 19th century notion of savages being educated by 17th century Jesuit priests, the painting is more interesting to me as a *possible* depiction of the West Lake area in the mid 1850s.

Certainly the view at sunset from what is now the Dunes Beach Day Use area is very similar to Barton's rendition of this 1660's native encampment. Those bare, receding hills look very much like the dunes along West Lake today.

This particular painting hangs in the Shire Hall, 332 Main Street, Picton where it is on permanent loan. [Macaulay Heritage Park](#) also has a number of Barton's works.

At right is Barton's illustration for Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, "Uncle Tom's Cabin", held at [Upper Canada Village](#).

Note the resemblance of foreground trees and background hills to those shown in "*The Sun Worshippers*". In fact, once the image is flipped horizontally, the similarity of composition is uncanny, from the foreground trees to the barren and receding background hills that look very much like sand dunes. And the central figures' outstretched hands?

Coincidence?



Barton was probably no different than any other artist; once a great location is found, it can be revisited many times for very many different and disparate subjects! And it does look like West Lake!

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