



A Short History of Fishing at East and West Lake

Early first peoples would have been drawn to this area for its plentiful summer fishing. We know that several groups came to the West Point and West Lake Bar, beginning with the Princess Point people, then the Pickering people, and finally the St. Lawrence Iroquois.

Fishing primarily for yellow pickerel, evidence of these early visitors can be revealed under the drifting sands by the occasional pottery shard or arrowhead.

Early records of fishing by Loyalist and European settlers from 1784 - 1830 are difficult to find.

The earliest references date from the mid-1830's, and describe the seine fishery at Wellington.

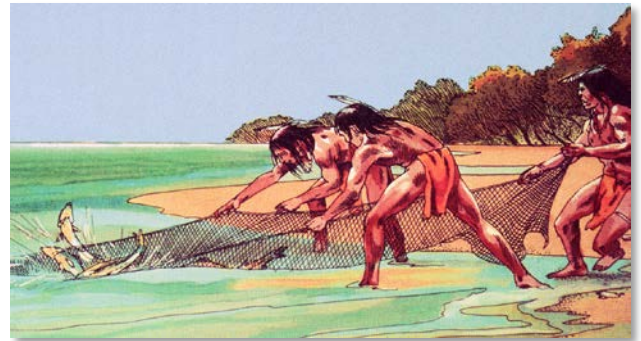


*Drawing in the seine nets near Wellington Harbour
Image 17-13621a, Wellington Museum*

Because of the success of the fishery, techniques for preservation by salting, and the ability to find both local and export markets contributed to high demand for the local fish. Some local individuals tried to claim parts of both the East Lake and West Lake bars as their own.

Despite a petition by **William Rorke**, a local surveyor, who managed to convince the government to issue an Order in Council, December 8th 1835, reserving those beaches for public use.

John A. Brebner, March 2018



*Iroquois fishermen along the West Lake bar;
Image 18-00425 (Sandbanks Park Archives)*

The Picton Gazette, 18th August 1834 reported:

"Wellington from its immediate proximity to Lake Ontario is well supplied with various sorts of fish. During my stay at Wellington I had an opportunity of seeing the seine drawn several times, when the most immense quantities of whitefish, salmon and herrings (much as it may astonish some Europeans) caught."

The same issue of the *Picton Gazette* continues:

"A most astonishing draught of fish was taken on Thursday morning last, at Wellington, at one haul, namely 104 sturgeon averaging at least 40 lb. each equal to 4,160 lbs. weight besides a few pickerel etc. They were caught on Lake Ontario, not far out from the shore, there were no less than three double wagon loads of them, and some of the sturgeon were so long and heavy that a very powerful man could scarcely lift them with both his hands over a low fence adjoining the Grove at Wellington. Sturgeon are not so much valued here, but in England it is considered a great delicacy, a dish meant for the Royal table."

Seine-net fishing was well-suited to the gently-sloping sand beaches. The process involved a long net, somewhat deeper in the centre than at the edges that was first fixed to the shore in an arc at both ends. Then the nets were pulled out into the water using large, four-oared boats. To harvest the fish, the net was then drawn back to shore by men or horses, and later mechanized using capstans and cables.

The resulting catch was scooped out, placed in barrels and salted for shipping.

While seine nets required little maintenance, they could be damaging to spawning grounds.

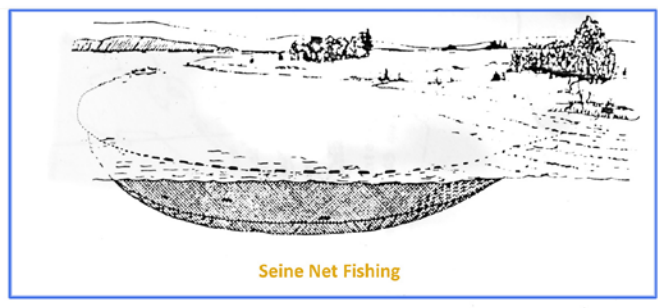


Diagram showing use of a seine net
Image 18-00423a

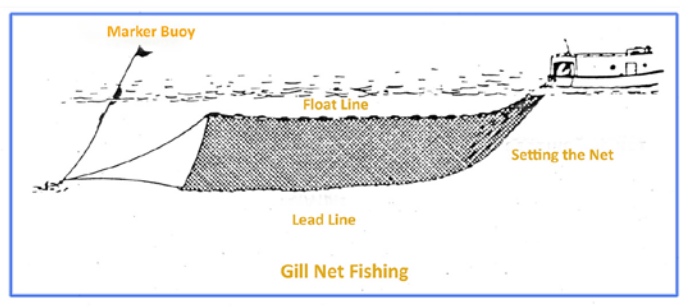


Diagram showing use of a gill net
Image 18-00422a

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This operation necessitated beach space, and by 1848 local farmers and fishermen had partitioned off areas of those beaches for their own use.

Another Order in Council was passed by the province in 1848 reconfirming the protection of the beaches for public use, after **Minard McDonald** had petitioned the Province for personal fishing leases.

But enforcement of the rules was next to impossible, with estimates that only 25% of the fish caught at Wellington were actually reported.

And that greed and mismanagement often meant that surplus catches were simply left to rot on the beaches.

Something had to be done.

- The government took matters into their own hands and introduced the Fisheries Act of 1857, which allowed the Crown to lease the fisheries, and issue licences of occupation to crown lands that fronted the best fishing areas.

In 1857, under the new act, **John McCuaig** was appointed Fisheries Superintendent and partitioned the beach into twelve sections. The fishermen were not pleased with this government intervention, and offered a token amount of money for those new leases. McCuaig countered by telling them that he could easily lease the entire beach to a single person for \$500, and the individual fishermen quickly dug into their pockets to cover that sum.

Between West Point and Salmon Point, which included the Outlet Beach, McCuaig found that seven families owned fishing station, each using between one and four seines. Their catch in 1856 was 2,481 barrels, 75% of which was whitefish valued at \$6 per barrel, and 25% being lake trout, valued at \$10 per barrel. While the fish were plentiful, fishing was a lucrative business.

Much of the fish caught between Wellington and West Point was destined for export markets, such as New York and shipped via Picton. All the fish at Salmon Point was exported to Oswego and via canal to the Erie Canal, and then throughout New York state.

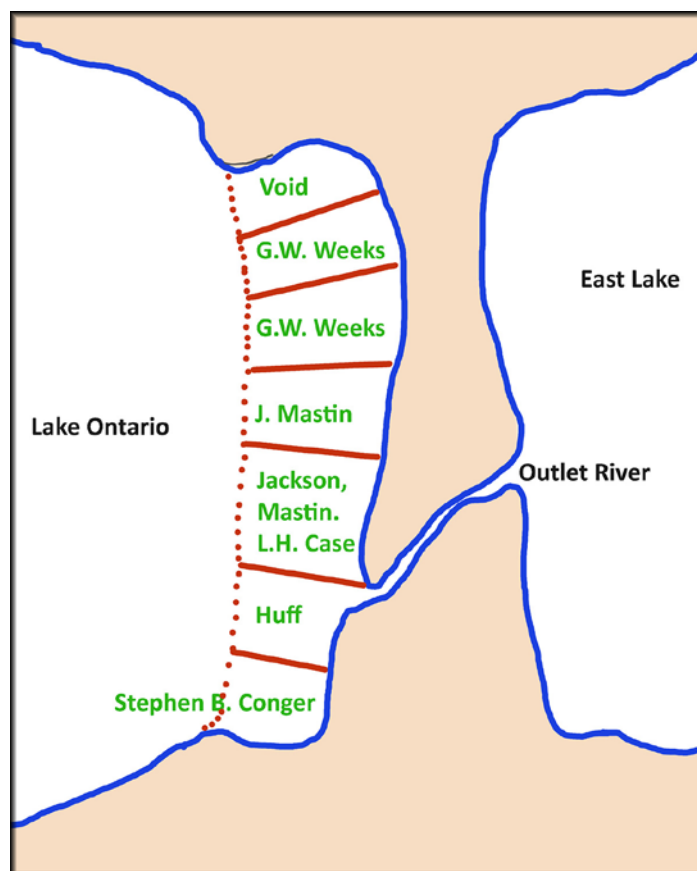
By 1871 the numbers of fishermen were on the decline because of the depletion of fish stocks from over-use of seine nets. The transition began to offshore gill net fishing in the 1840s, and by 1870 they had replaced seine nets as the standard fishing gear.

Gill nets were well-suited to the deeper water of Lake Ontario, and were made of fine thread with sinkers attached to the bottom of the net, and floats at the top to keep the net upright.

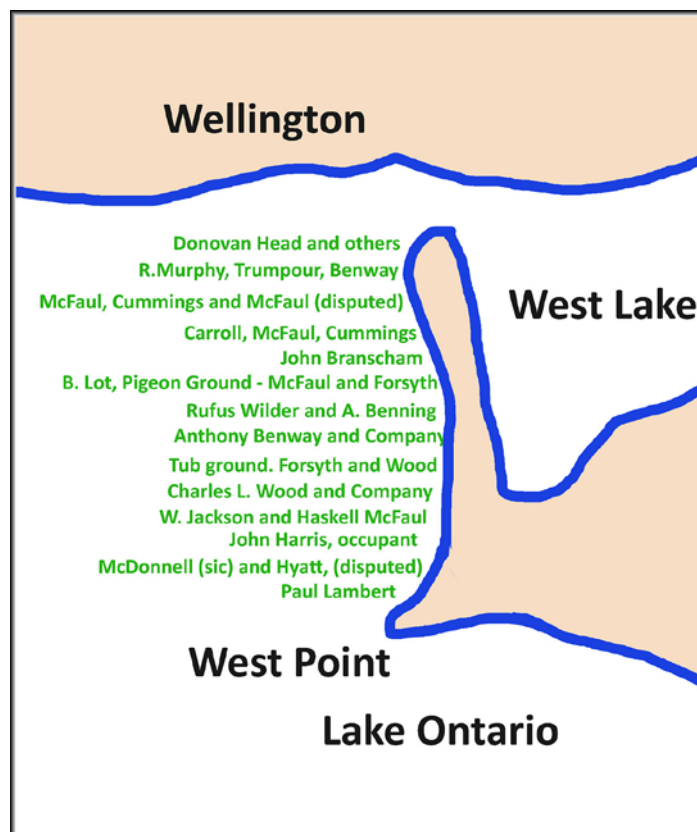
Substantial boats capable of hauling these nets needed considerable investment. Fishing transformed from being a seasonal activity that supplemented a local farmer's income, into a full-time occupation.

The base for the developing gill net fishery was Salmon Point. **Peter Huff**, who had settled the point in 1832 was described in the Belden Atlas of 1878 as being a fish inspector, farmer, light-house keeper and Justice of the Peace, in addition to being the local fish buyer. He erected an early ice house on the point, and soon sailing scows picked up barrels of fish destined for markets in Cape Vincent, Oswego or Rochester.

From at least 1875, Salmon Point was home to several fishermen. In 1920, to afford more protection from Lake Ontario storms, the present cove was dug, and docks and boat ramps installed.



1857 Fishing Rights, Outlet Beach; Image 18-00418b



1857 Fishing Rights map; Image 18-00417b



Left to right: Sorting and cleaning the catch; Willard Metcalf, Murray Clapp, George Bongard, Norman Farrington; the Point Traverse Fishery, 1932; Nelson Minaker; from the Mariners' Park Museum collection; Image 10-10717.

In 1922 **T.G. Bowerman** purchased the point and started up Salmon Point Fisheries. That included a packing plant, where fish could be packed and sent by road to Picton.

In 1926 the government deepened the harbour to nine feet. A new breakwater was built to better protect the harbour from the fall and winter storms.

In 1941, **Stanley Rankin** purchased the fishery and maintained large "turtle-decked" boats until the early 1980s.

As Salmon point became more developed, it ended the role of the MacDonald-Hyatt wharf on West Point as a site for shipping fish.

The highest fish yield on Lake Ontario was in 1913, and catches have been steadily dwindling. The rise of amateur fishing has brought the next influx of sport fishermen to the County.

Form F28-B
600 Nov., 1941 (A3651)

GAME and FISHERIES DEPARTMENT

No. A.R. 624

ONTARIO

Gill Net License
1942

FEE, \$ 30.00
0,000--- YARDS

This license is issued as a renewal of License No. A.R. 628 of 1941.

In Consideration of the sum of Thirty Dollars,
and the observance and performance of the conditions hereon endorsed, which are hereby incorporated with and made part and parcel of this license, the herein named Earl and Cecil Lohr
of Milford Post Office is hereby licensed to fish with Gasoline Launch No. 152
according to regulations for that part of the public waters of Lake Ontario, in the vicinity of West Point and Point Traverse.
"Nets of 2" mesh extension measure when in use may be set in not less than 150 feet of water for the taking of Herring and Gascones only."

with the exception of the waters of the Bay of Quinte, see Condition No. 18; and for the waters of Georgian Bay, see Condition No. 19; and all waters set apart or reserved by the Department for Propagation purposes.

In addition to the fee herein specified a royalty at the rate of 1/4c per pound shall be paid by the licensee to the Department on or before the 31st day of December, A.D. 1942, on all Whitefish, Salmon Trout, Pickerel (Dore) and Sturgeon taken in excess of _____ tons.

"Extension measure" shall mean the distance between the extreme angles of any single mesh, and such measurement shall be taken between and inside the knots. All measurements of the mesh in gill nets or gill netting shall be made with a flexible steel gauge authorized for use by the Department of Game and Fisheries of the Province of Ontario. In gauging a mesh, the flexible gauge shall be bent and inserted in the mesh parallel with the selvage and with the collapsed mesh, and finger pressure shall be released immediately, not gradually. If the flexible gauge does not straighten out completely under its own tension in two seconds after its release in the mesh without slipping a knot or breaking the twine, the net is unlawful. Any dispute as to measurements shall be submitted to the Department of Game and Fisheries of the Province of Ontario, and the sole and final judge of such measurements shall be the Minister of the said Department, or any person designated by him for such purpose.

This license cannot be either assigned or transferred and is issued subject to further licenses being granted for the territory stated hereon.

Issued at Toronto this 1st day of April 1942. (Belleville)

Not valid unless countersigned by [Signature] Deputy Minister.

THIS LICENSE EXPIRES DECEMBER 31st, 1942.

IMPORTANT—Read your License and Conditions on back.

A Gill Net Fishing license from 1942; courtesy Mariners' Park Museum; Image 10-10705

Do you have any photographs of the County fishing industry in the early 20th century? Please share them with us at mailto:media_relations@friendsofsandbanks.org



Google Earth view of the remains of the Salmon Point breakwater and harbour; Image 18-00419

Acknowledgements:

["Sandbanks Provincial Park, A Cultural Resources Study", January 1991](#)

[Mariners' Park Museum](#)

[Wellington Museum](#)

[1979 Commercial Fishery Report](#)