

# The Lost Seven Leagues: Samuel de Champlain's Landfall in Huronia

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*Champlain's landfall in Huronia was more likely on the western shoreline of the Penetang Peninsula facing Nottawasaga Bay than on the opposite side of the peninsula near present-day Penetanguishene, where it is currently commemorated. I reassess the accuracy of distances in Champlain's Works, and note the curious omission of the last seven leagues of his journey in subsequent historical analyses of his route. The area of Champlain's landfall has considerable potential for archaeological investigation.*

## Introduction

It has long been taken for granted that Samuel de Champlain, the first European to record his visit to the country of the Huron Indians in Southern Ontario, initially landed near Penetanguishene, opposite the eastern shore of Georgian Bay. A commemorative monument is situated across from the town on a narrow inland extension of Georgian Bay (Fig. 1). The assumption that this is near the site of the landfall has prevailed since 1908, and except for some debate about the exact location in this vicinity, has not been seriously questioned.

However, this assumption is not supported by Champlain's writings. According to his own geographic descriptions and estimates of distance travelled, Champlain's first landfall could be 20 km or more from the monument site. Somehow the last seven leagues he travelled on his journey to Huronia in 1615 have been lost to history. When they are put back Champlain's landfall is placed as far from Penetanguishene as the Coldwater River at the foot of Matchedash Bay in one direction, or near the community of Balm Beach in Nottawasaga Bay in the other, more likely, direction.

This paper first seeks an explanation for this somewhat surprising historical oversight. It then examines the accuracy and reliability of Champlain's estimates of distance on his 1615 journey, and identifies alternative landing sites based on these estimates.

## Toaniché: The Jesuit Tradition of One Landing Place

Discussion about the exact location of Champlain's landing place on his 1615 trip to Huronia has had a long history. There was agreement that the general location was opposite the eastern shore of Georgian Bay. Simcoe County historian A.H. Hunter set out the prevailing view at the turn of the century:

After long voyages by canoe from Quebec, following the Ottawa and French Rivers to Georgian Bay and then passing down the eastern shore of the latter, they made their first halt somewhere on the north end of the peninsula, having found there the settled Huron communities they were seeking. With such historic associations as these, Tiny [Township], first of all the parts visited by these early travellers, deserves to receive attention in our endeavours to interpret correctly their interesting narratives and to identify the places where they sojourned (Hunter 1899:5).

In the description of his journey to the Huron, Champlain sets out specific estimates of distance which do not support the conclusion that the landing spot was "on the north end of the peninsula." By and large these distances have been ignored in favour of the tradition which places the landing near Toaniché, the site of the first mission of the Jesuit Order.

Champlain began his 1615 journey to Huronia from the junction of the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers on 9 July (Fig. 2). He travelled in a party with two other Frenchmen and ten Indians (who were probably Hurons, or as Champlain referred to Hurons, "Attigouautans"). The small band in two canoes paddled up the Ottawa River to the mouth

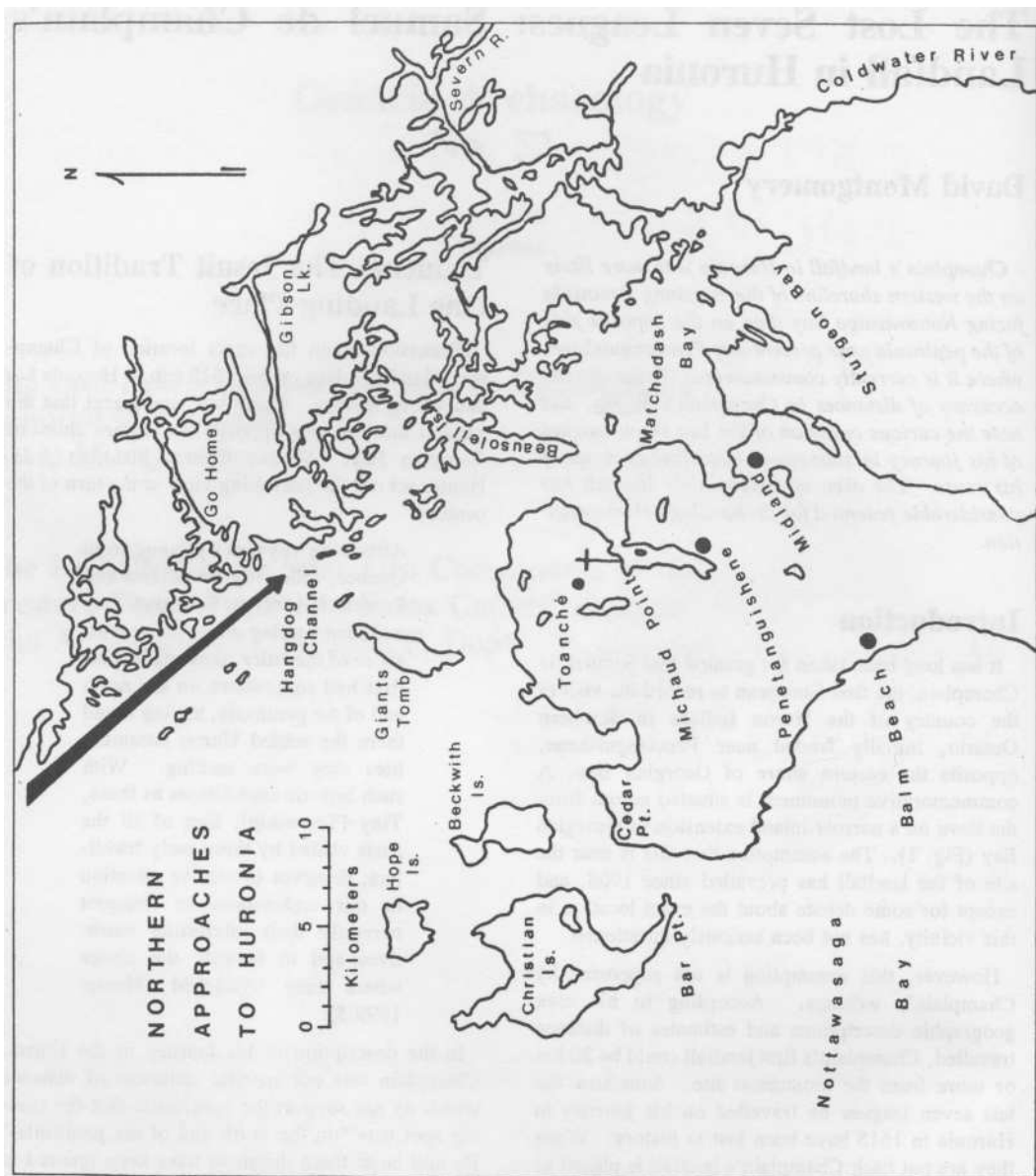


FIGURE 1  
Champlain's Monument in Huronia Near the Location of Toanché According to A.E. Jones (1908)

of its tributary, the Mattawa, then proceeded up that river arriving at Lake Nipissing on 26 July. Two days later they continued their journey down the French River to Georgian Bay. Champlain's description of the final leg of the journey from this point appears in Voyages et Descouvertes:

The next day we parted [from the mouth of the French River], and continued our journey along the shore of this Lake of the Attigouautans, in which there are a great number of islands; and we made about forty-five leagues, keeping along the shore of this lake ... Then afterwards we crossed a bay which forms one of the extremities of the lake, and made some seven leagues until we reached the country of the Attigouautan, and came on the first of August to a village called Otoüacha (Champlain III:45-46).

This passage is accompanied by a footnote which comments on the "seven leagues" - the only direct reference which I found in a survey of the literature. The footnote appears after the phrase, "country of the Attigouautan," and is attributed to l'Abbé Laverdière (1870): "This was mainly the peninsula between Matchedash and Nottawasaga Bays, and therefore the seven leagues can only be understood of the journey across the former Bay from the eastern shore of Georgian Bay" (Champlain III:46).

The length of a canoe route from the eastern shore of Georgian Bay to the northeast corner of the Penetang Peninsula is eight km at most (Fig. 1). This distance is much shorter than seven leagues. Laverdière seemed quite prepared to ignore Champlain's distance. Why? There are two possible explanations.

The first has to do with the unit of measurement, the "league." This is usually regarded as the equivalent of three statute miles or 4.8 km. As discussed later, the length of a league was variable. However, the commonly accepted view seemed to be that a league was "the distance a man could walk in an hour over an unimpeded course" (Heidenreich 1968:40; 1975:121,130). This, for example, is the length A.E. Jones adopts in his detailed 1908 study of the location of Jesuit missions and Huron villages:

At this date it is impossible to say with absolute certainty which of all the different leagues ... was the one the Fathers made use of in their calculations, but most prob-

ably it was the "lieue d'une heure;" for as they evidently did not measure off the distances given in the Relations, they naturally computed the space travelled by the time it took to tramp from village to village...For this reason I have always taken three statute miles, or one land league, as about equivalent to the "lieue" of the Relations (Jones 1908:115).

In the Seventeenth century distance was calculated simply by "dead reckoning" (Heidenreich 1975:136). Knowledge of this fact alone would probably make any commentator skeptical about Champlain's distances. Consequently, when distances based on 4.8 km per league were found to be nonsensical, it was too easy to assume that he was unable to estimate accurately on the basis of dead reckoning. For example, in the passage quoted above in which he estimated his travelling distance along the eastern shore of Georgian Bay as forty-five leagues (i.e. 216 km), his landfall would have been well beyond the southern extremity of Georgian Bay, and closer, in fact, to the southern shore of Lake Simcoe (Fig. 2).

It is generally agreed that Champlain followed the canoe route described by Hunter:

As the island called Beausoleil's ... lies in the course of a canoe paddled across the entrance of Matchedash Bay, from the rocky islands of the eastern shore to the opposite mainland of Simcoe County, we may infer the most convenient landing place to be somewhere on this mainland opposite the south corner of this island ... The same island ... has yielded remains of Hurons, thus affording further proof of having been on the line of travel in that early time (Hunter 1909:1).

The distance from the south corner of Beausoleil Island to the monument on the mainland is six km, significantly less than Champlain's estimate of seven leagues.

Early researchers seemed predisposed to the view that the landing place must be near Penetang Bay. The root of this belief was the longstanding assumption that the village where Champlain first landed, Otoüacha, was the same village referred to in the Jesuit Relations (Thwaites 1896-1901) as

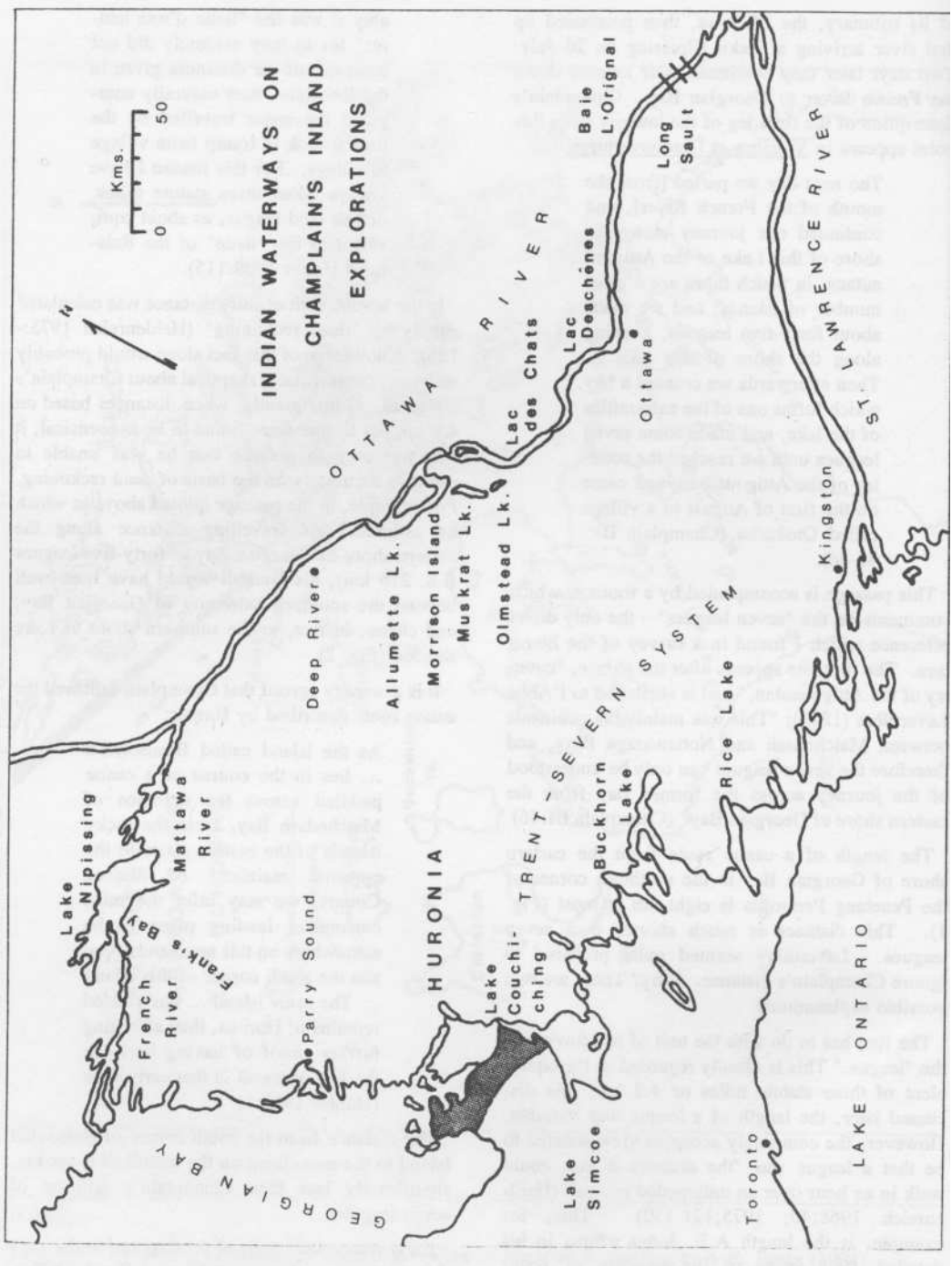


FIGURE 2

From the Lachine Rapids to Huronia

Toanché - the frequently mentioned early port of entry of the Jesuits, and the place where Etienne Brulé died in mysterious circumstances (Jones 1908:56; Jurgens 1966:130-33; Heidenreich 1971:31,251; Trigger 1976:300,473-76). This association was given formal recognition in Jones' "8endake Ehen" or Old Huronia. This exhaustive study was an attempt to identify the locations of Jesuit missions and Huron villages with reference to contemporary Seventeenth century sources, especially the Jesuit Relations, and translations of Huron village names appearing in these documents. Jones located Toanché a little less than 2 km inland from Michaud Point (Jones 1908:56), the site of the commemorative monument (Fig. 1). Jones favoured this site to another, closer to the northern edge of the Peninsula at Thunder Bay. He suggested that the name, Otoüacha, which he translated as the "double landing place," evolved over time into Toanché, "not a bad landing Place" (Jones 1908:60).

Jones was not the first to make this connection, and he acknowledges this in a useful summary of the evolution of Nineteenth century thought on the subject:

Were I now to have recourse to authorities, I find they favour the theory that Otoüacha either occupied the same as, or was indeed no other than Toanché. There are but two, to my knowledge who have touched upon the subject, M. l'Abbé Laverdière and Father Felix Martin, S.J. The latter [writing at mid-century], in his manuscript notes, takes it for granted that the two names applied to the same place, while on his unpublished map he sets Otoüacha down just where [I place Toanché]. M. l'Abbé Laverdière in a footnote ... of his edition of Champlain's Works, says: "Otoüacha est probablement le meme que Toenchain, ou Toanché." But authorities in these matters, unless good reasons are forthcoming have little weight.

The first more valid proof I would allege is custom. It is certain that down to Father de Brébeuf's time there was no other landing made use of by those who came up to Huronia save Toanché, and for this reason it would seem more than likely that Champlain's Otoü-

acha was indeed Toanché (Jones 1908:61).

The last paragraph succinctly describes what seems to have been conventional wisdom until very recently. At the same time, this location for Otoüacha/Toanché was too close to the top of Beausoleil Island, 12 km, to be consistent with Champlain's estimate of seven leagues. However, Steckley (1987) suggests that Jones improperly applied the rules of Huron grammar in making the association between Otoüacha and Toanché. As a result, "on linguistic grounds Touaguainchain is a much more likely candidate for Toanché than is Otoüacha" (Steckley 1987:29). In other words, Otoüacha and Toanché are probably not the same village; or, put another way, Champlain landed at a different place than the traditional port of entry for the Jesuit missions.

## Champlain's League

One of the curious contradictions about interpretations of this episode of Champlain's explorations is the lack of respect for his estimates of distance. In the preface to his translation of Champlain's Traité de la Marine, et du Devoir d'un bon Marinier, Morison expressed the hope that some specialist would "write a monograph on Champlain as navigator and mapmaker" (Morison 1972:238). This wish was soon fulfilled when Heidenreich (1976) completed a comprehensive study of Champlain's mapping techniques in which he concluded that "For all his other scientific achievements, Champlain stands out as the first cartographer to use relatively modern scientific principles in the mapping of Canada" (Heidenreich 1976:xii).

As part of this study Heidenreich tested the estimates of distance which appear in Champlain's journals and maps in order to determine which of the many different leagues then in use in France was in fact employed by Champlain. The underlying assumption, of course, was that Champlain would consistently use only one kind of league in order to compile his maps. At the same time Champlain did not name the specific league he used. According to Heidenreich (1975:126) the various leagues employed at that time included those set out below as part of Table I.

Heidenreich compared 105 estimates of distance which Champlain mentions in his 1632 publication, Les Voyages, with the same distances measured on modern charts and topographic maps. Whereas Champlain used a league of 5.31 km in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, he used a much shorter league of only 3.38 km in his inland journeys (Heidenreich

	Estimate of Distance in Leagues	Actual Distance in Kilometres	Kilometres per League
Lachine to Morrison Island (south end of Allumette Lake)	89	312	3.5
Top end of Allumette Lake to junction of the Ottawa and Mattawa Rivers	35	121	3.5
Junction of the Ottawa and Mattawa Rivers to the east shore of Lake Nipissing	25	68	2.7
Length of Lake Nipissing from Callender Bay to Northwest Bay	25	64	2.6
Width of Lake Nipissing from North Bay to Cross Point	8	19	2.4
Frank's Bay (Ridley 1954) to Main Outlet of the French River at Parting Channel	35	106	3.0
Average Kilometres Per League			2.95

Source: Champlain III:37-42

Seventeenth Century French Leagues	
<i>lieue commune</i>	3.91
<i>lieue commune de mer</i>	7.82
<i>petite lieue</i>	3.27
<i>grande lieue</i>	4.91
<i>lieue d'une heure</i>	4.91
<i>lieue de poste</i>	3.43
<i>lieue moyen</i>	4.07

Source: Heidenreich 1975:126

TABLE 1

Champlain's Estimates of Distance Along the Ottawa-French River Corridor to Huronia

1976:44, Table 1). Champlain's individual estimates of distance on his inland exploration were only slightly more inconsistent - i.e. showed slightly more variation from the average - than his estimates of distance in the Gulf of St. Lawrence (where he travelled by ship rather than by canoe or on foot). Furthermore, his estimates of long distances (10+ leagues) and short distances (0.5-10 leagues) were on average more consistent on his inland journeys (3.38 km in each case) than in the Gulf of St. Lawrence (4.34 km on short distances, and 5.47 km on long distances):

One must conclude that either Champlain was poor at estimating distances or that he used different leagues to suit different conditions. If the latter were the case, he used the Spanish league for long distances at sea and shorter leagues on coastal and inland surveys. Of the two possibilities, I would suggest the latter for three reasons. Firstly, his long and short estimates are fairly similar. Secondly, the sample sizes are fairly large and therefore some confidence can be placed in the results. Thirdly, it is difficult to believe that an explorer of Champlain's experience would make errors of estimate so large that his average league is 3.4 miles in the gulf and 2.1 miles inland (Heidenreich 1976:46).

The "two mile league" (3.2 km) and the question of measurement is echoed in a comment by David Thompson in his *Narrative* written in 1850-51 (Nicks 1985:883). With reference to the accuracy of Peter Pond's surveys, Thompson indicated that in his experience the voyageurs' league also measured two miles:

At Lake Superior he [Pond] procured a Compass, took the courses of the compass through the whole route to his wintering place [Lake Athabaska]; and for the distances adopted those of the Canadian canoe men in Leagues, and parts of the same, and sketching off the Lake shores the best he could... [H]e constructed a map of the route followed by the canoes. Its features were tolerably correct; but by taking the League of the Canoe Men for three geographical miles (I found they averaged only two miles) he increased his Longi-

tude so much as to place the Athabaska Lake, at its west end near the Pacific Ocean (Thompson 1962:132-133).

Clearly the two mile league was not simply an aberration peculiar to Champlain, or to early Seventeenth century navigation in the northern part of North America.

This conclusion represents a radical departure from the general assumption mentioned earlier that one league is 4.8 kilometers. The forty-five league segment of Champlain's journey along the eastern shore of Georgian Bay is now 152 kilometers (3.38 kilometers per league), putting the terminus at Beausoleil Island rather than in Lake Simcoe. In this context Champlain's distances take on new meaning - and may be the best (if not the only) indicators of where he first landed in Huronia.

## Lachine Rapids to Mouth of the French

Table 1 sets out the distances Champlain mentioned on his line of travel between the Lachine Rapids and the mouth of the French River. The number of kilometres per league is slightly smaller than the averages obtained by Heidenreich - 2.95 km per league for the 1615 journey, compared with 3.38 km per league in Heidenreich's broader analysis. Nevertheless the general conclusion that Champlain used a shorter league for his inland journeys is supported. All things considered, it would not seem unreasonable to select the *petite lieues* (3.27 km, rounded here to 3.3 km) as the most appropriate standard to test the distances mentioned by Champlain on his journey from the mouth of the French River to his landfall in Huronia

## Champlain's Landfall: The Alternatives

Champlain started his journey down the eastern shore of Georgian Bay from the mouth of the French River. Picking a precise departure point in this vicinity is more difficult than it might first seem (Fig. 3): the area is a labyrinth of islands and channels covering an area of some 250 km<sup>2</sup>. There are four principal channels with numerous outlets spread along a 20 km front on Georgian Bay. The most direct route to Huronia is through the eastern-most channels. In this case, the other channels would have been used only if the Hurons were going out of their way to trade.

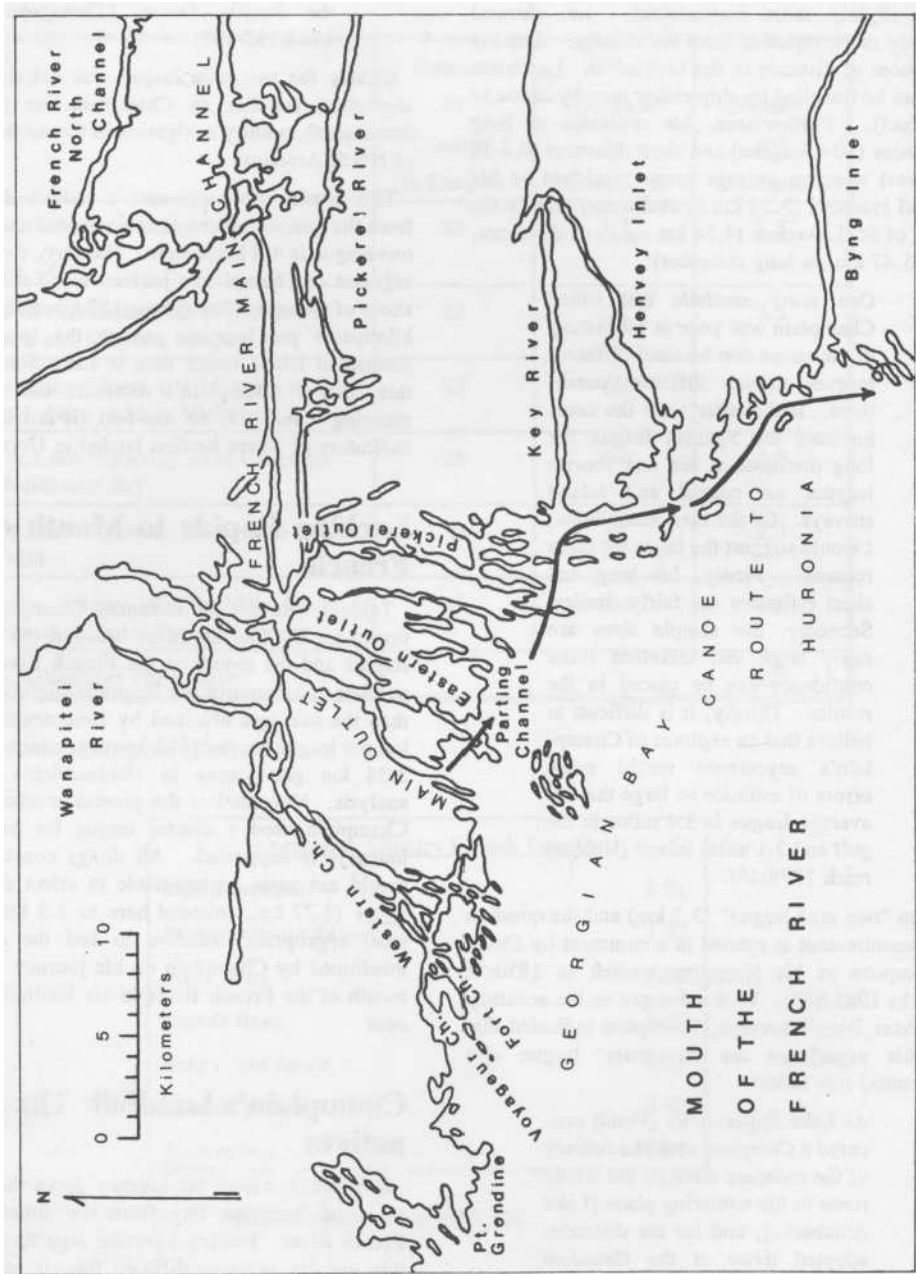


FIGURE 3

Outlet Channels at the Mouth of the French River



For the purpose of this analysis the choice of Parting Channel as the departure point is arbitrary. It is just to the east of Main Outlet, the waterway with the broadest channel and rapids that can be "run" on a downstream trip. Parting Channel is exactly 45 leagues or 148 km (at 3.3 km per league) from the top of Beausoleil Island following a canoe route in the lee of the Thirty-Thousand Islands. If the canoe party had departed from the mouth of the French River at Pickerel Outlet, this same distance would place the canoe party at the southern tip of Beausoleil Island. In either case, Champlain's estimate of forty-five leagues points to Beausoleil Island as the place from which the paddlers crossed Matchedash Bay to the mainland, and confirms the earlier speculation of Hunter.

From the top of Beausoleil Island (Fig. 4) Champlain either travelled seven leagues to Otoüacha (including the distance required to cross Matchedash Bay), or he first crossed to the main-land (near Adams Point, say) then proceeded seven leagues to Otoüacha. Champlain's account, cited above, suggests that the seven leagues began only after he crossed to the Penetang Peninsula. In either instance, as the canoe party approached Adams Point it had the choice of proceeding west across the top of the Penetang Peninsula towards Nottawasaga Bay, or south along the eastern shore of the Peninsula towards the Coldwater River.

There are two good reasons for excluding the southern route. First, a journey of seven leagues or 23 km south from Adams Point places the trip terminus at the bottom of Matchedash Bay near the mouth of the Coldwater river. This is a destination more logically approached by a canoe route following the eastern shore of Georgian Bay past the top of Beausoleil Island to the Coldwater River without crossing "a bay which forms one of the extremities of the lake."

The second reason is connected with Champlain's journey by foot across Huronia after he landed at Otoüacha on 1 August. His description of this journey suggests a march of more than seventeen leagues (56+ km) from his landfall (Champlain III:46-56), terminating at the Narrows between Lake Simcoe and Lake Couchiching (Fig. 2). This termination point is the only place in Huronia that can be unequivocally identified in Champlain's 1615 journal description. The distance from the Narrows to the mouth of the Coldwater River is 27 km; the distance from the Narrows to the western shoreline of Huronia on Nottawasaga Bay - the general area pointed to by the alternate canoe route across the top of the Penetang Peninsula - is 53 km (at Nottawaga Beach). These distances seem to support the notion that Champlain's march of seventeen leagues or more began from a location

on the western shore of Huronia rather than from the foot of Matchedash Bay.

For these reasons, Champlain's landfall is most likely to be found on a canoe route which crosses the top of the Penetang Peninsula (Fig. 4). Seven leagues measured from Beausoleil Island places the canoe party in the shallow waters of Christian Channel opposite Bar Point. On the other hand, seven leagues from Adams Point (if the seven leagues begins only after crossing Matchedash Bay) places the landfall four km further south at Gidley Point.

One other alternative is possible - a more direct route that takes advantage of the protection afforded by Giants Tomb on the exposed waters between Hangdog Channel and Methodist Point. Heidenreich indicates that this is one of the "known canoe routes" to the north (Heidenreich 1971:Map 17). Seven leagues measured from Hangdog Channel (six km north of Beausoleil Island) terminates at roughly the same point in Christian Channel as the route measured from the top of Beausoleil Island. On the other hand, seven leagues measured from Methodist Point after the canoe party had crossed "a bay which forms one of the extremities of the lake," terminates seven km south of Gidley Point at Nottawaga Beach just north of the present day community of Balm Beach. These various alternatives define a length of shoreline extending about eleven km along Christian Channel and Nottawasaga Bay.

## Summary

In 1970 Charles Garrad proposed that Champlain's 1632 map was most accurate in those places he actually visited. He went on to state that "Most accurately represented is the Tiny Township shoreline of the Georgian Bay between Cedar Point and Wasaga Beach, the home territory of his hosts the Attigouantans" (Garrad 1970:236-37). In recent personal communication, Garrad credited C. Heidenreich for this insight.

This paper set out to demonstrate that the assumption that Champlain's landfall in Huronia was at Penetanguishene may be wrong. By placing more emphasis on the accuracy and reliability of Champlain's own estimates of distance, and less emphasis on the Jesuit tradition of one landing place at Toaniché, it is proposed that this landfall was more likely on the western shoreline of the Penetang Peninsula between Christian Channel and Nottawaga Beach. This area has significant potential for future archaeological investigations on the Penetang Peninsula.

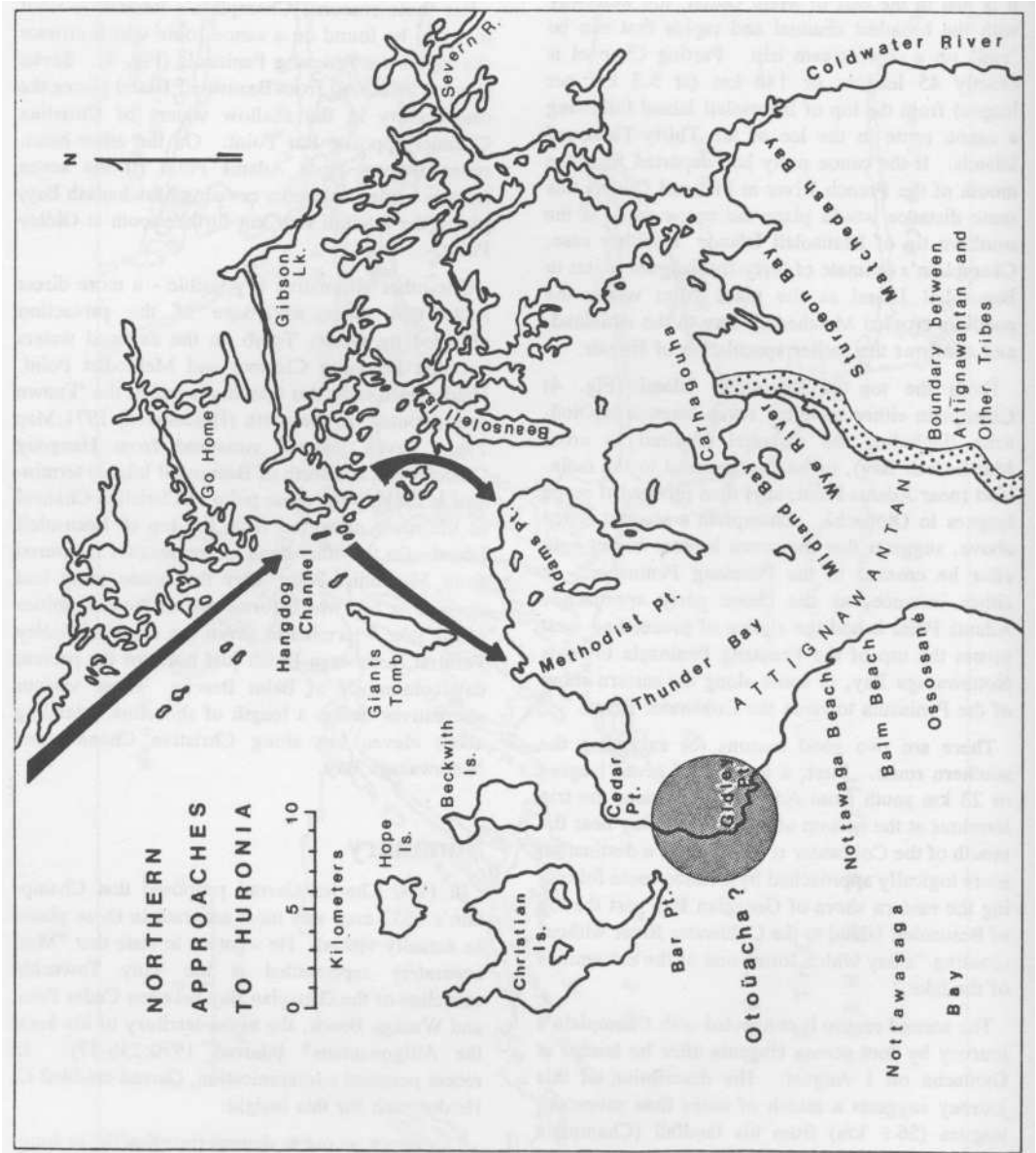


FIGURE 4

Champlain's Landfall: Most Likely Area

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