

Potton: Yours to discover **Highwater**



Highwater Inn circa 1930



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Highwater

Highwater is the gateway to Vermont from Québec on Route 243, through a tiny community, two kilometers from the border along the Missisquoi River, at the foot of Burnt Mountain. Highwater was first called South Potton to reflect its geographic location within the Township; later, Mansonville Station, when the railway came in 1873. Highwater, adopted in 1909, is definitely most appropriate!

Its beginnings

In the summer of 1793, Peter Perkins and family arrived here, full of hope and determination, likely much dampened, when their cabin was flooded the following spring. They moved! In June 1797, Moses Elkins and family were met with a similar problem.

The Able Skinner, and Abijeh Bailey families arrived soon after. The Skinner family suffered the loss of their two sons by accidental drowning, shortly after settling here. Lydia Skinner was a founding member of the Female Benevolent Society, the first charitable organization of the Eastern Townships, and was its president from 1832 to her death in 1843. Mark Elkins was mayor of the Municipality for several terms.

In 1798, Jacob Garland and Jonathan Heath settled between Highwater and Mansonville, near chemin Miltimore. Levi A. Coit purchased some land from Mr. Heath, and the place became known as Coit's Corners. In 1834, when Mr. Meig bought the land closest to the road, the same place was called Meig's Corner! In 1810, Coit's Corners boasted a church, a school (the first, and only one in Potton for twenty years), a gristmill, a general store with a postoffice – and two distilleries!

The Orcutt, Miltimore, Gilman, Elkins and Chapel Hill cemeteries stand witness to these first settlers, including one Bradbury Green and his kindly wife who, history tells us, was extraordinarily intrepid and often braved hardships to visit the suffering. Their son, Horace, was Mayor of Potton from 1858 to 1861.

Only a few miles east of Highwater, a second settlement began, on Province Hill, in the area of Potton's covered bridge. Only chemin de Province Hill and a small cemetery of the same name remain to immortalize the Gardyne, Skinner, and Blanchard families – to name but a few of the settlers of the early 1800's.

La belle époque

The building of the South Eastern Railway in 1873, and the construction of a station, were significant events in Highwater and Potton history. With the railway came a telegraph office. Canada Customs soon followed. Four general stores, a hotel and a school, known as South Hill, then served the 250 residents.

The real boom came with Prohibition in the 1920's. The proximity of Highwater to the United States meant that thirsty Americans had only to slip across the border for booze and entertainment! For a short time, it seemed Highwater became something of a frontier town. The Highwater Hotel had 26 rooms in addition to a dance hall. Alcohol, prostitution and gambling in the John T. House, a saloon-hotel, gave Highwater some notoriety. The Tourist Garden and Stanley House were also hotels of the time.

Canadian Pacific Railways acquired the original lines in 1883, providing regular service until 1996. Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railway has operated this line since 2003. Highwater Station closed in 1960 and later became a private home.

Highwater Customs

The Canada Customs have been located at Highwater since 1873. Because Potton's southern boundary is also the International Boundary, there were four other Customs offices until 1970, including one on Lake Memphremagog. Customs officers were kept very busy during the era of bootleggers and contraband smugglers, as one might imagine!



*Baker Talc -
Soapstone*

The industries

From beneath the earth to the skies above, Highwater's industrial history has been an interesting one:

For many years, Baker Talc extracted soapstone from the Van Reet, Marcoux and Baker mines in Potton, and shipped it by rail from Highwater. Talc, also known as steatite, is an acid, heat and electrically resistant stone having many industrial uses, in addition to its ornamental value. In 1961, 35 tonnes of soapstone were shipped from Baker Talc to the Inuit. The company closed in 1996.



Montreal Pipeline -
Construction

The Montreal Pipeline Company pumps oil from Portland, Maine to the refineries of Montreal via facilities located in Highwater, built in 1942. An automated pumping station replaced the cluster of Pipeline homes that existed in the 1950's.

Arguably, the most renowned in Highwater history was the Space Research Corporation (SRC), a sprawling cross-border installation that specialized in the development, production and sale of high velocity artillery in addition to high altitude research. Dr. Gerald Bull, about whom much has been written, headed that Corporation. SRC flourished from 1964 to 1980, when the American embargo on arms export forced its closure and eventual bankruptcy. Over 200 people lost their jobs. The community was devastated and recovery, slow.

Dr. Bull's projects included several versions of the Martlet, a projectile initially designed for high altitude research. He developed a range of munitions that could be fired from modified existing weapons, the most renowned, the GC-45 howitzer, a very long range gun, with a new shell, called the ERFB, an acronym for "Extended Range, Full Bore".

Following closure of the SRC, Dr. Bull associated with European Poudreries Réunies de Belgique, as an arms consultant. In 1988, when he collaborated with the Iraq of Saddam Hussein to build a gun capable of putting satellites into orbit, called Project Babylon, and to develop longer range SCUD missiles for that country, Intelligence Services around the world were alerted, including those of Israel. In March 1990, Gerald Bull, at the age of 62 years, was assassinated at his apartment in Brussels. The 1865 Jules Verne classic *From the Earth to the Moon*, was proven somewhat providential.

In the fall of 1980, Bombardier acquired the SRC production facility and retooled it for the manufacture of railway chassis and engine parts. More than 75 people were employed before Bombardier closed in 1985.

After such a storied past, Highwater is now quiet. Mining operations have ceased. Space research is but a memory. There are no more hotels. Bootleggers have disappeared. The bucolic countryside, however, has not changed. Try exploring the Missisquoi River by canoe or kayak to discover its charm.

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Sources

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Varied websites about S.R.C. and Dr. Gerald V. Bull

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