

The Role of the Land in the Development of Horton Township, 1760-1775¹

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The New Englanders who colonized the Nova Scotia township of Horton in the 1760s were drawn to the area by the promise of free land and easy settlement terms. They came to get ahead by exploiting the opportunities of the frontier. For many, it represented a chance to gain security and prosperity through a sizeable family farm, an opportunity no longer available in the overcrowded land of eastern Connecticut from which they had come. For others, land became the tool by which they could obtain profit and status in the new community. Clearly, land was the most powerful dynamic underlying the settlement process. An investigation of the first generation of New England settlement at Horton reveals that this interplay of people and land resulted in a closing off of opportunity within the first generation.

Unlike their Puritan forefathers who proceeded cautiously in developing a new town to ensure that local society was structured to foster community, the Horton grantees immediately focused on exploiting the opportunities of the frontier. A deep-seated desire to own land of one's own and an impulse to acquire as much of it as they could, led the proprietors to divide the entire township into individual holdings in the first decade.

The township was surveyed in typical New England form. Divisions of land of different types were laid out in lots of various sizes around a compact town plot. To ensure that all proprietors shared equally in the dykeland, marsh, upland and woodland of the township, grantees did not receive a contiguous block of land; rather, holdings were scattered around the township. The amount each received varied according to distinctions of status, family size and "ability to cultivate." Grants ranged from .5 to 2 shares. One share equalled 500 acres.

All of the township's land except the "size"² lots and the remote wildlands were laid out and distributed within the first four years of settlement. By 1770 virtually all lands were allocated and the settlement

1 For a more detailed discussion of the New England settlement of Horton Township see Debra A. McNabb, "Land and Families in Horton Township, N.S., 1760-1830," M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1986.

2 To compensate for variable soil quality appraisers assessed each lot against the highest prized lot, A No. 10, and awarded proprietors pecuniary tickets to be exchanged for "size" lots of equal value at the recipient's leisure. In this way, proprietors pitched one or more lots on the residual marsh, dykeland, intervale and woodland of the township.

pattern was established. No land reserve or communal property remained; even the so-called town “common” was privately owned. Providing land for future generations — which once had been a community responsibility — became the private duty of each landowner.

Even as the property surveys of the 1760s organized the land for settlement, proprietors restructured and used their assigned holdings according to their individual aspirations. Land changed hands quickly and often during the first decade of settlement. In the 1760s, 80% of all Horton grantees participated in the land market; more than 53,000 acres changed hands through 480 deeds.³ Although more than three quarters of the grantees registered fewer than six deeds for the decade,⁴ in many instances more than one and as many as ten lots changed hands in a single transaction. Consequently, the land trade was probably busier than the figures suggest. In all, at least 777 parcels of Horton land changed hands.

Landowning behavior between 1760 and 1770 suggests that acquisitiveness, expressed both in the pursuit of immediate profit and in property accumulation, motivated landowners.⁵ The land trade provided one of the few opportunities to raise capital on the Nova Scotia frontier and during the 1760s, one half of Horton’s resident grantees engaged in transactions that brought them a profit.⁶ Astute landowners capitalized on the land without reducing the size of their own shares by selling individually-purchased lots as a package deal. More often, though, immediate profit was only realized by the reduction of a shareholder’s improvable acreage. Defined broadly, “improvable” acreage was land easily prepared for cultivation. In the 1760s this meant accessible township land rather than the undivided third division. Exclusive of “size” land, grants of .5 to 2

3 The following analysis of Horton landholding patterns uses all deeds recorded in PANS, RG 47, King’s County, reels 1273, 1274. It should be noted that Horton’s extant registered deeds are not a complete record of all land transactions. For example, in reconstituting individual landholdings it was discovered that there are deeds for the sale of one or more lots for which there was no record of purchase.

4 The average number of deeds recorded by grantees from 1760 to 1770 was 4.5. Non-grantees have been excluded from these calculations because otherwise they could have been included by making a single purchase in the late 1760s, which would skew the general trends.

5 The following discussion of landowning behavior is based on an analysis of the dates, locations, acreages and prices of all lots bought and sold by every known landowner in Horton between 1760 and 1770.

6 Resident and absentee grantees are examined separately because their landholding practices were markedly different. Net profit/deficit is calculated as the difference between the prices cited for lots purchased and those sold during the decade. It excludes the monetary values of that portion of the original grant still owned in 1770, and therefore it does not measure the cash equivalent of total wealth in land.

shares contained from 31 to 145 improvable acres.⁷

Three-quarters of the grantees who made money from their shares reduced their farm areas.⁸ On average, this reduction amounted to 31 improvable acres. Clearly, some conceived of their land as a commodity of exchange in the cash-short economy of eighteenth-century Nova Scotia. They sold off some parcels to obtain funds necessary to improve and stock the remainder. For others, less committed to setting up a farm in Horton, emigration to Nova Scotia was temporary. Whether engulfed in debt, discouraged by pioneering hardships, or caught up in the speculative fever sweeping the colony,⁹ 38 shareholders sold their rights by 1770, putting more than 17,000 acres up for sale. Most of those who departed early in the 1760s sold their land before leaving Horton, but by mid-decade the majority of grants sold were the property of settlers who had returned to New England.¹⁰ The price varied according to whether a proprietor sold before or after leaving Horton, the buildings and improvements to be included, or if the grant was sold by a disinterested heir, but generally, one share of 500 unimproved acres could be purchased for approximately £100.

The willingness of many grantees to sell at least part of their shares made it possible for anyone with capital to buy land in Horton. A few Halifax businessmen who invested heavily in the outsettlements took advantage of this opportunity. But these were not typical newcomers. Of 35 non-grantees who purchased land in the 1760s, most owned less than 25 acres; as a group they acquired only 15% of the township's improvable acreage.

Most of the lands sold in the 1760s became the property of proprietors eager to augment their original shares. One quarter of the resident grantees invested substantial sums in the local land market to increase their holdings by an average of 66 improvable acres. A trend towards concentrated land ownership developed. By 1770, the top 20% (40) of Horton landowners controlled one half of the township's improvable acreage; 10 of these landowners owned three times the total acreage of the 78 smallest property holders. In effect, the balance of population and land was shifting in their favour. Future access to land would be severely limited

7 Documentary references to "size" are not included in calculations of "improvable" acreage in this discussion, although it may have been among the most valuable and frequently cultivated acreage any farmer owned.

8 The other one quarter are discussed above as that group of landowners who made a profit without reducing the size of their landholding.

9 That one quarter of the complete removals of Horton grantees occurred in 1760 and 1761 argues strongly for speculation as a motive behind some New Englanders obtaining Nova Scotia land grants.

10 Only two grantees who left Horton for good remained in Nova Scotia. Amos Fuller moved to Cumberland and Benjamin Woodworth settled in Cornwallis.

if these few individuals were not inclined to sell. Only six ranked in the top 20% without purchasing any land. They had been given the larger 1.5 and 2-share rights and by not selling any land, owned some of the largest holdings in 1770. All of them were non-residents. In 1770, seventy-five absentee grantees owned one third of Horton's improvable acreage. Most never ever lived in Horton and their shares were subsequently sold by heirs.¹¹

And yet, non-residency did not have to mean inactivity. In 1770, Horton's largest landowner was Halifax merchant and government servant, Joseph Gray. A shrewd businessman, Gray not only consolidated several substantial farms, he purchased a large chunk of third division wildland, perhaps speculating on the future value of the properties as tenant estates.¹² By 1770 he had increased his original 1-share grant of 517 acres to 21,494 acres.¹³

Gray's closest rival as a Horton landowner was local resident, Charles Dickson. In 1755, Colonel Dickson led a company of New Englanders to Nova Scotia to fight at Beausejour. Five years later he returned with his wife and five children to claim 1.5 shares at Horton. There he became a prominent merchant, politician and landowner. Unlike Joseph Gray, Dickson's land dealings favoured Lower Horton. By 1770 he owned almost 1500 improvable acres, more than four times Gray's improvable acreage and more than three times the improvable property of Horton's third-ranked landowner. By the time he died fifteen years later, Dickson had made twice as much money as he had invested in local land and still owned 5418.25 acres, although by that time primarily in the third division.¹⁴

11 There is no evidence to suggest how non-residents might have contributed their required share of capital and labour needed to establish the infrastructures of settlement. Perhaps, as in Sackville Township, N.B., local agents agreed to meet the obligations of non-residents (see James Snowdon, "Footprints in the Marsh Mud: Politics and Land Settlement in the Township of Sackville, 1760-1800," M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1975, 89).

12 Although the final disposition of Gray's Horton lands is unknown, he probably profited from this strategy; as early as the late 1770s, settlers were carving farmland out of the township's wooded interior. As well, Gray had tenants on his farms known as "The Pear Trees" and "Mud Creek."

13 For Joseph Gray's Horton deeds of the 1760s see PANS, RG 47, Reel 1273, Vol. 1: 8, 9, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 21, 36, 40, 42, 55, 64, 66, 68, 70, 72, 74, 76, 80, 82, 84, 105, 108, 110, 113, 114, 116, 117, 119, 120, 122, 123, 124, 126, 127, 133, 150, 159, 161, 167, 190, 196, 197, 199, 201, 203, 205, 207, 256; Vol. 2: 16, 19, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28 (2), 30, 31, 32, 54, 63, 64, 65, 67, 68, 71, 77, 130, 131, 274; Vol. 3: 269, 359.

14 For Charles Dickson's Horton deeds see PANS, RG 47, Reel 1273, Vol. 1: 2, 21, 35, 38, 40, 53, 60, 61, 86, 92, 152, 173, 180, 181, 182, 195, 212, 215, 217, 218, 231, 232, 234, 235, 236, 242, 247, 251, 268, 269; Vol. 2: 3, 4, 7 (2), 8, 22, 31, 47, 51 (2), 79, 102, 106, 140, 167, 182, 185, 187, 191, 211, 212, 213, 214 (2), 234, 241, 246, 247, 249, 273, 303; Vol. 3: 7, 66, 148, 150, 153, 154, 168, 199, 200, 227, 264, 352, 486, 519, 521, 530, 532; Reel 1274, Vol. 4: 5, 8, 154; Vol. 5: 104.

Few of the others who accumulated land emulated Joseph Gray and Charles Dickson. In fact, there seems to be no general pattern to the property acquisitions of the 1760s. Some grantees purchased one or two pieces adjoining, or near one of their other lots, but few attempted to acquire the most fertile land or to consolidate their holdings into contiguous fields. Land seemed to be acquired for the sake of owning it. As a result, the dispersed land system that had been initiated by the township survey, became entrenched on the landscape by 1770. Horton landowners left their farms spread over several miles, a few acres here, a few more there.

This acquisition pattern, in turn, affected the settlement pattern. To compensate for fragmented holdings or to concentrate on what remained of their grants, inhabitants began to build their homes on one of their upland lots. Even in the 1760s settlement began to drift westward, drawing families away from a communal town plot to homesteads often widely separated from each other by the empty fields of absentee proprietors.

Simeon Dewolf's residential mobility illustrates how people moved around the township. A blacksmith from Lyme, Dewolf arrived in Horton between 1761 and 1764 and erected a dwelling, barn, smithy and assorted outbuildings on the town lot of his 1-share grant. By 1768, he had built a frame house on a piece of upland size adjacent to his first division farm lot and moved his family and forge to that site just west of town plot. Although he was not Horton's only blacksmith, Dewolf must have believed that his business would not suffer by moving away from the center of town and closer to his farmlands. In fact, his new location on the well-travelled "road to the lower bridge" may have made him more accessible to others who had moved out of town. In 1770, Dewolf moved again. He purchased a house and 100 acres in the second division along the king's highway to Annapolis. In 1779, five years before he died, Dewolf moved for the last time to a dwelling farther west along this road.¹⁵

There were others who shared Dewolf's wanderlust, but most inhabitants who moved probably did so only once or twice. Although the evidence is impressionistic, it appears that as soon as they could build frame dwellings, most settlers left the crude shelters they had hastily erected at town plot. If they rebuilt at another site, it is likely that their first dwelling was sold or rented, although occasionally the building was moved or torn down so that the lot could be used for agricultural purposes.

The demand for land in Horton in the 1760s did not reflect the state of agricultural development in the new farming community. An analysis of agriculture at the end of the first decade of settlement reveals that farmers did not adequately provide for their families' needs and the land was

15 For mention of Simeon Dewolf's houses, see PANS, RG 47, Reel 1273, Vol. 1: 56, 214; Vol. 2: 116; Vol. 3: 296; Reel 1274, Vol. 4: 97.

under-utilized. There is no data on production and consumption to estimate subsistence levels at Horton. The only source of nominal agricultural information before 1851 is the census of 1770.¹⁶ To provide an interpretative framework for analyzing this agricultural data, those listed on the census were divided into three groups (top 20%, mid 40%, bottom 40%) according to the size of their landholding in improvable acres. Averaging farm size and crop yields for each of the three groups resulted in three distinct farm types. The characteristics of these "types" were compared to estimates of the minimum acreage required to produce a basic food supply found in James Lemon's study of eighteenth-century Pennsylvania.¹⁷ Admittedly, this procedure is crude; however, it does make an attempt to correlate farm size and agricultural production and it provides at least an impressionistic statement of Horton's agricultural system.

According to Lemon's requirements, most families were still struggling to obtain life's basic necessities ten years after they arrived in Horton. For example, farmers in the bottom 40% of Horton landowners possessed on average, slightly less than the minimum acreage identified by Lemon as necessary for adequate subsistence, and their meager crop yields reflected their primitive agricultural practices. Generally, middling landowners did not fare much better. Farmers in the middle 40% of landowners owned three times the mean improvable acreage of their counterparts in the bottom two fifths of society, but their holdings differed only in the larger size of their second division farm lots. Crop yields were only slightly higher than those of the bottom 40% and they were still well below comparable American subsistence estimates.

Horton's most successful husbandmen were its principal landowners. Yet, on average, the agricultural output of the top 20% of Horton's landowners only barely met basic subsistence requirements although they held thirteen times the required minimum acreage. No rates of clearing Horton land have survived; yet even at the pace of farmers who levelled a thick Ontario forest to clear 5 acres a year,¹⁸ sufficient acreage could have been cleared and prepared for planting in the first ten years to allow Horton farmers to produce more prodigiously. The reasons why they did not do so remain unclear. It is evident, however, that dispersed holdings, scarce labour, difficulties in obtaining stock and seed, poor markets and

16 "A Return of the State of the Township of Horton, 1770," PANS, RG 1, Vol. 443, 15; reprinted in *PANS Report*, 1934, 39-42.

17 James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (New York: 1972), 164.

18 The estimate of five acres a year is quoted in Kenneth Kelly, "The Impact of Nineteenth Century Agricultural Settlement on the Land," in J.D. Wood, ed., *Perspectives on Landscape and Settlement in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Carleton Library, 1975), 103.

the problems of adjusting to farming a new land were common hardships of eighteenth-century Nova Scotia farmers. Together they stood in the way of efficient agriculture.

The steady increase in population in Horton during this time (described below) suggests that the inhabitants did not suffer unduly from low agricultural productivity, but there is no documentation to indicate how they sustained themselves. It is not unreasonable to assume, however, that they lived as pioneers do, by making the most of what the new land had to offer. Horton could provide both a river fishery and proximity to the rich Bay of Fundy fishery; hunting and trapping opportunities in the woods of South Mountain, and the fruits of former Acadian orchards. Similarly, how their standard of living may have been influenced by a well-established trading network between New England and the Bay of Fundy region is unknown.

The imbalance in the distribution of land resulting from the active trading of the 1760s, persisted for at least the next two decades. Those who had gained control of the best township lands kept them out of circulation; as measured by the number of deeds registered, land transactions occurred at little more than half the rate that marked the 1760s.

Between 1770 and 1791 access to land was further reduced by escalating prices, driven upward by a rising demand and shrinking supply of land. Any comparison of Horton land prices over time is risky because the impact of the type of sale (i.e., private or public auction), soil quality, improvements and location on price are impossible to determine, although they surely were felt; lots of equal acreage in similar parts of the township were sold for different sums at almost the same time. In absolute terms though, prices increased. With time and the progression of settlement, buying land meant paying for improvements such as clearing, fencing, cultivation and perhaps even a house, barn and outbuildings. Because less expensive unimproved properties were not often offered for sale, the price of land was pushed out of the reach of some.

As the threshold of access to land rose, the population of Horton increased. The number of inhabitants grew from 689 in 1763¹⁹ to approximately 743 by 1770. By extrapolation from the number of adult men listed on the Poll Tax of 1791, the population of Horton in that year can be estimated at 1175; this was an increase of 63% over the 1770 total.²⁰ Such growth can be attributed in part to the high rate of persistence among the founding settlers and their families. Twenty-six of the 184 original Horton landholders are known to have died by 1790. Of the remaining 158,

19 "Return of the Families Settled in the Townships of Horton, Cornwallis, Falmouth, and Newport in King's County... 1763," PANS, MG 1, Vol. 471, 2.

20 "The Horton Poll Tax of 1791," in "Nova Scotia Poll Tax Lists, 1790-1795," PANS, RG 1, Vol. 444.

fully 123 certainly lived in Horton in 1791; the proportion may well have been higher because we do not know that some of the apparently missing 30 did not continue to live in Horton unrecorded.

Immigration was another component of population growth. Horton attracted several newcomers in the 1770s and 1780s. Fully 117 of these appeared as new names (not on the 1770 Census) on the Poll Tax; a few were Loyalists, some came from Ireland and others moved from Cornwallis and Falmouth, but the origins of most are unknown. So too are the reasons that they came to Horton. Some (perhaps seven) men settled Horton land included in the dowries of their local brides.²¹ Others may have had little choice but to move to Horton or one of the other settled communities in the colony. Between 1770 and 1783 Crown lands were available only by purchase; because prices were relatively high there was little settlement of unoccupied land and newcomers gravitated into established towns in search of other opportunities.²² Even the relatively well-to-do British migrants of the 1770s came, as Governor Legge observed, not "with the expectation of having lands granted to them", but "to purchase, ... perhaps to become tenants" or "to labour."²³

This was certainly the pattern followed by many of those who settled in Horton after 1770. Only one fifth purchased land in the next twenty years and only half ever acquired real property. In 1791 two thirds made their living as wage labourers. Revealingly, less than half of those registered as farmers on the Poll Tax owned land. To farm they had to rent land. Tenancy had become an important facet of the economic structure of the community.

As land grew scarce in Horton, everyman's opportunity to own a farm diminished. Between 1770 and 1791 the number of farmers in Horton decreased by one third. There were also fewer artisans and professionals on a proportional basis, and by 1791 labourers comprised almost half (47%) of the workforce.²⁴ They were not simply farmers' sons; Hortonians of the second generation accounted for only one quarter of this occupational group. Of the remainder, only one quarter had lived in Horton in 1770. Once landowners, they had sold their property for one reason or another, but continued to seek a living there. The rest were newcomers to

21 J. Noble Shannon, Samuel Avery, Ebenezer Fitch, James Fullerton, Moses Stevens, John Graham and Michael Wallace married daughters of Hortonians.

22 Margaret Ells, "Clearing The Decks For The Loyalists," *Canadian Historical Association Report* (1933), 43-58.

23 Letter, Governor Legge to Lord Dartmouth, May 10, 1774, in "Letter Books and Transcripts of Dispatches from the Governors," PANS, RG 1, Vol. 44, 32.

24 "The Horton Poll Tax of 1791", *op cit*. An increase in the number of labourers after 1770 is supported by an increase in the occurrence of the term "labourer" as an occupational identification in the Court of Quarter Sessions papers. For examples, see PANS, MG 1, Vol. 182, 38, 116-117, 228; Vol.183, 2-31, 79-81, 103-107, 267-270.

the community. Although it is difficult to tell what kinds of labour were performed, scattered references suggest that men were hired for a variety of unskilled and semi-skilled tasks, most of them farm-related.

When time came to pass on their land to the next generation, Horton testators faced difficult decisions. Forced to recognize even in the 1790s that the limits of good agricultural land had been reached in Horton and that the rising threshold of accessibility put land at a premium, they were conservative in subdividing their holdings. Some endowed all male offspring but only after most sons served lengthy apprenticeships as farm labourers, and then only with as much land as could be parcelled out without jeopardizing the viability of the family farm.

More importantly, almost one half (43%) of Horton testators bequeathed all of their real estate to one son. In some cases this represented the last of several disbursements that had begun many years before rather than a deliberate attempt to exclude all but one son. Even so, many of these testators had sizeable holdings, property which could have been divided among all of their offspring. By choosing to favour only one, these men preserved the integrity of the family farm in a way probably calculated to ensure the family's social and economic position in a farming community.

The incidence of impartible inheritance at Horton is high when compared to New England where it was rarely practised when settlements were new. There, characteristically large landholdings accommodated the first settlers who wished to distribute their land among all their sons. But after a few generations severely reduced the size of the family's landholdings by this practise, partible inheritance was no longer realistic. Still, rather than give land to some sons and not to others, men stubbornly clung to some form of partible inheritance long after it was a feasible method of transmission.²⁵

Perhaps the attitudes of Horton testators signify a conservative reaction to their earlier experiences in Connecticut. There, as in all of older settled New England, growing population pressure on a limited land supply, aggravated by generations of partible inheritance, severely reduced family landholdings and left fathers incapable of providing adequate patrimonies for their grown sons. This dilemma provided at least part of the impetus for some of these sons to leave Connecticut for Nova Scotia. These were the men who became Horton landowners and later found themselves forced to make hard choices that affected the lives of their sons. Because their own youth had been unsettled, these men must have been sensitive to the situations their sons faced when they reached manhood. But, at the same time they were keenly aware of their struggle to establish a patrimony and what sub-dividing the farm into small parcels would mean for the

25 Philip J. Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land and Family in Colonial Andover, Mass.* (Ithaca, 1970), 125-172.

family's chance of keeping a foothold in the community for future generations. As a result, decisions regarding the transfer of property to the next generation were influenced more by priorities of maintaining the family landholding and ensuring the patriarch's economic security in old age than by the affection testators may have felt for their children and their instincts to provide for them.

Some of the wider implications of the settlement experience at Horton seem clear. Acquisitiveness was the motor of colonization and formed the central tendency in the *mentalité* of the settlers who established the new community. It was best expressed in the accumulation of land for purposes of exchange and status-enhancement. More than anything else, this drive to accumulate shaped Horton's evolving character. The flurry of trading in land during the 1760s greatly outpaced agricultural development. Whether or not they wanted to participate in the drive to accumulate, all residents were affected by it. Few resisted re-shaping their landholding in some way. This process identified the leaders and lesser sorts and had ramifications for other aspects of community life. Economic differentiation, which was in place from virtually the beginning of settlement, was as important as the limitations of the Nova Scotia environment in determining the direction and extent of community development.

This discussion of Horton examines only the initial phase of the settlement process and ends with the deaths of the first generation of settlers. It reveals a society characterized by restricted opportunity, stratification and uncertainty. To fully understand the patterns of community development requires the investigation to be carried forward to determine how subsequent generations of Hortonians coped with the legacy left by the founding settlers. Perhaps the initial imbalance in land ownership levelled out and the significance of land as a commodity diminished as the importance of agriculture increased, the local economy matured and society grew more complex. As well, further study of Horton must place the township in its spatial context to understand its role in the economy and society of the Minas Basin area, its place in the hinterland of Halifax, and what the investigation of life and livelihood at Horton reveals about the colony of Nova Scotia in the much-neglected period of the Planters.