

A short history of the Johnston family on Kennebecasis Island

Thomas Johnston was born in Ireland in c1811 and immigrated to New Brunswick in May 1826. In May 1829, he bought 50 acres of land on Kennebecasis Island from Jeremiah Drake. In February 1833, he bought an additional 50 acres from Nehemiah Merritt. Johnston's 100 acres were on the northeastern part of the Island and consisted of original lots 9 and 10 as laid out in an early survey of the Island.

In c1844, Johnston married Catherine Armstrong, an 18-year old Irish immigrant whose family had settled in New Brunswick in 1827. Between 1845 and 1866, Catherine gave birth to 11 children - Sarah, Thomas Jr, Isabella, Elizabeth, John, Martha, James, George, Henrietta, Jemine and Hannah. Thomas and Catherine raised their large family on Kennebecasis Island where they farmed their land.

In the early 1870s, Thomas Sr died and Catherine fell heir to the Island property. Catherine remained on the Island and sometime after 1875, married James Carter. As the Johnston children reached adulthood, most left the Island. Some settled in nearby Saint John while others immigrated to the United States. Thomas and Catherine's daughter, Sarah, was married to Arthur Irvine, son of George Irvine. For a short time in the mid-1860s, Arthur and Sarah owned the land that Arthur's father, George, has purchased from Sarah's father. By the late 1880s only sons, Thomas Jr and George were still living on the Johnston farm with their mother Catherine and stepfather, James Carter.

In May 1889, George Johnston, who was a cooper by trade, married Levinia Long. Levinia joined George and his family on Kennebecasis Island. In August 1890, Catherine sold the Johnston homestead (about 50 acres as well as the farmhouse) to George and Levinia. This was not the first sale of "Johnston land". In 1857, Thomas Sr sold the southern part of the property surrounding Keith's Cove to George Irvine and in 1869, he sold 30 acres adjacent to the Milkish Channel to his son, Thomas Jr. Another son, John, bought a smaller parcel of land from his mother in 1876. Catherine also sold land on the "Old Ferry Road" on the southern edge of the property to the local School District so that a school could be constructed on the Island.

The 1890s saw a number of developments at the Johnston farm. A hotel was built on the property to provide lodging for Saint Johners who wished to get away from the city. The Johnston family was able to take advantage of the fact that their farm was located adjacent to where the ferry from Saint John docked. The hotel was owned and operated by George's brother, Thomas Jr. George also sold a small parcel of land on the south side of his property to James M. Keith. Keith's property was on the north shore of the cove to the south of the ferry landing and this body of water soon became known as "Keith's Cove". Also, George and Levinia's children were born in the 1890s thus adding to the number of people living on the Johnston estate. A daughter, Jennie, was born in December 1890, a son, Thomas Leslie, was born in February 1893, and a second daughter, Bella, was born in June 1895.



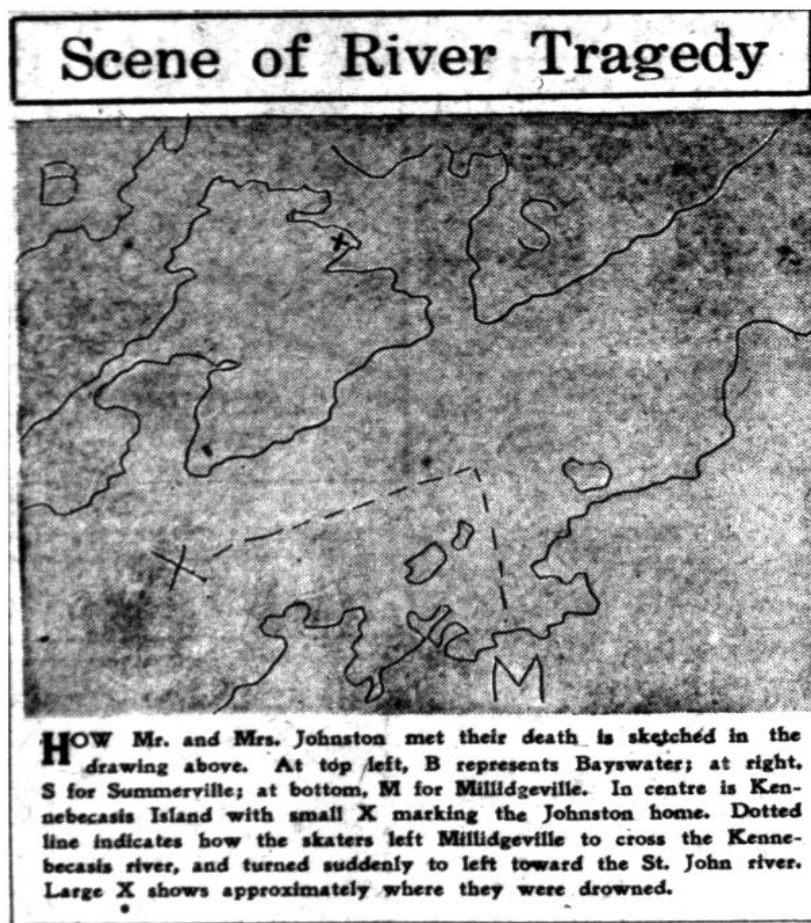
Note: *The Johnson Hotel is the building in the foreground and the Johnson farmhouse is in the background. The pilings at water's edge is the ferry dock - ruminants of this can still be seen today during low water.*

George and Levinia continued to "work" the Johnston farm throughout the 1890s and into the 1900s. In December 1896, James Carter passed away and was buried in the Hutchings family cemetery. George's mother, Catherine, lived on the Island until her passing in May, 1911. She too was interred in the Hutchings cemetery.

In February 1927, Leslie Johnston married Evelyn Watkins. Evelyn was born in England in August 1898 and immigrated to Canada as a young girl. She was the only child of A.H. Frederick Watkins and Maud Bowden. Leslie and Evelyn were married at St. Luke's Anglican Church on Main St. in Saint John. The Watkins family were members of the congregation at St. Luke's and Fred taught Sunday school there. Evelyn joined Leslie and his family on Kennebecasis Island where she gave birth to two children. Alfred was born in late 1927 while Eldon was born in 1929.

On March 11, 1931, tragedy struck the Johnston family when Leslie's 40-year old sister, Jennie, died from "acute hemorrhagic pancreatitis", a fatal inflammation of the pancreas. Jennie's death occurred at the Johnston family farm. Less than two years later further misfortune befell the family.

On Thursday, January 19, 1933, Leslie and Evelyn left their Island home and skated across the Kennebecasis River to the Millidgeville area of Saint John. After spending the day in the city, the Johnstons arrived back at Millidgeville and set out for Kennebecasis Island in a blinding blizzard. About halfway across the river, they apparently became confused because of the snowstorm and the changing direction of the wind (it was at their backs when they left Millidgeville) and instead of skating in a straight line from Millidgeville to the tip of Kennebecasis Island, they turned to their left and skated down the river to thin ice and open water opposite McCormick Cove. Leslie and Evelyn were heard calling for help but soon drowned in the icy water. Their bodies were recovered by grapplers in about 120 feet of water three days later on Sunday afternoon.



The Johnstons were survived by their children, Alfred and Eldon, who were left to be cared for by Leslie's parents, George and Levinia. By 1933, Evelyn's father had become a Minister and her parents were living in Longview, WA where Fred was rector of Grace Episcopal Church. Evelyn was an only child and had no other relatives in the Saint John area.

In August 1935, George and Levinia Johnston's remaining daughter died. Bella suffered from heart disease from birth and was an invalid most of her life. George and Levinia and their grandchildren remained on Kennebecasis Island for a few years after Bella's death and then moved to the South End of Saint John. George died in January 1941 while Levinia died in April 1951.

George and Levinia Johnston, as well as their three children and Leslie's wife, Evelyn, are buried in the Summerville United Church cemetery on the Kingston Peninsula in King's County, NB - only a few kilometers from Kennebecasis Island.

Alfred Johnston married Alexandra Hedderwick and they had three daughters. Alfred passed away in Ottawa, ON in September 2003. Eldon Johnston married Edna Carr in May 1949. Eldon lives in Saint John, NB.