

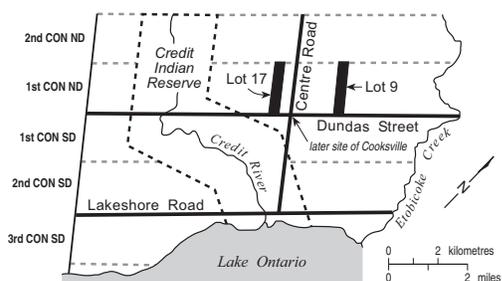
JOHANN SCHILLER: FATHER OF CANADIAN WINE?

The year 2011 is being heralded as the 200th anniversary of the Canadian wine industry, for it was in 1811 that Johann Schiller is said to have established Canada's first-ever commercial winery. Surprisingly perhaps, it was not located in one of today's centres of winemaking, such as the Niagara Peninsula. Instead it was north of Lake Ontario in what is now a very urban part of Mississauga.

Schiller's Story

Schiller was of German origin, and fought for the Crown in the American Revolutionary War. As a corporal with the 29th Regiment of Foot, he would have served mainly along the St. Lawrence and the headwaters of the Hudson. In October, 1789 he successfully petitioned for 400 acres of land south of Montreal close to the United States border. But he was unable to take possession of his land because the boundaries were never laid out by a surveyor. As he stated in a follow-up petition to the governor of Lower Canada in January, 1796, this left him in dire straits, "without means of procuring ... subsistence" for his wife and four infant children.

By July, 1798 he had moved to Upper Canada, working as a shoemaker in Niagara Township. He again petitioned for land, pointing out that he had "never located" the lands promised him in Lower Canada. But it was not until July 23, 1806 that he was granted 400 acres in newly-surveyed Toronto Township (now part of Mississauga), specifically lots 9 and 17 in the first concession north of Dundas Street. Lot 17 was to become his homestead, but he may not have moved there until 1809, as his name does not appear in surveyor Samuel Wilmot's list of township settlers in 1807/08.



Schiller's land in Toronto Township

In 1810 and 1811 he submitted affidavits stating that he had completed the required settlement duties on his lots. On lot 17, this meant clearing and fencing five acres, building a house measuring 16 by 20 feet, clearing half the road allowance alongside and cutting down the trees up to 100 feet from the road. He received patents conveying formal title to the lots in 1811, but sold lot 9 the following year. He died on October 12, 1816.

It was on lot 17 that Schiller would have made his wine. The lot lay just west of the intersection of Dundas Street and Centre Road (now Hurontario), which was to become the site of the village of Harrisville (later renamed Cooksville). According to Linda Bramble in *Niagara's Wine Visionaries*, he domesticated the wild vines that grew nearby, and by 1811 had supplemented these with American hybrids from Pennsylvania. He produced enough wine to sell to his neighbours, and is thus considered "the father of commercial winemaking in Canada." This is quite the accolade, one that is repeated by many other writers, and it is pertinent to ask what Schiller did to deserve such a distinction.

Wine before Schiller

Though he was definitely a pioneer, Schiller was actually a late arrival on the Canadian winemaking scene, for we know of others making wine long before 1811 (though not for sale). If we discount the possibility that Norse explorer Lief Eriksson gave the name Vinland to Newfoundland because of the wild grapes he found there in 1001, all the early references to grapes and wine occur in the writings of French explorers, administrators and missionaries.

Both Jacques Cartier in 1535 and Samuel de Champlain in 1603 commented on the abundance of grapes growing wild along the St. Lawrence. One of the earliest reports of anyone making wine appears in Jesuit priest Paul Le Jeune's *Relation* of 1636, in which he writes, "some have made wine ... I tasted it, and it seemed to me very good." The Jesuits and other missionaries of course required wine for sacramental purposes, but almost all of it was imported (Spanish wine being a favourite). There are also references to grapes and wine in the writings of several European travellers who came to North America in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1749 Swedish-born traveller Peter Kalm even mentions French grapevines planted in Montreal gardens, but adds that making wine was "not worth while." Instead the grapes were eaten as a dessert.

Prior to the American Revolutionary War what is now Ontario was largely the domain of native peoples, who themselves never made wine. Some of the Loyalist and other settlers who arrived in the late 18th century no doubt brought winemaking skills with them, but references to wine and even grapes are few and far between. In 1793 Elizabeth Simcoe, wife of the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada and a meticulous diarist, mentions that she "gathered wild grapes ... pleasant but not sweet" at York. She also cites a case of impromptu winemaking, when soldiers laying out Dundas Street (which ran alongside what was to become Schiller's land) "turned out very tolerable wine" from the

wild grapes found nearby. But making wine was rare, and most of the wine consumed in Upper Canada was imported from Europe. Whisky, rum and beer were the beverages of choice anyway.

Schiller as Vintner

There is in fact little evidence of winemaking in Upper Canada until Schiller arrived on the scene. He is the first winemaker to be identified by name, and the consensus is that he played a crucial role in the development of the industry. What Bramble is quoted above as saying is typical of many writers, and it comes as no surprise when Tony Aspler in *The Wine Atlas of Canada* refers to Schiller as the “acknowledged” father of Canadian wine. Not everyone agrees, however, for Rod Phillips in his book *Ontario Wine Country* claims that “Schiller is too insubstantial a figure” to warrant any such title. Though Phillips is very much a lone voice, his comment does raise the important question: what evidence exists to support the Schiller claim?

The answer is, not much. Significantly, none of the many books and articles on winemaking in Ontario and Canada cites a contemporary source (i.e., one dating from the early 19th century) that links Schiller and wine. The various Schiller-related documents that survive from this era (petitions, land grants, etc.) say nothing, and aside from stating that he had been a “constable of the peace” and shoemaker and later served as juryman and township poundkeeper, provide no details of what he did.

The first known references to Schiller and wine do not come until over a century later, in the form of two anonymous newspaper articles, the first in the *Evening Telegram* on September 10, 1929, and the second in the *Globe* on April 22, 1934. Both were reprinted shortly after in local papers (the *Brampton Conservator* and the *Port Credit News* respectively). But they contain little by way of solid evidence. To quote from the *Globe*, “in his rambles with a gun, looking for game [Schiller] was struck by the resemblance of wild grapes on the banks of the Credit to those in the vineyards of his Fatherland [the Rhineland]. Cutting slips of the vines, he began cultivation on a sunny slope at the rear of his home. The vines prospered [and] Schiller and his sons became vintners in a modest way, but found it hard, almost impossible, to compete with the then-flourishing whiskey trade.”

This article also makes two claims about Schiller, one questionable, the other false, that hardly inspire confidence. The first (which also appears in the *Telegram*) is that he was the originator of the Clinton grape variety, and the second is that in 1811 he saved the French wine industry by exporting root stock that was immune to the phylloxera then ravaging European vineyards. This second claim is emblazoned in the *Globe* headline, which reads, “French Wine Industry Saved by Canadian Living at Cooksville.” But it is simply wrong — if Cooksville

vines helped bail out French winemakers (and this is not clear), it would not have been until post 1870, long after Schiller was dead.

These articles seem to be the sole sources for the Schiller story (the *Port Credit News* reprint of the *Globe* article is actually cited in William Rannie’s *Wines of Ontario* in 1978), and they are less than convincing. While there is no reason to doubt that Schiller may have made wine, one wonders how much of a “vintner” he could possibly have been by 1811. After all, he was not granted his land until 1806, may not have occupied it until 1809, and had to perform settlement duties on two lots (two miles apart) in what was then basically a wilderness.

Though there is no early evidence of Schiller and wine, it turns out that there are sources linking others, if not to winemaking, at least to grape-growing. During the War of 1812 many farmers and property owners in Upper Canada suffered serious losses at the hands of both American and British troops, and later submitted claims for damages. Typically they were for livestock killed, fences destroyed, crops trampled, barns burned and items stolen. But Thomas Merritt of Grantham Township also claimed for the loss of grape vines, and the mere fact that he did so suggests that these were not just wild grapes growing at the bottom of the yard. Robert Kerr of Niagara Township went further, claiming for the loss of “a large nursery of grafted and inoculated [sic] fruit trees” and “four vineyards” all part of “the best garden in the province.” Merritt and Kerr had occupied their land far longer than Schiller and were clearly growing grapes. While their reason for doing so is unknown, it could well have included making wine.

Conclusion

What little evidence there is suggests that Schiller did nothing out of the ordinary, and certainly nothing to merit the honour that has been bestowed on him. Probably the only reason we know of him at all is that lot 17 in Toronto Township continued to be used for grape-growing long after his death. In the 1860s, Count Justin de Courtenay established a celebrated winery called Chateau Clair on the lot, and Schiller’s role as the one who “started it all” may well have become part of local lore, even though that role may have been little more than making wine for himself. The lack of contemporary evidence is telling, especially when there is solid proof that others were at the very least growing grapes around the same time. Two unattributed newspaper articles containing serious errors and written over a century after the event prove nothing. Unless further research yields new evidence, the case for celebrating Schiller as the father of Canadian winemaking remains problematic.

Principal Sources (in addition to those cited in the text): available on request.
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