

Clair House, Cooksville and the Beginnings of the Ontario Wine Industry

by Richard A. Jarrell

A point of pride in Mississauga history is the fact that the Ontario (indeed, the Canadian) wine industry began in Cooksville in the 1860s. In an article in *Ontario History* (Vol 103, no. 1, Spring 2011, 81-104), I have argued that the industry was largely the creation of one man, Justin McCarthy De Courtenay (1820-71). Research on his activities turned up a number of intriguing facets of the Cooksville connection. The early part of the story is riddled with myths, while the later part is almost wholly unknown. In this part, I would like to focus mostly on the early days of the Cooksville operation.

Johann Schiller, Founder of the Wine Industry?

There are several versions of this story but the gist is that Corporal Johann Schiller founded the Ontario wine industry. A Rheinlander serving for the British army, he received a land grant in Toronto Township in 1806. The land grants and subsequent sales are documented. According to the story, while hunting along the Credit River in 1811 he found wild *Vitis labrusca* grapes growing and planted cuttings on his property – Lot 17 NDS – just west of what would become the centre of Cooksville. In one version, “his vineyard eventually became one of magnitude and flourished with Clinton Grapes of plumpness and fine flavour.” Supposedly using his knowledge from the old country, he was able to make wine that was saleable. There are quite a number of problems with this story:

- There is *no* documentary evidence from the time supporting any part of this story.
- No one writing on the Canadian wine industry during the 19th and early 20th century ever mentioned Schiller. Henry Parker, who *did* plant a vineyard on Lot 17, never mentioned Schiller, either.
- The wild grapes that grown in the Cooksville area are typically *Vitis riparia*, which makes a very acidic wine. Schiller, who was dead by 1816, could not have grown Clinton grapes, which were not even recognized until 1830.
- Wild grapes produce so little natural sugar that one would have to add sugar during fermentation, which De Courtenay recognized from the first. This would increase the cost of production.
- According to the documentary evidence, Schiller was a shoemaker and was essentially a mercenary soldier. How would he know how to train and prune vines and to make wine?

Recent work by Professor Alun Hughes at Brock University and by Professor Rod Phillips at Carleton University suggests that the Schiller story has no basis. I believe we can classify it as an urban legend (well, at least a rural legend). It likely began, perhaps in the mid-1930s, when some newspaper writer confused the Parker-De Courtenay story with Schiller’s earlier ownership of the land.

But what if we were to give Schiller the benefit of doubt and assume he did grow some grapes, makes some wine and even sold some of it. Was he the founder of the Canadian wine industry? Certainly not. Other farmers might have done the same. There was *no* Canadian wine industry when, in 1859, De Courtenay proposed to establish one. He, and all his contemporaries involved

in creating the industry knew they were starting from scratch and said so. You might think that old-timers in the Cooksville area who remembered Schiller might have set the record straight with Parker and De Courtenay, but clearly no one did. The passage of nearly a half-century with no activity is *not* a sustained industry.

Henry Parker, Unlikely Vintner

We are on solid ground when we find vines growing on Lot 17 in 1859. By that time, the Parker family owned the old Schiller property. Rear-Admiral Sir William George Parker, Bart. had purchased it in 1841 and built Clair House as a base for his three youngest sons, Henry, Melville and Albert. It was Henry who planted vines, possibly in 1858, in hopes of making wine and inducing his neighbours to take up vine growing. Having grown up in England, Parker is unlikely to have had any horticultural experience; he appears to have desired to be a cut above the average farmer. He needed to hire Italian *vignerons* to tend the vines. His venture was going nowhere when he learned about Justin De Courtenay's proposal to the Provincial government to establish vineyards and to produce wine commercially. Parker and De Courtenay soon became friends and collaborators. With Montreal investors secured by the early 1860s, they proposed a joint stock company, the Canada Vine Growers Association (CVGA) to own and operate Parker's vineyard. By 1864, De Courtenay was in charge and expansion began. Henry Parker moved out of Clair House and moved in with his brother-in-law, lawyer John Hector, on Simcoe Street in Toronto. Melville Parker moved to a property north-east of the vineyard (now Parker Hill). The Parker brothers, the Hectors and Cooksville and Niagara-area farmers were at various times shareholders in the CVGA. At the height of production in the mid-1860s, Clair House produced as much as 50,000 gallons of wine and a considerable amount of brandy.

Count De Courtenay, the French Aristocrat and his Palatial Mansion

It is most curious how Justin McCarthy De Courtenay, an Englishman, was transmogrified into an aristocratic French count who built the wine vaults in Cooksville like those of his palatial French estate. His wife Blanche *was* French – they had met when he worked in the vineyards of Périgord – but the family was staunchly Anglican. He was reasonably well off but not a wealthy man. While a branch of the De Courtenays were aristocrats in mediaeval France, the English and Irish descendants were not save the Earls of Devon, to whom Justin was unrelated. In his time in Canada, De Courtenay was always referred to as “Mr De Courtenay.” It is not clear where the mythology came from but the reality was much more prosaic.

While Henry Parker was an amateur, De Courtenay was a professional, with experience in France, Switzerland and Italy. Clair House winery (it was never called Château Clair when De Courtenay operated it) was, without doubt, the first commercial vineyard and winery in Canada, and its example inspired others to follow. For De Courtenay, however, dealings with government, despite his friendship with John A. Macdonald, were often rocky and after a few years De Courtenay moved on. The CVGA's holdings in Cooksville were sold to Solomon White, a Windsor lawyer, in 1868. De Courtenay moved to Amherstburg in an unsuccessful bid to grow grapes and then moved his family home to a Dorsetshire village, where he died in 1871.

Henry Parker ceased to have a role, whether because he felt shunted aside or whether he lost

interest, we do not know. The mortgage on Clair House had never been paid and Parker sued the CVGA in 1875. He died two years later never seeing the money.

Note on sources:

The most accurate source for the later land owners is Verna Mae Weeks, *Cooksville Village of the Past* (Mississauga: Verna Mae Weeks, 1996). Land transaction records of the property are in the Peel Region Archives. A colourful account is given in Kathleen Hicks *Cooksville: Country to City* (Mississauga: Mississauga Library System, 2005) but the Schiller story is repeated in Tony Aspler, *Vintage Canada* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1980)³ and many other books on Canadian wine. On the Parkers, consult the Bellegham Scrapbooks in the Mississauga Central Library, Canadiana Reading Room. For the Parker-De Courtenay operation, see Richard A. Jarrell, "Justin De Courtenay and the Birth of the Ontario Wine Industry," *Ontario History* 103:1 (Spring 2011), 81-104.