



Map, 1857.  
Musée de la Gaspésie

## THE PERILS OF WALKING THE GASPÉ PENINSULA

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Walking is one mode of transport that barely rates a mention in the many accounts of the Gaspé Peninsula. Until the completion of the Kempt Road in 1833, it was a common mode of transportation for natives and many early settlers.

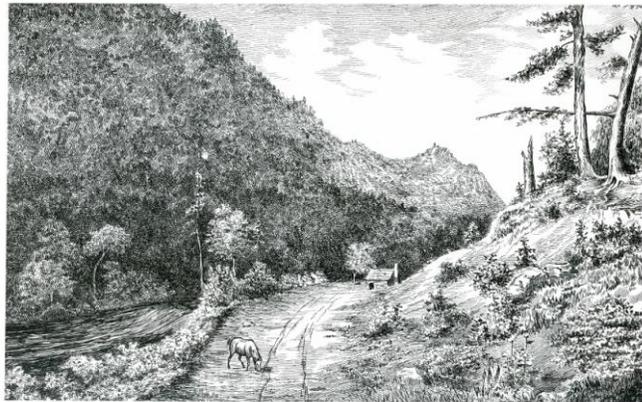
In writing the history of Metis, I have found numerous mentions of remarkable exploits of walkers who traversed the peninsula, with Metis the final destination or a half-way point. The walkers were sometimes important figures, like William Berczy. Painter, surveyor and co-founder of the city of Toronto, Berczy walked from Paspédiac to Quebec City in February 1802, using snowshoes for the very first time. Another walker of note was George Jehoshaphat Mountain who completed the last stage of his tour of the Anglicans of the region on foot, his clothes in tatters and his trousers held up by a belt made of cedar bark.

Those entrusted with the mail contracts transformed walking into a business. The mail contracts were entrusted to men who had applied for the position after public tenders, so they presumably knew what they were in for. In summer, the trails were uneven, boggy and sometimes impassable. In winter, the journey was often easier because free of most obstacles, but the challenges of weather and isolation made the trips perilous. Several mail carriers met a tragic end. Unfortunately, records of their achievements are few. Abel Lucas reported an expedition he undertook for the postmaster at Gaspé to take the mail from Gaspé to Quebec City. Leaving with 52 pounds of mail on his back on January 8, he arrived after 19 days of walking and snowshoeing on January 27<sup>th</sup>. "I saw no man for three days and two nights," he told the province's House of Assembly.

In 1845, the "Death of a Canadian Mail Courier" was reported with much dramatic flourish in newspapers, both in Canada and England. On April 24<sup>th</sup>, the *Brighton Gazette* reprinted this story published on March 1<sup>st</sup> in *The Quebec Mercury*:

Died, on the Kempt Road, near Restigouche, on the 28th January, Donald McLaren, aged 36—the Mail Courier.

The deceased had been employed the preceding eighteen months in carrying the mail between Metis and Restigouche, a distance of 97 3/4 miles, which distance he accomplished regularly twice a week—leaving Restigouche on Monday morning, and returning Saturday during the night, having thus to walk on snow shoes in the winter season 195 ½ miles every six days carrying a mail bag on his back, frequently weighing from 35 to 40 lbs. The powers of endurance and iron constitution of the deceased were the wonder and admiration of both the white and the red man—he seemed proof against fatigue, and has been known, after a snow storm, to "break the road," as it is called, the whole distance through the roads, travelling without rest, except to eat, for three days and nights in succession.



Gravure du chemin Kempt, vers 1860-1865.  
On y voit la rivière Assemetquagan à gauche et le relais  
du gardien à droite. À l'époque de M. McLaren, il n'y  
avait pas de gardien à ce relais. À la suite de son décès,  
Thomas Evan sera le gardien attitré.  
Image tirée de : *L'opinion publique*, 1882.



Un marcheur, début du 20e siècle.  
Image tirée de : Goudreau, Michel,  
*Le chemin historique  
Kempt, Guide du marcheur,  
Ristigouche Sud-Est,  
Héritage Chemin Kempt, 2012, p. 36.*

His only dress, in the severest weather, was fustian trowsers, cloth waistcoat with fustian sleeves. The heavy and continued snow storms in the month of January, told severely upon him; and he was observed to have lost flesh from a frame already gaunt and sinewy. On his arrival in Metis, on the 15th January, he was obliged to lay up for six days, receiving the kindest care and attention from Mr. Page, the post-master. Finding himself somewhat recruited, he returned to Ristigouche, and resumed his trips, but he was evidently unequal to the exertion, being only able to walk out one half the distance, sending on a man in his place. On returning from this trip, he encountered one of the heaviest storms of the winter. He left Lowe's Camp on the Saturday morning, having 42 miles to walk to reach the first house on the Ristigouche; he was accompanied part of the distance by a lumberman, but who gave out when within 16 miles. In the course of the day they met a man who was trapping marten, who had a camp on the road. This honest fellow, Peter Glasgow, towards evening, seeing the storm increase, and having observed the weak state of the Courier, decided in his mind that he could never get out without assistance, and acting upon this generous impulse, he put on his snow shoes, and made after

him. At dusk he arrived at a deserted camp on the Desamaguagan, where he found the lumberman, who had given out, and who told him the Courier had left him an hour previous, still hoping to get out before morning with his mail. On hearing this he delayed but an instant to mend one of his snow shoes, which he had broken hurrying down the mountain.

A dark tempestuous night had now set in, and the storm howled round this generous fellow as he with difficulty followed the tracks, now fast filling up with snow. About nine o'clock he missed the trail, and after looking and listening for a while, he thought he heard a slight tapping as with a stick. This directed him into the bush, where he found the poor Courier lying with the mail bag under his head, feebly trying to knock the snow off some spruce boughs to make himself a bed—his fireworks being wet, he had tried in

vain to kindle a fire—the sight of Glasgow revived him, he staggered to his feet, and felt as if he could get out now if the road was broke for him, he tried it for a short distance, but sank down from weakness—his kind hearted friend kindled a little fire, of bark and dry sticks, and he slept a short time, which refreshed him—and, with many such rests and delays they struggled out by daylight, to the first house, from whence a person was sent to Mr. Dixon’s aid.

The present courier, Duncan McGregor, (a fine sturdy fellow) arrived with others to carry him out, but weak and exhausted as he was, and unable to put one foot before another, it seemed to break his heart who have to be carried on another’s back; and, when, after much persuasion, he submitted, he quietly said, “Now, I know that it is all over with me, I shall never travel again.”

\_\_\_\_\_ “tis too late;  
The reed in storms may bow and quiver,  
Then rise again; the tree must shiver”

- A quotation from the poem, “A Siege of Corinth”, by Lord Byron.

He was carried to Mr. Dixon’s, where he received the best and kindest attention; the severity of the storms rendered it impossible to obtain the services of either minister or medical man, and, after thirty-six hours’ suffering, poor Donald yielded up his spirit to his Maker.

The present Courier, McGregor, was formerly engaged in the duty with his brother Alexander, when this last was unfortunately drowned, three years since, on the Lake Matapedia, while carrying the mail.