

Just Passing Through
Number 10 in a Series
Joseph Chambers Houston
Mine Developer & Manager

Local History by Allan Stacey ©

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On April 13th, 1885, Benjamin Thomson, master of the Allan Line steamship Hanoverian, out of Glasgow, Scotland, docked his ship at the port of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Disembarking were the family of Moses Houston (1842-1917), a farmer from County Donegal, Ireland, his wife Margaret (1845-1908) and their nine children ranging in age from one to seventeen years. Amongst the five girls and four boys was eleven-year old Joseph Chambers Houston, the subject of this article.

Joseph Chambers Houston was born on March 3rd, 1873 in Swilly Mount, Londonderry, County Donegal, Ireland. After landing at Philadelphia, the family made its way to Kansas, where in 1895, Moses, Margaret and five of the children were still living at Ellsworth, a small town of about 1,500 in central Kansas. By this time, twenty-two year old Joseph had left home. It is unfortunate that the majority of the 1890 US census was lost in a fire so information on the Houston family is unavailable.

The gap between Joseph's coming of age and his first mention of being in Canada is a mystery. During his early days, newspapers and other sources reported, prior to 1908, that he had been involved in mining and had "wide experience" in Kansas, Missouri, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, British Columbia, the Klondike, Lake of the Woods, Eastern Townships of Quebec and Sudbury. Only one possible reference has Houston supervising mine rehabilitation work in the Barker district of Montana, although a later record of his passing through the Port of Buffalo

records him being in the US from 1885 to 1893.

The 1901 Canada census for Montreal, Quebec, reports that Moses Houston had moved his family to Canada in 1895 and was working in the shops of the *Montreal Street Railway* before becoming an insurance collector. Besides wife Margaret, the recorded family included Joseph, now 28 years old and reporting as a miner. Five other children fill the household.

Prior to the 1901 census, Joseph put in two years as a fire ranger for the Ontario Government in the Temagami-Montreal River area. Proof of this comes from the Ontario Sessional Papers where Joseph's salaries for 1899 and 1900 are recorded. Further proof comes from an article in the magazine, *Field and Stream and American Angler* of May 1901. In the article, J.E. Meiers, of New York City, tells of he and his wife taking a guided fishing tour from Haileybury to the Montreal River, through Lady Evelyn Lake, Lake Temagami and back to Lake Temiskaming in September of 1900. On their first day they traveled from Haileybury by logging road to Sharp Lake, where they met Joe Houston:

"It was a tired and hungry company that finally reached Sharp Lake, and a halt for dinner was decided upon. On an elevation commanding a view of the lake we found the cabin of Joe Houston, a veteran of the forest, employed by the government as fire ranger and game warden. His latchstring was out, and we received a hearty welcome.

The dinner call was responded to with alacrity. How good that first meal in the forest tasted! Joe Houston joined with us and enlivened the repast with some interesting experiences, told in an inimitable way, that brightened his otherwise lonely station."

Three short years later the discovery of silver at Cobalt during the northerly construction of the *Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway* would bring a

tourism and mining boom to the whole Temagami and Cobalt area. In the meantime, Joe Houston had apparently completed his employment as fire ranger, as evidenced by his recorded residence in Montreal. Later, in 1917, some clues appear to explain where Houston may have been next. Three individuals connected with *Dome Mines Company* proposed Houston for membership in The American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers (A.I.M.E.). His resume included the vague “different positions at different mines in the West,” as well as “1902-1905, examination work on iron.” The most likely candidate for the latter may have been the prospecting work of Sudbury’s former mayor, Dan O’Connor, in the Lake Temagami area. O’Connor had surveyed a number of locations in the vicinity of the northeast arm of Lake Temagami prior to 1902 and spent some time developing them as he awaited the arrival of the railway in the immediate area.

By 1905, Houston had moved on to the booming Cobalt mining camp where he managed the early development of the *O’Brien Mining Company’s* silver mine. He took time out in 1906 from his busy schedule to enter into marital bliss with Margaret Wilkinson, a ten-year younger hospital nurse from Lee Valley (near Webbwood). In the marriage certificate, Houston lists himself as a “mining engineer” although there is no proof he attended higher learning.

In early 1907, Houston moved down the road from the O’Brien mine to become manager of the developing properties of the *Right of Way Mining Company*. This company had mining rights on a 99-foot wide section, four miles long under the right of way of the *Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway*, mainly in the vicinity of the Cobalt station. On a small three-acre bulge of land at the north end

of Cobalt Lake, the company established its main operations.

In May of 1909, Houston’s feet were becoming itchy again, traveling to the new Gowganda silver camp to manage development interests of the Sifton-O’Brien and Bonsall interests.

His next ventures, mentioned in the A.I.M.E proposal and largely unproven, were said to be examination work in Mexico and in British Columbia. Some sources indicate that, in 1910, he may have been in the Sheep Creek Camp near Salmo, British Columbia leasing and working a silver-lead property.

Houston’s next assignment, beginning in March 1911, was manager of the St. Anthony gold mine of the *Sturgeon Lake Development Company*. One of the co-owners of the mine was George Glendinning, one of the trio of university graduates who discovered the aptly named University mine in the Cobalt camp. Houston would have known Glendinning from his time at the O’Brien and Right of Way mines as well as their time when they were both in the Gowganda silver camp.

Glendinning was no stranger to the Sudbury area as he was later involved, through *Bolniver Mines and Investments, Limited* in the Skead gold mine. Officers in this venture were mainly made up of *International Nickel Company* management.

Ever the optimist, Houston suggested in August of 1911 that the St. Anthony gold mine was second only to the Dome mine in the Porcupine (Timmins gold camp). Unfortunately, the mine shut down the next year.

By 1912, Houston was manager of the Schumacher mine of *Schumacher Gold Mines, Limited*, in the Porcupine, and among his duties were to prepare plans for a 150-ton per day concentrator to treat the gold ore. Not long after, in February of 1916, Houston resigned to become general superintendent of the *Dome Mines Company, Limited*.

A succession of postings followed his stint in the Timmins area. In 1918 he was manager of the gold mine of *Kirkland Porphyry Gold Mines, Limited*, a company that was wound up in September of 1919. While at *Kirkland Porphyry* Houston supervised development work on an adjoining property of the *Orr Gold Mines, Limited*. A major in Orr was Dr. Conrad E. Wettlaufer, a mine developer with the reasonably successful Wettlaufer silver mine in the South Lorrain mining camp.

In 1920, back went Houston to the Gowganda camp where he became president of *Cane Silver Mines, Limited*, a property he optioned with R.S. Potter of Matheson. Interest temporarily waned in this property, so in 1921 Houston was off again to Mexico where he had a commission to examine mining properties.

The years 1924 and 1925 saw Houston back in the Cobalt camp where he first managed, in 1924, the re-opening of the Penn-Canadian mine for a Toronto investment securities company. No new ore having been found, this venture folded.

The next venture was engagement by *Cobalt Contact Mines, Limited* to design and supervise the construction of a 50-ton/day mill on the shuttered Green-Meehan silver property, just east of North Cobalt. Original discoverers of this property in the summer of 1905 were Sudburians Michael Meehan (1870-1919) and Philip John Green (1860-1947). In the long run it was wise that they sold the property in 1906 for \$50,600, as it was plagued over the years with incompetent and questionable management. The *Cobalt Contact Mines, Limited* operated the Green-Meehan mine from 1925 to September 1930 and the mill from July 1926 to February 1928.

By this time Houston had moved on to several other endeavors, including as consulting engineer for *Furness Gold Mines,*

Limited, an unsuccessful gold play in the township of Deloro, Cochrane district, which carried out development work between February 1927 and May 1928.

The year 1926 also saw Houston venturing into the Province of Quebec to investigate a gold mine property for *Duprat Mines, Limited*, in Duprat Township near Rouyn-Noranda, where his progress report was "awaited with keen interest." While in Quebec he also took a turn as engineer and field manager for *Boischatel Mines Limited*, a company with gold property in Boischatel Township, a township adjoining Duprat Township to the south.

A short stint in 1927 as consulting engineer for *Bennett Mining Company, Limited*, a gold mining venture with properties in various locations in the Temiskaming district was followed up in 1928 with a position as director and company engineer for *Sbooniah Mines, Limited*, located in Central Manitoba.

Back to Ontario came Houston in mid-July 1928 to spot diamond drill holes for *Perry-Kirkland Gold Mines, Limited* followed in September 1929 with examinations of the holdings of *Marriot Mines, Limited* in the Cadillac-Malartic area of Quebec and engagement as consulting engineer for *Clermont Mines, Limited* with property north of La Sarre station on the Canadian National Railway.

It would appear that the 1930's were the time for Joseph Chambers Houston to slow down as he was moving into his 60's. During this decade his main ventures were as consulting engineer for *Oro Grande Development Company* (1932) in the Long Lake area of Manitoba; consulting engineer for *Bailor Gold Mines, Limited* (1934) in the Rice Lake area of Manitoba and mining engineer for *Arnold Kirkland Gold Mining Syndicate* (1938) in Arnold Township, Kirkland Lake area.

His last recorded venture was part-time manager, in 1941, developing the gold

property of *Wampum Gold Mines, Limited*, located 45 miles north of Fort Frances at Wampum Lake.

The 1940's saw Houston and wife Margaret move to Toronto, where son James Joseph Browne Houston, an aeronautical engineer with *de Havilland Aircraft Company* lived with his parents. The *de Havilland* company was responsible for two iconic bush planes, the DHC-2 Beaver (1947) and the DHC-3 (single) Otter (1951).

Adding to the mystery of Joseph are the notations in the Toronto street directories that he was a draftsman (1945) and mining engineer (1954) for the *de Havilland* company.

Joseph Chambers Houston passed away on February 23rd, 1955 in his 83rd year. His wife Margaret (Chambers) has previously passed away on August 25th, 1947.

The children included daughter Josephine Chambers, born September 11th, 1907 at Cobalt, Ontario; daughter Margaret, born November 1910 at Haileybury and dying February 16th, 1923 of influenza and pneumonia; son James Joseph Browne, born July 31st, 1916 at South Porcupine, Ontario.

There are two foremost mysteries about Joseph Chambers Houston. The first involves the actual date he immigrated to Canada from the US. He is represented twice in the 1911 Canada census, where he gives his date of immigration to Canada as 1889 (Thunder Bay) and 1877 (Toronto); in the 1921 Temiskaming census the date is 1884. In 1939 while passing through Buffalo, the year is 1893.

The second mystery concerns his designating himself as “mining engineer,” first recorded in 1906 in his marriage certificate. There seems to be no record of any formal education and it is likely that, as was often the custom of the time, his experiences were the qualification.

The unusually long list of localities he worked at reported prior to 1908 and in

1917 was probably a figment of the newspaper's imagination, the “fake news” of the day, a trait that was all too common when there was no simple way of corroborating the truth.

Nonetheless, it was a long and interesting life.



O'Brien mine of *Agnico Mines, Limited* in winter 1970. The author began hard rock mining at this location in 1965. - Author's collection ©



Northwest Territorial Airways single Otter CF-NTR at author's exploration camp, Regan Lake, NWT, June 1964 - Author's collection ©