

The Construction Camp at Newboro

Most of the Rideau Canal was built using independent contractors who constructed accommodations for their workers. We have period paintings showing some of these construction camps at places such as Lower and Upper Brewers, Jones Falls and Old Slys. They generally show what one might imagine a construction camp in that period to be, a dozen or so timber or framed buildings to house the contractor and his staff, the tradesmen and the pick and shovel labourers.

But at Newboro the difficult conditions eventually dictated a much larger site, with upwards of 60 buildings. Outside of Bytown, only Kingston Mills was larger than Newboro, with 101 buildings recorded in an 1830 census. Kingston Mills grew because it was in fact a community – it was on the road from Kingston to Montreal and featured 3 licensed taverns, a chapel and a schoolhouse. Newboro on the other hand was in the middle of nowhere.

Newboro, then known as the Isthmus, was then and is still today, the watershed divide between the Rideau River watershed and the Cataraqui and Gananoque rivers watersheds. A long portage allowed paddlers to get from one side to the other. As a portage on a major indigenous travel route, it saw thousands of years of use and there were various indigenous seasonal campsites occupying the site over the years.

In the late 1700s, the area was land-granted to loyalists and their families who never occupied the site. The first settler appears to have been George W. Hastings and his family who settled on Conc. V, Lot 1 in 1819, likely squatting on the land. He didn't do too well, it was noted by surveyor John Burrows in 1827 that "Mr. Hastings ... who with a wife & 5 Children seem to feel the pressure of the times, - the dilapidated state of his house, unhealthiness of his family and appearance of their clothing, bespeaks that Misfortune has marked them for her own."

In 1827, the contract for excavating a canal cut through the Isthmus was awarded to William Hartwell. At that time a simple canal cut (no lock) was planned since it was believed that there was only 3 1/2 feet difference between the level of Rideau Lake and Newboro Lake, then known as Mud Lake and that most of the excavation would be through gravels, not bedrock. Both those assumptions turned out to be incorrect, leading to alterations of the original plan for a simple canal cut (see "A History of the Rideau Lockstations" for details).



Captain Cole's Residence

The cabin in the background was Captain Cole's residence, located at the head of the portage. Upper Rideau Lake is in the background. Note the stumps of trees that have been cut down to promote the free flow of air in order to prevent malaria. The purpose of the low building in the foreground is unknown. Speculation is that it might have been an ice house or a provisions storage house (or both). If you know what it is, please email US. "Captain Cole's House, the Isthmus, Rideau Lakes", by John Pattison Cockburn, Royal Ontario Museum.

The main problem was the unexpected discovery of very hard bedrock, hidden just below the surface soils and gravels. As John MacTaggart noted in March 1828:

"In the Beaver Meadow where Earth or clay was supposed to exist little else but rock is met with and that of a very stubborn nature to excavate as the quality is extremely hard and strata dipping in all directions. I am sorry that when surveying the Isthmus last Summer we had not a set of boring tools to ascertain its nature in consequence the estimate returned of this work will not I am afraid be sufficient unless some other method than present be adopted."

Excavating this hard and fractured bedrock proved extremely difficult. It was also found that due to the survey error, several more feet of excavation would have to be done. To compound those problems, malaria hit hard in 1828, leading to site abandonment by the workers. In the fall of 1828, Hartwell asked to be released from his contract and Colonel By granted his request. By this point, Hartwell had built accommodations for himself and a construction camp for the workers. He had a sizeable camp consisting

Friends of the Rideau is a volunteer, non-profit organization, working to enhance and conserve the heritage and charm of the Rideau Canal.

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of a large barn (34' x 35'), a long stable (69' x 35'), a mill house, a carpenter's house, an "old house", a smithy, a store and 6 large (20' x 20') shanties for the workmen, which could accommodate up to 150 men.

By had a new contractor, John Stevenson, assigned to the site, but he too struggled with the same difficulties that Hartwell had faced and ended up quitting. By August of 1829, By noted there were only 4 men left on the site and that he'd been unable to procure a new contractor. That's when he decided to have the Royal Engineers do the project. That fall he had additional buildings constructed on the site with the intent of providing accommodations for the 7th Company of Sappers and Miners (59 men) and their families (27 women and 46 children) as well as up to 300 civilian workers. As Colonel By later noted "I had accommodations built for them [civilian workers], and Provisions of every description provided for their comfort, the circumstances of the case imperatively calling for a deviation from the general mode of carrying-on the Works" The last part of the quote indicates that he had to bend a number of military rules in order to provide for the workers.

A number of the workers brought their families with them, and in some cases, as with other canal construction sites, they built their own cabins. There would have been lots of timber available since Colonel By had the forest cut down on either side of the path of the canal cut to improve the quality of the air to drive out the malaria, believed at the time to be caused by bad air (mal-aria means bad-air). He also had his new construction camp built on a height of land, the spot the Bilton family had settled on in May 1828. The construction of the work camp was done in the fall of 1829 under overseer Thaddeus Boyd. On January 1, 1830, Captain Pennel Cole, a Royal Engineer, arrived with an advance

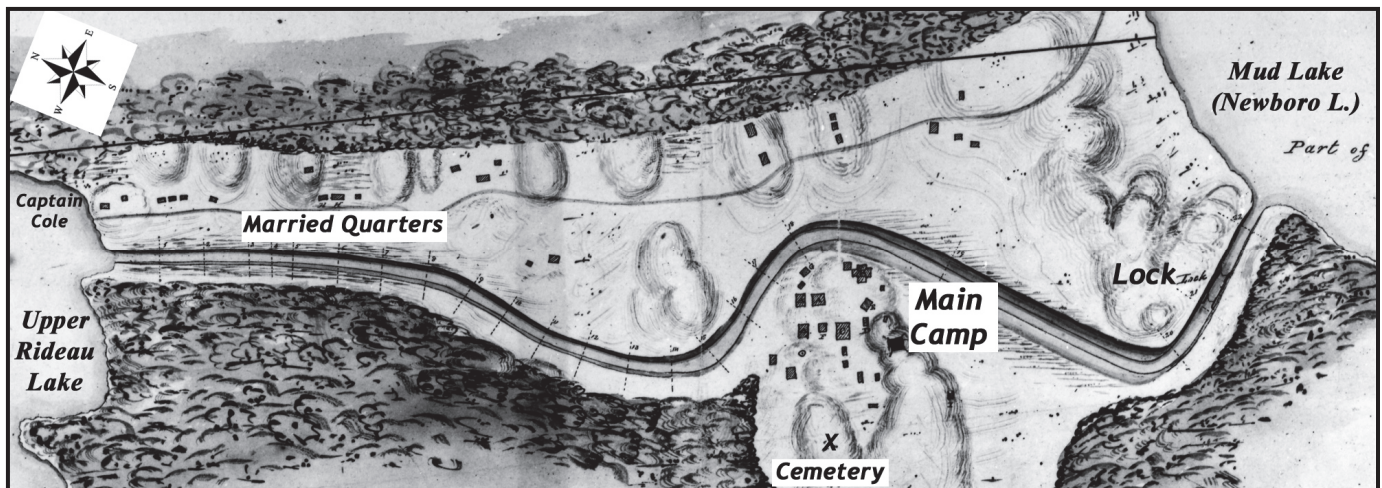
detachment of Sappers and Miners. In February 1830, the rest of the 7th Company arrived by sleigh.

The total number of people at the Isthmus during construction is unknown. In 1830, it was recorded that there were 334 men on the site. But there were also many women and children, one estimate has upwards of 700 people on the site. That's well over twice the population of today's Newboro (~260 people).

Work was difficult and dangerous. While men were injured and several killed as a result of work accidents, such as black powder accidents, most of the deaths were due to disease, which also killed women and children at the worksites. Malaria is most often blamed, but there were also medical problems and deaths due to dysentery, regular fevers, pulmonary diseases and even liver disease (generally alcohol related). We don't have full figures but know that 12 Royal Sappers and Miners died at Newboro. In addition, there may have been in the order of 60 men, women and children who also died at the site. All would have been buried, in marked graves, in the Military and Civilian Graveyard (as it was called in the 1830s), today's misnamed Sappers and Miners Cemetery.

The Isthmus back then was not the gem Newboro is today. John Redpath described it in the fall of 1829 as "The Isthmus is a dull and ugly looking place, at least in my eyes." Despite that description, the difficult working conditions and the ravages of disease, some of the canal workers saw the potential for this spot, meeting in 1830 to decide to form a village. They chose the name Newborough for this new community, one that was to grow through the 19th century, supported in part by commercial activities related to the Rideau Canal.

- Ken Watson



Construction Camp at the Isthmus in 1830

This period drawing shows the many buildings that made up the camp. The main camp had at least 25 buildings including civilian barracks, engineer's office, cook house, carpenter's shop, engineer's smith shop, sapper's shanties, sergeant's quarters, powder magazine, guard house and several privies. On the other side of the cut there were buildings strung out along the road, likely the original portage route. At the head was Captain Cole's house. The area also included the hospital, married quarters for the Sappers and Miners and dozens of other buildings. Note the area of forest that has been cut down to try to reduce malaria. "Plan of the Isthmus Between Rideau and Mud-Lakes" by P. Cole & John By, January 22, 1830 and March 18, 1830, Library and Archives Canada, NMC 12892 54/80.



Captain Cole’s House, 1831

A different view of Captain Cole’s house than the painting shown on page 1 of this newsletter, this shows its location near the shore of Upper Rideau Lake, at the head of the portage across the Isthmus. “Residence of Cap^{tn} P. Cole, R. Eng. The Officer in charge at Isthmus, &c. during construction of the Works, from 1830 to 1832”, by Thomas Burrowes, 1830, Archives of Ontario, I0002154



Bridge over the Canal Cut, 1841 (looking south)

This high level bridge was erected in 1831. In the foreground are rubble piles from the extensive excavation required to create the canal cut. A bridge stood in this location (eventually with stone abutments) until 1952 when the main road was realigned to cross the channel about 100 m south of this location (today’s bridge location). “Rocky cut at the Isthmus, to join Rideau Lake and the Waters falling into Lake Ontario, looking South, 1841” by Thomas Burrowes. Archives of Ontario, I0002156

Newboro and Area Heritage Society

In July of this year, the Ontario Historical Society incorporated the newly formed Newboro and Area Heritage Society as a not-for-profit corporation in Ontario. To society’s mission is to seek to collect, study, preserve, convey, and celebrate the rich history of Newboro and the area. For more information, see their website at: newboroheritagesociety.com

Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends,

Friends had a remarkable year, with an unprecedented number of visitors to The Depot, our interpretation centre in Merrickville, and strengthened partnerships with Parks Canada, the Village of Merrickville-Wolford, and the Chamber of Commerce of Merrickville. Both at The Depot, and through our “road show” participation with a booth at Paddlefest in Smiths Falls and also at the Classic Boat Show in Westport, we were able to reach out to visitors with our messages about the history and heritage of the Rideau Canal.

While our dialogue with Parks Canada was made more challenging due to unexpected changes in the staffing of senior level positions in the Ontario Waterways directorate, we had a number of useful conversations with Parks, particularly Mark Brus, the Manager of Operations for the Rideau Canal. Mark’s support for the work of Friends is greatly appreciated.

Elsewhere in this newsletter there are reports on the season’s activities at The Depot, and the heritage

landscape study just beginning on the section of the Rideau Canal between the Ottawa Locks and the Hogs Back Locks. Please read them and let us know what you think.

Looking ahead, after an absence of several years, Friends will be returning to the Ottawa Boat Show at the end of February, 2024. This is an opportunity to meet a community who don’t necessarily visit The Depot but who - in our experience – finds the information provided by Friends of interest, especially regarding the heritage of the Canal and its accessibility to boaters and land-based visitors. We are in discussions with Parks Canada regarding the role Friends could play in presenting information on its behalf at the Show. If you visit the Show, please drop by our booth for a chat.

- Hunter McGill, Chair



At the Antique & Classic Boat Show—Hunter (left in photo) and Ken (taking photo) met with dozens of people interested in the Rideau Canal at the Boat Show held in Westport this past summer.

The Depot

The Depot, Friends of the Rideau's information and visitor centre in Merrickville, had an exceptional year during the 2023 season, from mid-June to Labour Day. We welcomed over 14,200 visitors during that period, and an additional 200 "guests" on September 24, when we opened exceptionally for the European Car Show. Much of the credit for the successful operation of the visitor centre goes to Joshua Terpstra and Elijah Loos, our summer employees, who put in many hours of work spreading the good word about the Rideau Canal. Being located in Merrickville allows staff to inform visitors about the many features of interest in the village, while also encouraging people to sample other sites of note along the Canal, including Jones Falls, Upper and Lower Nicholson's, and Upper and Lower Brewers locks, to say nothing of Westport. Our aim is to encourage an appreciation of the full character of the Rideau, including an understanding of the challenges met in constructing the Canal through the varied geographic features of eastern Ontario (Upper Canada, as it was named in the early 19th century.)



Elijah Loos and Joshua Terpstra staffed the Depot this summer

Despite putting forward what we believed was a very strong case for financial support from the Canada Summer Jobs student employment program, the grant Friends received was only one-third of what we needed. Thanks to careful management and a steady flow of donations, we managed to get through the season, but we hope that the federal summer jobs program will receive enhanced funding in 2024, as community-based, volunteer-driven organizations depend on this support to deliver their activities.

Friends' partnership with the Merrickville Chamber of Commerce continued to develop during 2023. An important element of this relationship was the provision of wifi at The Depot from mid-summer. We also benefited from the support of the Merrickville lockmaster, Aden Wiltsie, and his team.

- Hunter McGill

BUILDING THE LOCK GATES

A very interesting article, all about building the Rideau Canal lock gates, authored by Friends' Director Bruce Kemp, an internationally known, award-winning writer and photographer, was recently published in Canadian Woodworking magazine.

Part photographic essay, part detailed description, the article provides a wonderful understanding of how each lock gate is built at the Parks Canada gate shop in Smith Falls. It is available online at: https://canadianwoodworking.com/techniques_and_tips/rebuilding-the-gates-on-the-rideau-canal/



Photos by Bruce Kemp

The Canal Workers

by Sue Warren

One of the questions Rideau Canal researchers get asked constantly is “Where can I find out if my ancestor worked on the Rideau Canal during its construction?” The answer is not simple. Since the most of the construction of the lockstations was done by contractors who hired their own labour forces, the main sources are scattered in various archives and do not exist for most lockstations.

You can try the Wright papers held by Library and Archives Canada, the Tett papers at Queen’s in Kingston (Chaffey’s), the Redpath account books (Jones Falls) at the McCord Museum in Montreal or the Rykert-Simpson papers (Smiths Falls) which were at one time housed in the realty section of Parks Canada, but their present location is not known. The published “McCabe List” shows the names of 800 workers in the Ottawa area. Newspapers from this period mention contractors’ names but the labourers, stone masons, carpenters and blacksmiths are largely anonymous.

There is a general myth that most of the workers on the canal were Roman Catholic Irish fleeing circumstances in the old country. But there were also many French-Canadian Roman Catholic workers as well as many Protestant Irish plus many from English Canada as well as England, Scotland, Wales and the United States.

In the Tett papers, the overwhelming majority of workers at Chaffey’s Mills seem to have English or Scottish names as the contractor was recruiting them from Perth. As one wit quipped in the Kingston Chronicle in 1826, “For I love all Canadians (French speaking Canadians) ...give me plenty of Canadians and Irish but let them work apart and wonders



The Great Dam with Esthertown in the background

The construction camp for the Great Dam at Jones Falls was called Esthertown, named after John By’s wife, Esther. Father MacDonald visited here several times to minister to Roman Catholics on the site. The large house was the residence of Thomas Fairbairn and his wife Elspeth, John Redpath’s half-sister. Redpath hired Fairbairn to be his construction foreman at the site. Redpath set up a separate construction camp for the locks, the present day site of the Blacksmith Shop. “The Great dam at Jones’ Falls; from the West end, 1841”, by Thomas Burrowes, 1841. Archives of Ontario, 10002172.



The Town of Perth in 1828

Visible on the far left is St. Bridget’s Chapel built in 1820. Father John MacDonald, a Roman Catholic priest, arrived here in 1823 and served in this location until 1838. In 1825 he noted that he “finds the miserable mission at Perth is now a well established parish with nothing lacking.” MacDonald also tended to his more distant flock, Roman Catholics in the general region, including canal workers in the area between Jones Falls and Merrickville. He travelled hundred of miles a year and recorded the names of those he tended to. “Perth, the Capital of the District of Dalhousie; from the N-East bank of the River Tay, 1828”, by Thomas Burrowes, 1828, Archives of Ontario, I0002141.

will be wrought...As for Jonathan (a nickname for Americans) I know not what to think – he comes here quickly. He wants to fill his pockets.” In one amusing episode chronicled in an early Kingston newspaper, a number of soldiers from Oswego, New York State threatened their commanding officer at gunpoint, deserted to Canada and were soon employed on the Rideau Canal (including the officer).

One little-known source of canal worker names are the notes of Reverend John MacDonald of Perth. As a child, MacDonald emigrated from the Scottish highlands to Glengarry County in Upper Canada. By 1814 he was ordained as a Catholic priest and served in the Perth district during the 1820s and 1830s. MacDonald’s first language was Gaelic (he often wrote notes in the margins in Gaelic) so his spelling of some place names and last names is a little erratic. The hardworking priest often travelled five hundred miles a year administering to his flock by collecting tithes, saying mass and conducting baptisms and marriages. Except in the immediate Perth district, he was not present when someone died. Of course, his flock included Catholics at local lock construction

The Canal Workers—continued

sites from Poonamalie to Jones Falls. Sometimes his parishioners paid him in oats for his horse, socks for his use, candles, wheat, flour, onions, beets and venison. Canal workers tended to pay in cash (or promised to pay in cash). Priests were poorly supported in Upper Canada and some of the tithes paid for MacDonald's upkeep. Most of the settled parishioners were cash-poor but canal workers as a rule donated a day's worth of wages to the church. Father MacDonald made a number of trips to the Jones Falls site which he called Easterville (which was actually named Estherville (aka Esthertown), after Colonel By's wife) and only one visit to Chaffey's Mills (Jeffey's Mills with his characteristic spelling). He married at least one couple and baptised a number of children born at the sites particularly at Mud Lake

(Isthmus/Newboro). One father walked from the Narrows to Mud Lake to get his child baptised. Names listed for Jones Falls reflected a French-Canadian heritage as well as an Irish heritage. There appear to be just a handful of workers at Chaffey's and Davis Lock who were Catholic although there were more in Newboro which was a much larger site. He avoided visiting the sites in the summer months when malaria was present.

Where can one find the names of these workers? The Leeds and Grenville Genealogical Society has copies of the papers of Father MacDonald of the Perth Military Settlement. The listings for some of the stations from Poonamalie to Jones Falls can be found in these volumes.

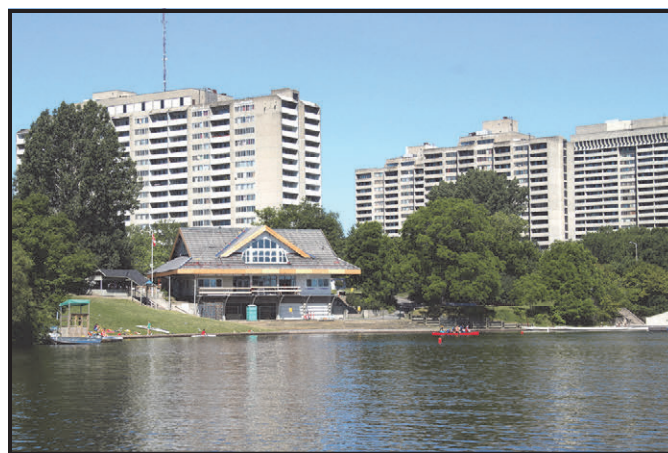
- Sue Warren

Rideau Canal Landscape Studies

Friends learned a few weeks ago that the long-awaited landscape studies have been launched with the first being the Rideau Canal between Ottawa Locks and Hogs Back. This is a welcome development. According to the Rideau Canal Management Plan, five of these are to be completed by 2025: "By 2025, the cultural landscapes and heritage values of five lockstations are described and documented to support conservation initiatives, interpretation and authentic visitor experience opportunities." While they are unlikely to meet that deadline, we are glad to see the studies finally get started.

Friends has called on Parks Canada to do these types of required studies for all the lockstations, to provide foundational documentation of each of those sites, something they don't presently have. These are needed in order for Parks Canada to meet its mandate to both protect and present those important Canadian heritage sites. Following Ottawa study, Parks plans to do Smiths Falls (presumably Detached to Old Slys), Jones Falls, Newboro and Merrickville.

The Ottawa study has been contracted to Matrix Heritage Inc. consulting, and is being managed by Parks Canada, the National Capital Commission, and the City of Ottawa, in recognition of the jurisdictional complexities that apply to this stretch of the Rideau Canal. Friends will follow the progress of the study and be involved whenever possible. We will provide updates via our newsletter, and we encourage our supporters to engage on-line and at stakeholder involvement events. For more information about the Ottawa study, email: heritage@ottawa.ca.



The Rideau Canal in Ottawa

This photo, taken a few years ago, shows large concrete condos and apartment buildings looming over the Rideau Canoe Club clubhouse adjacent to the locks at Hogs Back. More are being built to accommodate ever increasing urban populations. A proper understanding of the landscape character is needed to ensure that urban development is done in an appropriate manner, sensitive to maintaining the heritage character of the Rideau Canal, a National Historic Site of Canada and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Our World Heritage Site designation is due, in part, to the heritage character of its landscapes.

2023 Rideau Canal Boating Statistics

Canal traffic in 2023 was down 1.2% compared with 2022 with a total of 56,308 vessel passages compared to 56,981 in 2022. Moorings showed just a slight increase with 12,366 in 2023 compared to 11,942 moorings in 2022.

In total, during 2023, 67.7% of the boats were from Ontario, 21.9% from Québec, 9.9% from the United States and 0.5% "Other". The number of boaters from Ontario and Québec showed a slight drop, almost made up for by an increase in American boaters.

For the 2023 numbers for some of the individual lockstations go to: www.rideau-info.com/canal/statistics.html