

Rideau Mill Dam Mysteries

There remain many mysteries on the Rideau Canal which will require research and archaeology to figure out. One is the drowned Round Tail dam located to the north of Upper Brewers lockstation. When Parks Canada did underwater investigations on the Rideau back in the early 2000s, this dam was missed. I've been lobbying Parks Canada since that time to do this critical archaeological investigative work and finally, this summer, some work was done. The underwater team from Parks spent several days on the Rideau Canal, mostly work related to the upcoming landscape study at Jones Falls, but they did spend a day investigating the drowned Round Tail dam.

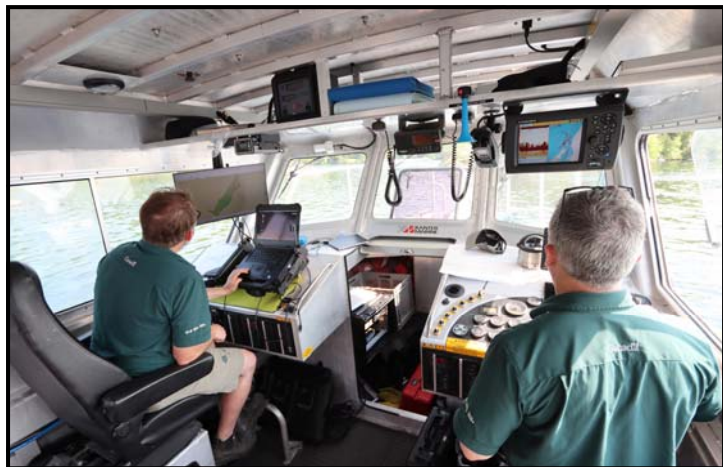
That dam is very intriguing in its odd design. It speaks to the early millers who started to dam the Rideau long before Colonel By used dams along the entire length of the Rideau to complete his slackwater canal design.

The first human-built dam was constructed by the government in 1784 at Cataragui Falls, today's Kingston Mills. That dam provided a head of water to a sawmill and a gristmill, also built by the government to support settlers. Later we see individuals searching the countryside for rapids, a source of waterpower where they could set up a mill. Once a suitable fall of water was located, they would petition the government for permission for the use of that waterpower in order to set up a sawmill.

The story of the Round Tail dam starts with brothers Lemuel and Carey Haskins who, in about 1803, built a dam and a sawmill at White Fish Falls, today's Morton. At some point after they built their dam, they realized that the water only ever got so high on it (about 7 feet) no matter how high they'd build the dam. There was a leak somewhere in the upstream topography.

They found that their leak was a 13 km long area, between the south end of Deans Island and the Round Tail, a forested floodplain. Their source of water was the White Fish River which flowed out of Jones Falls. But now, it was backing up and heading south over the floodplain. The Round Tail was the spot at the very south end of the floodplain where the Cataragui River, with its headwaters in Loughborough Lake, flowed in from the west.

The geographic history of this region is complicated. For maps and other details of this area, please see my 2024 article "The Indigenous Canoe Route via Hart Lake – A Geographic Evaluation" which you can find here: www.rideau-info.com/canal/articles/



Investigating the Round Tail

Ryan Harris (l) running the multibeam sonar with Jonathan Moore (r), piloting the Parks Canada research vessel, "Investigator". Photo by Ken Watson.

Some time prior to 1816, likely much closer to 1803, the Haskins brothers found that the best place to plug the leak was at the Round Tail, and they built a dam in that location. Their installation of the Round Tail dam backed up the water over the floodplain, making it navigable for the first time. It vastly expanded existing marshlands in the southern portion of the floodplain, which became known as the Cranberry Marsh, and drowned forests to the north all the way up to Jones Falls. Colonel By referred to that area as "the drowned lands."

The first documentation we have of the Round Tail dam is in Lt. Joshua Jebb's report of his 1816 survey of the Rideau Route. To quote Jebb "The Cranberry Marsh is rendered passable by a dam [Round Tail Dam] at the entrance or head of Kingston mill stream which throws the water coming from the Loughbro Lake onto it, and overflowing it to a depth of 6 feet."

We have documentation of the Round Tail dam in Colonel By's reports and in a period painting by Thomas Burrowes. But the painting doesn't provide the needed detail regarding the exact design of the dam and By's reports simply mention the dam by name but do not provide any description.

The dam was kept intact during the building of the canal, even though Colonel By noted in every one of his yearly reports an anticipated cost for the removal of the

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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This newsletter is published by Friends of the Rideau with assistance from the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport.



Round Tail Dam—1830

This Thomas Burrowes painting is our only view of the Round Tail dam prior to submersion. It is geographically accurate (you can still see those same outcrop features today) so presumably the dam is accurate. But its configuration is puzzling. Hopefully the UW archaeological information, when fully processed, will provide answers. "Round-tail & Dam; view down the Cataragui, sketch taken in 1830 before the water was raised in the Lake" by Thomas Burrowes, 1830, Archives of Ontario, C 1-0-0-0-62

Round Tail dam. In the end he never removed it, opting instead to excavate a bypass channel around the dam. This left the dam intact when the canal dam at Upper Brewers was completed in 1831, flooding this area by 17 feet and drowning the dam. What remains today is a series of vertical posts embedded into a raised foundation.

While the Burrowes painting and current archaeological evidence is a bit confusing, a clue comes from another Burrowes sketch, one done in 1837 of the White Fish Falls (Morton) Dam, which in several respects looks like what we see at the Round Tail. The vertical posts are the supports for a timber slide and water bypass sluice. In fact, the 1831 canal dam at White Fish Falls appears to be based on the original mill dam, with modifications made to it by the Royal Engineers.

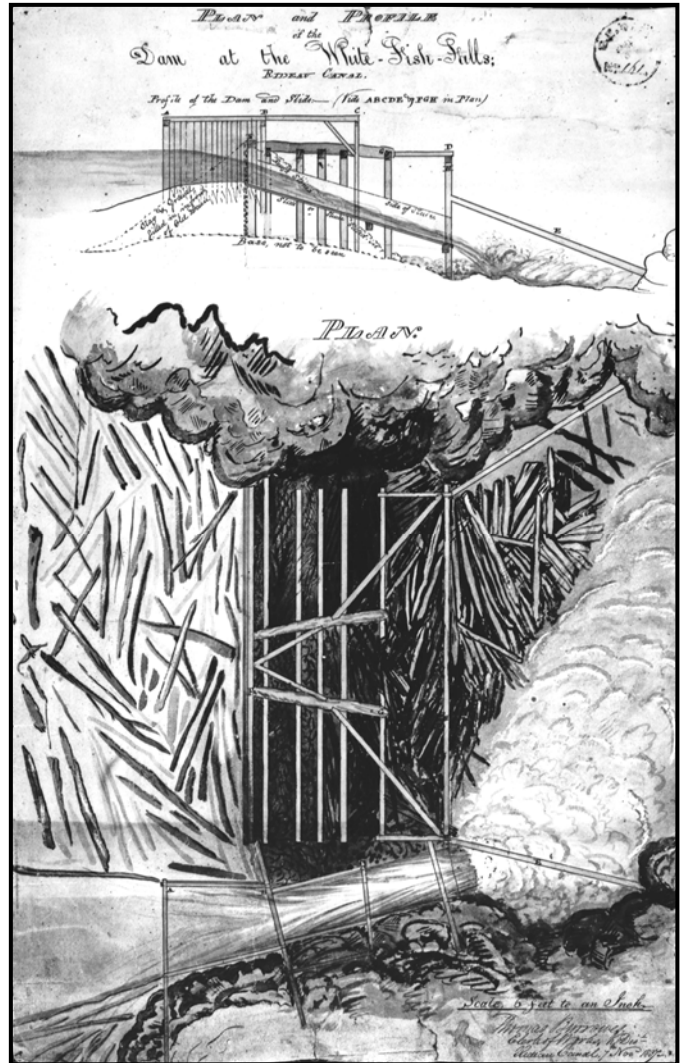
It begs the question of why By did it that way, why not put in a standard canal dam at White Fish Falls like he did at all other spots on the Rideau? What's the difference in this location? The difference is that there is no lock. The Rideau, pre and post canal, was a commercial waterway, initially for the timber being floated along it to various sawmills. Colonel By did everything he could to keep mills intact, only buying out those mills where it was "indispensably necessary" (his words) to remove them to make way for locks and/or canal dams.

At White Fish Falls there was still a sawmill that needed a supply of timber, most of which came from upstream on the Rideau Canal. At other locations, the locks provided a means to move the timbers downstream. But at White Fish Falls there was no lock, the only way to move timber was with the use of a timber slide. This is exactly what Burrowes shows in his 1837 sketch of the White Fish Falls dam.

In the pre-canal era, a timber slide existed in many sawmill dam configurations. Given that the White Fish



White Fish Falls (Morton) Dam, 1837



Enlightenment or Confusion?

A possible "eureka" moment came when looking at the 1837 profile of the White Fish Falls dam. The vertical post configuration seen in the profile view looks very similar to what was seen underwater in 2024 at the Round Tail dam. This dam appears to have been only slightly modified by the Royal Engineers and in 1837 it was clearly passing a lot of timber coming through Morton Bay. Both the top painting and lower plan and profile were done by Thomas Burrowes, who, at that time, was the Clerk of Works for the southern Rideau Canal (he lived near Kingston Mills)

Falls dam and the Round Tail dam were likely built by the same people, the similarity is unsurprising. In looking at the Round Tail dam, my initial thoughts 20 years ago regarding why it wasn't removed was that it was useful to Colonel By as a coffer dam to help with the construction of the locks and dam at Upper Brewers. But now the evidence suggests that it was perhaps kept intact to keep timber moving. It still could have been used as a coffer dam to help with the construction at Upper Brewers (I'm not giving up on that idea), but clearly, it was constructed as a mill dam and was likely not significantly modified by the Royal Engineers.

As is common on the Rideau Canal, water clarity, particularly in downstream areas such as Cranberry Lake, poses a challenge due to algae in the water. The best time of year to do this type of underwater investigation is very early in the spring, but that rarely works in terms of scheduling. The Parks Canada investigation this year had to be done in mid June (they are a very busy group). Photogrammetry of the dam could not be done due to poor visibility. Also, Parks Canada regulations precluded the ability to do multibeam sonar over the dam, it had to be conducted adjacent to the dam.

Your author looked at the dam with an UW camera back in 2017 and again this past August. August was a bust, there was essentially zero visibility. The 2017 imagery, also not great but better than 2024, now makes a bit more sense given the physical mapping of the site by Parks Canada divers. The data from this summer's underwater survey has not been processed as of this writing. That information, including multi-beam sonar results, will hopefully provide greater clarity. As will future discussions with Jonathan Moore (underwater archaeologist and manager of the Parks Canada UW Archaeology team) when the processed data is made available.

- Ken Watson



A Jones Falls Challenge

Diving in the narrow constraints of the winding channel leading from Sand Lake to Jones Falls is a safety challenge due to boat traffic. For this dive, the Investigator was anchored to the south (seen on the right), my boat to the north, each with a different view of boating traffic. Divers are instructed to head to shore when a boat approaches. In this case the pontoon boat stopped with the people asking the divers (in the water on the left) what was going on. Jonathan Moore, who was diving with Josh England, chatted with them for a few minutes. Photo by Ken Watson

Citations for White Fish Falls images on page 2:

Top: "Wooden Dam, at the White-Fish-Falls", by Thomas Burrowes, c.1839. Archives of Ontario, C 1-0-0-58. and bottom: "Plan and Profile of the Dam at the White-Fish-Falls Rideau Canal" by Thomas Burrowes, Nov. 7, 1837, NMC 129846.



Round Tail Dam Today

These are snapshots from an UW video taken by the author in 2017. The murkiness is due to algae in the water, a chronic problem in this area. You can see a plank, part of the foundation and vertical posts, which are simply unfinished tree trunks. At least one appears to have a cutout for a horizontal piece of timber. The video was done from a camera on a cable (your author is not a diver). The images were hard to put into context in 2017, they make more sense now after the Parks Canada investigation. An attempt by the author to do the same kind of video with a better UW camera on a cable system failed in August 2024 due to essentially zero visibility (the water was pea soup green). Photos by Ken Watson.



That's not going to work

An attempt at photogrammetry by Parks Canada diver John Ratcliffe in June 2024 had to be abandoned due to poor underwater visibility. Photo by Ken Watson.

Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends,

I hope that you had a good summer. Certainly, after a rather soggy start to the season, the Rideau Canal had an exceptional fall, enabling us to enjoy the waterway in more tranquil conditions. That said, it is always a tad depressing to walk along the Ottawa Reach, from the Chateau Laurier to Dow's Lake, after Parks Canada has pulled the plug for the winter shut-down and to this year see a collection of e-scooters resting in the mud. John By would be shocked, and may I add, appalled. Or maybe not.

Notwithstanding the bungle at the Lasalle Causeway in Kingston, we did see American boaters on the Rideau Canal, and I had the pleasure of welcoming some of them to our visitor centre The Depot in Merrickville. It is always fun to speak to visitors and find out where they are from – France, Germany, Australia (!), India, and so many parts of Canada – and enquire what prompted them to visit the Rideau Canal. These encounters help stimulate Friends' work to develop tools to promote knowledge about and understanding of the heritage and history of the Rideau Canal.

As you will remember we rely on the federal government's Canada Summer Jobs program (CSJ) for funds to hire students who staff the centre. We rely on the CSJ money, which we blend with a welcome and generous grant from the Village of Merrickville, plus donations from you, our members, and from visitors to The Depot, to operate the visitor centre for 12 weeks non stop. This year we received one-quarter of our request, which required us to draw on our modest reserves in order to provide the level of service we know visitors to the Rideau need and expect. A letter from Friends to the federal minister responsible for the CSJ, pointing out how small, community-based, not-for-profit organizations like ours rely on CSJ grants to hire students in regions where there are few job opportunities, went unacknowledged. Optimists that we are, we hope for better in 2025.

Finally, Friends, like many heritage organizations and individuals committed to the sound protection and management of the Rideau Canal, is still waiting the public release of the consultant report on the cultural landscape study of the Ottawa Reach of the Canal. Since a flurry of activity in late 2023 and early this year there has been total radio silence from the three partners paying for this study – Parks Canada, the National Capital Commission and the City of Ottawa. We hope this does not mean that the study is now defunct, as it is an important piece of work which has the potential to provide a valuable roadmap for the three agencies to protect and manage the cultural resources of the Rideau Canal in the heart of the nation's capital.

Thank you for your ongoing support of the Friends' work to preserve and enhance the heritage elements that make the Rideau Canal a unique North American waterway.

- Hunter McGill, Chair, Friends of the Rideau

DEPOT Report



This year we had a great season at the Depot, the visitor center operated by our organization. We were able to engage with many visitors who arrived both by land and by boat. We provided lots of information to our visitors about the Rideau. This includes the history of the Rideau, trip planning, paddling, general information etc.

This year the Depot welcomed 13,208 visitors. This is 896 less compared to last year but these are still excellent numbers (considering when I started working here in 2019 we had about 8,500). We believe that this is due to the weather not being the greatest on many days. We had quite a bit of rain as well as some days with extreme heat. This year, starting on July 1st until the end of our season, we tracked the use of our washrooms, 62.28% of visitors used the washrooms. This shows that they are a great asset to have and that they are a big draw to the Depot.

Friends would like to thank a couple of organizations whose support is essential to our operations and greatly appreciated. We would like to thank Parks Canada for providing us with the Depot. Without it, we wouldn't have any operating base. We would also like to thank the village of Merrickville-Wolford for its support through a generous financial grant as well as for providing us with water and sewer service. Another organization that we would like to thank is the Merrickville-Wolford Chamber of Commerce, who provided the Depot with internet for both our operations and visitors to use.

If ever you would like to help with operating the Depot, feel free to let us know. Help is always welcome and I'm sure I can find something for you to do.

We are very happy with how this season turned out. We look forward to welcoming you all again next summer.

- Joshua Terpstra,

Depot Manager and Chair of the Depot Committee

Shortchanging the Rideau Canal

Back in 2012, when the poorly planned Ontario Waterways unit, combining the administration of the Rideau Canal and the Trent-Severn Waterway (TSW) under a single Director, was rolled out, there were predictions that it wasn't going to work. Those predictions came from authoritative sources, including John Bonser, a former Superintendent of the Rideau Canal. The situation was made worse when the Director of Ontario Waterways was stationed in Peterborough with no equivalent staffing on the Rideau Canal. Those predictions have come true, the Rideau Canal is clearly being shortchanged in terms of resourcing and staffing, while the Trent-Severn Waterway has seen a buildup of staff and resources, to the detriment of the Rideau Canal.

Advocates for the Rideau Canal, such as Friends of the Rideau, are not the only ones concerned about this. In September 2024, staff on the Rideau Canal released a letter of concern regarding several of these issues. We can't comment on the specific details of the letter other than to say that they are correct in that the TSW is being much better resourced than the Rideau Canal. Ken Watson has posted the letter to his Save Our Rideau website, you can read it here: www.rideau-info.com/canal/save/

Rideau Waterway Land Trust

Just a plug here for our friends, the Rideau Waterway Land Trust (RWLT). Land trusts purchase land in order to conserve it. The RWLT formed in 1996 and since that time has preserved 21 significant properties in the Rideau Corridor through ownership and conservation easements. The most well know is Rock Dunder, a very popular nature hike for people to get the view overlooking Morton Bay.

Most recently, they've been working to acquire a 31 acre portion of Long Island in Big Rideau Lake. This is adjacent to Colonel By Island (owned by Parks Canada) and if successfully completed will create a large area of conserved land in the middle of the lake.

For more information about the RWLT, see their website at www.rwlt.org Just like Friends, donations to the RWLT are always appreciated.



World Heritage Concerns

In November 2019, UNESCO wrote a letter of concern to the Government of Canada regarding issues relating the management of the Rideau Canal as a World Heritage Site (WHS). That letter stated that "ICOMOS [technical evaluation branch of UNESCO] concludes that the management system for the property does not currently provide adequate protection to the OUV [Outstanding Universal Value – the reasons for the Rideau's WHS designation] or the setting thereof." In response Parks Canada wrote back that it was working on a new management plan which would address those issues.

In April 2021, Friends of the Rideau (Hunter McGill), Manuel Stevens and Ken Watson made separate submissions to the Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre with letters of concern addressing various aspects of Parks Canada's non-compliance with World Heritage Site requirements including issues relating to the then draft management plan. When the management plan was finally released in December 2022, seven years after it was due, it was completely silent on UNESCO's concerns, in fact pretty much silent on any of its World Heritage Site commitments.

The three letters of concern triggered paragraph 174 of the Operational Guidelines for World Heritage Sites, which allows the state party (Canada via Parks Canada) to respond to those concerns. As far as we can determine, Parks Canada never responded to UNESCO. A few weeks ago, Ken Watson wrote to UNESCO asking about this and recommending an ICOMOS investigation be carried out. There has been a change at the World Heritage Centre with the long-time director (who was familiar with our case file) retiring and a new person now in charge. The new director did acknowledge receipt of the letter, but the wheels of UNESCO grind slowly, so it may be some time before we find out if any action will be taken.

LaSalle Causeway

The sad tale of the LaSalle Causeway continues after Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) first broke and then removed the historic lift bridge this summer. A temporary bridge has been installed but PSPC has not been communicative on their plans for the future. The ideal solution would be to put in a fixed high level bridge (there is lots of room for one). That would solve everyone's needs; Kingston vehicle and pedestrian traffic, access to the Inner Harbour and of course access to the Rideau Canal.

Ghost Boat of Opinicon Lake

by Sue Warren

Opinicon Lake has many ghost stories and legends. Much of this is due to Ned Fleming who was born on a farm near the lake. Ned was the son of Captain Billy Fleming and the grandson of William Fleming, the first lockmaster at Chaffey's. Most of his life he worked on the lakes as a purser and later the captain of the Rideau Queen and the canal boat the Loretta. Besides his navigational ability, Ned was an amateur poet and a violinist, a bit of a Renaissance person. The legend of the ghost boat of Opinicon originated with him.

In the 1890s, in an Ottawa newspaper, Ned talked about how he experienced seeing the phantom boat. Ned and two friends Martin Dunn and Jim Doyle were camping on the lake after a day of duck hunting. After running out of milk (for coffee presumably) the three set off in the bright moonlight rowing towards Chaffey's Locks. It was Halloween. On their way, the men saw another rowboat approaching them with three figures in it. Ned shouted at the ghostly passengers who did not have oars or paddles. The rowboat, only a few yards away, sheered away from the duck hunters and totally disappeared. Fleming noted that this was the era before motorboats on the canal, boats did not mysteriously move on their own. He later authored a poem about it called "The ghosts of the Opinicon." (you can read that poem on Ken Watson's Rideau website in his Tales of the Rideau section: www.rideau-info.com/canal/tales/).

Fifteen years later Ned's sister Sadie Fleming Gray embellished the story, which was also reported in an Ottawa paper. According to Sadie, the three men had been drinking strong coffee at the lockmaster's house one Halloween night and around midnight ventured off to camp. The light of the full moon was as bright as daytime. Ned and his friends saw a mysterious phantom boat containing a woman and a man moving through a bay. It was almost next to the Fleming boat when it disappeared without any noise or warning.

My grandfather's version was different and likely provides the logical explanation. There was a deaf boy who liked to row around the lake collecting driftwood. He thought the men had seen this young boy. Whatever the story, it has remained a legend for 130 years, stated in tourist pamphlets and canal publications, a good example of how a story changes over time.



Captain Ned Fleming, c.1905

Captain Ned Fleming on the Rideau Queen in about 1905. (all photos from the Rideau Lakes History Centre)



Rideau Queen



Loretta

2024 Rideau Canal Boating Statistics

Canal traffic in 2024 was down 10.3% compared with 2023 with a total of 50,484 vessel passages compared to 56,308 in 2023. Moorings decreased by 5.1% with 11,735 moorings in 2024 compared to 12,366 in 2023.

In total during 2024, 66.0% of the boats were from Ontario, 23.3% from Québec, 9.8% from the United States and 0.9% "Other". Overall, boaters from Ontario were down by 12.7% compared to 2023, Québec boaters were down 4.6% and U.S. boaters were down by 10.9%.

Part of the reduction in numbers was clearly due to the closure of the LaSalle Causeway. Even though smaller boats can pass under the east channel fixed bridge, when word gets out that there are issues on the Rideau Canal, many boaters choose somewhere else to boat. That was clearly the case this year.

For the 2024 numbers for some of the individual lockstations go to: www.rideau-info.com/canal/statistics.html