

Early Rideau Roads

The construction of the Rideau Canal started with the clearing of trees from Entrance Valley after it was chosen as the site for the first set of locks of the Rideau Canal on September 26, 1826. While the Rideau Corridor, through which the canal was to be constructed, has been described as a wilderness, it was in fact a frontier in various stages of development. There were settlers scattered along the entire length, mills in operation at most sources of waterpower and several well established villages in the region including Merrickville, Delta, Perth and Richmond. While travel by water and trails took place, there was also a developing road network.

Roads were needed for travel by wagon which was tied to settlement, farming, and early industrial use of waterpower for sawmills and grist mills. We have a few direct accounts, such as one by the founder of Delta, Abel Stevens, who brought in a group of settlers from the U.S. in February 1794. They travelled with ox-drawn wagons north from Brockville, heading to their intended destination, Plum Hollow. They followed an existing road until it ended and then they cut a road through the forest to their destination. In 1796 Stevens received a land grant over present day Delta and built a sawmill and later a grist mill adjacent to the rapids in that location. The farmers in the area, who were clearing land at a rate of between 3 to 5 acres a year, were now building roads to access the grist mill and other services in Delta. This pattern repeated itself in several areas.

In 1793, the Upper Canada legislature passed an act that required settlers to provide labour for the building and maintenance of roads and bridges for a total of 12 days per year. Roads were to be between 30 and 60 feet in width, but the quality of those early roads was often problematic. The initial Stevens' road was just an rough cut opening through the trees. In the spring of 1817, the Reverend William Bell travelled from Brockville to Perth. He described a particularly bad part of that road south of Rideau Ferry, which had been built in 1816: "The road for the first seven or eight miles was nothing more than an avenue cut through the extensive forest where the traveller had to pass over rocks, and wade through swamps and to surmount all the inequalities of the ground in its natural condition." Not all roads were that bad, good quality roads were also built such the one completed under the direction of Abel Stevens in 1798 to tie the Brockville to Delta road with Kingston. He had Mathew Howard and 15 men build 31 miles of road which included building 15 bridges along

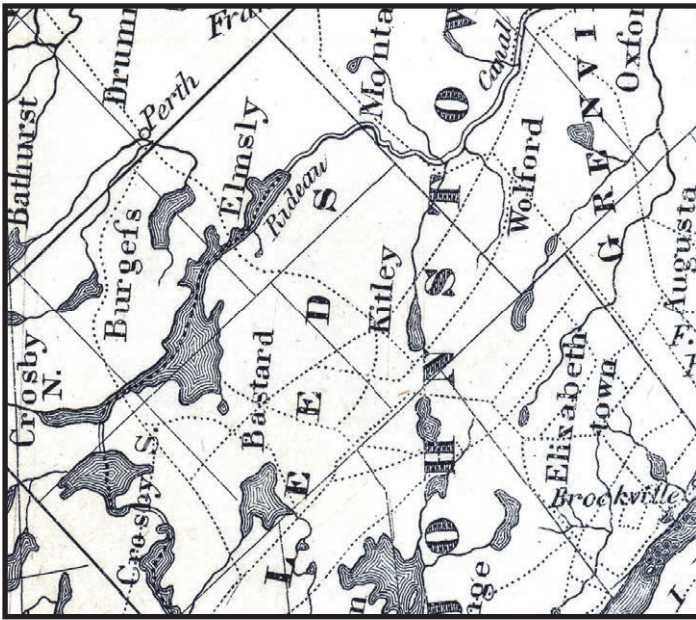


Big Trees

This 1830 painting shows French Canadian axemen with chopped down old growth trees near Old Sly's. A road winds through the area. Roads were created in this manner, men chopping down trees with axes to clear a pathway. "Near Old Sly's, Rideau Canal" by James Pattison Cockburn, c.1830.

the way. This tied into the original Stevens' road which had been greatly improved over the years and this route from Brockville to Kingston became known as the Kingston Back Road, a preferred route of travel due to its good condition.

One of the best overviews of the pre-canal road system is an 1826 map of Upper Canada (see next page) compiled by James G. Chewett, assistant draughtsman, done under the direction of Surveyor General Thomas Ridout. It shows road connections between Kingston and the Ottawa River at Rideau Falls. The greatest density of roads within the Rideau Corridor is in the south-central area, with its early agricultural development and ties to communities along the north shore of the St. Lawrence such as Brockville. Roads also connected to the military settlements of Perth and Richmond. Another interesting map that shows roads was done in early 1828 by Royal Engineer J. Walpole. He was tasked by the Kempt Commission to document the roads leading from the St. Lawrence to the Rideau Canal. It's not an overly accurate map, but of interest is how Walpole coded the roads. He shaded in those where "waggons heavily loaded pass through them in the wet season" – that was clearly the mark of a good road. He also



Roads in the Central Rideau in 1826

This section of a c.1826 map provides a sense of the road network, shown as dotted lines on the map, just before the building of the Rideau Canal. It only shows the main roads, smaller roads (farmers roads) are not included, but you can see the general pattern, lots of roads around Brockville, quite a few in the Bastard and Kitley townships area due to early settlement, and connecting roads to towns such as Kingston and Perth. You can also see the proposed route of the Rideau Canal marked on this map. Map by James G. Chewett, c.1826.

annotated the map with comments such as “the neighbourhood in the vicinity of White Fish Lake [Lower Beverley Lake] is well settled.”

Many of these roads had inns along them to service the traveler. Joshua Jebb’s 1816 Rideau map shows some of these such as Soper’s Inn and Hodskiss’ Inn. Some of these were simply a log cabin where the owner offered services to the traveler. The Rev. William Bell describes a “Yankee Tavern” he overnights in on his spring 1817 journey from Brockville to Perth which apparently had a reputation for poor service. “Had I known of another tavern on the road, I would have proceeded ; but as there was no other for many miles I concluded it was best to walk into the log cabin and rest myself until my saucy mistress had leisure to attend to me.”

On all early roads, travel in winter was much better than summer, sleighs providing a more comfortable ride since ice and snow provided a better quality road surface. These roads could get quite busy in winter. In 1827, a letter published in a Montreal paper stated: “Nothing that I have seen since I came to America, surprised me so much as the quantity of traffic I witnessed on the road between Brockville and Perth. I am pretty sure that I do not overstate the matter when I say between these places we [saw] from 150 to 200 loaded sleighs. These were in general [driven] by a yoke of oxen each; some four oxen to one sleigh: and a small number were [driven] by a pair of horses.” Most of the sleighs were carrying goods such as oak staves, grain and potash destined

for sale in Brockville. Another example of winter travel is in February 1830 when the 7th Company of Sappers and Miners, who were to help with the canal construction at Newboro, travelled from Bytown to Newboro by sleigh.

In 1827, as major construction was starting all along the Rideau Canal, new roads were being built to accommodate the movement of heavy goods such as stones being hauled to canal construction sites from area quarries. In an 1827 report, Colonel By noted, in reference to the stones required for Jones Falls, that “No suitable Materials could be found on the Spot, it was therefore necessary to take them from a Quarry over 6 Miles of New made Road.”

The fact that so many roads existed, including good roads from the St. Lawrence River, influenced defensive decisions about the canal, including building the largest blockhouse at Merrickville. Colonel By, in an 1831 report, explained why he planned to substitute the originally planned lockmaster’s house with a blockhouse: “Merrickville as it is now named, being a very flourishing Village, very much on the

increase not arising from the Workmen employed by Government, but in consequence of the Canal passing through it, and the thickly settled state of the County in its vicinity, and as the High road from Brockville also crosses the Line of Canal at this place, immediately over the Locks. I considered that some work of defence would of necessity have ultimately to be constructed for the security of the Works.”



Road to York in 1830

The original road from Kingston to Toronto. “Road Between Kingston and York” by James Pattison Cockburn, c.1830

Tracking down the exact route of early roads isn’t easy. All early maps are both incomplete and inaccurate. In addition, over time, roads have disappeared or been realigned. Ground truthing is required to try to locate physical evidence of an early road. I did such an exercise in 2015 when trying to create a map showing the first settlers’ routes to Perth on behalf of the Perth & District Historical Society. For those interested, my narrative of discovery, including images of several period maps, can be found at: www.perthhs.org/perthroad/

- Ken Watson

Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends,

What a year it has been. As you will see from Joshua Terpstra's report on activities at The Depot, we met an unprecedented number of visitors this year, which gave us the opportunity to spread the message about the history and heritage of the Rideau Canal to a very large audience. There were quite a few American visitors among the people we welcomed. Some of the conversations had, as you might expect, a certain political content, as Friends staff at The Depot explained the reasons the Rideau Canal was conceived and constructed, and why blockhouses were an important part of the system's infrastructure dating back to 1830.

Several members of our board of directors took part over the summer in what we call our travelling road show. This meant participating in events along the Rideau Waterway such as Stewart Park Days in Perth, the Manotick Classic Boat Club Show in Westport, and the classic boat show at Sirens Boatworks in Merrickville. These activities serve as a way of reaching an audience interested in the Rideau Waterway who may not visit us at The Depot or our website.

As mentioned in our spring newsletter, Ken Watson and I represent Friends on the Rideau Canal Stakeholders Advisory Committee, chaired by David Britton, Director of Ontario Waterways at Parks Canada. The semi-annual meetings of this group serve as a valuable mechanism for exchanging information on the management and sustainability of the Rideau. At the most recent meeting, a few weeks ago, there was a stimulating discussion of the planning process for the commemoration of the Canal's 200th anniversary in 2032. Also discussed were the problems posed for Parks Canada by the lack of progress to resolve the issues of the destroyed bridge at the Lasalle Causeway in Kingston, and the very dry weather and low water conditions during the latter part of the 2025 navigation. Is the challenge of water management throughout the Rideau system to be the new normal?

In conclusion it's my pleasure to advise you that we have a new director of Friends, Paul LaRose-Edwards. Paul has an interest in the Rideau going back decades and lives on the Waterway near Upper Brewers. We are delighted he has joined us.

Best wishes for the "dormant" season on the Rideau. Let's hope for lots of snow to replenish the Rideau watershed. Onward and upward to 2026.

- Hunter McGill, Chair, Friends of the Rideau

DEPOT Report



Our 2025 summer staff: Kyra, Lenore and Joshua

This year, we had a great season at the Depot, the visitor center in Merrickville 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 Canal. This includes the history of the Rideau, trip planning, paddling, general information etc.

This year was our best year in regards to total visitors who stopped by the Depot during our regular operating season. We welcomed 17,341 visitors from mid June until Labour Day. This was an increase of 4,133 visitors compared to last year. Once again this year, we counted the number of visitors who used our public washrooms. This year 11,920 people used our washrooms or 68.7% of visitors. This was also a slight increase compared to last year.

Friends would like to thank several 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.

I would also like to thank the two other employees from the Depot this summer, Lenore and Kyra. They worked very hard all summer and ensured that we had a great season.

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 we can find something for you to do.

We are very happy with how this season turned out and we look forward to welcoming visitors again next summer.

- Joshua Terpstra,

Depot Manager and Chair of the Depot Committee

Meditations on the Rideau: Photographing Heritage Through Time and Water

by Colonel (Ret'd) Scott Murphy, Kingston resident and MA Photography Candidate

The Rideau Canal and photography were born within the same remarkable generation of human ingenuity. As Lieutenant-Colonel John By's engineers carved the canal through the Canadian wilderness between 1826 and 1832, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce was fixing the first permanent photographic image - a sunlight-based heliograph made in 1826/27. A decade later, Henry Fox Talbot's calotype process introduced the paper negative, allowing reproducible contact prints that bridged science, craft, and art. While no photographs of the Rideau exist from that early period, we are fortunate to have numerous contemporary paintings that vividly document its construction and early years. *Meditations on the Rideau* draws inspiration from this shared era of innovation, using period-appropriate methods to explore how light, water, and material memory continue to shape the Canadian landscape.

As part of my Final Major Project for the MA in Photography program at Falmouth University (UK), I am creating a mindful, analog-led body of work that examines the canal through both contemporary image-making and historical research. The project is due for completion in April 2026, after which I plan to continue expanding it as a long-term contribution to the Rideau 200 bicentennial celebrations in 2032.

Using a hand-crafted wooden pinhole camera, I photograph the canal's bridges, locks, and shorelines on black-and-white medium and large-format film. Each image is developed at home with Rideau Canal water, allowing the site itself to influence the final result. In this way, material and place become inseparable, with the water, minerals, and light of the canal embedded in every negative.



Upstream and Downstream views at Upper Brewers Lockstation

Photo by Scott Murphy, 2025, using 6"×6" film and a hand crafted pinhole camera.

The project unfolds through three interwoven streams:

- 1) **Photography:** creating a typology of the canal's bridges and landscapes using fully analog, sustainable methods.
- 2) **Archival research:** working at Library and Archives Canada to digitize early maps, charts, and engineering drawings that connect contemporary imagery with original plans.
- 3) **Eco-friendly chemistry and printing:** experimenting with alternative film developers and contact-printing processes that minimize environmental impact while evoking the aesthetics of early photography.

As *Meditations on the Rideau* evolves, I am eager to connect with others who know the waterway intimately. If you can share local insights or lesser-known scenic viewpoints, or if you are a property owner willing to allow brief access for photography, I would be grateful to hear from you.

You can learn more about the project and view selected works, including the featured *Upper Brewers Diptych*, at scottmurphyphotographer.com

Through this mindful, hands-on practice, my intent is to honour the Rideau not only as a feat of nineteenth-century engineering but as a living waterway that continues to reflect Canada's enduring relationship between land, craft, and time.

Scott Murphy
info@scottmurphyphotographer.com



Soldier On

The Rideau Canal sees many paddling groups travelling on it each year. This photo shows a group of veterans paddling into Davis Lock on September 7 as part of a Soldier On paddling transit of the Rideau Canal. Soldier On is a Canadian Armed Forces program committed to supporting veterans and serving members to adapt and overcome permanent physical or mental health issues through various types of sport, recreational, and creative activities. See www.soldieron.ca

Rideau Roundtable

Just a plug here for our friends, the Rideau Roundtable. The Roundtable started as a public advisory group for the Canada Museum of Nature's study of the Rideau River between 1998 and 2000. They subsequently formed as a non-profit group and have been active ever since. They are perhaps best known for their Rideau Experience Program which offers interpreted voyageur canoe tours at spots up and down the Rideau Canal.

More recently, they've also been engaging with schools and libraries, creating the Rideau Eco-Literacy Centre which welcomed hundred of youth this summer to learn about nature. To quote "Through our program, we provide opportunities for children to connect with nature, learn about environmental sustainability, and develop a deeper appreciation for the natural world through hands-on activities and interactive learning experiences."

For more information about the Rideau Roundtable, visit their website at: rideauroundtable.ca

They also have a website for their Eco-Literacy Centre, you can visit it here: rideauecoliteracy.com



Youth of All Species Enjoy the Rideau Canal

Two five-day-old chicks follow Mom. These hatched on an artificial loon nest maintained by Ken Watson. In the 30 years that Ken has been maintaining the nest, 34 chicks have successfully hatched and survived the summer (not all do) to fly south in late fall. These two are still on the lake but will head south soon.

Water Levels

This summer's drought conditions proved challenging on the Rideau, particularly in the Cataraqui watershed section where navigation levels in late summer dropped to 4 feet 3 inches in one spot. Parks Canada did well with water management given the challenging conditions. The fall rains have done enough replenishment to allow levels to be brought back to normal, now at winter draw-down levels.

A reminder for those interested that you can find daily water level numbers on Parks Canada's website in their "Water Management InfoNet" section: parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/on/rideau/info/infonet—click on the map and select your waterbody to get a chart of levels.

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 in 2024. The cumbersome replacement is very expensive to move and that was done only on a scheduled basis about 20 times during the 2025 Rideau navigation season, severely restricting larger boat traffic from using the Rideau Canal.

Parks Canada has installed a visible level gauge on the east channel opening which has a clearance of between 14 to 16 feet, depending on the level of Lake Ontario. This makes it easier and safer for smaller boats to use that Rideau Canal access.

The very bad news is that, as of this writing, PSPC has not even started planning for a new bridge—they don't have a concept much less a design. They've told Parks Canada that a permanent bridge is not a priority for them. This is going to have long term negative impacts on the Rideau Canal.

2025 Rideau Canal Boating Statistics

Canal traffic in 2025 was up 11.4% compared to 2024 with a total of 56,241 vessel passages compared to 50,484 in 2024. Much of the increase can be attributed to the free lockage from mid-June to the end of August (Canada Strong Pass). The LaSalle Causeway closure continues to have an estimated 10% impact on Rideau boating traffic.

For the 2025 numbers for some of the individual lockstations go to: www.rideau-info.com/canal/statistics.html

Alfred Foster: The entitled lockmaster

by Sue Warren

Alfred Foster, née Forster, is a notable figure whose legacy as a lockmaster on the Rideau endures even though he left no descendants. For many years, Davis Lock was commonly referred to as Foster's Lock in his honour, and local newspaper articles even called the nearby settlement Fosterville. Existing records portray Alfred as a person of remarkable strength and character.

Alfred was born in 1849 in Dover, England, and moved to Canada with his family during early childhood. His father, David Forster, worked on the locks at Nicholsons and in 1856 he was appointed Lockmaster at Long Island. In 1862, David transferred to Newboro, exchanging roles with Lockmaster William Addison who went to Long Island. David's son Alfred's career commenced unexpectedly at age sixteen after the sudden death of his father while on duty in 1864. Subsequently, Alfred was appointed as lockmaster—a position of considerable responsibility, particularly for someone of his age by 19th century standards.

In June 1871, Alfred exchanged lockmaster positions with Lockmaster John Johnston of Davis Lock. Alfred and his wife Margaret Clarke moved into the Davis Lockmaster's House, where they stayed for the next twenty-six years. Shortly after taking the role, Alfred clashed professionally with Dennis Mahoney, an Irish employee who worked as a lock labourer and also farmed two hundred acres. Mahoney and his family initially lived in a log cabin before building a frame house across from the lock. In 1874, Mahoney was dismissed at Superintendent Wise's direction, as Foster thought he was focusing more on his farm work than his lock work. Despite this, Mahoney continued farming, raised eight children, and became well-known locally for his stories and hospitality. In 1882, after four of Mahoney's cows were poisoned, concerned neighbours petitioned for action, though Foster did not sign. Over the years, Foster had further disputes with other workers including George Littlejohn, who was suspended in 1895 for inattention to duties.

Over the years, the Fosters made several improvements to the Lockmaster's house, including an attached wooden frame kitchen, a barn, a new outhouse, and new metal roof—some funded by Alfred and some by the canal. When Alfred retired in 1901, he requested compensation for the barn. Lockmasters of that era could hire contractors to do this sort of work, but Foster drew attention when he tried to employ an invalid boarder. The family likely hosted summer boarders, especially fishermen, and enjoyed modern touches in the house like Victorian wallpaper and a coal stove.

Foster oversaw the Hart Lake Dam and was knowledgeable about the Rock Lake Dam. When Opinicon Lake farmers dismantled the Rock Lake dam over flooding concerns, canal authorities hired a detective to investigate. Foster testified at the Kingston trial but the case ended up being dismissed and a farmer later sued the Rideau Canal.

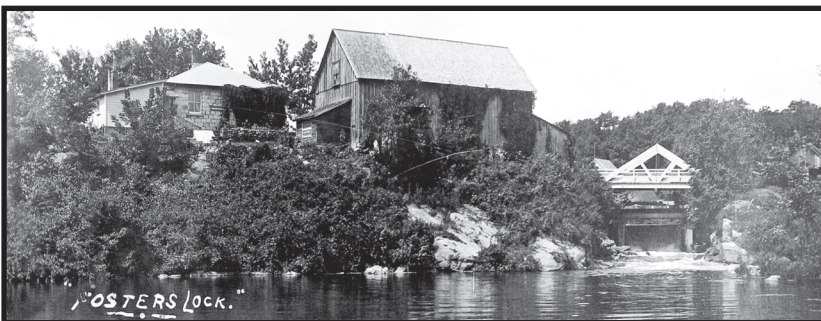
During 1896 and 1897, patronage determined appointments for new lockmasters, with political considerations affecting all aspects of the process. Foster was instructed by the Superintendent to relocate to Jones Falls to accommodate Philander Alford. Jones Falls entailed significantly more responsibilities for Foster, who expressed opposition to the

reassignment but was not given an alternative. As part of this transition, Foster requested improvements to the Lockmaster's house at Jones Falls; however, these requests were denied. His four-year tenure at Jones Falls was largely uneventful, except for a substantial leak in the horseshoe dam, which he temporarily repaired using straw. When a second leak occurred, a work crew was dispatched to undertake permanent repairs. Following these events, Foster retired in 1901 and moved to Ottawa, where he passed away from typhoid five years later. Nevertheless, his legacy persisted through a nickname that Davis Lock retained for many years.



Davis/Foster's Lock in 1903 (looking south)

In the background, the bridge over the weir can be seen as well as the barn built adjacent to the Lockmaster's House in Foster's time. The bridge has since been replaced and the barn burned down in the 1980s. Photographer unknown, Parks Canada, Rideau Canal Collection, photo 489.



Davis/Foster's Lock in 1906 (looking north)

View of the lockmaster's house with attached kitchen, the barn and the bridge over the weir. Photo c.1906 by Clifford Pennock, Parks Canada Pennock Collection.