

RIDEAU REFLECTIONS

Newsletter of the Friends of the Rideau

Spring/Summer 2026

WHO BUILT THE RIDEAU CANAL?

The answer to the question of who built the Rideau Canal is a complex one. For many the answer is Lt. Colonel John By and/or the British military and/or Irish immigrants, but those are only a part of the story. It's a story involving many different groups including the British Military (Royal Engineers, Commissariat, Royal Sappers and Miners), independent contractors, skilled tradesmen of various ethnic backgrounds, support workers ranging from surveyors to payroll clerks, pick and shovel workers, mainly French-Canadian and Irish, local settlers, and even women and children on the worksites (mostly wives and children of the workers).

In March 1826, Major General Sir James Carmichael Smyth wrote a memorandum to General Mann (Inspector-General of Fortifications) which read in part, "I am of the opinion that it will be found more economical and more expeditious to execute the greatest part, if not the whole, of the proposed Rideau Canal by contract ..." This recommendation was to have a profound impact on how the Rideau was built. It would be up to the contractors to hire their own workforce for each location and this is one reason we see such a wide variety of workers.

On September 21, 1826, Colonel By and his staff arrived in Wright's Town (Hull). They subsequently examined in detail the various options for the start of the canal, settling on what is now known as Entrance Valley. On September 26 that was officially confirmed when By met with the George Ramsay, the 9th Earl of Dalhousie and Governor-in-Chief of British North America, and Colonel Elias Durnford, Commander of the Royal Engineers in Canada, who went over the ground with By, approving his choice of location. Dalhousie also encouraged By to start surveying a townsite for settlers at this location. This became the founding of Bytown, what would later become Ottawa.

By initiated work on clearing Entrance Valley of trees and tasked John McTaggart, his new Clerk of the Works, with doing a survey from the Beaver Meadow, which was located at the head of Entrance Valley, to Hogs Back, to determine the exact route of the canal. Colonel By also planned out how the contractors would do the work, dividing the Rideau Canal project into 23 sections, ranging in length from 1 ¾ miles to 29 ¼ miles (3 km to 47 km), each with its own contractor. His idea was to give no more work to a single contractor than could be completed in two years. In December 1826 he started to release tenders for the work.

Many contractor selections were made in early-mid 1827 although surveying of the route continued that year, with Colonel By making his first trip by water in May of 1827 (as



Ethnic Origins

A diverse group of people came together for the building of the Rideau Canal. Most prominent in the written and visual records are French-Canadians and recently immigrated Irish. In paintings from the era (in this case, all from 1830), their clothing often reflects who they were. Top left is a French Canadian axeman at Old Slys. Middle and right are two paintings from Long Island showing an Irish axeman and an Irish family. The bottom image shows French Canadian voyageurs paddling through Upper Rideau Lake in their typical costume. In the middle of the canoe are British Ordnance staff in their blue uniforms (see our website for the colour versions of these images). Top three painting by James Pattison Cockburn, Library and Archives Canada. Bottom is by Thomas Burrowes, Archives of Ontario.

documented in our Spring/Summer 2023 newsletter). Contractors, once chosen, started to hire their own workforces. A few such as Philemon Wright's sons, Ruggles and Tiberius, who were the contractors for several jobs in the Ottawa section of the canal as well as constructing the dam and lock at Burritts Rapids, were able to tap into a pool of their own workers, primarily French-Canadian timbermen. John Redpath, who was a contractor from Montreal, was also able to call upon French-Canadian workers, which included skilled tradesmen in addition to pick and shovel workers, for his work at Jones Falls. For others it was a matter of hiring anyone who was

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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available which included many recent immigrants, mostly Irish.

As word of the Rideau Canal project spread, people flocked to the newly established Bytown looking for work. While a majority of those were immigrant Irish, they weren't the only ones, a project of this magnitude attracted all sorts of workers, including skilled tradesmen such as masons, carpenters and blacksmiths. A major draw of the project was that it offered wage work, scarce in Canada at that time. Not only that, but the pay was made in cash to the workers in the form of silver coins. This was a requirement of the Commissariat to ensure that the workers were properly paid by the contractors. The contractors weren't paid until their workers were.

Many of the worksites had women and children on them (see our Spring/Summer 2015 newsletter for details) since many of the recent immigrants had their families with them and most of those lived on the worksites, often in cabins they built themselves. Some places became small communities of their own. The extreme example was the worksite at Kingston Mills where a November 1830 census shows 101 buildings on the site, including three licensed public houses (O'Reilly's, Franklin's and Mahoney's), a Catholic chapel, a store, and a schoolhouse. Another example was Newboro, where, after the failure of two contractors, the work was taken over by Colonel By in late 1829. It became a small village, with about 60 buildings and upwards of 700 people (men, women, children) on the site.

The exact numbers and worker makeup is difficult to determine in part because the historic records are so fragmented and also due to the nature of the job and the conditions the workers faced. In the Rideau Canal's most recent National Historic Site designation update (2011), it states that "Each year, as many as 5,000-6,000 workmen assembled at over two-dozen worksites." While the term "workman" brings to mind pick and shovel labourers, as noted there were many others including skilled tradesmen and support staff such as payroll clerks, people needed at each worksite to support the construction. With seasonal malaria affecting the southern worksites from 1828 to 1831, there was site abandonment during the "sickly season" (August) – not all returned.

While wage work was attractive, the difficult nature of the job wasn't for everyone, so there was high labour turnover. This meant that the number of people on a worksite at any given time fluctuated. Another problem is that there are no master lists of people who worked on the Rideau Canal. Most contractor records are long gone, only a few still exist in archives.

Memorials for those building the canal tend to focus on either the military side (Colonel By, Sappers & Miners) or the immigrant Irish side. But some estimates put the overall number of French-Canadian workers on par with the Irish. And the fact that these construction worksites were in fact small communities, with women and children in addition to the workers, is often unsaid. Many died during

construction, the vast majority of those by disease which played no favourites (similar death rates for all those on the worksites, including women and children).

Today we enjoy the tranquil beauty of the Rideau Canal. It's historic significance, including as a military canal built for the defence of Canada from the United States, is still relevant today. It's a tangible reminder of our continued rocky at times relationship with the U.S. The building of the canal was a collective effort involving thousands of people with many different backgrounds – we should do our best to remember them all.

- Ken Watson



Merrickville in 1830

Merrickville was a well established village at the time of the building of the canal. Painting by James Pattison Cockburn, c.1830, Library and Archives Canada.



Rideau Construction Camps

Typical Rideau construction camps—Top is Old Slys, bottom is Lower Brewers. Top: painting by James Pattison Cockburn, c.1830, National Gallery of Canada. Bottom painting by Thomas Burrowes, 1829, Archives of Ontario.

Message from the Chair

Dear Friends,

There is quite a bit to tell you about in this newsletter. News about developments at Parks Canada, an update of the fate of the Canadian Register of Historic Places (CRHP), continued issues with the LaSalle Causeway, and views on the proposal to build high-speed rail through Eastern Ontario cutting across the Rideau Canal.

First, at Parks Canada, there is a new Director of Ontario Waterways (Rideau Canal and Trent-Severn Waterway). Director David Briton has left on assignment and John Festarini has been appointed Acting Director of Ontario Waterways, covering both the Rideau and Trent-Severn canals. We know John from his earlier assignment as Associate Director of Ontario Waterways (2016-2018). Most recently he has been Director of Quebec Canals, but we understand he is very pleased to be back on the Rideau. Several members of the Friends' Board have had meetings with John and it's clear he is very enthusiastic about the Rideau. His official title is Acting Director of Ontario Waterways but we believe there is a good chance he will be confirmed in the coming months which will be a very positive development.

Secondly, many of you will be aware that the federal government has included Parks Canada in the government-wide expenditure reduction initiative now underway. It appears that the capital investment budget will not be reduced, which is good news as we all know that the Rideau Canal infrastructure needs constant attention. But, unfortunately, several summer activities – Learn to Paddle and Learn to Camp – have been discontinued. At this time there have not been any announcements of permanent staff cuts, but one never knows.

Many students of Canadian history are concerned at news that the CRHP, hosted by Parks Canada, is to be closed. While not a perfect record of Canadian heritage places, the Register has served a key role as a source of information about historic places for scholars, planners and students of Canadian history. On behalf of Friends, I have been working with the National Trust and heritage organizations from coast to coast to save the existing database and find a new home for the Register. There is hope.

The future of the Lasalle Causeway bridge replacement in Kingston remains murky, and the 2026 navigation season operations will be handled much in the same way as in 2025. Part of the impediment to arriving at a long term solution is the involvement of three federal government departments, Public Services and Procurement Canada, Transport Canada, and Parks Canada. It appears that Parks has the least influence. Pity.

Finally, we have heard from Friends members of their concerns about the routing of the ALTO high-speed rail line from Toronto through Ottawa to Montreal. Board members have asked the Rideau Canal managers about the role they will play in route siting and have been told that at this time the focus is on the Ottawa to Montreal segment, and Parks Canada national office is handling the file. Our sister organization, the Rideau Waterway Land Trust, has written a very good paper on the risks to the Rideau Canal system posed by what is called the Southern Corridor (see rwlt.org/press/). Your Board will continue to raise concerns about the potential threats to the heritage of the Rideau and will endeavour to keep you posted. Do continue to let us know of your concerns.

As we approach the opening of the 2026 season I wish you an enjoyable summer and invite you to visit us at The Depot in Merrickville.

- Hunter McGill

Depot Report

With summer fast approaching, Friends of the Rideau is starting to ramp up preparations for opening the Depot, our visitor centre located in Blockhouse Park in Merrickville. We are looking forward to welcoming visitors and helping educate and inform them about the Rideau Canal. Last year we welcomed a record 17,341 visitors. We are hoping see as many again this year. We are especially excited about it being the 200th anniversary of the start of construction on the Rideau system.

We are not yet sure on the exact date that we will be opening the Depot for the season. We are planning for it to be sometime in June, opening on the weekends. Then in July and August, we will be open for seven days a week.



A primary role of the Depot is as a visitor information centre. Here we see Joshua helping out a couple of visitors in 2025. In the foreground is a table full of area tourism literature.

Depot Report cont.

Our daily open hours will be from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm. We will update our website and Google listing with the most current information regarding when the Depot will be open. We are pleased to say that we already have our staff lined up for this season at the Depot.

We are hoping to once again participate in some of the main events taking place on the Rideau this summer. If ever you see our booth, feel free to stop by.

If you are interested in helping out at the Depot, we always welcome volunteers. Please feel free to contact Friends: info@rideaufriends.com.

We look forward to being able to welcome you once again at the Depot this summer. If ever you are in Merrickville, feel free to stop by and say hi.

Joshua Terpstra

Depot Manager and Chair of the Depot Committee

Merrickville Blockhouse Museum



Exciting things are going on over at the Blockhouse Museum in Merrickville-Wolford. This year, the museum has gone through a refresh and will have quite a few changes from past years. These changes include making the space less cluttered with artefacts, bringing in some new artefacts, and a new small store section. The museum is also now offering programming for schools and for seniors.

The museum is also very pleased to host a visiting exhibit this summer. “The Historic Rideau Canal” created by G.W. Russell for the Elgin and Area Historical Society, was on display in 2025 at the Red Brick School in Elgin. This exhibit consists of sixteen large panels that include 67 remastered colourized photos and 34 maps which cover all 24 lockstations and 47 locks.

The museum is looking forward to opening again this season and welcoming visitors to see the refreshed museum and the amazing Rideau exhibit that will be there for the entire season. For details on when the museum is open, you can visit the Museum’s web page on the Village of Merrickville-Wolford website (www.merrickville-wolford.ca/our-community/history-heritage/blockhouse-museum).

- Joshua Terpstra



Rideau Heritage Photo Exhibit

This is part of the display that will be in the Blockhouse this summer. It is a “must see” for any Rideauphile. Head over to Merrickville this summer and check it out (and drop by the Depot while you’re there). It’s quite spectacular.

Patronage on the Rideau

by Sue Warren

Throughout much of its history, the Rideau Canal operated under a system of patronage. Appointments and employment were often influenced by family connections, political affiliations, personal friendships, and military experience. In the canal's early days, Colonel By selected most of the lockmasters and permanent canal staff based on their service in the Sappers and Miners Corps, which assisted the Royal Engineers at Bytown, Hogs Back and the Isthmus (Newboro). Other individuals were chosen because of their involvement during the construction phase of the waterway. For example, Peter Sweeney of Jones Falls was a member of the Royal Artillery, a regiment stationed in Bytown in the late 1820s. Essential qualifications for these positions included good character, sufficient literacy, and demonstrated loyalty.



Sappers and Miners

Most of the first lockmasters were chosen by Colonel By from the ranks of the Sappers and Miners. This image shows them in their 1825 dress uniforms (left) and working dress (right). Painting by George Bryant, from "The History of the Corps of Royal Sappers & Miners", London, 1855, Plate XIII.

With the canal's transfer to civilian control in the 1850s, a pattern emerged in which many lockstations were inherited by relatives of previous lockmasters. Some families served at a single lock for several

generations. For instance, at the Smiths Falls Detached Lock, the Jones family held the position for four generations, spanning from 1847 to 1931. Similarly, the Mooney family operated the Narrows Lock from 1846 to 1956. It was common for canal workers to begin their careers as teenagers, often at a nearby station. Occasionally, efforts were made to prevent sons from working directly under their fathers, but familial succession remained a defining feature of canal employment. It was a point of pride at many stations and families identified as "canal families."

By the late 19th century, political patronage became common. Whether Liberal or Conservative, the member of Parliament often had the say over appointments, based on party membership. Lockmasters received steady income and a place to live at minimal rent. It was a coveted job. In 1896, when the Liberals achieved government after many years of Conservative rule, some cost cutting occurred and many of the permanent lockmasters were laid off and replaced over the winter by acting lockmasters. Most of these positions were restored the next year but there were rumours of political interference.

Following World War I, the employment practices on the Rideau Canal faced renewed scrutiny, particularly regarding the hiring of recently returned servicemen. Although veterans were eventually given preference for canal jobs, the process was not straightforward and encountered significant resistance. A letter published in the Kingston newspaper on December 23, 1918, from an injured soldier highlighted the ongoing challenges faced by veterans seeking employment. The letter raised concerns about the existing lockmasters and their circumstances: at Kingston Mills, the lockmaster had been bedridden for years; at Lower Brewers, the lockmaster managed a farm with a dairy herd of fourteen cows; at Chaffey's, the lockmaster had served for nearly two decades while his wife operated the Post Office from the lockmaster's house, and the canal man's wife collected mail from the CNR train under a government contract. The Newboro lockmaster, William Dargavel, was described as elderly and frail, and noted to be the brother of John Dargavel, the Member of Provincial Parliament for Leeds and Grenville. Additionally, the bridge master at Burritt's Rapids also ran a taxi service to Merrickville, and in his absence, the bridge was operated by his children or whoever happened to be passing by.

The letter underscores the frustration felt by veterans, who perceived that jobs along the canal were occupied by individuals with other commitments or limited ability to perform their duties, rather than being reserved for those who had served and were now seeking employment. By the mid-1920s, however, the number of "returned" soldiers working along the canal had increased, indicating a gradual shift in hiring practices to accommodate veterans.

One example of patronage happened in the 1930s to my grandfather, who was lockmaster at Chaffey's. On voting day, he offered a car ride to a known liberal woman. The Conservative whip phoned him and told him he would lose his job if he gave this neighbour a ride. He did not and felt terrible about it all his life. Temporary workers were particularly affected by party membership. During the Depression, lists of workers had to be approved by the local party whip or even the MP. I have seen lists where certain workers were crossed out due to the wrong affiliation.

After World War II, as the canal staff became more bureaucratic, many of these issues faded away.

Professor Brian S. Osborne, CM



Our dear friend and long-time member of Friends of the Rideau, Brian Osborne, has died at the age of 87. Brian was a member of the department of geography at Queens University, where since 1967 he had taught historical geography, cultural landscapes and the development of Canadian identity. As well as his teaching, Brian worked with many organizations such as Parks Canada, the National Capital Commission, the Royal Canadian Geographical Society and the Ontario Historical Society to promote Canadian heritage preservation and understanding.

Friends of the Rideau was fortunate to have Brian Osborne as a board member for many years, especially during the campaign to have the Rideau Canal and the Kingston fortifications designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007.

Among his many honours Brian was made a member of the Order of Canada, and received the Royal Canadian Geographic Society Massey Medal, and the Queen Elizabeth II Golden and Diamond Jubilee Medals. The citation for his nomination to the Order of Canada said it appropriately: "Lending a geographic lens to history, Brian Osborne has shed a brighter light on Canadian identity and sense of place."

We miss him, his scholarship, guidance, friendship and good humour.

- Hunter McGill

UNESCO ISSUES

The spectre of ALTO (high speed train project) ramming a 60m wide barrier through the central Rideau (their southern route) threatens our UNESCO World Heritage Site status. In their evaluation report for the Rideau’s WHS nomination back in 2006, UNESCO requested that the visual values of the Rideau Canal be defined and protected. Although some work on this was done in 2012/13, it was poorly done and Parks Canada has never completed the process. So Parks Canada today, 20 years after the initial request, has no solid supporting documentation that they can use to make strong comments regarding development that would have a negative impact on that visual character. There is no solid protection in place to prevent inappropriate development (ALTO is just the latest example).

We will continue to strongly encourage Parks Canada to provide the required resources to complete the UNESCO requirement to define and protect the visual character of the Rideau Canal.

Rideau Canal 2026 Fees

- Single Lockage & Return = \$ 1.50 per foot
- One Day = \$ 2.25/ft
- Transit (one way) = \$ 6.00/ft
- Six Days (any six days) = \$ 6.50/ft
- Seasonal (power boats) = \$ 11.25/ft
- Mooring (overnight) = \$ 1.50/ft

FREE LOCKAGE

As part of the 2026 Canada Strong Pass, the Government of Canada is offering **free lockage** and a 25% discount on fees for camping and overnight stays from **June 19 to September 7, 2026 inclusive**.

MEMBERSHIPS/DONATIONS

Friends of the Rideau is an all-volunteer group that depends on the generosity of our membership and donors. Please consider a membership and/or donation today. See the donation page on: rideaufriends.com

LASALLE CAUSEWAY

Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) still haven’t come up with a solution for a new bridge on the Lasalle Causeway that would serve both vehicle and boating traffic. They have implemented a slow and very expensive temporary solution to allow that channel to be opened on rare occasions. The 2026 opening schedule can be found on Parks Canada’s Rideau Canal website: parks.canada.ca/rideau

For boats that are less than 14 to 16 feet high, the east channel opening in the causeway can be used. A water level gauge that displays the current height clearance which changes with the level of Lake Ontario has been placed on both sides of the opening. That clearance information is available on-line on PSPC’s Lasalle Causeway webpage: tinyurl.com/mu7rr8yj

Rideau Canal 2026 Hours of Operation

Dates	Days	Hours
May 15—June 18	Mon to Thurs	10 am to 4 pm
	Fri to Sun, holidays	9 am to 7 pm
June 19—Sept. 7	Mon to Thurs	9 am to 6 pm
	Fri to Sun, holidays	9 am to 7 pm
Sept. 8—Oct. 12	Mon to Friday	10 am to 4 pm
	Sat to Sun, holidays	9 am to 5 pm