

The Grand Opening

It was 1831 and Lieutenant Colonel John By of the Royal Engineers planned to celebrate the grand opening of the lower part of the canal, from Bytown (Ottawa) to Burritts Rapids. Four beautiful silver cups had been prepared to award to his best contractors, Andrew White & Thomas Phillips, Robert Drummond, Thomas McKay and John Redpath. The cups were inscribed with the official opening date of August 21, 1831.



The day arrived revealing a small problem - not enough water. The water in the lower stretch of the canal had dropped below navigation level. Without water there could be no official opening. Investigating the problem, Colonel By discovered that William Merrick had dammed the river upstream of his mills so that he could make repairs. Colonel By's report to the Ordinance office, written in the formal language of the day, does not quite convey how angry he must have been with William Merrick.

"I have the honor to report that after exciting myself with the hope of opening the Rideau Canal on the 21st Instant from By Town to Burritts and having every thing ready to pass Steam Boats, I find the Navigation impeded by the supply of water being cut off by Mr. Merrick having dammed up the river, to enable him to perform repairs at his Mill etc.;"

He then went on to recommend that individuals not be allowed to control the water on the Rideau. This was just the start of many conflicts between mill owners and the Rideau Canal regarding who had the first rights for use of the water of the canal. Today we have laws that state that water for safe navigation takes precedence over most other types of water use.

On the Rideau, ecology is also factored in. Water in the system is maintained at a sufficient flow rate to support the many and varied wildlife that depend on the marshlands and aquatic habitat that the Rideau provides.

Heritage



The canal was designed by Lt. Colonel John By of the British Royal Engineers. It was built between 1826 and 1832 by independent contractors under the supervision of Colonel By and his staff. Hundreds of Irish and French Canadian labourers, Scottish stonemasons, and British Sappers & Miners battled the Canadian wilderness, nineteenth century working conditions and malaria to complete this wonder of a canal system.

In 1926 the Rideau Canal was designated a National Historic Site. In 2000 it was designated a Canadian Heritage River. It remains the oldest continuously operated canal system in North America, still operating today much as it did when first opened in 1832.

Nature

The "slackwater" design of the Rideau - the drowning of rapids by the use of dams - created many new areas of marshlands that today host abundant and varied wildlife. The southern part of the Rideau traverses part of the Canadian Shield (very old rocks) known as the Frontenac Axis, which produced the beautiful Rideau Lakes. The northern part of the Rideau traverses the floor of the former Champlain Sea, now fertile farmland.



Friends of the Rideau

We are a group of volunteers dedicated to preserving and enhancing all those elements that make the Rideau a unique North American waterway. During the summer, visit our retail outlet, The Depot, located in Blockhouse Park in Merrickville. Please consider taking out a membership to help support our work (only \$20 for individuals).

FRIENDS OF THE
RIDEAU

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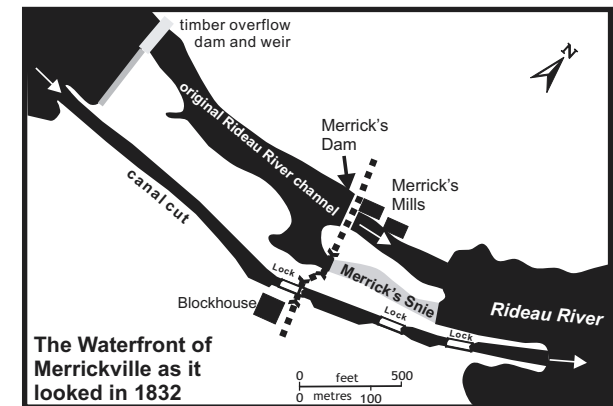
email: info@rideaufriends.com

For more information please visit our website: www.rideaufriends.com

The Depot to Dam Trail



*Take a pleasant stroll of
heritage and nature discovery
on the waterfront of
Merrickville*



FRIENDS OF THE
RIDEAU



This brochure is yours to keep. However, if you are done with it, please return it to where you picked it up or return it to The Depot. Thank you.

Aussi disponible en français

Rideau River



This brochure is yours to keep. However, if you are done with it, please return it to where you found it, or return it to The Depot.



7 Tip of the Dam

You will have noticed as you walked out here that you are on a cut stone dam. It was built at the same time as the locks (1827-1832). Also at that time, a timber dam and weir were built from here to the far bank (see sketch on front panel). This provided the main water control for this part of the system. It was torn down in 1914 and replaced by the current cement weir, located adjacent to the upper lock. This location marks the head of the rapids with a total drop of 27 feet (8.2 m) that existed here prior to the construction of the canal. It was this attractive bit of water power that led William Merrick to establish his first mill in 1792.

6 Pond View

Mix together several ingredients; sunlight, warm summers, lazy moving waters laden with nutrients and a shallow riverbed of organic matter. This recipe describes the marsh in front of you. Where some see an unsightly swamp, biologists see a thriving eutrophic wetland. Such nutrient-rich waters encourage the growth of plant life like the beautiful white waterlily, many kinds of underwater plants like tape grass, and the less appealing blue-green algae (the pale green floating slimy stuff). A vital part of the aquatic food chain, algae can sometimes explode in number (algal blooms) when heavy rainfall during hot weather flushes extra land-based nutrients into the water. With careful river stewardship this pond-like environment will continue to thrive in the face of increasing change such as shoreline development and the spread of invasive species like eurasian watermilfoil, purple loosestrife, and zebra mussels.

4 The Trail

The trail follows the top of an artificial embankment, built during the construction of the canal, separating the man-made canal cut from the former channel of the Rideau River. The embankment is shoreline edge habitat, part of the ribbon of life, an important transition area between river, marsh and land - typically very rich in all types of life. In this case, it is vegetated by plant life that is adept at growing in areas previously disturbed or significantly changed by man.

Vegetation includes shrubs such as honeysuckle, sumac, dogwood and willow, and trees such as white elm, mountain maple, apple and white ash. Along the trail and in the water you might spot muskrats, painted turtles, chipmunks, leopard frogs, green frogs, red winged blackbirds, ospreys, catbirds, song sparrows, purple finches, great blue herons, mallard ducks, loons and much more.

3 The Locks

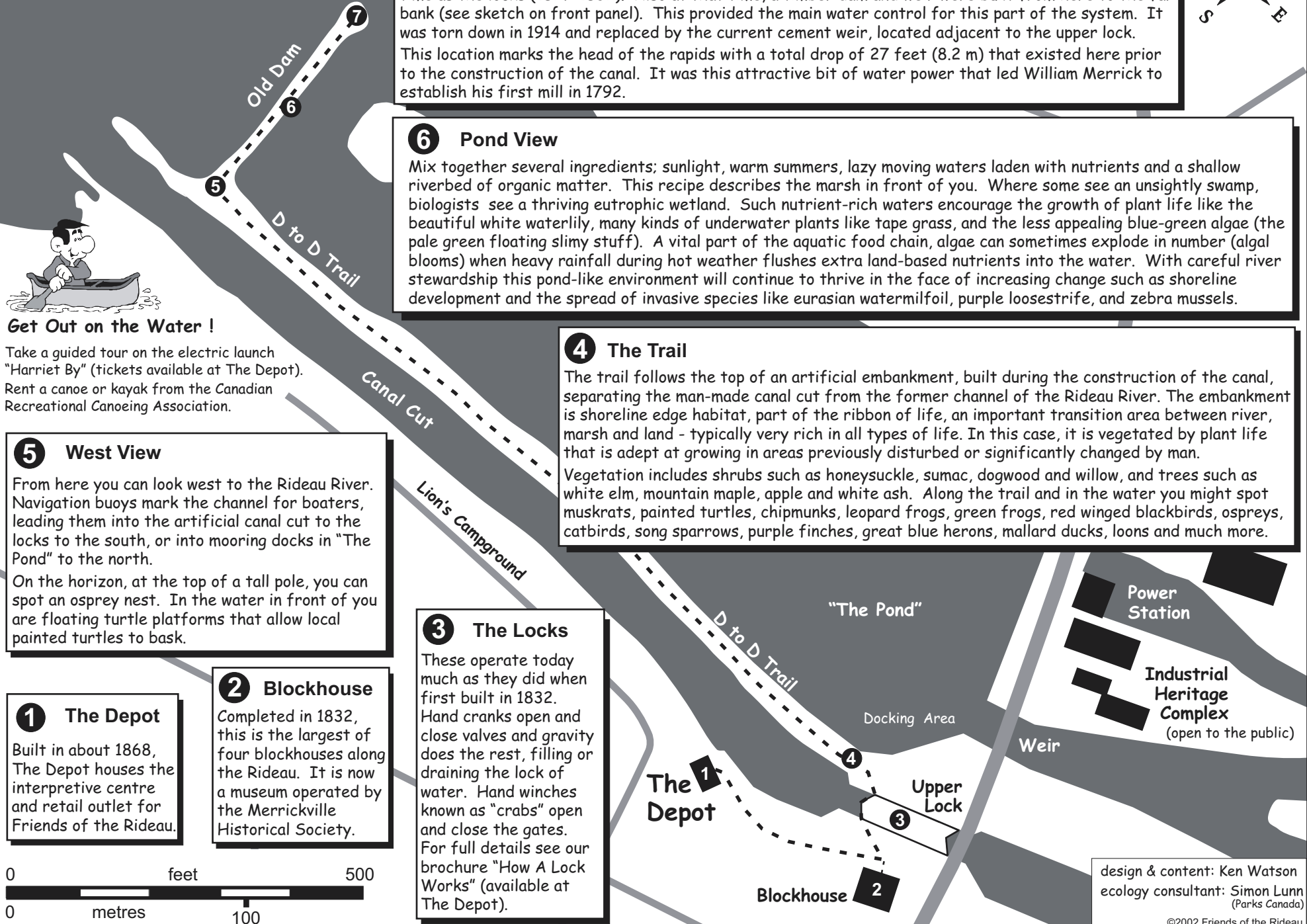
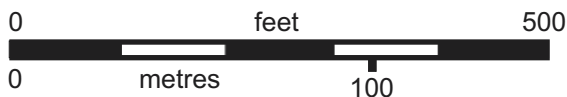
These operate today much as they did when first built in 1832. Hand cranks open and close valves and gravity does the rest, filling or draining the lock of water. Hand winches known as "crabs" open and close the gates. For full details see our brochure "How A Lock Works" (available at The Depot).

2 Blockhouse

Completed in 1832, this is the largest of four blockhouses along the Rideau. It is now a museum operated by the Merrickville Historical Society.

1 The Depot

Built in about 1868, The Depot houses the interpretive centre and retail outlet for Friends of the Rideau.



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