

## The Wrights and the Rideau Canal

While much of the Rideau region was a sparsely populated frontier when Colonel John By arrived in September of 1826 to choose the entrance location for the Rideau Canal, one spot, the Township of Hull, had been occupied for many years. It included a vibrant community, Wrightstown, named after Philemon Wright. Wright, a farmer and entrepreneur from Woburn, Massachusetts, led several families into this area in 1800 and settled on the north side of the Ottawa River. His first homestead was located adjacent to the Gatineau River (just north of today's Lac Leamy). He was not a Loyalist, he'd fought on the side of the rebels (Americans) during the revolutionary war. But now Canada afforded opportunities for him that weren't available in Massachusetts, including large amounts of land.

Although his initial focus was agriculture, Wright soon got involved in the timber trade, sending his first large raft of timber to Quebec City in 1808, a trip that took 2 months. He formed the company P. Wright & Sons under which to conduct his various business interests, which, in 1826, was to include the Rideau Canal. Wright himself had lobbied for the Rideau to be built and when the decision was made by the British government in 1826 to go ahead with building the canal, Philemon charged his sons, 38-year-old Tiberius and 33-year-old Ruggles to acquire some of the work.

We are fortunate today to have some correspondence between Tiberius and Ruggles, transcribed by Karen Price of Parks Canada as part of Manuscript Report 193, "Construction History of the Rideau Canal", 1976. It is interesting to note the spelling (or lack thereof) in the following quotes. It was a fact of life for many in North America during the pioneer era, that education suffered. Schooling was rudimentary with children expected to help out on the farm or in the family business rather than getting a level of education that was common in more urbanized areas. Tiberius and Ruggles were young school-aged children when they moved to Hull in 1800, most of their schooling would have stopped as the pioneer families worked to make a new life in this remote part of the country.

Philemon did send both Ruggles and Tiberius to Europe to learn of the latest improvements in agriculture and forestry, so, despite an apparent lack of fundamental education (i.e. spelling), they had a broad background.



**Wrightstown (later Hull) in 1823**

Located near Chaudière Falls, Wrightstown was a small but thriving community at the time of the building of the Rideau Canal. "View of the settlement at Chaudiere Falls showing the mill and tavern of Philemon Wright" by Henry Robert Duvernet, 1823. Library and Archives Canada, 1989-402 X DAP.

In a letter from Ruggles to Tiberius dated October 5, 1826 he states: "I have just arrived in town this Evening, had an interview with Mr. Mears and Standely Bag will have proposed taking a gala of the Excervation of the line of Canal from the Ottawa River to the Rideau in partnership to Gother if it meets your approbation...I wish you to try Col. By for the warf and Excavation for the locks as soon as I arrive, I will collect what information I can and will write you."

In a letter from Tiberius to Ruggles dated October 31, 1826 he states: "...they wish very much to contract with me for the excavation of the Canall from the Ottawa to the Redo River not including the locks. I told them that we wold take it at afair price on your Return."

In a letter from Tiberius to Ruggles dated December 21, 1826 he states: "I have proposed the excavation of the locks...the job will amount to about five thousand pounds - wish that you would came home so that we cold git on with our affairs. I wish yo to see Col. By and gut his Opinion on the subject of the excavation."

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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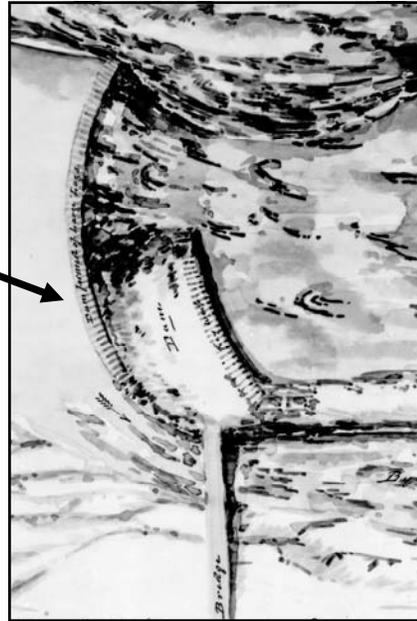
It appears from the letters that, between the two brothers, Ruggles was the legal/accounting expert. It was Ruggles who submitted the bids for work to Colonel By. In the end, they got quite a bit of work. The Wrights built the embankments that formed the eastern side of Dows Lake (they lost money on that project). They worked on the Hogs Back Dam, originally building the coffer dam in front of the proposed stone dam, then on the main dam, in conjunction with the 7th and 15th companies of Royal Sappers and Miners, when the original contractor, Fenlon, quit (after the dam failed twice). Then, after it failed again (not their fault, it was an engineering error), they helped with the new design, a timber crib dam. They were the contractor for the lock and dam at Burritts Rapids. The Wrights also opened up a limestone quarry on the north side of the Ottawa River to produce cement for the works on the Rideau Canal. This cement turned out to be much better quality than cement imported from Britain.

Their workforce was a mix of French-Canadian and English. Many of their men were existing employees working in their timber camps. The Wrights moved these men to their Rideau projects where their timber skills were put to good use. Lists of their names have survived the ravages of time, one of the few insights into part of the workforce that constructed the canal.

There are many interesting Wright connections to Ottawa. These include Nicholas Sparks, who became a major landholder in Ottawa. Sparks was an employee of the Wrights. He was hired by the Wrights in 1816 and, after saving his salary for several years, purchased a large tract of land on the south side of the Ottawa River (Lot C) from John Burrows in 1823.

Jumping forward to 1868 we find Joseph Currier marrying for the third time. Currier, in 1860, was a partner with Moss Kent Dickinson in the building of a new mill, today's Watson's Mill in Manotick. His new bride at the time, his second wife, Ann Crosby, was killed on her first visit to the mill in 1861 (her dress was caught up in moving machinery). In 1868, Currier married again, to Hannah Wright, the daughter of Ruggles Wright. He built his bride a nice new house in Ottawa, the address of that house is 24 Sussex Drive.

- Ken Watson



**Hogs Back, 1828**

The top of the drawing is where the locks are now, the bottom is the weir. The dam on the left is the timber coffer dam built by the Wrights to drive water to the bywash and keep the downstream area dry to allow the stone dam to be built. The coffer dam, using the largest timbers that could be found, could only be made 2 feet higher than the excavated depth of the bywash. Unfortunately the bywash couldn't handle the volume of flood water. On March 29, 1828 water topped the coffer dam, eroding out half of the stone dam sitting behind it. Wright's timber coffer dam held but the stone dam didn't. No.4 map of Hogs Back by Colonel By, 1830. Library and Archives Canada, NMC 12892/80.



"Wrights house"

**Burritts Rapids, 1831**

The centre of this map is the island on which the Village of Burritts Rapids is located. At the top is the fixed bridge connecting the island to the mainland and on the bottom is a high level fixed bridge over the navigation channel. Today's swing bridge is located about 60m downstream (to the right) from this original high level bridge. In the bottom left corner is a building labeled "Wrights house", the contractor's house, located about midway between the dam near the head of the island and the lock at the foot of the island. "Survey of Burritts Rapids and Works there forming part of the Rideau Canal" by John By, January 22, 1831, Library and Archives Canada, NMC 21951.

## 2020 AGM

For most volunteer-run and community-based organizations, such as Friends of the Rideau, the COVID-19 pandemic has created real dilemmas when it comes to holding annual general meetings. After discussion among the Board members, and considering the surge in the affected population and the guidance from public health authorities, we have decided to postpone our 2020 annual meeting. This means that current Board members will continue in their positions until we can have a meeting in 2021.

Take care, stay well, and we will meet again.

Hunter McGill

for the Board of Directors

## The Depot



### Pop-up Info Booth

With the Depot closed in 2020 due to renovations by Parks Canada, our summer student from 2019, **Joshua Terpstra**, on his own initiative, set up our booth in Blockhouse Park adjacent to the Depot to greet visitors on several weekends this summer. He saw about 50 people each day. The most common question was “where are the washrooms?” Photo by Hunter McGill.

## 2020 Boating Stats

Canal traffic in 2020 took a COVID-19 hit. The canal opened late and we had no American boaters. Traffic was down 27.8% with a total of 44,141 vessel passages recorded through the locks, compared to 61,145 vessel passages in 2019. Mooring took a bigger hit, down 32.4% in 2020 compared to 2019.

In total, during 2020, 77.7% of the boats were from Ontario, 20.6% from Québec, 0.2% from the United States and 1.5% "Other".

For the 2020 numbers for some of the individual lockstations go to: [www.rideau-info.com/canal/statistics.html](http://www.rideau-info.com/canal/statistics.html)

## Message from the Chair

Dear Friends,

On behalf of the Board of Friends of the Rideau I send you our best wishes for good health in these challenging times. What a year this is! But we have been able to enjoy our wonderful Rideau Canal.

For the members of the Friends' Board, it was a disappointing summer, as the events and celebrations we usually take part in were cancelled. It's hard to convey to you how important these events – boat shows, regattas and other celebrations – are in staying in touch with you, and taking our message to the public. This year our outreach work was made more difficult as The Depot, in Merrickville, was closed for restoration. This work was long overdue for the 170-year old building, especially for the washrooms (not 170 years old!) given that we received over 9,500 visitors in 2019. But we are assured by Parks Canada, the owner of the building, that the revived Depot will be up and running in 2021. We will be back.

On the initiative of Joshua Terpstra, one of our 2019 summer students, Friends ran a pop-up information kiosk during the weekends in August in Blockhouse Park in Merrickville. We were able to meet about 250 visitors and help them make the most of their visit to the village of Merrickville and to the Rideau Canal. We're grateful to Joshua for initiating this activity.

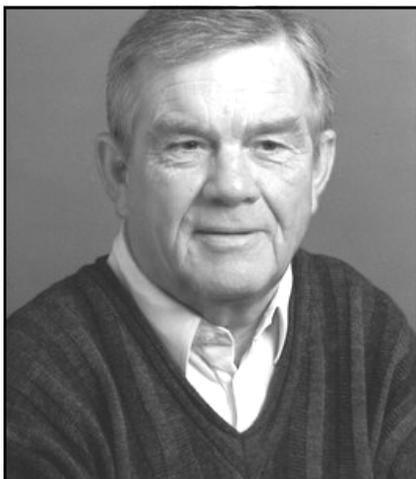
Elsewhere in this newsletter you will read a note about the passing of John Bonser, long-time Superintendent of the Rideau Canal and friend and supporter of Friends of the Rideau. We will miss him.

You will also see in these pages our submission to the *Let's Talk Parks, Canada* consultations, as we have kept up our advocacy for the cause of protection and promotion of the Rideau Canal. If there are issues you feel we should be highlighting, please write and let us know at [info@rideaufriends.com](mailto:info@rideaufriends.com)

Best wishes and see you in 2021.

- Hunter McGill

## John Bonser



Our friend and long-time supporter John Bonser passed at the age of 80 in September. During a distinguished career at Parks Canada he served as Superintendent of the Rideau Canal National Historic Site from 1980 to 1983, 1987 to 1992 and 1994 to 1997. During his tenure, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rideau Canal was celebrated in 1982 and John made sure that communities along the length of the Canal could participate in the festivities. As well, in 1994, John initiated the process that would culminate in the 2007 designation of the Rideau Canal as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. John was also at the helm when the first management plan for the Rideau Canal was done in 1996. He ensured broad and meaningful public engagement during this process to make sure the plan fully reflected the diverse nature of the Rideau Canal National Historic Site.

During his tenure on the Rideau Canal, John was a great supporter of Friends of the Rideau and we are proud and fortunate to have worked with him over the years, including after his retirement.

Hail and farewell, John.

## Management Plan

We are about to mark a dubious milestone, 2021 will be the 10th year that Parks Canada has been operating the Rideau Canal without a management plan. The 2005 management plan was effectively made obsolete by the massive changes in management and policy direction in 2012 when Parks Canada formed the new Ontario Waterways unit. While Parks Canada continues to cite the 2005 plan, the reality is that they are not following large portions of it and are also engaged in activities not covered by the 2005 plan.

There has been no word from Parks Canada as to when consultation will begin on the new draft plan, which we've yet to see. Parks Canada has not responded to several requests to sit down and discuss heritage issues affecting the canal, issues that are going to have to be front and centre in any new plan. We continue to wait.

## UNESCO

As noted in the Spring/Summer 2020 newsletter (page 4), UNESCO has expressed serious concerns about visual value protection of the Rideau Canal, or more correctly, the lack thereof. Parks Canada still has not provided this protection, and, as UNESCO noted "the management system for the property does not currently provide adequate protection to the Outstanding Universal Values or the setting thereof." They also reminded Parks Canada that despite jurisdictional issues, the protection of the world heritage site is a federal responsibility.

We will be addressing these and several other heritage issues with UNESCO. We have been waiting for the management plan consultations, to see if Parks Canada is willing to step up and address their World Heritage Site obligations and the deficiencies that UNESCO pointed out. As the world hopefully normalizes in 2021, we'll be tackling this issue.

## A Heritage Win

In August, Heritage Ottawa announced that a new, heritage conformable design had been put forward for the addition to the Château Laurier Hotel. It's a huge win for the heritage community and thanks are owed to Heritage Ottawa for making this happen. It was this inappropriate development that sparked the UNESCO investigation (see article) and their conclusion that Parks Canada has abrogated its responsibility to protect the visual character of the Rideau Canal.

For more information, see the Heritage Ottawa website: [heritageottawa.org](http://heritageottawa.org)



Top is the original heritage inappropriate proposal, bottom in a new heritage conformable proposal. Image from Heritage Ottawa, rendering by architectsAlliance.

## Let's Talk Parks, Canada

Under the Parks Canada Agency Act, every two years the Minister invites Canadians to share their views and perspectives on the work of Parks Canada. The largest such consultation was done in 2017. We are still waiting for recommendations from that consultation to be applied to the Rideau Canal NHS. One is that there should be *“An emphasis on commemorative integrity at national historic sites, together with the need to dedicate additional resources to education and interpretive programs.”* On the Rideau Canal NHS we have a significant problem in that there are still no resources for education and interpretive programs – a very serious deficiency that Parks Canada has yet to address.

Parks Canada chooses the topics for these consultations. This year there was one topic dealing with heritage: Protecting our cultural heritage – creating specific legislative protection for federal built heritage. The following is Friends of the Rideau's submission on that topic, made to Mr. Michael Nadler, Vice-President, External Relations for Parks Canada on October 27, 2020.

Dear Mr Nadler,

I am writing on behalf of Friends of the Rideau to provide our views on the theme of “Protecting our Cultural Heritage” as input to the Let's Talk Parks, Canada 2020 Minister's Consultation and Round Table.

The mission of Friends of the Rideau is to enhance and conserve the heritage and charm of the Rideau Canal National Heritage Site and UNESCO World Heritage Site. With respect to the above-cited theme of the consultations, we are concerned that in the context of the Rideau Canal NHS there is a lack of attention to commemorative integrity which we would present as directly linked to the case for legislative protection for federally-owned heritage sites. Indeed, legislative protection will constitute only a first step in the process to “play a leadership role in natural and cultural heritage conservation...and ensure that Canada's national parks and national historic sites are a source of national pride and enjoyment today and for future generations”, to quote from Minister Wilkinson's mandate letter from the Prime Minister.

We are also concerned that although the theme of the consultation is “Protecting our Cultural Heritage”, the proposed legislative protection is limited to federally-owned built heritage. Commemorative integrity applies to the entire scope of a national historic site, not just the built elements. All aspects of commemorative integrity must be covered by any legislative protection.

There is no question that legislation is required to protect the extraordinary wealth of Canada's built heritage that is within the responsibility of the federal government. Canada is the only G-7 country that lacks this essential mechanism for its historic sites and landscapes. While Parks Canada has the lead, given its remit for National Historic Sites, the legislation should extend to all federal departments, crown corporations and agencies, as ownership of built heritage is spread across the entire range of the Canadian government's operations.

As part of legislative protection, attention must also be given to protection of heritage landscapes, an important component of National Historic Sites such as the Rideau Canal. The inclusion of heritage landscapes and the protection of their visual values has been recognised by ICOMOS (the technical advisory group to UNESCO) in its monitoring of Canada's performance in terms of its stewardship of built heritage. From the evidence we have gathered from observing Parks Canada's response to threats to heritage landscapes along the Rideau Canal, we are very concerned that the Agency takes a narrow, bureaucratic perspective on its responsibilities to protect the visual values of the Rideau Canal, as was seen during the deplorable saga of the proposal to build a heritage inappropriate addition to the Chateau Laurier NHS.

Periodic assessment and public reporting must also be included as part of any legislation dealing with protection of cultural heritage. Assessment, as was done for the Parks Canada 2012 National Asset Review, expanded to include assessments of heritage landscapes as well as built heritage, must be done on a regular basis. The results of these assessments must be made available publicly so that all Canadians can be aware of the state of conservation of federally-owned heritage sites. A reporting requirement enshrined in legislation is fundamental to the transparency and ultimately the success of the system.

Finally, from our perspective, there is risk that legislation of some dimensions will be drafted and tabled, but not given adequate priority to be considered and approved, and if passed, will not be enforced, leading to disillusionment by stakeholders and disservice to Canadians as their built heritage won't receive the protection they expect and want.

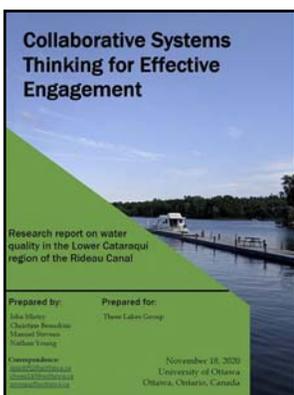
Yours sincerely,

Hunter McGill, Chairman, Friends of the Rideau

## Lower Cataraqui Report on Stakeholder Engagement

Researchers from Carleton University, the University of Ottawa, and the University of Sherbrooke, have been engaged in a research project to enhance our understanding of the natural ecosystems of the Rideau Canal and Trent-Severn waterways, as well as the impacts (positive and negative) of human activities and decisions on the waterways. Their most recent report is a step-by-step guide on how to engage stakeholders in collaborative systems thinking workshops to address complex problems. The following is from one of the researchers, Christine Beaudoin:

Researchers from the University of Ottawa have been working with the Three Lakes Group, which brings together residents from Cranberry, Dog and Colonel By lakes who are concerned about increasingly severe and frequent algal blooms. In partnership with the Three Lakes Group, the Cataraqui Region Conservation Authority and the Beaty Water Research Centre at Queen's University, the researchers held a workshop with various stakeholders to better understand water quality concerns and potential solutions. Findings are presented in an academic paper that is currently under review for publication. To make this information more accessible to community groups and other interested readers, the researchers wrote a report focusing on the engagement method that they used to facilitate the workshop. The report shares insights on how grassroots initiatives can address local concerns and work towards positive action with this collaborative workshop.



The case of poor water quality in the Lower Cataraqui watershed is used as an example in the report. The report begins by explaining the barriers and opportunities related to jurisdictional fragmentation, a challenge stemming from the overlapping jurisdictions of municipal governments, provincial departments, and federal agencies on the Rideau Canal. Then, the report presents collaborative systems thinking as a tool to critically engage diverse stakeholder perspectives and address complex problems like water quality issues. The report provides a step-by-step guide on how to host such a workshop to help address environmental concerns collectively. These tools are meant to develop a holistic understanding of the problem informed by the different stakeholder perspectives to promote collective problem solving. The goal of this workshop is two-fold: (1) use systems

thinking tools to develop an understanding of the problem and to identify potential solutions based on the knowledge of participants, and (2) bring together stakeholders that may have conflicting interests or misperceptions. The report concludes that collaborative systems thinking and action research could be used by a variety of local groups who want to work with partners to address environmental concerns.

This report and other information about our research programs are available on our research website: [historicwaterways.wixsite.com/research](http://historicwaterways.wixsite.com/research) Feel free to contact the researchers, Isha Mistry M.Sc ([imist092@uottawa.ca](mailto:imist092@uottawa.ca)), Christine Beaudoin PhD candidate ([cbeau143@uottawa.ca](mailto:cbeau143@uottawa.ca)) or Professor Nathan Young who supervised this work ([nyoung@uottawa.ca](mailto:nyoung@uottawa.ca)). We would like to thank the Natural Science and Engineering Council and Professor Steven J. Cooke from Carleton University for providing the funds that made this research possible.

## An Interesting Summer

Although the canal opened late this year, it wasn't until late June that the entire canal was open, those who managed to get out enjoyed a great summer on the Rideau Canal. The COVID-19 protocols that Parks Canada put in place served well to protect both Parks staff and visitors.

For those of us who got out and about, it was a normal summer on the water except for the general lack of American bass boats and cottagers. It was strange to see many lovely waterfront properties not occupied this summer, their American owners unable to come to Canada this year.



**The Depot 2020**

Gated off, the Depot remained closed in 2020. The restoration of the Depot by Parks Canada was a casualty of COVID-19. Originally slated to be completed by this spring, Parks Canada has assured us the building will now be ready by spring 2021. We very much wish to be back, greeting visitors and sharing with them the wonders of the Rideau Canal.