

Portages on the Rideau

Prior to the development of good roads, boats were the preferred method of travel. People and goods could be much more easily moved on water than by land. However, natural waterways are not always friendly to boats. Rapids, waterfalls and watershed divides form navigation impediments to boats and these require a portage, a trail bypassing the impediment over which a boat and its contents can be carried.

Early indigenous peoples plying Rideau waters used dugout boats. Then, about 3,000 years ago the birch bark canoe was invented, a much lighter craft and one much easier to portage. By the time of the first European survey of what was to become a portion of the Rideau Canal, birch bark canoes of varying sizes were the standard method of travel. On September 29, 1783, Lt. Gershom French wrote "Departed from Carillon with seven men of the Provincials, Two Canadians and an Indian as Guide with two Bark Canoes ..." That's 11 men in two canoes. Those canoes were possibly "canots du nord", about 7 metres (22 feet) long.

There are several difficulties in determining the location of old portages along the route of today's Rideau Canal. One is that the Rideau route was divided in two – today's water connection to the Cataragui River didn't exist in the pre-dam era. The original route from the Ottawa River led to Gananoque, not to Kingston. While there is some documentation of the Ottawa to Gananoque route portages, there is little information on the Cataragui River portages (Kingston to Loughborough Lake), other than there were lots of them. Surveyor Lewis Grant, in 1795, wrote "a great number of rapids and carrying places [portages] on this creek."

Another issue in determining the location of old portages is that what was portage for some, was not a portage for others. We have an example from 1814 with the story told of the Billings family shooting Hogs Back Rapids. The story indicates there was a portage around the rapids, but that the Billings got caught in the current and ended up accidentally running the rapids. The story is told incorrectly in that it assumed the falls we see today existed in 1814, but they didn't. Those falls were created by the canal dam, completed in 1831, which raised the water by 41 feet (12.5 m), creating the falls we see today. The original Three Rock Rapids (see photo on next page) were not portaged by early surveyors – there was no need. They would generally pull their canoes up rapids



First Camp

Colonel By's first camp on his arrival near Rideau Falls. The canoes he used to travel from Montreal appear to be *canots léger* (5 m/16 ft long), designed for fast travel. The men in the peaked caps are French-Canadian voyageurs. The canoes were likely Algonquin made, using their advanced birch bark canoe building skills. They would have portaged past the Carillon and Long Sault rapids on the Ottawa River on their way to the Rideau. "First Camp, By-Town", Lt. Col. John By, 1826. McCord Museum. M386.

and shoot (run) down rapids. But later, as settler families travelled by canoe, a portage was used in favour of shooting or pulling the canoe through the rapids.

Only a few portages show up on maps, but several more are referenced in surveys. John Burrows, during his 1827 surveys, makes a number of indirect portage references. At Black Rapids he noted "a man (one of the canoemen) emerged from the woods with a heavy load of biscuit which he had been portaging across the Black Rapids." Burrows also describes canoes being pulled up rapids such as at Edmund's Rapids noting that "where over shoals and rapids the canoes were to be lifted, while the passengers waded – at times dropping off large stones up to their armpits in water."

A final issue is that portages changed over time. With the coming of mill dams, a portage had to be established to get around the mill dam. In some cases this created a portage where none had existed before such as at Davis' Rapids and in some cases it shortened an existing portage such as at Chaffey's Rapids. Here, by 1820, the original portage was considerably shortened after the establishment

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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of mill dams at Davis' and Chaffey's rapids, which raised the water levels of both Indian and Opinicon lakes. Canal surveys done in 1827 indicate a lot more portages than were noted in 1783.

Our only pre-dam era written documentation is from Lt. Gershom French's 1783 survey which was done before any dams were established. He only notes a few portages along the Rideau portion of the route. The first was the portage from the Ottawa River to the Rideau River. It came up from Governor Bay and was about a mile (1.6 km) long, likely coming into the Rideau River just above Porter Island. The next portage he notes was around the falls at Merrickville. Then came the portage over the watershed divide at the Isthmus (Newboro), then a long portage around Chaffey's Rapids and another long portage around Jones Falls' Rapids. The route then went down the White Fish River, which led through Morton Bay to a portage around White Fish Falls (near today's Morton canal dam) and then down the Gananoque River system (which had several portages).

The building of the Rideau Canal eliminated the portages. People could now travel from Ottawa to Kingston without the need to get out and haul their boats around rapids. The locks not only served unportageable steamboats and barges, but also many canoes, with continued indigenous travel along the waterway in birch bark canoes as well as local settlers who were also using canoes (mostly dugout) as a means of waterway travel.

Remnants of long abandoned portages are difficult to find. Only portions of a very few exist, such as parts of the Jones Falls portage and the original Chaffeys Rapids portage. But others, such as the original portage route across the Isthmus (Newboro) or the Merrickville portage are long gone, mostly due to subsequent cultural disturbance of the area.

- Ken Watson



Shooting the Rapids

This undated painting shows an indigenous couple shooting a set of rapids (likely somewhere in Quebec). Lightweight and easy to repair, birchbark canoes were well suited to doing this. "Indians Shooting Rapids in a Bark Canoe" by John B. Wilkinson, n.d., Library and Archives Canada, R9266-429



Portages—1783 & 1816

The map on the left is a section from Lt. Gershom French's 1783 survey. The top carrying place is the portage across the watershed divide at Newboro. The next is the long portage around the rapids at Chaffeys and the bottom is the long portage around Jones Falls Rapids. The map on the right is Lt. Joshua Jebb's 1816 map showing the short portage (400 yards) from Clear Lake to Indian Lake and the long 1,500 yd portage from Indian Lake to Opinicon Lake, bypassing the Chaffeys Rapids. Left: "Communication with the St. Lawrence & Ottawa Rivers by the Rivers Petite Nation & Rideau", William Chewitt, 1794. Archives of Ontario, AO 1336. Right: "Plan of the Water Communication from Kingston to the Grand River" by Lt. J. Jebb, July 8, 1816, Library and Archives of Canada, NMC 21941 2/3.



Portaging Smiths Falls

It's unclear if there was originally a portage around Smiths Falls since early survey maps don't show a portage. But after the river was dammed for milling, a portage was necessary. "My Canoe, Portage" by James Pattison Cockburn, c.1830. Library and Archives Canada C-012603



Three Rock Rapids (aka Hogs Back Rapids)

This is the lower half of the original Three Rock Rapids, aka Hogs Back Rapids. The upper portion of the original rapids is now buried below the large Hogs Back canal dam, but the bottom portion still exists today, looking much as it would have in the pre-canal days. There are no indications that early surveyors portaged these rapids, but it was apparent that a portage did exist for settlers to use. Photo by Ken W. Watson.

Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends,

As we head in to deep fall, I've been reflecting on the recently-concluded summer season, with a certain degree of satisfaction at the work Friends of the Rideau was able to accomplish since I last wrote to you in the spring. As you will see from the report on the operation of The Depot, Friends' interpretation centre in Merrickville, we had the chance to meet a large number of visitors during the season, many of whom were learning about the Rideau Canal for the first time. It's stimulating to talk with these people and impart our enthusiasm for the Rideau, and encourage them to return to the Canal and visit other charming sites along the Waterway.

Though the usual season of events and festivals was very limited this year, we were able to attend the Rideau Paddlefest in Smiths Falls and the Stewart Park Festival in Perth, reaching out further to a wider constituency. Hopefully, in 2023 we'll be able to return to the customary summer-long sequence of events.

In September, Ken Watson and I had the opportunity to meet Stephen Braham, acting Associate Director of Ontario Waterways and Mark Brus, Manager of Operations for the Rideau, for a very useful conversation about Rideau Canal issues. We hope that with Mark's appointment and presence in Smiths Falls we can reinforce and enhance our partnership with Parks Canada. Earlier this year, under contract with Parks Canada, Friends supplied 10,000 copies of our interpretive brochure, *How a Lock Works*, for distribution to visitors at lockstations.

I wish you all a pleasant autumn and winter and look forward to seeing you in 2023.

- Hunter McGill



Conquering the Rideau

Every year, various groups do fundraising paddles of the Rideau Canal. This year included a group of Soldier On members (serving and retired ill/injured Canadian Armed Force members) who challenged themselves to paddle the entire Rideau Canal. Here we see them paddling through Sand Lake on their way north to Ottawa. Photo by Ken W. Watson

Depot Report



The Depot, Friends' information centre in Merrickville, had a very successful season, welcoming 12,340 visitors. This is an increase of almost 3,000 visitors over 2021. Our staff of Joshua Terpstra and Elijah Loos worked tirelessly during the season from mid-June to Labour Day weekend, and Joshua pitched in when The Depot had a special opening on September 25 for the European Car Show in Merrickville.

At The Depot, as well as giving information to visitors about the Rideau Canal in Merrickville, Friends also provides information about other notable sites along the waterway, such as Jones Falls, Long Island, and Burritts Rapids lockstations to name but a few.

The Merrickville-Wolford village council made a generous financial contribution to help meet the operating costs of the The Depot. Friends is working on building partnerships with the Merrickville and District Historical Society and the Merrickville Chamber of Commerce. All three organizations share an interest in presenting Merrickville as a well-preserved example of 19th century Ontario heritage.

Even if you have visited The Depot in the past, we look forward to seeing you during the 2023 season.



Getting Ready for Visitors

Summer staff Elijah Loos prepares the cash box. In addition to Rideau information and our public washrooms, we provide the opportunity for the public to buy books about the Rideau and other Rideau items.

Draft Federal Legislation to Protect Historic Places

Several months ago, the federal minister of Environment and Climate Change, Stephen Guilbault, who is also responsible for Parks Canada, introduced draft legislation to protect historic places in Canada. The draft bill is now being studied by a Parliamentary Committee. The aim of this article is to outline the implications for the Rideau Canal. The bill is labelled C-23, Historic Places of Canada Act.

Most elements of the legislation apply to federally-designated heritage properties owned by federal departments. Some are National Historic Sites, like the Rideau Canal, and others are classified as heritage properties by the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office. The Act provides for the creation of a register of federal heritage places and requires owner departments and agencies to follow the *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada*.

There are some missing elements in the draft legislation. The designation “National Historic Site” is to be replaced by “place of national historic significance or interest”, a change which risks the loss of an important label whose value has been built over the past 100 years. Also, there is concern that the legislation has very limited enforcement content, thus constraining accountability. At the very least there should be the requirement that Parks Canada report annually to Parliament so that Canadians can learn of progress in protecting heritage places, or the lack of progress which puts heritage at risk.

Another significant change is the addition of “heritage value” to historic sites/places. Previously, legislation required the maintenance of the “commemorative integrity” of the site, the new wording now has “to ensure the commemorative integrity **and heritage value** of historic places.” “Heritage value” has a much broader definition than commemorative integrity. Parks Canada has never defined the “heritage value” of the Rideau Canal and that is something they will have to do if the bill is passed into law.

Although the bill is titled “an Act respecting places, persons and events of national historic significance ...” it also contains sections dealing specifically with historic canals, including allowing Parks Canada to write their own regulations with regards to the Rideau Canal and other historic canals. Current regulations are listed in the Historic Canal Regulations which are enabled under the Department of Transport Act. These were written decades ago and while they have received updates over the years, Bill C-23 will empower Parks Canada to prepare and implement their own regulations rather than having to go through Transport Canada.

A read of the current Historic Canal Regulations shows the broad range of topics it covers, everything from navigation to resource protection. These will now all come under the direct control of the Parks Canada Agency. In addition, the new act will put in place an enforcement and penalties framework equivalent to the one in national parks, which includes a range of investigative powers for wardens, much higher fines than under the current Historic Canals Regulations, and the ability to issue court orders and increase the statute of limitations to 2 years.

Parks Canada estimates it will take 3 to 5 years from the date of implementation of bill C-23 to put new regulations in place. Friends hopes that there will be proper (meaningful) public consultations for the drafting of these new regulations.

Friends of the Rideau will take part in the process to review the draft legislation and will report in future issues of the newsletter on developments and outcomes.

Rideau Canal Management Plan

It’s been well over a year since public input into the new Rideau Canal management plan was completed. How much of that huge amount of input, including 50 written submissions (more than any Parks Canada site has ever received), has Parks Canada incorporated into the plan? It is expected that the Minister will be rubber stamping the plan and tabling it in Parliament prior to year-end (2022).

2022 Rideau Canal Boating Statistics

Canal traffic in 2022 was down 7.4% compared with 2021 with a total of 56,981 vessel passages compared to 61,534 in 2021. This may be due in part to the jump in gas and diesel prices we experienced this year. Moorings showed just a slight decrease with 11,942 in 2022 compared to 12,262 moorings in 2021.

In total, during 2022, 69.7% of the boats were from Ontario, 21.6% from Québec, 7.8% from the United States and 0.9% “Other”. The percentage of Ontario boats remained constant but Québec boats saw a significant drop from 29.2% last year to 21.6% this year. This was partially made up by an increase in American boaters, from 0.8% in 2021 to 7.8% in 2022. In 2019, boats from the U.S. represented 9% of the vessel passages.

For the 2022 numbers for some of the individual lockstations go to: www.rideau-info.com/canal/statistics.html

Unrest at the Isthmus and Hogs Back in 1830

by Sue Warren

The Isthmus (later Newboro) had a reputation for being one of the most difficult stations during the construction of the canal. Besides the terrible malaria (lake fever) that plagued the workers, there were at least two contractors who resigned due to the difficulty of building the canal cut at this site. In the summer of 1829, at one point, only four workers remained at the station. John By, alarmed that the Isthmus might delay the finishing of the canal, sent Captain Cole and the 7th Division of Sappers and Miners (the soldier-artisans of the British army), their families and a number of contracted workers to complete the task.

In January of 1830, after Captain Cole had arrived with an initial small detachment of the 7th Division, a religious dispute occurred among the Irish workers who often brought their differences from Ireland with them. Newspapers in this period can be very inaccurate but according to the reporting, six hundred workers [a large exaggeration] participated in the fray. After fisticuffs and shoving, the group turned their attentions to the dwelling of a Mr. Ferguson who appears to have boarded many of the labourers. The roof was torn off the boarding house and Ferguson fled in terror for his life. Denny, the local magistrate at the time, called out the militia but it was a lost cause. Women and some men surrounded the militia, with their cries compared to the howling of a pack of wolves. The militia attempted to keep the main offenders under their control, but it was proving to be a lost cause. Eventually, the armed Sappers and Miners turned up to save the day. Magistrate Denny, who could not identify the ringleaders, released the others on bail.

Before long, more unrest showed up at the Hogs Back site near Bytown. Mr. Little, a Protestant, became involved in an argument about the Catholics and the Orangemen. There were also reports that his wife was harassed at one point by hostile individuals. Eventually, the home of Mr. Little was blown sky-high by a gunpowder barrel smuggled into his house. Nearby homes were damaged, and a man called Riley, one of the rioters who surrounded the building, lost his



Royal Sappers and Miners.

This shows the uniform (left) and working dress (right) of the Royal Sappers and Miners. While used mostly for their trade skills (miners, masons, etc.), they were also trained soldiers and were used in several instances to maintain the peace. "Uniform and Working Dress, 1825" from *The History of the Corps of Royal Sappers and Miners*, Vol. 2, by T.W.J. Connolly, 1857.



Residence of Captain Cole, The Isthmus, 1830

Located on Upper Rideau Lake at the head of the portage, the peaceful nature of this scene belies the tensions that sometimes erupted with the workers. "Residence of Cap^{tn} P. Cole, R. Eng. The Officer in charge at Isthmus, &c. during construction of the Works, from 1830 to 1832", by Thomas Burrowes, 1830, Archives of Ontario, 10002154

life in the explosion. A perpetrator was arrested and imprisoned in the Perth gaol. He named another man who strangely enough was found at the Isthmus. The newspaper article in the *Montreal Gazette* says that all disorderly labourers should be fired as an example. Of course, this wasn't practical since it was hard enough to keep labourers on the Rideau.

We don't know what connected these events if any, but religious differences are the common denominator. Unlike the myth that most of the Irish on the Rideau were Catholic, there were in fact many northern Irish Protestants employed on the canal. These two groups were obviously bringing the tensions from the homeland to Canada. In the 1830s, some of these tensions would erupt in Leeds County with by-election riots in the towns of Delta (then known as Beverley) and Philippsville. These religious tensions remains an interesting angle on canal history that hasn't been fully explored.

- Sue Warren

Helping the Loons

Iconic on the Rideau lakes is the loon—its beautiful appearance and haunting call. We have a healthy population of loons on the lakes in part due to human help, the use of artificial nesting platforms. Loons generally like to nest very close to the existing water level, so a fluctuation in that level, or the waves from a passing boat, can swamp a nest, destroying the eggs. Nesting on a floating platform eliminates this problem. Back in the early 2000s, Friends of the Rideau produced a brochure, “Be Rideau Loon Aware” outlining some of the challenges loons face in this area.

There are a couple of other issues pointed out in the brochure. One is the danger to loons of lead fishing tackle, including small sinkers and jigs. Something as small as a single split shot lead sinker will kill an adult loon if ingested. Last year, the Wolfe Lake Association launched a buy-back program for people to get rid of their lead tackle and switch to non-lead alternatives. You can find that information at: fishleadfree.ca

Another issue is the mortality of young chicks due to boat strikes during their vulnerable time, June through to early August, when they are not strong enough to dive out of the way of a speeding boat.

So, please be Rideau Loon Aware and pass this information on to your friends and neighbours. The brochure is available on our website, see: www.rideaufriends.com/loonaware/



Hitching a Ride

Young loon chicks often ride on Mum’s back to take a break from the hard job of swimming. Photo by Ken W. Watson



Loons on Natural Nests

The loon nests in the left and right photos are very vulnerable to water level fluctuations or being flooded out by the wake from a passing boat. The loon in the centre has chosen a nesting site that is more resistant to the problem of water levels and waves, but she’s an anomaly. Loons face many other challenges including predation of the eggs and chicks and unsuccessful hatchings (the two eggs the loon in the centre was sitting on never hatched). Your author has maintained a loon nesting platform for the past 27 years. In that time, 30 chicks have survived to fly south in late fall. For pictures of an artificial platform and my loon nesting diary, see: www.rideau-info.com/canal/ecology/loon-nest.html. Photos by Ken W. Watson

We Have A Warden

Last year, the Rideau Canal was fortunate to get its own warden, Nathan Byington. A warden is a peace officer with full enforcement capabilities (unlike lock staff). This spring, Nathan was supplied with a boat which now allows him to properly carry out his enforcement duties on the Rideau Canal. Parks Canada has made his priorities the following:

1. Protection of shoreline and aquatic habitat from unauthorized shoreline and in-water work
2. Enforcement of vessel speed zones
3. Enforcement of overweight vehicles on Rideau Canal infrastructure
4. Enforcement of special event permit conditions
5. Enforcement of illegal access on Rideau Canal property (without permit, in closed area etc.)

As noted on page 4, Bill C-23, when passed, will provide greater enforcement capabilities for a warden on the Rideau Canal.