

# The Merrickville and District Historical Society NEWSLETTER

Autumn 2003

Volume 1 Number 2

## Heritage

Here we are well into the Fall season and looking forward to another busy winter. This fall in September we enjoyed hearing from Don MacKay of Parks Canada who told us about 1840s social life along the Rideau. In October a full house heard Barbara Humphreys, co-author of "Legacy in Stone", describe how stone, since ancient times has been used to convey strength, beauty, substance, even integrity. Her beautifully illustrated lecture took us from the pyramids to the Sam Jakes Inn, where the meeting was held. From quarry to quoin we saw how this most respected building material was used. Our own Rideau corridor in general, and Merrickville in particular is blessed with some of the best examples of stone used in military, religious, commercial and residential applications. From the 1830s stone cottages along the river road, to the stately Merrick homes we saw how changing styles reflected circumstance. If you missed this one, you missed a dandy.



Last April, as a finale to our spring sessions we held our annual dinner at the Baldachin restaurant. Brian Anthony, Director of Heritage Canada, spoke about the Heritage Canada Foundation's ongoing efforts to save Canada's built heritage. He stated that from 1970 to 2000 we lost between 21-23% of our built heritage nationally. Focusing on the federal government, the foundation has played a major role in developing legislation that will provide greater controls and incentives to save these structures.

In the United States similar legislation 30 years ago has led to saving many historical buildings and districts. It has also led to the birth of the restoration industry and has provided opportunities for the army of people who now work in this area. Here the number of carpenters and masons who come out of the heritage programs at Algonquin College every year testifies to the success of such programmes.

Mr. Anthony also described the "Doors Open phenomenon" which has gone a long way to promoting heritage preservation. This year there were Doors Open programs in various cities across the country including Ottawa and Smiths Falls. Something to consider for Merrickville-Wolford perhaps? Not only do we have numerous heritage buildings in the village but we also have a wealth of heritage homes, barns, and other outbuildings throughout Wolford, not generally open to the public, that it would be of great interest to visit.

### **\*\*\*\*\*Should it be Smyths Falls ?\*\*\*\*\***

*Did you know that Thomas Smyth, after whom Smiths Falls is named, was a first cousin of William Mirick's wife Sylvia. Also, did you know that Wolford was named after a property of Governor John Graves Simcoe in Devonshire, England?*

---

## The McGuigan Cemetary

The year was 1808. The family of Samuel Stafford stood in silence as the 49 year old pioneer was buried in a plot of land on a hill overlooking the Rideau River. His wife and five daughters were witnessing the burial of the first settler in the township of Montague. Stafford's family had come from England to Plymouth in 1626, and by the 1780's he had settled near Saratoga. Like others loyal to the Crown he had come to the Rideau in 1794,

settled, and built his log cabin on the north side of the Rideau near Cox's Creek. Now he was at rest in the cemetery known now as McGuigan. From 1800 and for the next 50 years many of the region's pioneer families were interred in the same hillside plot. Some of their names, McCreae, Gurthie, Dougherty, Takabery, are barely visible on their tombstones. A small ledger in an onsite wooden shelter speaks poignantly of the hard life of the era. For example, for a young girl:

"In memory of Caroline, beloved daughter  
of Peter and Elizabeth Davidson,  
died Dec 28, 1851, aged 13 years,  
"I would not live always,  
I ask not to stay,  
where storm after storm,  
rose dark o'er the way"



But, there are no names at all to mark the place of the next largest group to be buried here. They were the workers who perished during the construction of the Rideau canal and their final resting place is indicated only with unmarked chunks of stone. (While the construction of the canal was a superb engineering accomplishment, there was a high price paid in human life. Along the Rideau the fallen workers were interred in plots such as this one, near where they fell.)

**\*\*\*\*\*Malaria on the Rideau?\*\*\*\*\***

*In 1828, 500 died in Cranberry Creek alone, most from malaria. This deadly scourge, was probably brought to the Rideau by the Royal Sappers and Miners, recently transferred from duty in India to supervise canal construction. And once here it was broadly spread by the plentiful mosquitoes.*

By the 20th century the McGuigan cemetery, set back from the River Road on the south side, opposite the dam at Clowes lock, had been abandoned and overgrown with many markers broken or buried.



In 1979 members of the Merrickville & District Historical Society, with the benefit of a federal New Horizon grant, undertook to restore the site and many hours of volunteer effort went into clearing the overgrowth and unearthing and righting the stones. A small shed to house the known records was constructed on the site. A plaque commemorating the restoration was unveiled on July 25, 1981.

As a result of their efforts this important historic site, one of the earliest cemeteries in Ontario has been preserved for the respect of those buried there and for our historic appreciation. The cemetery itself and path to it, now maintained by Wolford Township, are in nice shape, but we will be looking for volunteers in the spring to repair the fence, gate and signage, and refresh the exhibits in the shed.

**\*\*\*\*\*For the Record\*\*\*\*\***

*The McGuigan Cemetery was named after Miles McGuigan who served with the 81st Royal Lincoln Volunteers under the Duke of Wellington. During the battle of Waterloo, he was shot through both legs. After a long convalescence he made his way to Canada and eventually married the widow of John Leahy, then the owner of the property where the cemetery is situated.*

*Ref: "The Story Of The Lower Rideau Settlement" Max Virginia Martyn*

---

**The Blockhouse Museum**

If you drive along 401 near exit 705 you will see the sign for Merrickville, featuring, of course, the Blockhouse. Unquestionably the most important icon of our Village, the Blockhouse is owned by Parks Canada and, this summer we had another successful season of operation. As you know, the Merrickville & District Historical Society has the pleasure and responsibility of operating this historic structure as a museum, making its interesting collection of artifacts accessible to the public. This summer we had many visitors pass through and most made donations (which are turned over to the Village to offset operating costs.) It is somewhat ironic that management of this icon of the village is done primarily on a volunteer basis and that the Village contributes only \$1000 per year to the Historical Society to conduct its affairs and to sustain this important hallmark of our local history and focus for many present activities.

**\*\*\*\*\*For the Record\*\*\*\*\***

*Most folks know of Mary Pearson, daughter of foundryman William Pearson. This multi-accomplished woman once played a recital for Alexander Graham Bell and in 1938 gifted to the town the building which is now our public library. One of the most famous residents of Merrickville, Mary Pearson lived in the William Merrick house until her death at 99 years of age. But, did you know she was the granddaughter of Merrickville's longtime lockmaster John Johnston, and that her mother Margret, born in 1837, grew up in the Blockhouse as daughter of John & Margret Johnston, the first of their five children born in the Blockhouse at Merrick's Mills?*



**Lockmaster John Johnston and wife, Margret. Grand parents of Mary Pearson**

But, wonderful as the Blockhouse is as an historic monument, it is intrinsically a poor, no, totally inadequate, place to retain important historical records and artifacts. Unfortunately, it is the only place presently available to the Historical Society.

---

## **The Fragile Archives**

Virtually all of the historical "facts" in this newsletter come from the material contained in archives and records of The Merrickville & District Historical Society. Over the years many people have worked to research and publish interesting and important information about our community.

But, the permanence of these important documents is in jeopardy. While the Blockhouse is a marvelous historical structure, it is a dangerous storage spot for important documents and artifacts. With no heat in winter, no temperature or humidity control in summer, and barely adequate security, the historic documents and the important information they contain are in a danger of irrevocable loss. This summer we engaged a capable local student, Kaven Baker-Boakes to catalogue and file most of these documents in acid proof containers and this is an important start. But only a start. It is an urgent priority of the Historical Society to find a more suitable and permanent home for the archives.

Virtually all of the constituents of the Village understand that our history and heritage is the tie that binds all of the Villages' interests together. But, in spite of its importance to commerce, tourism and the character of the Village, there are few resources available to protect this valuable asset. Instead, maintenance of our heritage relies mainly on the initiatives of concerned community members. Perhaps since it is deemed very important to Merrickville Wolford, it is time for the Village to create a central office for all the various groups with an interest in our local heritage. Such an office could not only provide a safe spot for the Historical Society archives, but could support the interests of

commerce, community, visitors and village planning. Literarily, a "Home for Heritage"

**\*\*\*\*\*For the Record\*\*\*\*\***

*Andrewsville is named for Rufus Andrews who built the first mill there in 1861. By 1880 its population was over 200 and it boasted a grist mill, shingle & saw mill, post office, cheese factory, blacksmith shop and a thriving tavern. The mill was dismantled in 1917, its millstone now an honoured relic in Upper Canada Village.*

---

## **November 25 Annual Meeting**

This year, the annual general meeting of the Merrickville & District Historical Society will be held on Tuesday, November 30, 2003 at 7:30 pm at Ste. Marguerite Bourgeoys School. At this brief meeting we will present our annual reports and elect next years Officers and Chairpersons for the association. A slate of candidates will be presented for approval by the membership and all interested in serving are invited to have their names put forward. All are invited to attend. We are very pleased that most of the present members of the executive are prepared to serve again, as well as some interested new members. We will however reluctantly say goodbye to President George Barnhill, who will be stepping down at the completion of his term. Since George assumed the position over three years ago he has overseen the rebirth of interest and enthusiasm in the organization, and we all owe him a debt of appreciation for the work he has done and the healthy state in which he leaves the association.

Following the annual meeting we will be treated to a presentation by Margaret Carley who has agreed to show us her interesting photographs of St Lawrence Street during the "Twenties & Thirties". She will be assisted in her presentation by Wayne Poapst.

**\*\*\*\*\*For the Record\*\*\*\*\***

*Our Village was incorporated in 1860 as Mirickville". But, In 1862, the Village's name was changed to "Merrickville". At the same time, the post office as well as the Chronicle newspaper, adopted the Merrickville spelling. Even Aaron Mirick who operated "Aaron Mirick's Store" changed its name to "A Merrick's Store" in 1862. It seems all the Miricks changed their name to Merrick at this time. Does anyone out there know why? We don't. If you do, please let us know and we will pass the information along to readers.*

---

## **Presenting Heritage to the Community**

As our association has grown we have considered conducting more items of historic interest to members of the community. Many of these such as historical walking tours, open house visits and outings to neighboring historic sites require volunteers in order to accomplish. If you have ideas, or if you can volunteer time to work on such activities, please drop a note to Pat Molson, our co-coordinator of volunteers, at the address for the Historical Society shown below, to tell him of your interest or ideas.

---

## **Did You Know?**

The community of Elizabethtown was settled in 1784 by the Buell family and soon attracted a number of United Empire Loyalists who had drawn land location tickets in the township. Conditions were harsh and difficult and not all newcomers were as comfortable with frontier life as the Miricks and Burritts. Many settlers were unhappy with their lot, to the extent that boatmen on the River who called in at the community called it "Snarling

Town". The Buells and another family of settlers, the Jones, carried on a vendetta for years, even arguing about a name for the fledging village, each wanting it named after their families. They finally referred the matter for settlement to General Brock who solved the issue by promptly declaring it would be called Brockville. And that was that.

\*Presentation to the Merrickville & District Historical Society, April 1966, J. K. Abbott Abbott.

---

Published by The Merrickville & District Historical Society  
Copyright The Merrickville & District Historical Society, 2003,  
John Cowan, Editor

---

[Return to Publications Page](#)

---

Merrickville and District Historical Society  
PO Box 294  
Merrickville, Ontario K0G 1N0

[Home](#) | [About Us](#) | [News](#) | [Publications](#) | [Projects](#) | [History](#) | [Blockhouse Museum](#) | [Walking Tour](#) | [Links](#)

website design donated by [Ken W. Watson](#)

©2006 The Merrickville and District Historical Society