

The Merrickville and District Historical Society NEWSLETTER

Spring 2010

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What's in a Name?

In 1810, William Merrick received official title to virtually all the lands now constituting Merrickville. By all accounts he was very reluctant to part with even a small piece of them. Upon his death in 1844, his sons had no such compunction. William Sr. was barely ensconced in his Welsh-style stone-box tomb in the Collar Hill Cemetery before his four sons began dividing up his vast holdings.

*In 1846 the land south of the Canal was surveyed into streets and lots. The same was done north of the Canal by 1849, although the final town survey by John Burchill was not completed until after the incorporation of the Village in 1860. The new streets probably acquired their present names at that time and provide capsule records of the history of the Village and, indeed of the new Canadian nation as well. The following is a record of the street names (**shown in bold**) as they appear to have been attributed.*

James **Bruce**, 8th Earl of **Elgin** and 12th Earl of Kincardine was Prime Minister of Canada but is more notoriously known for having earlier pillaged ancient artefacts from Greece for the British Museum. Marching down St. Lawrence St. the Duke of **Wellington** and Sir Isaac **Brock** speak to our British military history and the struggles to maintain British-Canadian independence in the Americas. As well as possessing one of the most important U.E.L. surnames in Eastern Ontario, Lieutenant General, Sir Gordon **Drummond**, first provided estimates for building the Rideau Canal and dispatched Royal Engineers to determine its best route. Sir John **Colborne**, was Lieutenant Governor of Ontario from 1828 to 1836. **Charlotte**, was the eldest of William Merrick's daughters and is buried with her husband Elisha **Collar** in the cemetery at the foot of the street named for her. While Terance Merrick was married to **Amelia** Sherwood.

The streets running south from Main on the west side of St Lawrence, **St. John** and **St. Patrick** spiritually embrace the Catholic Church, St. Ann's. On the other side of St. Lawrence, **Church** Street would most obviously be named for the Holy Trinity Church on the corner, but . . . wait a minute; perhaps it was named for Basil Church, Merrickville's colourful luminary in the mid 1800's.

While there were a number of famous "Reads" in Merrickville's history, Read Street is likely named for public spirited William C. **Read**, one of the 1860 inaugural Village councillors. Of course **William** Merrick Sr. is remembered in the street named for him near the location of his hard hewn mills.

Thus in the street names is told the history of the Village and indeed of Canada itself. But the story is incomplete. Who was **Julia** and who was **Lewis**, lying between Drummond and Colborne? This writer is unable to track down these clearly very important people. If you can help, why not drop us a note.

Old Town Hall Memories John Beamish, Ottawa

Life member John Beamish wrote to give spirit to our Fall, 2009 newsletter feature on the "Old Town Hall" as a theatre in the early 20th century.

Your newsletter on the Old Town Hall brought back many memories.

My dad, (1885) described one incident that happened on the Chatagua Circuit. One of the actors announced he wished to recite a poem that had just been published.

As he strode back and forth reciting the poem, he stopped and stated he could not remember the next line.

Seated near the front, was a town character who had a little too much to drink and spoke out "Barns and woodsheds are my bedrooms". The astonished actor replied, "Thank you, thank you" leaving the audience astonished.

As well in one of the plays on the 17th of March Uncle Ed Adams on stage began talking with my brother also on stage and I thought "what an odd time to have a conversation?" Vince later explained that Ed had forgotten his next line.



Merrickville Old Town Hall
Photo 2009 J Cowan

Buoys Will be Buoys, or maybe not. The Early Rideau markers

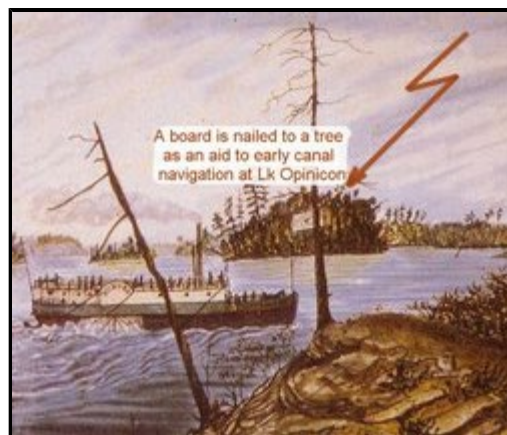
When the Rideau opened in 1832, the sluices and gates at the locks were ready to receive vessels, but how about marking the route between them?

The first responses were quite primitive, albeit effective. The "low marshy lands" in the estuary of the Cataraqui at Kingston were particularly difficult to negotiate. In 1834, Edward J. Barker reported that the channel was marked by long poles stuck in the mud, but "so imperfectly, as to render it almost impossible to run this part of the route during the night, unless the moon shines brightly." Further along, the drowned lands were no problem.

There, the cleared channel was marked by the line of standing trees, complemented by stakes driven into the ground, and by, "marks" on the trees; Thomas Burrowes, Clerk of the Works at the Kingston end - and prolific amateur artist to boot! - recorded other navigation aids.

In others, Thomas Burrowes recorded stone-filled barrels and a spar located close to the shore, and painted posts in Mud Lake and Upper Rideau Lake. In other sections, cedar bushes attached to posts, so called "brush buoys" were supplemented by "numbered board markers with white side towards channel and black toward shoal."

Gradually, improvements were made, first with floating platforms anchored with chained stones (which drifted), then cedar bushes wired to poles



Thomas Burrowes image of Opinicon Lake with the steamer Hunter en route to Bytown aided by a wooden sign-post nailed to a shoreline tree.

sunk in the river bed. Over the years numerous styles of fixed buoys were installed. All attempts suffered from the impact of spring ice. It was not until 1932, 100 years after the opening of the Canal, that the Trent Waterway style spar-buoys were in place over the whole length of the canal, all distributed and emplaced by the hard-worked "Buoy Scows".



Early Canal navigational aid

Excerpt in part from Friends of the Rideau winter/spring 2007. Article: Byways #23 "From Brush Poles to Spar-buoys:" Marking The Channel by Professor Brian Osborne

The Lady in Blue . . . Mystery visitor to Burritts Rapids

The red-haired lady in blue, Kathleen McBride, arrived in Burritts Rapids sometime in the 1860s on an early summer's day, long after the Irish labourers and the British army had finished the Rideau Canal. Kathleen McBride took a room in the hotel beside the canal bridge. She rented one room and the maid reported that she had brought with her only one of everything - one blue dress, one pair of shoes, one brush, one suitcase.

Throughout her stay, Kathleen spoke to no one. All summer and into the fall, her flowing red tresses and long trailing blue gown travelled slowly on the path from tip to tip. Many a long hour she spent, standing on the upriver hill at the end of the island.

She would look out over the Rideau River where the water divides, part into the canal and part downriver to the dam. Often, she stood at the dam watching the water roaring down the sluiceway as it released the surplus water. Most other time she spent walking the mile along the bank of the canal and the river, searching the water. What was she searching for, a son, a husband, a lover? Where could he have gone? Was he one of the many killed by accident during the canal construction? Did he die of the dreaded fever? Had he wandered off, work done, to seek a new life somewhere in America?

Kathleen went out for her last search on the moonlit night of October 31st, with frost crisp underfoot and the water bright and cold. She searched and searched, we know not where or why. Two days later a torn piece of blue satin dress was found on the bank, where the new bridge crosses the river in the middle of the village. In those days most of the countryside was forest, and wild animals abounded. Kathleen McBride might have drowned or been eaten by the bears.

As the years went by, whispers spread that on moonlit nights on the tip to tip trail near the dam, and near the little hill at the top end, Kathleen appears. The red-haired lady in blue still searches, walking or floating through the air, with her torn dress clutched to her breast. Some have been close enough to feel the chill in the air as she passes by. Some have been close enough to hear a tiny keening cry as she searches on. As the decades pass, the sightings still continue. So, if by chance you venture out on a summer's eve and she passes you by in the moonlight, please move to the side so you don't hinder her everlasting search.

Sources: "Edukit", Rideau Canal Office, Parks Canada, 2000 Ken Watson website Rideau-info.com

Celebrating Spring

In April we enjoyed our Spring Dinner in the new Locali's restaurant in the Old Town Hall. Following a delicious dinner, a capacity crowd welcomed special guest Major James Walsh of the North West Mounted Police as portrayed by historical re-enactor, Brian Porter. In the person of Brockville born Major Walsh he regaled us with some of his more memorable anecdotes and recollections of his relationship with the famous Sioux leader Sitting Bull. We are grateful to Brian Porter for this entertaining performance.

Heritage Award of Merit

In 2002, the Merrickville and district Historical Society established a "Heritage award of Merit" to be given to individuals who have contributed over time to the celebration and preservation of the history and heritage of our region. Past winners have included Duncan and Jane Douglas, first President and secretary of the Historical Society, Alice Hughes, Robert and Nora Nichols, Phyllis Walker, James Pendergast, Gary Clarke, Thomas Manning, Lenore Newman, Denis Faulkner and a number of residents and business owners who through their diligent efforts in restoring their properties with historical sensitivity have helped to maintain the character of the Village and area.



John and Sheena Cowan receiving the Merrickville and District Historical Society Heritage Award of Merit at the Spring Dinner, April 27, 2010

Editors note

This year, Sheena and I were appreciative recipients of the honour for our 15 year participation in the activities and management of the Historical Society. It is nice to be recognized for something you love to do. Although we are "natives" of a strange and distant country, namely Toronto, and expect to be returning there soon, we will continue to be interested in the fascinating history of this area, and will continue to support the efforts of the Merrickville and District Historical Society to preserve it.

John and Sheena Cowan

Help Wanted - this means YOU! Volunteer Opportunities

As usual, we are looking for volunteer help in several areas. This is particularly important in this year of curtailed funding. It would be great if you can help us make our plans a big success.

The Historical Society is composed entirely of Volunteers who develop and present our events and programs. There are numerous enjoyable programs, a few of which are listed below and we welcome your involvement. Why not look at the categories below and indicate to us your area of interest.

Blockhouse Museum visitor reception

During the Spring and Fall, before the hiring of summer interpreters, Volunteers on the weekend, greet Visitors to the Blockhouse. If you have even a few hours to spare and would like to enjoy meeting and greeting our interested (and interesting) visitors, why not contact Ellen Hackett, Volunteer Chair, at telephone, 613- 269-2621

Genealogical/Archival Research

Nearly every month we receive enquiries from all over the world from people asking about their Merrickville ancestors. At this point, we have no one who is able spend time providing information for them. The resources are here. Birth and Burial records, Alice Hughes genealogical records, but we need an individual who can put the pieces of the puzzle together to answer questions.

Monthly Speakers Series

The arrangement of speakers for our monthly lectures brings us in contact with all sorts of interesting people. Merrickville has hundreds of interesting stories. If you have suggestions for a person or party to address us, or a subject you would like to hear about, Victor Suthren, Program Chair would like to hear from you. 613-269-3609

Administrative/Computer Assistance

Of course we are always in need of computer adept folks who can help with record keeping and digital recording of archival records. We would be pleased to hear from you if you can help in any of our activities.

Membership Matters

After holding the cost of membership constant for ten years we have finally yielded, as the Banks and Utility Companies say, to the need for "changes" to our membership fees. Who are we kidding? We mean increases.

The following Historical Society Fee structure was approved at an executive meeting and became effective March 30, 2010.

Individual annual dues - \$10.00
Annual Family dues 2+ persons - \$15.00
Life Membership each - \$100.00

With apologies again for sounding like Hydro, these "changes" are necessary to maintain the high level of activities and services to which you are accustomed. (At least we are not trying to recover the debt accumulated as a result of poor investment decisions - our investments are just fine.)

We hope you will understand the need for these increases and will continue to provide us with your much appreciated support.

Thank you,

Sheena Cowan, Membership Chair

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