

# The Grand Dispatch

A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area.

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## The Grand River Naval Depot

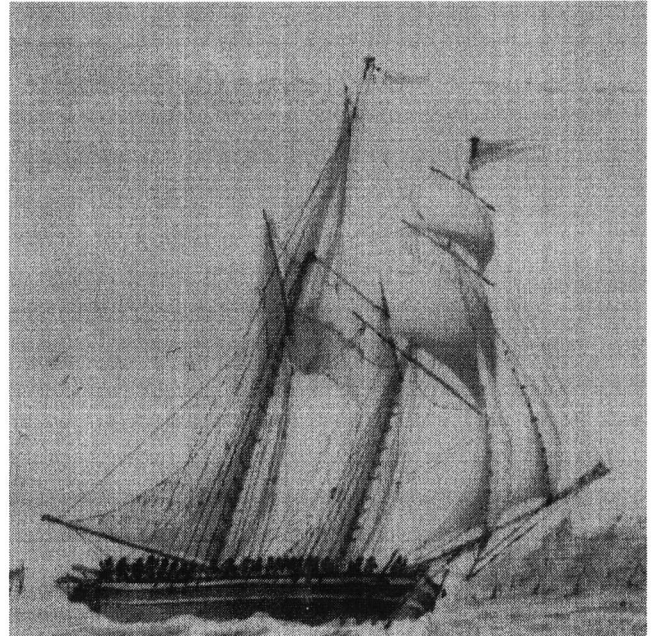
As promised in the last Dispatch, John Docker has taken pen to hand and has put together a condensed history about the Grand River Naval Depot which was located mostly on the east side of the Grand River at Port Maitland. As I am not aware of any sketches or paintings depicting this depot, I travelled to Discovery Harbour at Penetanguishene in July to photograph the restored naval depot located there. Here can be found buildings of the same era and design as formerly found at Port Maitland. Also, in conjunction with Discovery Harbour, the Marine Heritage Association, maintain and sail a number of replica ships, one of those being the Tecumseth.

### Naval Depot, at Mouth of Grand River by John Thornley Docker

My earliest recollections of Port Maitland are walking to the end of the pier and hamburgers. My parents used to go to the Maitland Arms for an ale and would give me money to go down the street for a hamburger. Perhaps it was because I was allowed to go there on my own, that I thought Canadian hamburgers were terrific! At that time there were lots of fishing boats coming into Port, nets were drying on the shore, and there was a place to buy fish right off the boats. Years later I noticed a historical marker in the playground in Esplanade Park telling about the Grand River Naval Depot.

Last year Estelle Pringle, director of Dunnville District Heritage Association's History-Genealogy

Room, asked me to do research on this Naval Depot for the Heritage Association. My research has resulted in a book entitled *The Grand River Naval Depot*, which will be published by the Dunnville District Heritage Association at Heritage Day next February. Bill Warnick asked me to write an article for *The Grand Dispatch* on some of my findings. I hope that this brief introduction will make you want to read the story of the depot when the history is published next year.

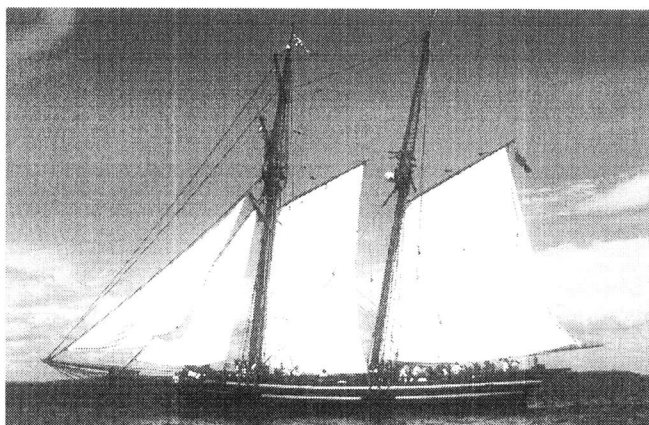


"His Majesty's Schooner SAUK at the mouth of the St. Clair River, Sarnia/Port Huron, circa 1817.

Photo provided by; Royal Ontario Museum

Because of the fear of an American attack on the north shore of Lake Erie, in the year 1815, the

British Government claimed three naval reserves comprising 295 acres, near the mouth of the Grand River. The smallest one, containing 30 acres was on Mohawk Bay, on the eastern side of Mohawk Point. The second at Barbet Point, contained 33 acres. (Some maps called it "Barb Point" because of its barbed shape. That is probably how it got its name but "Barbet" may also come from the French word "Barbette" denoting a form of fortification where cannons are fired over a parapet.) The largest property containing 232 acres lay on both sides of the mouth of the Grand River but most of the land was on the east side in Sherbrooke Township.

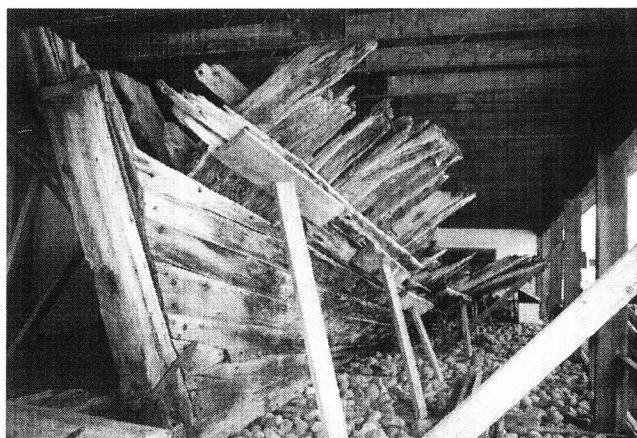


Replica of the HMS Tecumseth sails the Great Lakes today.  
Photo Courtesy; Discovery Harbour, Penetanguishene, ON

Late in the summer of 1815, a crew of officers and craftsmen, lent from the Kingston Yard, arrived at the mouth of the Grand, under the command of Captain William Bouchier, to search for the best site for the Naval Establishment and to begin construction. They decided to locate the depot behind the sand hills on the east side of the river. No explicit statement ordering the setting up of a permanent station on the Grand River has been found, but it seems the base grew from this beginning.

In 1816 the British force on Lake Erie consisted of four schooners: the H.M.S. Tecumseth and the H.M.S. Newash, sister ships newly completed at Chippawa Creek, with four guns each; and the

H.M.S. Huron and the H. M. S. Sauk, with one gun each. There were also at least four smaller gun boats classed as "Durham" boats. These ships made their home at the new naval base at the mouth of the Grand River. They were used primarily for transporting men and stores from post to post.

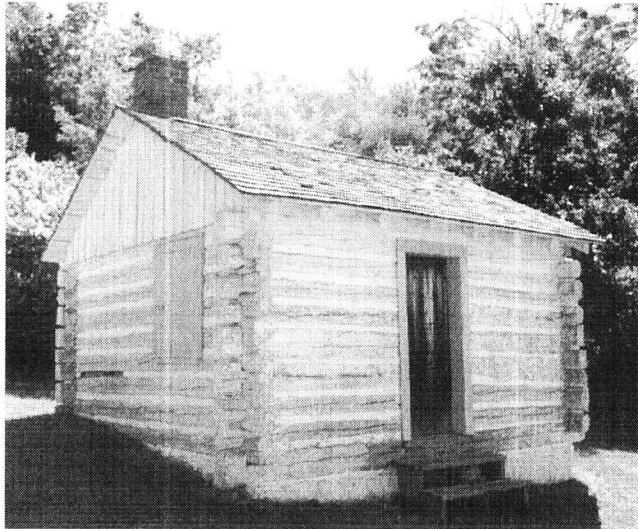


HMS Tecumseth remains can be seen at Penetanguishene  
William A. Warnick photo collection

The Tecumseth and the Newash were built during the flurry of building activity near the end of the War of 1812. They were built as fighting ships but before they could be launched, the war was over. The Tecumseth had a 70' 6" gun deck, weighed 166 tons and carried 48 men. The Newash, a schooner with brigantine rigging was the same size as her sister ship but could carry 57 men. The smaller schooners Huron and Sauk were captured from the United States Navy at Fort Erie on August 12, 1814. The Huron, formerly the USS Ohio, weighed 66 tons and the Sauk, formerly the USS Somers, weighed 87 tons. The Tecumseth and the Newash ran aground on the sand bar in 1816 which led to their being replaced by smaller vessels, the Confiance and the Surprize from Lake Huron. The Confiance, armed with one 24 pounder cannon, weighed 63 tons. The Surprize armed with one long 24 pounder and another gun in the hold, weighed 52 tons and had a crew of five officers and thirty-one seamen and soldiers.

By May, 1816, the number of enlisted men

establishment. In June of 1834, the inland Naval Establishment in Canada was officially abolished. The next year Thomas Rolph of Ancaster in describing various parts of the country, as he saw them, described the mouth of the Grand:



Office of the Clerk in Charge as it might have been at the Grand River Depot.

William A. Warnick Photo Collection

“At the mouth of the stream there is yet the remains of the naval station, erected there during the last war. The sailors and mariners, as also the arms and ammunition have been long since removed and all that remains to tell the visitor where the huge leviathans of the lake spread their canvas to the breeze, or where the chivalry of Canada with firm resolve rallied around the banner of old England are a few dilapidated buildings and barracks whitened and bleached with the storms, and reeking in every passing gale, fit representatives of the destruction for which they were intended; — and being convincing evidence of the progress of time, and the final dissolution of all things terrestrial. The bar in the mouth of the River is sufficiently deep to admit the largest vessel on the lake to pass and proceed directly up to Dunnville. This is a remarkably fine harbour, and vessels in the greatest storms have entered with the utmost safety.”



Surgeon's quarters and dispensary they as might have been built at the Grand River Depot.

William A. Warnick Photo Collection

When the Mackenzie Rebellion broke out in 1837, The Lakeshore Volunteer Militia was stationed at the naval station. By 1851 the depot was finally closed, but there was new activity at Port Maitland.

*This is to  
certify, that*

*has been duly mustered  
in accordance with  
His Majesty's Regulations  
at the Royal Naval  
Establishment, in  
Penetanguishene, Upper  
Canada, in this year  
of our Lord, Eighteen  
Hundred and Twenty.*

*George Chiles*

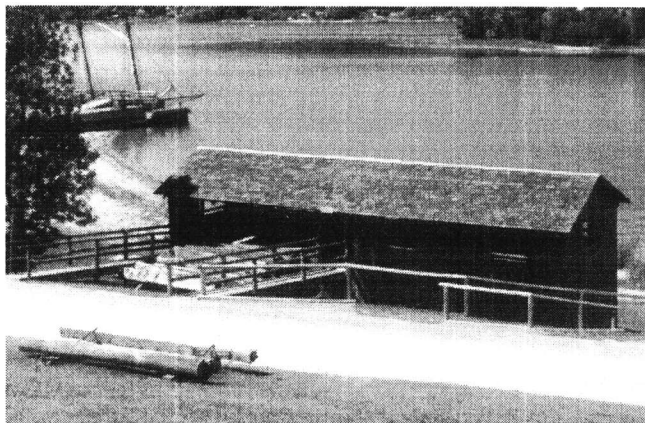
*Clerk-in-Charge*

Mustered-up Pass for ordinary seaman to receive monthly rations.

The port was filled with steamers coming to take on supplies of firewood, schooners putting in for supplies, and Grand River scows and barges waiting to be towed to Buffalo. During extreme gales, so common on Lake Erie, the harbour was packed with hundred of vessels seeking shelter. At the end of the century Port Maitland had become an important commercial fishing port and a popular summer holiday resort.

By 1900, the old buildings of the Naval

stationed at the Grand River Naval Establishment had grown to 187. In addition there were eight men in the Civil Establishment who served as storekeepers, clerks, quartermaster of shipwrights and other artificers (artisans). What did the Grand River Naval Depot look like? A 1820 survey lists the following buildings on the east side of the river.



Lower Dockyard as it might have looked at the Grand River Depot in 1815.

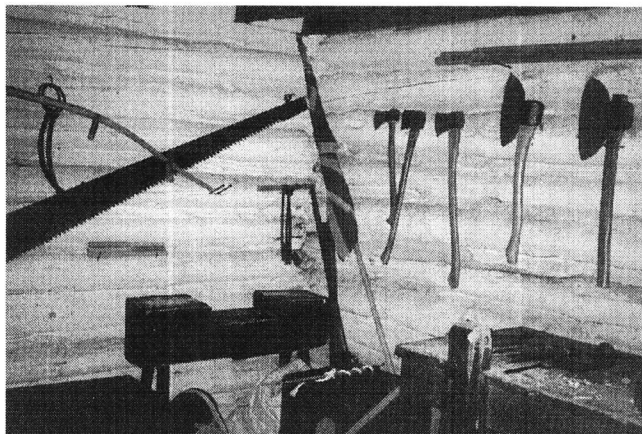
William A. Warnick Photo Collection

1. A blacksmith's shop, with two fires, a log hut with a shingled roof.
2. A steam kiln.
3. A temporary shed, framed and boarded, with a boarded roof with a mould loft over it, used in ship building.
4. A log hut with a shingled roof, occupied by the commander of the depot.
5. The shipwrights' barracks, a log hut with a shingled roof.
6. A quartermaster's dwelling house, a log hut with a shingled roof.
7. The naval store, a log building with a shingled roof.
8. A surgeon's quarters and dispensary, a log hut with a shingled roof.
9. A log hut with a shingled roof, used for an armoury.
10. A log hut used as a bake-house with a shingled roof.
11. A log building, used as the office and quarters of the clerk in charge.
12. A military barracks, a log building.
13. The stable, a log hut, with a boarded roof.
14. The storehouse, a log building.
15. A temporary framed building, used for stores.
16. A dwelling house for the Captain of the Surprise, a log building.
17. The naval mess-room, a log building with a kitchen and shingled roof.
18. The military officer's quarters, a log hut.
19. A vegetable store, a log hut with a boarded roof.
20. A wharf.

Negotiations between the British Government and Washington resulted in the Rush-Bagot agreement which was to influence policy with respect to the future defence of the Canadas. The new convention became effective April 28, 1817 and was formally endorsed by the participating governments October 20, 1818. The agreement demilitarized the lakes and limited Britain to four armed vessels, not exceeding 100 tons, each with one 18-pounder cannon: one on Champlain, one on Ontario, and two on the Upper Lakes. From then on there was a steady reduction in personnel at the Grand River Depot. The Confidence, Surprise, Huron, and Sauk were placed in the state of "ordinary" which meant their armaments, rigging, and masts were removed, but their hulls maintained in a state of readiness should hostilities with the Americans resurface. The establishment became a home for ships in "ordinary" and it was thereafter sometimes referred to by the officials at Kingston as "The Grand River Ordinary". Most of the men were paid off on June 13, 1817 but the depot still continued as a naval and military presence on Lake Erie to monitor American sailing activities.

Over the next years, as the international situation showed signs of improvement and money from Great Britain became tighter, the Naval Department at Kingston continued to reduce the Grand River

Depot had disappeared but the government still held the land on both sides of the river as naval reserves. The naval reserves were formally relinquished by the Crown in 1915. The largest reserve on the east side of the river was sold to the Toronto, Hamilton and Buffalo Railway. Years later the T. H. & B. subdivided a portion of the area on the east side of the river into lots and sublet the land to summer residents who built cottages on the site. This land was sold by the T. H. & B. October 29, 1990, to the Beckley Beach Cottagers' Corporation. The naval reserves at Mohawk Bay and at Barbet Point were sold to the farmers whose farms adjoined them. In 1957 the outer point of the former Barbet Point Reserve was purchased by the Department of Lands and Forests. On this seventeen hectares of land, Rock Point Provincial



Quartermaster's dwelling and repair shed with tools of the era.  
William A. Warnick Photo Collection

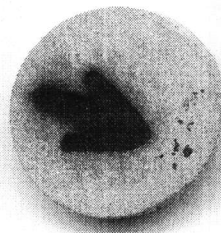
Park was established.

Today the land once set aside to defend the Canadian border from the threat of invading American forces is now used for farming, camp sites, or for summer cottages. Where a British Naval Depot existed, people of all ages come each summer to relax and enjoy swimming, boating, fishing, and hiking.

In the village of Port Maitland, on the west side of the Grand River, the municipality retains a 66 foot

strip along the water's edge and a small triangle at the end of the pier. This public land called Esplanade Park is now a children's playground, a picnic area, and a boat launch ramp. Here, on the west bank of the mouth of the Grand River, a plaque, erected by the Archeological and Historical Sites Board, Department of Public Records and Archives of Ontario, was dedicated July 13, 1969. It outlines the history of the Grand River Naval Depot. If it were not for this plaque, few would ever know that in this area there was once a significant naval installation, since nothing of it remains.

By John Thornley Docker



Did you know that naval ordinary men were recruited by having the unlucky fortune to find a wooden coin under the foam in their beer?

### **It is time to thank those people who so greatly contributed to this issue!**

A thank-you goes out to all those who helped in whatever way they could to put together this issue of the Grand Dispatch. First, a big thanks to John Docker who wrote the article. I look forward to his book being published in February 2001. Then to the staff at Discovery Harbour in Penetanguishene and St. Marie Among the Hurons in Midland. I think of Jason, a great tour guide and Mike Serafin the Program Co-ordinator at Discovery Harbour. Also, Bill Brodeur and his staff at St. Marie Among the Hurons, who loaned me the slides of the Tecumseth. At Last, but not least to Linda Tanaka, the Rights and Reproductions Coordinator at the Royal Ontario Museum, who helped me locate and

then arranged deliverer of the sketch of the Sauk.

### **From Old Newspapers and Books Etc., Etc.**

**The Reform Press; 108 years ago (1892)** Port Maitland, Several weeks ago Dell Thompson unearthed at Port Maitland a boat 40 feet long and 8 feet wide, skiff built. It was found imbedded in the sand a few feet from shore; opposite the residence of Mr. John Miskins, and had evidently laid there between 80 and 100 years. Besides a wagon load of bones supposed to have belonged to a human being were found in it, as well as a couple of knives, a pistol and an auger. A hole had been bored in the bottom, proving the boat was scuttled. The remains of two other boats lay on the beach. It is supposed that a small fleet had been sunk there during the war of 1812.

### **Looking for someone!**

A couple of months ago, I started the "Looking for someone" column. To date no one has responded, either by answering my query or by suggesting anyone they would like to find. Please let me know if there is someone you would like to locate. Oh,

and don't forget to let me know if you know where someone is that we are looking for.

### **In Memoriam**

I am pleased to say that to my knowledge there is no one associated with Beckley Beach who has passed on since our last Dispatch.

### **Do you know anyone who wants a Dispatch?**

If you know anyone who wants the "**Grand Dispatch**," have them send me a book of stamps. I will mail one Dispatch for every two stamps.

### **Mailing Address**

William Arthur Warnick  
180 Rosslyn Ave. South  
HAMILTON, ON L8M 3J5  
E-mail: [wwarnick@cogeco.ca](mailto:wwarnick@cogeco.ca)  
Phone: (905) 549-6086  
Fax: (905) 549-6086 (You should call first)

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