

The Grand Dispatch

A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area.

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The Feeder Canal and its effect on Port Maitland

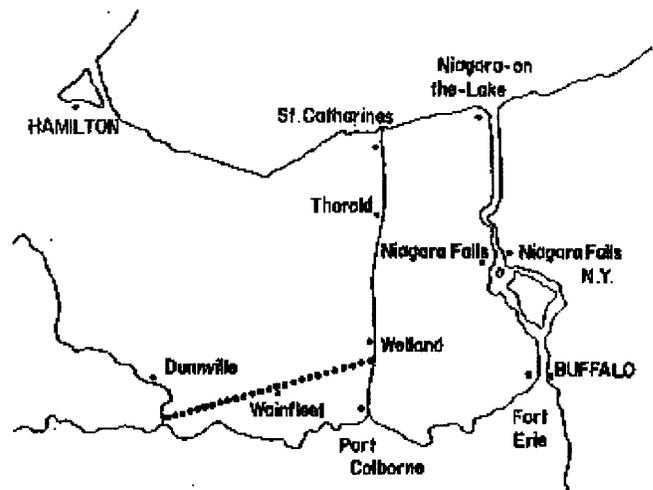
The Feeder Canal has served many Purposes

If there is one subject about Port Maitland that intimidates me more than the history of the Feeder Canal, I don't know what it is. My purpose for writing this article is simple. I did so in answer to a request. Much of Port Maitland history parallels that of the Feeder Canal. This is not to say I would have nothing to write about had it not been for the Feeder Canal, but clearly it has coloured much of what Port Maitland was to become. Many books, thesis and studies have been published about the Welland Canal and its feeder. My eight page historyletter can only at best scratch the surface of one small aspect of what we know as the Feeder Canal.

The Feeder Canal was not at first built to be a transportation corridor for ships but rather as a ditch to supply water to the larger Welland Canal. William Hamilton Merritt wanted it to provide water to his mills. Our Feeder Canal as it eventually developed was not the first choice of the builders of the Welland Canal. This only came about as a result of construction difficulties on the Welland River.

With the opening of the first Welland Canal on November 29, 1829, contracts were let to deepen the Feeder Canal. By July 1830, the Feeder was no longer a ditch, but a full-fledged transportation

canal. The shallow sand bar at the mouth of the Grand River was now an obstacle, as during the shipping season the depth of only seven feet was insufficient. In 1831, the sand bar was dredged to a depth of nine feet allowing the vessels of that day entry to the Grand River.



The first Welland Canal consisted of forty locks. It did not go from St. Catharines to Port Colborne as it does today. It opened into Lake Ontario at Port Dalhousie. Today, Port Dalhousie is part of the City of St. Catharines. You can see a portion of the original canal while driving on the Queen Elizabeth Way at St. Catharines. While crossing the Henley Bridge, look toward the lake and you will see the former village of Port Dalhousie and the Henley rowing course. You will have just crossed the first Welland Canal! From Lake Ontario the canal continued south through Shipton's Corner now St.

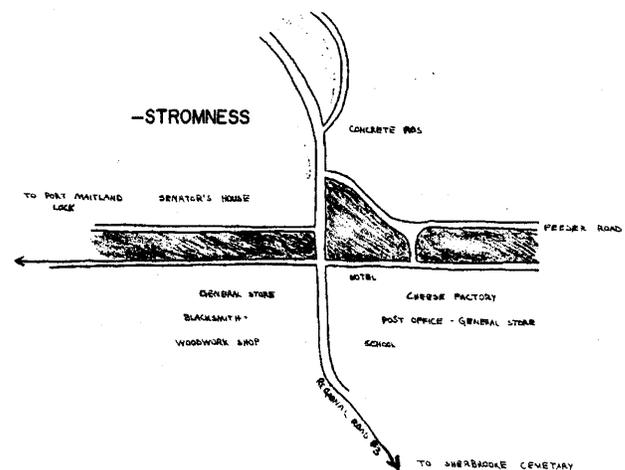
Catharines. It then climbed the escarpment at Merriton, and Thorold, continuing south to Allanburg and Port Robinson, until it reached the Welland River, sometimes known as Chippawa Creek. At this point it turned sharply to the east entering the upper Niagara River at the Town of Chippawa. From there horses or oxen would tow the schooners and barges to Fort Erie where they would then be on their own to make their way. The Erie Barge Canal had only recently been opened (October 26, 1825), providing a route to the Atlantic via New York City. The entrance into the Niagara river at Chippawa was so close to the edge of the falls and presented considerable danger to the schooners and barges. It was discovered that if the vessels remained tied to the horses or oxen and headed toward the centre of the river, it was much easier for the animals to tow them against the strong current.

By July 1830, the Feeder Canal had taken on a more important role. However, it never lost the designation "Feeder Canal," and for many years would be an important transportation link joining the Grand River to Lake Ontario. The Colonial Advocate reported on July 1, 1830. *We learn from St. Catharines, that the water was let into the canal on Saturday the 19th ult. the excavation having been completed on that day. On the Sunday following it had reached the deep cut. There are now four arks on their way from Brantford, on the canal, each loaded with about 400 bbls. of flour, the property of Messrs. Jackson & Ives.*

It was not until 1833, that the cut was dug to Port Colborne allowing the canal to extend to that city and enter Lake Erie at that point. This new canal intersected with the Feeder Canal at what was then called the Junction, and from here the water was supplied by the Feeder Canal to the locks of the original canal. Present day Welland now includes the former Junction.

For the first fifteen years the Feeder Canal did not

open into the Grand River at Port Maitland. Instead it left the Junction heading westward to Broad Creek now Stromness, and from there veered northwesterly to Dunnville. With the building of the thirty-two lock second Welland Canal in 1842 the section between Stromness and Port Maitland was finally excavated. At this time a stone lock measuring one hundred and eighty-five feet in length, forty-five in width with a nine foot mitre sill was built. This lock when first built was said to be one of the best if not the best on the Welland Canal. It would be designated lock number "Twenty-seven." We pass this lock each time we drive along the Feeder Canal when entering Beckley Beach. The major significance of this lock was that vessels could travel from the lower Grand River to the



Stromness Circa 1962, showing buildings which were long since removed or used for other purposes.

upper Grand.

Until the connection was made between Port Maitland and Stromness, ships had to tie-up at Dunnville in the lower river and off load. The cargo would then be reloaded onto another ship or barge and sent up the river as far as Brantford or down the Feeder Canal passing Stromness, then onto the Junction and Lake Ontario. With the building of this lock and short extension of the Feeder Canal to Port Maitland, the Welland Canal now had two Lake Erie harbours. During the period of 1845 - 1850 while the renovations to the Welland Canal between Welland and Lake Erie that

section was unavailable for vessel movement. During this five year period the Feeder Canal was put to extensive use. As many as five hundred and seventy-five vessels passed up or down the feeder each year carrying grain for Cleveland, lumber for building Chicago, sand and gravel for building piers and roads throughout the Great Lakes, and plaster of paris for Buffalo. Cheese manufactured at Port Maitland and Stromness was shipped throughout the United States as was cord wood to heat homes. Many other products left and arrived daily during the navigational season. Port Maitland had the benefit of being an excellent early spring harbour as the ice came out of the lake a number of weeks earlier at Port Maitland than it did at Port Colborne.

There has always been some dispute about where the canal should be built. Many suggested that Port Colborne was not the best choice as the waters off its harbour was shallow and the lake had a rock bottom. When the fourth canal was built in 1929-1932, considerable blasting was required off that harbour to permit the passage of the new and larger ships that would now use the canal. In the hotly contested federal election of 1904 the following excerpt is found in the Reform press. *The dredging away of the bar of gravel outside Port Maitland harbor has evidently been overlooked in discussions of the campaign. It puts the finishing touch on one of the best harbors on the norther shore of Lake Erie, and a large quantity of this fine gravel was used in the concrete work of the Port Maitland Lock. This bar was one of the obstacles mentioned, when the building of elevators either at Port Colborne or Port Maitland was the all-important question. It was then said that a new canal could be made from Port Maitland without any rock excavation, and done for less than to build breakwaters and blast the rock at Port Colborne. It will be remembered that a party from Port Colborne on a tug accidentally (?) ran upon the bar, which was called a rock. This bar was an important factor in depriving Port Maitland of the*

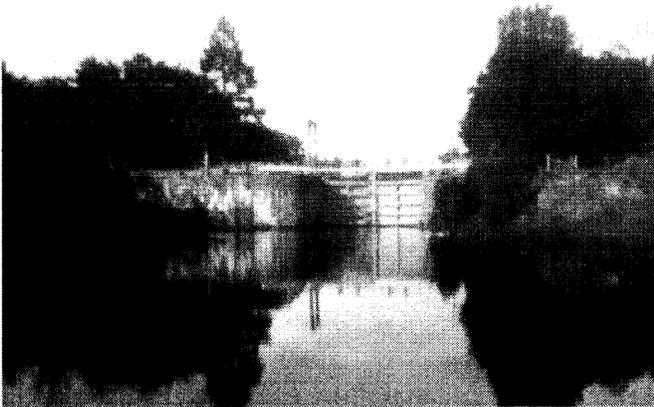
Government work. Had it been removed previously the result might have been different. Who will deny that the dredging at Port Maitland and up to the progressive town of Dunnville was a good investment.

In an earlier Reform Press of 1881 the following paragraph is found. *As usual the harbor at Port Maitland is open much earlier than the lower ports of Lake Erie. There is considerable less ice in the Lake. The prevalence of north or east winds drives the ice from the north shore so that vessels could clear for western ports with a fair prospect of reaching their destinations. Vessels of light draft can pass from the lower lake via the Feeder as soon as the water is let into the canal. Some time will elapse before Port Colborne will be available. Port Maitland is one of the best ports on Lake Erie, being easy of access in foul weather and having ample depths of water for the largest vessels on the lake. The harbor is completely land locked and capacious enough to accommodate all the shipping on Lake Erie. It does appear strange that all these advantages should have been ignored in locating the Lake Erie entrance to the Welland Canal, and many millions expended in constructing an artificial harbor that is not safe to enter in foul weather and has but little room in case of a rush for safety during the storms which are so prevalent on Lake Erie.*

Various dates also have been suggested for the closing of the Feeder Canal, some as early as the 1890's. One date offered is found in the "Grand Heritage" which provides this account. *The last attempt to use the canal was in 1890 when a cargo of lumber was shipped from Bronte to Allanburg aboard the Rapid City and here switched off into the Feeder Canal to Dunnville. By this time, the Feeder was in bad shape: in some places, the towpath had vanished and the seldom-used bridges were badly rusted. After several attempts, the crew and the teamster hired to tow the schooner along the canal gave up. The teamster returned to*

Allanburg and the crew settled down for some sleep before deciding how to proceed.

At the risk of finding myself in conflict with those who have studied the Feeder Canal at length, I must offer you this from The Reform Press dated August 27, 1890. *This Wednesday evening the Dixie will leave the dock lower river, at 7 o'clock for the Lock at Corcoran's residence, Stromness, where all arrangements are complete for a grand garden party. The ladies of St. Michael's congregation will serve refreshments on grounds which together with the admission fee is set at the very reasonable figure of 25¢. The Dixie will make two trips from the grounds, one at 11 p.m., the other after midnight.*



West entrance to Feeder Canal at Port Maitland. Circa 1915
Photo Courtesy; Late Earl M. Siddall

Or this from the Dunnville Chronicle dated June 10, 1904. *The lock at Port Maitland is to be repaired. The flooring which is decaying and leaking will be taken up and replaced by a new one. Four new lock gates are also to be built, and new mitre sills to be put in. In order to effect these repairs a temporary dam will have to be constructed above the lock and another below it. The work will be commenced immediately and will probably occupy some three to four weeks. It will be under the supervision of Mr. J. E. Scott, the Deputy Superintendent. Navigation on that portion of the Feeder between Stromness and Port*

Maitland will necessarily be suspended during the time the lock is under repair.

And this from yet another source dated July 1905. *Port Maitland to Port Dalhousie, Welland Canal lighting and lock operation now by electricity.*

This last bit of information has proven very difficult to support. Carroll Kenney who was born in 1909, and grew up in the former TH&B station near lock twenty-seven claims that this lock was never electrified and points to the hand wenches that sat on the lock until the 1940's or 50's as proof that it remained hand-operated until it closed. Carroll Kenney, recalls barges being moved up and down the canal and recalled at least one serious accident taking place within the Port Maitland lock. During the building of the nine foot pavement from Stromness to Dunnville in 1922, barges were used to haul gravel from Port Maitland to the construction site via the Feeder Canal.

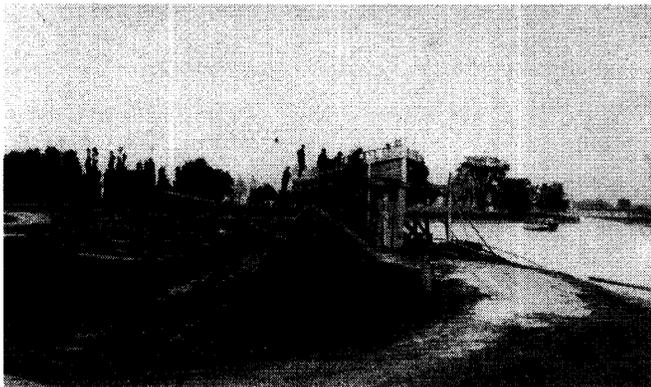
In a book called "A Feasibility Study on the Welland Feeder Canal," published 1979 by; Rehabilitate the Old Feeder Canal Association, Inc., we find the following paragraph. *Local people used the canal for pleasure trips but no one planned major industrial activities around the canal. In 1908 a load of wood was sent down the Feeder to serve as trolley line ties. That was the last major commercial activity on the Feeder.*

I can site many incidents of use of the Feeder Canal well into the twentieth century, some found in documents, other from stories told by old-timers who lived and worked on the Feeder Canal. Harry Siddall, while in his early twenties was badly injured in lock twenty-seven having his leg pinned between two barges being towed through the lock. Harry was born in 1891. You do the math!

It remains unclear to me, when the first pier was built at Port Maitland. I have found it suggested that one was in place as early as 1812. From an

that one was in place as early as 1812. From an article in the Dunnville Chronicle dated February 17, 1938, I find the following quote, *“Two British men of war were stationed there some time after the war of 1812. At that time the piers were even with the water and all moss covered.”*

We find a reference to building a pier at Port Maitland in “A Guide to THE GRAND RIVER CANAL.” On page 9 of this book is the following paragraph. *In the early summer of 1831, Port Maitland probably offered little more than a wharf and perhaps a store house for transhipment of cargo from vessels unable to navigate the bar to those which could: at a meeting of the Directors of the Welland Canal Company on May 2, 1831, it was “Resolved Pier to be erected at mouth of Grand River so long as it did not exceed £ 3000.”*



Shipbuilding in Stromness. This boat is on the north side of Feeder. You are looking toward Wainfleet.

Photo Courtesy; Arthur Clark

Senator Lachlan McCallum was born in Tiree, Argyshire Northern Scotland on March 15, 1823 he immigrated to Canada in 1842. A Conservative in politics, he served on Moulton Township Council as Reeve before entering federal politics. In 1877, he was appointed to the Senate a position he held until his death on January 16, 1903. It is not so much Senator McCallum’s political career that is of interest to this story as it is his commercial ventures. To say that he owned the town may be a bit overstating the facts, but not by much!

His early commercial career began with a saw-mill he owned at Stromness. Using lumber cut from his own local forest he began his shipbuilding business at Stromness. Many of the ships built in Stromness remained the property of Senator McCallum as he assembled his shipping and contracting business, much of which was supported with contracts to construct and repairs locks and piers along the Welland and the Grand River Canals. Senator McCallum owned a cheese factory at Stromness and was well known for producing quality cheese.



Senator Lachlan McCallum’s stately home on north shore of Feeder Canal, west of Stromness.

Photo Courtesy; Arthur Clark

Early Moulton and Sherbrooke Township maps give some indication as to the vast holding that Senator McCallum had in these townships. Large tracts of land on both side of the Feeder Canal extending from Port Maitland to Wainfleet were owned by the Senator. He organized and commanded a volunteer naval company known as the “Dunnville Naval Brigade” and in 1866 this brigade took part in battle at Fort Erie, fending off the Fenian Raiders. There is little physical proof remaining to help us understand his contribution to this community but there is found on the north side of the Feeder Canal and just west of Stromness the home of Senator McCallum. In today’s standards, hardly a mansion, but we have over the year come to naming it the “McCallum Mansion”. It has been

beautifully restored in recent years after many years of neglect and now sits proudly once more on the banks of the Feeder Canal.



Arthur David Clark, cutting ice in turning basin.

Photo Courtesy; Arthur Clark

The Feeder Canal provided ice for our earlier residents and cottagers to cool their food and beverages during the long hot summer. Ice was cut by David Clark and others at the bend of the Feeder Canal at Stromness. At the point where the Feeder turned to go to Dunnville or continued forward toward Wainfleet was a large basin. It was into this basin that the ships built at Stromness first touched water and from this basin that many a winter day was spent cutting ice. David Clark provided ice to Milan Culp who stored it in his ice-house at the pier. Milan was extremely unyielding when it came to the cut of the ice. He insisted that it be just a certain size and not a bit smaller. By being so particular, he was able to store the maximum amount of ice as he could precisely line one row beside the other. Others who bought ice from David Clark was the Club House later known as Jesse Taylor's and even later as Dolly Gray's.

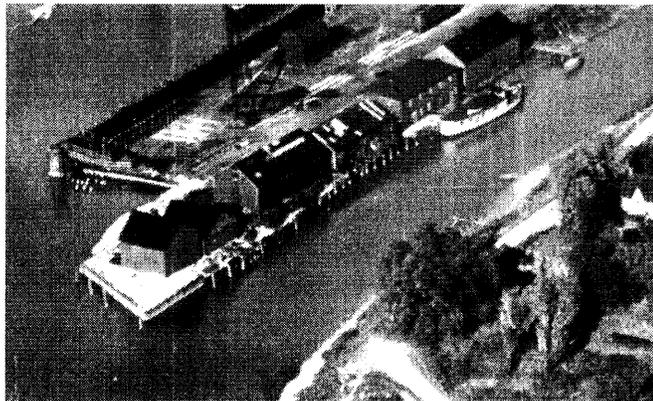
A number of boats have been built in various locations along the Port Maitland section of the Feeder Canal as have a number found their demise in the same section. Our commercial fishermen have for nearly one hundred years used the banks of the Feeder for their docks and fish-houses. During the early part of the twentieth century they all

congregated on the north side.

Those who cottage at Beckley Beach, entering via River Road would be particularly interested in the Feeder Canal at Port Maitland. They are accustomed to passing the fish-houses and tugs as they make their way to the cottage. What many may not be aware of is that the fish-houses were once on the north side of the canal. There were groupings of fish-houses beginning at the mouth of the Feeder Canal and extending back to approximately opposite Wayne Siddall's present day fisheries. However, even before the fish-houses were built on the north side of the Feeder Canal, that area was known as Robinson's Point. It was the home of George and Jenny Robinson. The house they called home was moved from the point by the TH&B on railway tracks and became their Port Maitland station.

As for the fish-houses that were on the north side of the Feeder Canals, the one closest to the river was called the Independent Fish Company and was owned by John Mossip and George (Shorty) Gorrall. Next to the Independent was the Port Maitland Fish Company owned by a group of Port Maitland fishermen including Percy Siddall, George Little, Stephen McKeown, and Jack McKee. These men chose to pack and sell their fish as a collective, much as they did years later at the Port Maitland Fishermans Co-op on the west side of the Grand River. A third fishery was built and owned by Benny Crumbs. Benny lived for one summer and a winter in the Gardner cottage, now owned by Jim and Sandra Gill (lot 19). Unfortunately Benny ran into some difficulties and within only a year or two had to sell his fishery. For a time brothers Harry, John and Bill Siddall took over the Crumb fishery. Harry and John left Bill to go it on their own and purchased the pond net fish-house which was further up the canal near the floating bridge just west of the station. Harry and John continued in business for a short time before they sold the building to Carroll Kenney.

I do not know exactly what year but it was in the early to mid 1930's that brothers George and Lorne Siddall moved their business across to the south side of the canal. At that time they owned the fish tug named G. and L. There had been a number of fires which destroyed some of the fish-houses and the TH&B was pressuring the fishermen to move from its property.



Fish-houses on north side of Feeder Canal.

Circa 1929

Photo Courtesy; T. Carroll Kenney

Many of you know Bruce and the late Doug Siddall and recall often seeing the tug Rainbow S. which remains at Port Maitland. Lorne is their father. Lorne's brother Bill Siddall senior, then owner of the fish tug Aletha B is the father of Wayne and the late Bill Siddall Jr. Following shortly after George and Lorne, Bill built his packing house a couple feet east of them. These new packing houses did not make Carroll Kenney particularly happy, as he felt that his property ran to the water edge and the packing houses blocked the view from the house he owned across from where Bill Siddall was building. The fishermen had done their homework and had the proper papers. Harry and John Siddall very shortly thereafter built another packing house some distance west of Bill Siddall's. Owner's of the Harridel, and the Marjorie B, Harry and John could not seem to agree much where business was concerned and soon thereafter sold the packing house to the Minor Brothers.

The Minor brothers included Wray, Bob, Danny

and Pete. They owned a couple tugs which included the Mary R and the Lincoln R. The Mary R. has long since been replaced with the Charles R and later the VAC. The Lincoln R. has been rebuilt twice and is now much longer and wider. Wray still fishes the Lincoln R. Many of us who are fifty years or older will remember the Minor fish packing house was moved to the home of Wray Minor on Rymal Road. It has now been torn down and the lumber has been used for other purposes. In a future article I will tell you of the many fish tugs that fished from these three fish-houses as well as those that fished from the fish-houses on the north side of the Feeder Canal.

Lynne Wheeler to the Rescue!

Have you ever wondered who the highway heroes are and where they come from. In the mid 1990s, Lynne Wheeler found herself in such a situation while going to work. While travelling on Hwy #20 in Stoney Creek she came across a upside down school bus that had been hit by a truck failing to stop at a stop sign. Lynne was well qualified to step in and take charge. Lynne is a registered nurse who graduated from Seneca College Nursing School. She had practised her skills at Sunnybrook Hospital Toronto, Henderson Hospital in Hamilton, Versa Care Centre and McMaster Medical Centre in Hamilton. Lynne was use to dealing with all kinds of situations having furthering her people skills while participating in the Dunnville Terry Fox run and through her experience in Minor Softball as a baseball mother in the Dunnville Minor Softball League.

After dealing with the numerous minor injuries and assisting to get victims away from a potential explosion, Lynne then became a surrogate mother to any child in need of comfort.

Lynne loved her summers at Beckley and made many friendships with fellow cottager's. Her only regret was that summer was so short and that all

communities couldn't be as nice as Beckley Beach.

In May 1997 she would herself experience a terrible automobile accident and never fully recover. She lived in constant pain, never regaining full use of her legs. Life became very difficult for Lynn and on March 12th she left her pain and suffering behind. So when you look up at the stars, you may just see her as part of the face of God!

Thank you from the Editor

Thank you to the many who helped me put together this issue. This includes the authors and publishers of numerous books on the Feeder Canal. It includes the committee who produced "A Feasibility Study on the Welland Feeder Canal," from whom I borrowed the maps on page one and two. Thank you to John Docker and John Burtniak who reviewed my work and who did not always agree with me, once again saving my bacon! The list goes on and on; Wray Minor, Art Clark, Earl Deamude, Violet Crumb nee Ross, and T. Carroll Kenney, are but a few who contributed to this issue. Thanks to all.

In Memoriam

Wheeler, Lynne, : Died March 12, 2001, Lynne is the wife of Len Wheeler, lot 44A. Lynne leaves six children, Derek, Daryl, Melanie, Brent, Brock, and Michelle.

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