

The Grand Despatch



A brief social history of Port Maitland Ontario, and the surrounding area
Port Maitland, "On the Grand" Historical Association (PMHA) - Free to PMHA members

Name Changed to The Grand Despatch & Disasters on the lake!

The Luxurious Cruise Ship S.S. Seeandbee!

Recently, I found a great webpage for history nerds and I was right at home! It included very old newspapers from New York State. While looking for "Mohawk Island" I kept finding pages with an advertisement for a day trip leaving Buffalo on a ship named the S.S. *Seeandbee*. Passengers boarded at 9:30 a.m., paying the enormous fee of \$1.25. The trip went along the south shore of Lake Erie to Northeast Ohio, thence crossing to the north shore to Long Point, skirting the ports along the way as she headed back to Buffalo in order to be home by 4:00 p.m. The advertisements always included a mention of Mohawk Island. There were dozens of these ads as the ship seemed to run every summer weekend from 1916 until 1924.



The S.S. *Seeandbee* was built in Wyandotte Michigan, south of Detroit. At the time of her maiden voyage on November 6, 1912, she was touted as the largest most luxurious steamship ever to be built on the Great Lakes. She was a side-wheeler but the wheels were concealed within her sides creating a narrower and sleeker appearance. I have reviewed a number of websites that refer to her but they all are vague regarding the above route. The earliest mention I can find of her on site is 1916 and she remained on virtually the same route until 1924.

Since she was built and owned by the Cleveland and Buffalo Transit Co., it is very likely she spent her first three years doing as her sister ships did; being a transit vehicle for freight and well-heeled passengers between Cleveland and Buffalo.



Ballroom of the S. S. *Seeandbee*!

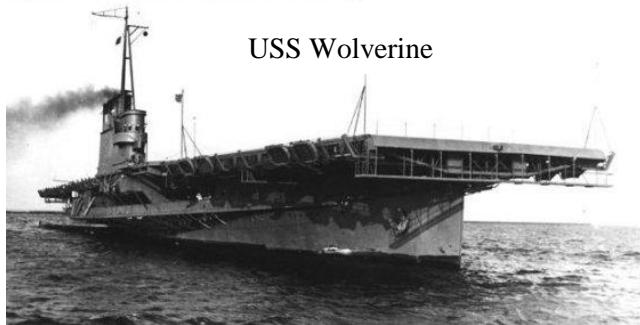
As steamer passenger service waned to cars, trains and planes the S.S. *Seeandbee*'s usefulness as a passenger/freight ship waned as well. This is only the first half of the story of the S.S. *Seeandbee*. All was not lost! In 1941, after the outbreak of war, new life was breathed into S.S. *Seeandbee*. My American readers will well know of "Naval Air Station Glenview" in Glenview, Illinois.

Saved from the wrecking ball, she would become the proud naval aircraft carrier *USS Wolverine*. Her cabins and luxurious ballroom were stripped away and a landing pad was placed upon her. Alongside the *USS Sable*, another ship with similar early years, she would be stationed at the Chicago Pier. Many a young novice pilot looked down on her deck with fear as he made his first aircraft carrier landing before being sent France, the Pacific or places he had never before heard of!

If you are reading this via email you can open the following link and view a movie of the S.S. *Seeandbee*.

SS Seeandbee ~ The Greatest Four-Funneled Side wheeler on the Great Lakes .

You should enjoy it! Let's hope it works!



USS Wolverine

Our Name has changed to Despatch from Dispatch!

There has got to be a reason! As I mentioned in the last issue, I had considered using the spelling “Despatch” instead of “Dispatch” but settled for the “i” instead of the “e”.

Many of you are aware that in 1850 two ships, the *Despatch* and the *Commerce* which was carrying members of the Reserve Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers (23rd Foot) and some of their family members collided off the shore of Port Maitland taking a number of lives. The number remains a mystery as different newspapers of the day claim as few as forty to as high as fifty-four died. All the deceased were soldiers of this regiment and their families. A number of these souls were interred in Christ Church Cemetery in west Port Maitland.

A few years ago, PMHA attempted to have a new memorial installed in memory of these people but ran into some unexpected opposition and backed off this project. As this issue of The Grand Despatch marks its eleventh year of publication I felt it was time to settle on a more meaningful spelling of the word Despatch. I wish history had been written just a bit differently and it was the ship *Despatch* that bore these brave souls but alas it was the *Commerce*! However, I have decided to use the name of the ship that sank the *Commerce*, as our name! ■

Stories / Events seem to Connect!

Also a number of years ago I wrote an article in the Dunnville Chronicle about “connections” taking a bit of instruction from the British documentary named the

same. I took my readers from one “connected” event to another until after many events I ended up right back where I started. What I am about to make known here is one of life’s real connections! When we built the Cairn in 2015, my research took me to John Dockers’ book on the Grand River Naval Depot. In his book was a print of a painting done by Peter Rindlisbacher well researched depiction of the Naval Depot as it might have been in 1817. Me being Me, I looked Peter up on the web and I found him and suggested to him that I believe the buildings would have been up on an embankment of some twenty to thirty feet. You may recall that I think all of what is today’s Beckley Beach once stood much higher before the years of quarrying.

Since then Peter and I have had a number of phone calls and emails. Again, Me being Me, I boldly asked him if it would be possible for us to use his painting for yet unknown purposes. He did much better than that. Peter had made greeting cards using this very same image. He sent them to us free of charge and told me to use them as I felt appropriate. We used them to invite a number of special guests to the Cairn commemoration and are selling the rest. **Don’t worry this story ain’t over yet!** Go to page 6. “Earlier I wrote”

A bit of Mohawk Lighthouse History!

*Sectional Papers No 2
REFERRED TO IN THE
FOURTH VOLUME
OF THE
JOURNALS / 1844-45
Canadian Parliament LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
OF THE
PROVINCE OF CANADA
BEING THE FIRST SESSION
OF THE
SECOND PROVINCIAL PARLIAMENT
1844-5 VOL. 4.*

*A first class Light on Mohawk Island is now indispensable, from its proximity to Port Maitland at the mouth of the Grand River, which, next spring, will be the outlet to the whole trade up the Welland Canal. It would also be of infinite advantage to vessels plying between Port Colborne, Port Maitland, &c., and Port Dover, or any of the Ports on that part of the Lake, as it may be said to lie in their direct course, and a very long and dangerous reef extends from the Island, upon which a vast deal of property has been lost. Such a Light, with the Pier Light at Port Maitland, would add greatly to the safety of navigating that part of the Lake. The Light at Mohawk Island should be a revolving one; the lesser annual consumption of oil, &c. *in revolving Lights, compensates for the greater first" cost, which may be set down at between £80 and £100. A Beacon on this shoal also would be desirable.*

This new light was obviously needed as my hunt through old newspapers told me of a number of tragedies near Mohawk Island. All accidental deaths are tragedies, but one that stands out is the deaths of a father and a son. Richard Foster age 61 had been the lighthouse keeper on Mohawk Island for twelve years. At the end of the 1932 season his son James age 24 went out to the island to fetch him. On Thursday December 15, 1932 they closed up the lighthouse for the season. When they did not arrive at home in Dunnville that evening concern set in and soon “*crowds gathered along the heights of Burges Bay, (today known as Mohawk Bay) as I did some 24 years later eyeing another tragedy.*” It seemed apparent the dual had left the island as the light in the lighthouse was set to a fixed position rather than the normal shipping season standard of revolving on a set time*. Ice had come fast and early this season: so fast and firm that the United States Coast Guard in Buffalo was unable to assist as it could not get its boat out of the harbour for the thick ice.



At first it was not known if they had left the island for home. Finally on Saturday the 18th with considerable difficulty the steam tug *Maitland Rose* from Port Maitland carrying Ontario Provincial Police made its way to the island. The absence of their skiff and personal belongings satisfied the searchers that the two had indeed attempted to cross over in their little skiff. Once weather would permit a plane was sent out from Buffalo and small locally owned motorized launches searched where they could, but had no success.

I am sure the Foster family would for many years ask, “why did they not stay just a bit longer,” as within days search crews were able to reach the island? “Why oh why did they just not wait another day or two and walk across the ice?”

Cold though it was, it was also rather windy and the ice in the bays and along the north shore of Lake Erie did not freeze solid. It became icy and difficult to push a boat through. Reports continued in local and American papers stating how slushy the conditions were and suggested the torture these two men endured.



By Wednesday December 21st nearly a week since first going missing there was still no sign of them, nor was there any debris found along the shore. Speculation was that they had gone under the now high ice banks built up along the north shore. Hope had indeed waned!

Teams of searchers from Port Colborne, Welland and other communities assisted in the search. Finally, on January 3, 1933 in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, I found the following article. *“Dunnville, Ont., Jan. 3 —Richard Foster, Mohawk' Island lighthouse keeper, and his son, James, were found frozen to death on the shore of Lake Erie, near Lorraine, yesterday. They had been missing since Dec-15 when they closed the lighthouse for the winter and attempted to make their way to the mainland.”* Lorraine is about 3 km. east of Port Colborne at the lake end of Weaver Road.

The two men were not found until January 3rd just east of Port Colborne. My thoughts turn to the twenty-one days between going missing and being found. There is an article in Grand Heritage which quotes an unknown writer who states that James crawled from the boat to the top of a sand bank where he died. The funeral of both men will be held from Clark's undertaking parlor this afternoon. Interment in Riverside Cemetery

Continue on pg 6

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Continued from pg 3

I have not found any articles which suggest a specific day James died, but it would seem he could not have been there long as searchers were covering the beach each day. Both deaths are recorded as taking place in Welland County on January 3, 1933. I wonder, had the two men taken food or blankets with them from the lighthouse as they were closing it up for the winter? Even if they had food, it would have presented considerable difficulty eating it, as it would have soon froze in the sub-zero temperatures! My suspicions lead me to think any food was likely canned and there is no reason to suspect they brought along a can opener. Food so close but yet so far. I am sure Richard and James came to believe that Hell was frozen over!

I reviewed twenty-eight newspapers with rather consistent articles. I did notice that they had considerable problems reporting Richard's age. They had him anywhere from fifty to eighty-one years old! ■

Stories / Events seem to Connect! "Earlier I wrote"
Continued from pg 3 "*crowds gathered along the heights of Burges Bay, (today known as Mohawk Bay) as I did some 24 years later eyeing another tragedy.*" This tragedy was a small plane crash with the loss of five lives. It happened on a Saturday afternoon on December 11, 1956. I was eight years old and while playing with Aaron Moore we heard the sputtering of an airplane engine; then nothing! I went home and told my mother and sisters who suggested I had a good imagination. The next morning a large crowd gathered on the heights near Highbanks. Today there is a road nearby named "Warnick Rd." It was at the end of this road and slightly to the east where this small two engine Aero Commander failed to touchdown on a farmer's field and crashed into Mohawk Bay with five aboard. All were killed.

Now for another connection – In late November, I contacted Peter to see if he would be interested in doing another Port Maitland painting. This time it would be the collision of the *Despatch* and the *Commerce*. He was not aware of this event and was interested so I sent him an article written by Kyle McIntyre called "*This Sad and Melancholy Catastrophe: Port Maitland, Ontario and the Wreck of the Troopship Commerce, 6 May 1850.*" Peter is a well-known painter to those whose interest are sailing ships and naval events. It took only a few days until I got a phone call from whom else but Peter! He is not only willing to do the painting and help us out with a fair exchange where we can make some profit, but I doubt if I could stop him if I tried! Peter mentioned a name to me

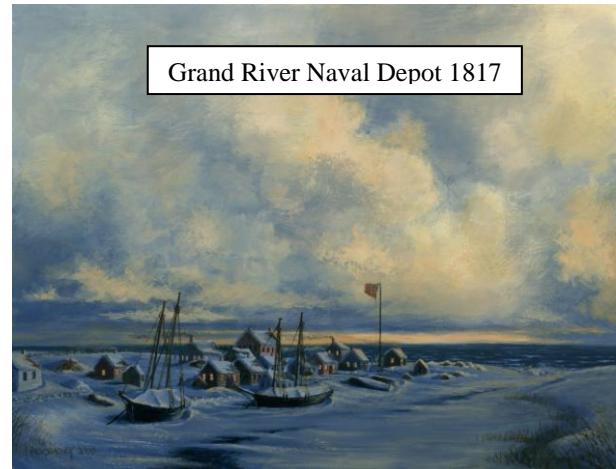
who he thought I really needed to know. He told me about Don Graves of London Ontario, who wrote "*Dragon Rampant: The Royal Welch Fusiliers at War, 1793-1815*". Oddly, I had just ordered this book and was awaiting its arrival. A couple days and a couple emails later Don Graves emailed me asking how he could assist. I was quick to tell him I would like to find out the names of all the soldiers onboard the *Commerce* who drowned. Soon the following email arrived.

Mr. Warnick

Peter Rindlisbacher informs me that you wanted to get in touch with me concerning the sinking of the SS COMMERCE as I may have some contacts with the Royal Welch Fusiliers. The last Colonel of the Welch Fusiliers (now 1/Royal Welsh), LGen (Retd) Jonathon Riley, is a personal friend and I shall contact him about the need for the names of the deceased lost in the sinking.

LGen Riley and I visited the grave site in Port Maitland about five years ago and we are familiar with it. It is quite clear that the deceased were buried in a mass grave, as there are no tombstones in front of the RWF marker. That should be kept in mind when contemplating the placing of a memorial.

I will contact General Riley and get back to you.
 Sincerely D.E. Graves



I spent hours and hours between 2012 and 2015 attempting to just get close to someone or something that might possibly lead me to some remote possibility of finding information on these fellows and it was at my feet all the time! In fact at about the same time I was looking for my needed information, Mr. Graves and L Gen Riley were visiting the graves of these poor unnamed souls! Through a connection with Mr. Graves I now have

thirty-eight names. It is all about “connections!” As for LGen (Retd) Riley here is what I found on LinkedIn.

One of the British Army’s most experienced and consistently successful field commanders, with a breadth of experience and the delivery of results not only commanding troops of many nations in complex emergencies, counter-insurgencies and counter-terrorist campaigns, but working with a wide range of international civilian actors and governments in humanitarian relief operations.

Jonathon is also an accomplished academic with a doctorate in modern history and fifteen published books.

Hire Jonathon for Military Technical Advice, Education & Training Support, and Senior Level Mentoring Support. Jonathon is also available as a speaker on subjects ranging from history to strategy, defense, security and international affairs.

Jonathon is on the UK Register of Expert Witnesses. Academic and Professional Bodies:

- Council Member of the Royal United Services Institute.
- Former Council Member of the Army Records Society.
- Former Council member of the Society of Army Historical Research.
- Visiting Fellow in the Department of Modern History, Birmingham University.
- Visiting Professor in war Studies, King’s College London.
- Former Fellow, University College of Wales Aberystwyth.
- Former Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.
- Chairman of the Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum Trust.
- Patron of LINKS (combat stress-related charity in Wales).
- Patron of MPCT (military preparation college).

Credits re the S.S Seeandbee/USS Wolverine – All the photos were borrowed from various WebPages. The movie was found on YouTube.

What else I found while looking at old newspapers!

Buffalo Courier Express March 30, 1960

Book “Takes Wing Among Birds of V. S. By HAL HIGBY ADVENTURES AMONG BIRDS” By [Hugh M. Halliday. \(1932 – 2009\)](#)

“Some of nature’s strangest creatures are birds. They have fascinated man for centuries with their miracle of flight and entertained him with their song. Hugh M.

Halliday has spent a lifetime studying birds. In this book he visits many places in the eastern United States and Canada in search of different species of birds. In search of gulls he visits **Mohawk Island** which is about 25 miles west of Buffalo. This island is infested with gulls. From the pictures in the book you would literally have to wade through thousands of screeching gulls. Each chapter contains at least one picture of the subject covered. Each is devoted to one bird. All in all, the book covers some of the oddest birds in North America. Anyone seeking to learn about birds would certainly benefit by this book”.

More about Hugh M. Halliday!

Contrary to expert opinion, Halliday found that holding a skunk up by the tail does not deodorize it. There is still another skunk under the school. The school officials and Mr. Halliday hope it will leave voluntarily.



Annual General Meeting held on December 13, 2017

2016-17 was both a good year and a year where we failed to secure the lock property. This too has two sides to it. The work had been getting difficult and volunteers were beginning to look like hens teeth. You city slickers who have never looked down the mouth of chicken don’t know that chickens don’t have teeth! I had hit a roadblock with volunteers, a little rebellion if you like! One or two suggested that if I couldn’t find more I would lose what I had. I am satisfied that had we secured the property volunteers could have been found, but why go overboard finding hands if we ended up not needing them. In the end, your executive has made a decision not to pursue the property at this time. We are still open to ideas and may someday return to this endeavor.

A motion was passed “PMHA to purchase a PowerPoint projector costing no more than between \$600.00 and \$900.00 before tax.” Note a projector was purchased; the total including tax was \$624.32.

It is my intention to make myself available to do a number of PowerPoint presentations over the next year. I did a presentation on the effect of the TH&B railway on Beckley Beach following the business section of our AGM and good comments were received. I look forward to having a couple outdoor presentations this coming summer. Let me know if you would like one! Indoors or Out!

A motion was passed “that PMHA commission William Biddle to paint a portrait of Sir Frederick Haldimand at the cost of \$3,500.00 plus framing; which will be hung in the foyer of the new Haldimand Administration Building.” It was suggested that we ask the County to cover the cost of the framing; however the motion remains that we cover the total cost should the County decline. See the spring 2018 Grand Despatch.

Additional discussions:

A portrait of Sir Frederick Haldimand to be hung prominently in the new Administration building in Cayuga will be commission and painted by William Biddle for the cost of \$4,000 including the frame.

The County of Haldimand will be asked to contact the Six Nations leadership to ascertain if they have any concerns about Sir Frederick Haldimand. They have until April 1, 2018 to reply. Failing any concerns the go ahead will be given to Mr. Biddle.

We are pleased to tell you that our books are in good shape, both financially and bookkeeping wise. This is thanks to Janet deVos and our auditor Cheryl Sensabaugh. It is a small world! Until after we hired Cheryl a number of years ago, I did not realize I went to school with her. She was Cheryl Minor of Lowbanks away back then!

We are also planning another (executive) meeting, possibly in late March where we will hold a conference call with our liability insurance provider. We need to know more about our risk at the Cairn and while we are displaying our wares at events.

Currently working on!

Currently, I am attempting to locate as much information on the collision of the Commerce and the Despatch. This event needs to be better acknowledged. We are appealing to you to tell us what we should do to better enlighten all about these people who traveled to this country and died off our shore in the protection of our country.

* **Mohawk Island timing** was a revolving light showing three bright flashes, with intervals of 30 seconds between their points of greatest brilliancy, followed by an eclipse of 75 seconds, or making a complete revolution in two and one forth minutes.

Mike Walker to Talk at PMHA Meeting. Mike will have lots to tell you about Mohawk Island at our meeting in the Dunnville Library on Feb. 14th at 7p.m. All are welcome.

MEMBERSHIP DUES ARE DUE!!

PLEASE Don’t forget to pay your \$15.00 annual membership! Please make payment to *Port Maitland, On the Grand Historical Association* and mail to Bill at address below.

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