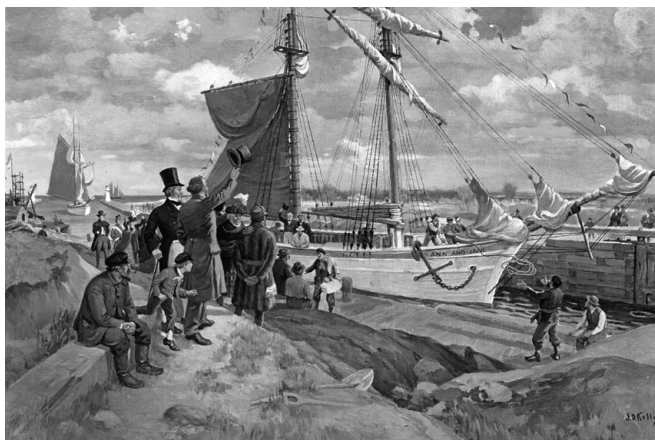


THE OPENING OF THE FIRST WELLAND CANAL

When the First Welland Canal formally opened in November 1829 there were no photographers or artists present to record the scene. But a twentieth-century artist, John David Kelly, imagined what it was like, and his popular painting is reproduced here. It shows the *Ann and Jane*, one of two lake schooners that made the inaugural passage along the canal, in Lock 1 at Port Dalhousie, with the other schooner, the *R. H. Boughton*, about to enter the canal from Lake Ontario. The passage of these ships is a well known fact, but the story of their journey has not been told until now.



When work commenced on the First Welland Canal after the sod-turning on November 30, 1824 no one imagined that it would take five years to complete. But the venture was beset by problems, starting in 1825 with the abandonment of the tunnel that was to link the Welland River with Beaverdams Creek, and culminating in 1828 with the collapse of the banks of the Deep Cut. These all caused delay, and by the middle of 1829 the Welland Canal Company was desperate to bring the project to a conclusion. Besides, additional financial support was urgently needed, and the best way to secure this was to pass a ship through a completed canal.

The slips in the Deep Cut meant that water could not be taken directly from the Welland River as planned; it had to be brought through a feeder canal from the Grand River. Though excavation of the feeder did not have to start from scratch — a secondary canal was already being built through Wainfleet Township — it was still a big undertaking. And problems continued: there were labour disputes, workers came down with ague (malarial fever) — William Hamilton Merritt was himself a victim — and the need for haste meant that the work was not always of the best quality. Thus when water was let into the feeder on October 7 it had to be turned off

immediately because the Grand River dam settled, and repairs were not completed until November 6.

By November 12, however, the Company was able to announce that the “opening [of] the Welland canal for navigation, and the passage of the first vessel thro’ all the locks” would take place on the 24th. The Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Colborne was invited, the citizens of St. Catharines composed a special address of welcome, the band of the 71st Regiment was engaged to play, and preparations were made for a “grand celebration ... in a style worthy of this most important and beneficial epoch in the history of Canada.” But again fate intervened. Severe frosts threatened to freeze up the canal and a storm prevented company directors from travelling from York, so it was reluctantly decided to postpone the public opening until spring.

Then on the 26th the storm abated, and Merritt resolved to go ahead anyway, at least with an inaugural passage through the canal. The American schooner *R. H. Boughton* had arrived from Youngstown, and the Canadian schooner *Ann and Jane* was expected from York. She finally made it at mid-afternoon the following day, and though there was no “grand celebration” the epic journey began.

The Master of the *Ann and Jane* was Joseph Voller, and Isaac T. Pheat was at the helm of the *R. H. Boughton*. In addition to their crews, the boats carried a number of passengers. Some were on board for the entire journey, while others joined en route. Company director George Keefer of Thorold came on board at Chippawa, while his son Jacob and Merritt himself were there from the start. Other passengers included two members of the Upper Canada Legislature, Robert Randal and John J. Lefferty, and two of the earliest settlers of St. Catharines, John Hainer and Jacob Dittrick. However, Company President John Henry Dunn was absent, possibly detained by bad weather at York.

The identity of another important passenger is unknown. This is the person who wrote an account of the voyage in the *Farmers’ Journal*, and *Welland Canal Intelligencer* under the pen name “A Passenger,” and who provided some of the details that follow. Though he claimed that he had “never taken an active part in this great undertaking,” one can’t help wondering if the anonymous scribe was not Merritt himself.

The journey began at about 3 p.m. on Friday, November 27. The *Ann and Jane* was decorated with a variety of “national ensigns, flags and

pendants,” including “a beautiful small silk flag, with the words ‘The King, God bless him’ imprinted in gold letters, surmounted by the crown.” Though there was little time for advance publicity, the people of Port Dalhousie and St. Catharines came out in force to cheer the boats on.

The two schooners proceeded for three hours before stopping for the night. The sun had set before 5 p.m., but an hour or so of twilight allowed them to keep moving until six. By that time they had passed Lock 19, which placed them just north of the present location of the Lybster Mill in Merritton. Where everyone slept is unknown. In July 1829 John Vanderburgh bought land for an inn just beyond Lock 20, but it is uncertain if it was built by November. There were only a few farms in the area, so perhaps everyone huddled together below deck.

The schooners set off again at 7 a.m. on the Saturday morning, and by 9:30 had reached George Keefer’s flour mill atop the Niagara Escarpment in the village of Thorold, an achievement marked by “three hearty cheers for the King.” The accolades were well deserved, for in just 5½ hours (spread over the two days) the schooners had travelled 8½ miles, passed through 32 locks (at an average of about 7 minutes per lock) and climbed over 330 feet. A modern laker, travelling from Port Weller, takes 6 to 7 hours to reach the same level, having travelled only 7 miles through 7 locks. Bear in mind also that the schooners were towed along the canal, either by oxen (the “horned breeze”) or horses, the locks had to be operated by hand, and there were no locktenders at the locks — all the labour was done by those on board. “More work than play” is how Jacob Keefer described the experience later.

The remainder of the journey went much more slowly. After crossing the reservoir south of Thorold (later known as Marlatt’s Pond), the ships encountered ice 2 to 3 inches thick, which had to be broken up by a scow hauled by a heavy team. Then as they approached the village of Deep Cut (now Allanburg) they were delayed for some hours by wood chips stuck in the paddle-gate of a lock. They moored after sundown at the bridge that took Lundy’s Lane (now Hwy. 20) over the canal, and spent the night in one of the local inns (at least the passengers did — the crew no doubt slept on board).

The following day, Sunday the 29th, the schooners passed through the Deep Cut proper, the excavation through the high ground between Beaverdams Creek and the Welland River. The *Journal’s* correspondent was most impressed, proclaiming, “This is certainly the most magnificent and imposing part of the Welland canal; and one cannot but feel a degree of self-importance in contemplating what the exertion of man, when properly directed, can bring about.” But progress was slow. The boats were delayed by ice and floating timber, and when they exited the Deep Cut and

locked down to the level of the Welland River they grounded on a sand bar. The guard gates had to be closed and the water level raised to set them free.

Wisely, perhaps, they decided to tie up for the night. Again it is not clear where they slept. A small village called Beverley (later Port Robinson) had developed during canal construction, but it is not known what accommodation existed there in 1829. Their sleep was interrupted anyway by “a most unpleasant event,” when Irish canal labourers attacked the captain and crew of the *R. H. Boughton* and drove them from the vessel. Why they did this is unknown. One of the passengers — Samuel Street, a magistrate — intervened to restore order.

The passage through the canal was completed the following day, as the ships followed the Welland River down to Chippawa. (The canal was not extended south from Port Robinson to Lake Erie until 1833.) The date was Monday, November 30, five years to the day from the sod-turning ceremony in 1824. Once more, however, the going was slow. The weather was stormy, there was a snowy headwind, and an unfinished towpath caused great difficulties on marshy ground.

Someone had obviously gone ahead to tell the people of Chippawa that the ships were coming, for they were welcomed by a salute, and several of the principal houses were lit up. Someone must also have ridden off immediately to St. Catharines with the news, for the following announcement was submitted to the *Journal* the very same day.



The schooners moored overnight at Grant and Kerby’s wharf in Chippawa, and after dinner a number of toasts were drunk to celebrate the first transit of the canal. The journey was still not complete, however, for the ultimate destination was Buffalo. At 11 the following morning the boats sailed through Campbell’s Cut at the mouth of the Welland River into the Niagara River, and were then towed 9½ miles against the current and a headwind to Palmer’s Tavern, which they reached at nightfall.

On Wednesday December 2, aided by offshore breezes, they set sail at 7 a.m., crossed the Niagara River just off the southern tip of Grand Island, and moored at Black Rock harbour, which, in the words

of the *Buffalo Republican*, “opened its arms and gave the ‘tars from [Lake] Ontario’ a glorious hug.” Then it was on to Buffalo, which they reached at midday. They were greeted by bursts of applause, discharges of artillery from the park, and a gathering at the Eagle Tavern. Considering that the Welland Canal was competition for the Erie Canal, completed four years previously, the people of Buffalo welcomed “the navigators of the Deep Cut” with remarkable generosity, though the *Republican* did remind the state and federal governments of the need for a north-south canal on their own side of the frontier.

The intention of returning to Upper Canada the same day was thwarted by a strong west wind. Jacob Keefer took advantage of the delay to go shopping, buying a blue soup tureen, which he presented to the Thomas Rodman Merritt family 36 years later as a souvenir. (It is now on display in the St. Catharines Museum.) The return trip finally began at 7 a.m. on Thursday, December 3 and ended two days later when the *Ann and Jane* reached Port Dalhousie. The *R. H. Boughton* had stopped at Centreville (later part of Merritton), where it laid up for the winter.

So ended a remarkable journey, and at 4 p.m. on the 5th about 30 gentlemen “partook of a sumptuous dinner, at the Welland Canal Hotel in St. Catharines.” They celebrated in fine style, and Merritt in particular must have been well satisfied that the naysayers who had cast doubt on the canal project since its inception had been confounded.

To confirm the achievement, the newspapers published no less than seven signed statements — by the two Captains, by groups of passengers and by others — testifying to the fact that two schooners had indeed passed through the Welland Canal in both directions. The first of these, dated December 2 at Buffalo, appeared in the *Journal* that very same day, testimony to the speed with which news could be communicated even in those bygone days.

Principal Sources (apart from those cited in the text): Merritt, *Merritt Biography*; Styran and Taylor, *Great Swivel Link*; *Merritt Papers*; First Welland Canal plans and documents, other contemporary maps; Welland Canal Company *Minutes, Correspondence and Directors’ Reports*; *Third Report* (of committee of inquiry into management of Welland Canal).

Reproduced from the *Newsletter* of the Historical Society of St. Catharines, December 2007
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