

THE COMMUNITIES OF THE “FIRST” FIRST WELLAND CANAL

This article examines the origin and naming of the communities that existed on the First Welland Canal when it opened in 1829, before it was extended to Lake Erie. This “first” First Canal ran from Lake Ontario to the Welland River, with the river itself providing the necessary link to the Niagara River and Lake Erie.

When the schooners *Ann and Jane* and *R. H. Boughton* made their initial trip along the canal in late November 1829 they passed through eight communities: Dalhousie, St. Catharines, Centreville, Thorold, Beaverdam, Deep Cut, Beverley and Chippawa. If one or two seem unfamiliar, bear in mind that these are their original names. Some of these communities existed before the canal, while others developed because of the canal. Some just grew, without any formal plan, while others were laid out as new towns by the Welland Canal Company or by individual landowners.

Dalhousie

Dalhousie was one of five communities that did not exist prior to the canal and one of two that resulted from individual enterprise. It is first mentioned in an 1826 newspaper advertisement in which Nathan Pawling states that he has “laid out a Town Plot on an extensive scale, with regular and spacious streets, on his premises,” and advertises building lots for sale “on a Peninsula at the confluence of the Welland Canal with Lake Ontario.” The ad is headed Port Dalhousie and datelined Dalhousie, which suggests a distinction between the port on the one hand and the village on the other. This is supported by ads placed by others later the same year, all referring to the “village of Dalhousie.” At this time the port was usually called Welland Canal Harbour, or sometimes Dalhousie Harbour or Harbour at 12 Mile Creek. Not until late 1827 do we find Port Dalhousie being used for both the port and the village, though exceptions do occur even after that date.

The origin of the name is clear. It recognizes Scottish peer George Ramsay, 9th Earl of Dalhousie, and Governor-in-Chief of British North America from 1820 to 1828. Who chose the name is another matter. Some say it was Nathan Pawling himself, as a token of his admiration for the Earl. A more likely explanation is that the Welland Canal Company made the choice, for Ramsay was an enthusiastic advocate of canal-building and provided crucial political support for the Welland Canal venture. Moreover, it is consistent with the naming of other canal communities (such as Allanburg and Port

Robinson) after prominent individuals.

That leaves the question of how to say the word “Dalhousie.” The university that the Earl founded in Halifax is pronounced “Dalhowzee,” and it is often assumed that the local usage “Daloozee” is an aberration. But this is probably wrong. The local pronunciation is also used elsewhere (e.g., Dalhousie Street in Ottawa), and expert linguistic opinion suggests that it is in fact correct. Significantly, in 1884 Dalhousie University itself was uncertain how to sound the name, and asked the 13th Earl for advice. His pompous response, that he would never pronounce it “Dalhoossie” like “an uneducated Scotchman,” speaks volumes, and implies that the real aberration is “Dalhowzee,” not “Daloozee.”

St. Catharines

St. Catharines existed before the canal, having emerged in the mid-1790s at the intersection of today’s Ontario and St. Paul Streets. The name itself first appears in a document dated 1796 listing 44 settlers who contributed money towards the construction of a church. (The document, now held at St. George’s Church, spells the name with an “e.”) Only one or two other buildings preceded the church, and though the village grew steadily it was very small until the canal was built, after which it became the largest of the canal communities.

The origin of its name is uncertain, though most sources suggest it honours Catherine Hamilton, wife of Queenston merchant Robert Hamilton. He provided the land for the church and nearby school, and his wife was apparently a caring woman known for helping the less fortunate. Another theory points to Catherine Butler, wife of John Butler, commander of Butler’s Rangers during the American Revolutionary War, for many of those on the church list were former Rangers. In the early decades of the last century a fierce debate raged in the pages of the St. Catharines Standard between advocates of the two ladies, but nothing was resolved.

For a period the village was also known as The Twelve and Shipman’s (and possibly Shipman’s Corners, though this is debatable), but it was St. Catharines that prevailed, and it became the name of the post office in about 1820. The first postmaster was William Hamilton Merritt, and he may have been responsible for the distinctive “a” spelling, this as a tribute to his wife Catharine. She was not, however, the person for whom the community was named, for she was only three years old in 1796.

Centreville

In 1826 Oliver Phelps, the American contractor responsible for most of the construction work on the First Canal, advertised for sawyers to assist in lock building. The ad was datelined Centreville, so named because it was half way between Lake Ontario and the Welland River and at the mid-point of the series of locks. Phelps was clearly referring to his own farm, which was located on the line of the canal about a kilometre north of what is now downtown Merritton. Though Phelps never laid out a village — indeed he moved to St. Catharines in 1828 — a community called Centreville did evolve later along what became Thorold Road (now Oakdale Avenue).

During the building of the Second Canal it acquired the nickname Slabtown, after the wooden shanties canal workers built for themselves on nearby government land, and in 1849 it was the site of the infamous Battle of Slabtown between Irish Protestants and Catholics. At the time it was the only settlement in the area, but this changed in the early 1850s when the Welland Canal Loan Company established a new town called Welland City where the heart of Merritton is today. Not until 1869, however, were Welland City and Centreville given the common name Merritton, this, of course, in recognition of William Hamilton Merritt.

It is often said that the switch from Welland City to Merritton was part of a name exchange with the people of Welland, which was previously known as Merrittsville. This is not so, for Merrittsville became Welland 11 years before Merritton got its name.

Thorold

Thorold, like Port Dalhousie, was a product of the canal and individual enterprise. George Keefer, first President of the Welland Canal Company, owned land on the canal route on the Escarpment brow, and in 1828 built a grist mill in anticipation of the canal's completion. He was rewarded with free water rights in perpetuity for his initiative. About the same time he or his son George Junior laid out the rudiments of a village and called it Thorold, and in 1828 the post office was moved there from Deep Cut. Some sources say that the village was originally called Stumptown and St. George's, but there is no hard evidence for this.

In naming the village Thorold Keefer simply adopted the name of the existing township. Originally called Township No. 9 when surveyed in 1788, it was renamed Thorold in 1793 in keeping with a county-based naming policy employed by Governor Simcoe. The counties of Upper Canada west of the Trent River were all named after English counties, and places within each county were often given names from the corresponding county in England. Since the Niagara Peninsula fell in Lincoln County all the early townships were given

Lincolnshire names. Most were named for places, but Thorold is the name of an ancient Lincolnshire family with roots in Saxon times.

Perhaps the most famous Thorold (or Thurrald, as family members say their name) was Godgifu, better known as Lady Godiva, who lived in the 11th century. The story of her unclothed ride through the streets of Coventry in an attempt to persuade her husband Leofric III, Earl of Mercia, to reduce taxes is well known. Less well known is the film about her made in the 1950s. Maureen O'Hara played the title role, George Nader was Leofric, Arthur E. Gold-Porter was Thorold, Sherriff of Lincoln, and the part of First Saxon, very much a minor character, was played by someone named Clint Eastwood.

Beaverdam

This is not a typographic error. In early times the name was usually written as a singular noun, Beaverdam, though often it was split into two words and/or preceded by the definite article, as in The Beaver Dam. The modern plural form Beaverdams was also used early on, but only rarely before 1830.

The beaver dam in question was located on what became known as Beaverdams Creek, a tributary of the Twelve Mile Creek in Thorold. Its remains were still visible in the late 19th century, but in 1904 were submerged beneath the waters of Lake Gibson. It is likely that the creek was named first (precisely when is unknown), and some time later the name was used for the village that developed nearby at the junction of two important early routes (nowadays the intersection of Beaverdams Road and Marlatts Road/Decew Road).

Beaverdams is not normally thought of as a canal community, but the First Canal ran directly alongside the village, which by then had been in existence for three decades. The earliest written mention of the name is dated 1804, and the first recorded burial in the cemetery is 1801, so there was probably a village before 1800, making it roughly contemporaneous with St. Johns in the Short Hills. Beaverdams flourished briefly while the canal was being built, and in 1826 became the site of Thorold's first post office, but soon afterwards was eclipsed by other canal-side communities.

Deep Cut

Deep Cut was the original name for Allanburg. Most sources claim that the original name was New Holland, but strictly speaking this is not so. Prior to the canal there was no village, just scattered farms and a tavern run by Joseph Badgley, where Merritt and his associates repaired following the canal sod-turning ceremony in 1824. The name New Holland was applied to the general area, not to a specific community. Both it and the name Holland Road date at least as far back as the War of 1812, and most

likely reflect the Dutch origins of settlers like John Vanderburgh, who had 700 acres of land in the vicinity. An 1818 reference to Holland Settlement seems to imply that a village had emerged by then, but this is unlikely. While the term settlement as used in the 19th century did refer to settlers, it did not mean that they were concentrated in one spot. There was no reason for a village to exist anyway.

With construction of the canal, however, a village did develop at the north end of the Deep Cut, where the line of the canal intersected Lundy's Lane. The Deep Cut was the excavation through the high ground between Beaverdams Creek and the Welland River, and this was the name given to the community. Deep Cut was a bustling place, with several stores and taverns catering to canal labourers, and Thorold's post office moved there in 1827.

In 1827 the Welland Canal Company bought 65 acres of land west of what became Centre Street from Hall Davis. Some time later they laid it out in building lots, possibly in conjunction with Harmonius Vanderburgh, who owned land to the east. By 1830 the village was called Allanburgh (the "h" was later dropped) after William Allan, Vice-President of the Canal Company and President of the Bank of Upper Canada. Some claim that the "burgh" recognizes the Vanderburgh family, but this is uncertain. Much of the new village was wiped out by later canals, but the name survives.

Beverley

The history of Beverley (later Port Robinson) is not unlike that of Deep Cut/Allanburg. Located at the south end of the Deep Cut where the Welland Canal met the Welland River, the village emerged during canal construction on the farm owned by John Carl. Initially, it may have been much smaller than Deep Cut, and in fact there is no certainty that it even had a name prior to 1830.

The name Beverley (not Port Beverley as some sources claim) appears in canal-related documents at this time. It was very short-lived, however, and soon gave way to Robinson, which in turn yielded to Port Robinson by mid-1831. The names Beverley and Robinson both come from John Beverley Robinson, Attorney-General of Upper Canada and a director of the Welland Canal Company.

As in the case of Allanburg, there was an element of deliberate planning in the creation of Port Robinson, for in 1830 the Canal Company purchased 240 acres from John Carl, and a portion of this was laid out in building lots. They were divided into three classes and were to be sold for

£25, £12 10s and £6 5s, prices significantly higher than for corresponding lots in Allanburg. If this reflected the future prospects of the two places it made sense, for Port Robinson soon oustripped Allanburg in importance.

Chippawa

Chippawa is possibly the oldest of the First Canal communities and certainly the one with the oldest name. The village developed alongside Fort Chippawa, a storehouse-cum-blockhouse built in 1791 at the southern terminus of the west-bank portage around Niagara Falls. The village took its name from the Fort, and this in turn took its name from the river, which before Governor Simcoe introduced the Lincolnshire name Welland River in 1792 was known as Chippawa Creek.

The earliest known reference to the name is in a traveller's account for 1785, and in old documents it is spelled in various ways, among them Chippawa, Chippewa and Chippeway. It is often mentioned as being an Indian name, and in a sense it is, since "Chippawa" is a corruption of "Ojibway." However, the Indians would not have called it this — it was a name introduced by the British.

The original native inhabitants of the area were the Neutral Indians, and it is not known what name they had for the river. In 1649 they were wiped out by the Iroquois from the Finger Lakes region, which left the Niagara Peninsula uninhabited. During this period the French called the river Chenondac, and some time after the capture of Fort Niagara in 1759 the British substituted Chippawa. Why they chose this name is uncertain, for the Ojibway were not native to the area. There are reports, however, of their camping alongside the river when visiting Fort Niagara, and over time the two may have become associated. Some say that there was an actual native village on the creek in 1788, but this is unconfirmed and is probably not correct.

In the late 1980s local barrister Romaine K. Ross mounted a campaign to make the official spelling Chippewa on the grounds that this was the more authentic version and the one currently used by native peoples, but he was unsuccessful.

Principal Sources: Aitken, *Welland Canal Company*; Cruikshank, *Simcoe Papers*; Riddell, *Life of John Graves Simcoe*; Seibel, *Niagara Portage Road*; Styran and Taylor, *Great Swivel Link*; Thompson, *Jubilee History of Thorold*, and other local histories; Registry Office documents; land survey records; Welland Canal plans; Welland Canal Company *Directors' Reports*; *Merritt Papers*; *Farmers' Journal* and other period newspapers; *Third Report*, Bureau of Archives; *Third Report* (of 1836 inquiry into management of Welland Canal).