

THE 1855 MAP OF WELLAND CITY

If the accompanying map of Welland City looks nothing like Welland it's because it is a map of Merritton! Welland City was an older name for what in 1869 became Merritton, and in 1855 it was mapped by the firm of John Ellis, Printers and Lithographers, of Toronto. The map shows land located "at the Mountain descent" in lots 10, 11 and 12 of concessions 9 and 10 of Grantham. At the bottom is the boundary between Grantham and Thorold (now St. David's Road and Townline), across the middle runs the road allowance that became Glendale, and at the top is the line of Abbot Street and Rockwood Avenue. The lower portion of today's Burleigh Hill Drive lines up with Division Street in the west.

The map shows many interesting features, most notably the Second Welland Canal climbing from Lock 11 in the north to Lock 21 at the Escarpment brow. The Great Western Railway, completed in 1853, crosses the canal just below Lock 12, with the station close by. North and east of the canal is the distinctive pattern of east-west streets and laneways with tree names — Walnut, Chestnut, Almond, Hazel, etc. — that still marks downtown Merritton today. (A notable exception is Tunnel Street, but what tunnel, existing or projected, this refers to is unknown.) Running north-south are Hartzell Road (now Merritt Street) and Bessey and Kerr Streets, all named for early settlers.

South of the canal, on the slope up the Escarpment, we are in less familiar territory. Lock Street (now Bradley) is easily recognizable, but the other streets are a bit of a puzzle. Most are named for people. William, Hamilton and Merritt Streets clearly denote Merritt himself, and Catherine (despite the spelling) suggests his wife. Thomas and Lawlor may be a local surveyor of that name, while Raglan could be Lord Raglan, who led the ill-fated British forces in the Crimea and died the year the map was drawn. Other names are less certain. What is most puzzling, however, is that with the exception of Lock Street and a few short segments here and there none of the streets south of the canal ever seems to have existed!

It is a commonplace that maps can mislead, and this map is a classic example. Beautifully engraved, Ellis's map depicts a large, established, well-laid-out town, and does so with an air of authority. In reality, nothing could have been further from the truth.

Welland City was a new town proposed by the Welland Canal Loan Company, which was

incorporated in 1851 with a view to promoting industry, commerce and settlement at the key intersection of the Welland Canal and the Great Western Railway. With William Hamilton Merritt as President and James Rea Benson as Secretary-Treasurer, the Company bought up over 500 acres of land, some from the government and some from private owners, and in 1855 began advertising lots for sale and water rights for lease in the new town of Welland City (the name was available because at that time Welland was called Merrittville).

That same year they commissioned Ellis to produce his map. But how much of the map actually existed on the ground? The canal and railway did, as did the "Macadamized Road" between St. Catharines and Thorold (now Oakdale and Merritt), but beyond that not much. Possibly the only other "real" features were the tavern that John Vanderburgh had established alongside the First Welland Canal in 1829 (at the very centre of the map), a barn, tollhouse and two dwelling houses nearby, and the historic Ball House, which still stands on the Escarpment slope south of the canal. There were other people living in the Merritton area, but aside from the locktenders in their cottages most were further north on the St. Catharines road in what was known as Centreville or Slabtown. Though there is evidence that some surveys were carried out by the Loan Company, it seems most likely that in 1855 Welland City existed only on paper, save perhaps for some stakes in the ground. Most telling perhaps is the fact that the railway station was called, not Welland City, but Thorold Station, this after the nearest community of any size.

Ellis's map was really a promotional document, intended to proclaim the Company's vision of an industrial powerhouse to be established on the Welland Canal. The text accompanying the map makes this clear, boasting that "no site on the Continent of America, combines greater natural and artificial advantages, or presents a more favourable opportunity for the Investment of Capital or Employment of Labour." It adds for good measure — entrepreneurs take note — that the "Mountain Terrace" (marked "Esplanade" on the map) "is admirably suited for private dwellings, for which purpose it has been reserved."

The history of the Welland Canal Loan Company has yet to be written, but though it survived until 1930 it clearly achieved only mixed success. Though it did bring industry to the area, notably the Gordon & McKay (later Lybster) cotton

mill and Riordan's paper mill, it became embroiled in major disputes over water and property rights, and the city itself never expanded to anything like its full extent. Indeed, when surveyor George Z. Rykert drew up a registered plan of Welland City in 1867 the Company's ambitions had been scaled back considerably, for his map shows only those streets in the immediate vicinity of downtown Merritton. And, as is clear from later maps and airphotos, that is how Merritton remained until well into the last century.

Unfortunately, a misconception has arisen that Merritton was a large town from an early date, and for this the blame lies with H. R. Page, who in 1876 published the *Historical Atlas of Lincoln and Welland Counties*. This atlas contains a full-page

map of Merritton that is simply an updated version of Ellis's map. The Welland Railway and some mills have been added, but nothing has been omitted. All the roads of the original Welland City remain, even though by that stage large swaths of the project had been abandoned, notably the residential streets proposed for the Escarpment slopes south of the canal. This atlas and others like it are invaluable sources of historical information, but sometimes the maps they contain need to be taken with a grain of salt.

Principal Sources: WCLC *Cash Book*, WCLC Articles of Incorporation, *St. Catharines Constitutional*, 1855-57 issues, Ellis, Rykert and Page maps, Province of Canada and Dominion of Canada government documents, Registry Office records

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