

The Merrickville and District Historical Society NEWSLETTER

Summer 2005

Volume 3 Number 2

Blockhouse Museum Opening

On hand to receive their awards were the winners of the School historical essay contest. This programme was initiated four years ago by the Historical Society to engender interest in local history among the youth of Merrickville & district. The winners were all from Merrickville Public School; **Harry Hitsman**, winner from the grade 4-5-6 category wrote about the "History of the Corktown Road" while grade 7-8 winner **Devon Coates** told about the "Ghost of Sam Jakes Inn".

Thanks to Mrs. Lorraine Allen, Principal and the teachers Miss Elizabeth Telford, grade 8 and Mrs. Kathy Porter, grades 5,6 for their encouragement of the students and their cooperation with the contest. All of the student essays will be on display in the Blockhouse over the summer. Drop into the Blockhouse over the summer and read the talented efforts of these budding authors.

TEXT



Merrickville-Wolford Rural Heritage

In discussing our local history we usually focus on Merrickville Village; its' founding families and it's bustling industry. But, really for virtually all of the 19th century the vast majority of the Canada's population was rural. Many small hamlets grew to provide essential supporting services such as mills, tanneries, dairies, foundries and blacksmiths for the local farming community. And Churches sprang up for social and spiritual needs.

Gradually however these services became consolidated in the larger centres, particularly those with canal or rail access. Before the Canal, it is estimated less than 20% of the local population lived in what is now Merrickville Village. Of the former hamlets little remains but perhaps a pile of rubble, or an enigmatic sign, such as "Jellyby Road" and their story has largely escaped telling. (the research of Leonard Newman on Andrewsville and adjacent properties is an important exception). It is for this reason the Historical Society has begun a survey of important rural sites.

Fred Grodde is leading a committee of volunteers who are combing the countryside as well as the National archives to seek out relevant historical information. So far the Committee has identified seventeen sites. Everything from Orange Lodges, schools, railway stations, bridges, brickyards and more. They have been interviewing old timers for personal family accounts and looking for ruins and residuals from earlier days. One of the challenges the Committee is facing is to develop a consistent format for documenting the sites. Presently they are reviewing a Parks Canada format, the Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings (CIHB) which may be suitable for their purposes.

But, they need your help. If you have knowledge of special importance to our rural heritage please get in touch with Fred Grodde at 269-4306

The McLean Cairn at Deeks Quarry

As you trek along the Old Scotch line between Donahue Road and Johnston Road you come to a desolate stretch of rocky scrub. To the south, the CPR line rides on a hill above a rock cut and to the north there is nothing but rubble and litter. It is hard to imagine that in the early twenties, there was a bustling construction plant here employing as many as 200 men. This was Harry MacLean's Deek's Quarry. It was development of this site which first drew McLean to Merrickville.



H.F. McLean

As the CPR and Ontario Northern Railways planned Western expansion the construction contract for laying the roadbed was let to Dominion Construction Limited of Montreal and its President, the talented young and ambitious engineering entrepreneur, Harry Falconer McLean. In order to obtain the ballast for the tracks a division of his company, Grenville Crushed Rock Ltd was established at the site and a production plant set up to crush the road bed ballast .

McLean acquired about 100 acres adjacent to the existing CPR line and in 1919 began the rock crushing operation. At it's peak in 1926 annual production had reached 2,700,000 tons, and chunks of Leeds Grenville limestone were spread on railbed as far away as western Canada.

It was hard and dangerous work beginning with blasting the limestone bed rock, then crushing and stockpiling for shipment by train to the rail head. Inevitably there were injuries and deaths. It was part of the job then. When the crushing job was completed in 1932 a bronze cast plate was made in the quarry shop. It was one of eight or nine such cairns known to have been built by Harry McLean across Canada in memory of those men who were injured or lost their lives on the job. This bronze plate was placed on the cairn with their names engraved as well as a verse from the Rudyard Kipling poem extolling the virtues of labour, "The Sons of Martha".

Today, little remains of that cairn. The plaque is gone and the rocks are just a tumbled pile, hard to distinguish from the landscape if you don't know where to look. Through vandalism and the natural forces of nature, it is inevitable even these crumbled remains will not be long evident.

But this is an important part of our history, and it is a project of the Merrickville and District Historical Society to rescue the cairn from loss and to reconstruct it, probably here in the Village. The project is being led by Society archive head, Dieter Raths and involves jurisdictional as well as physical complications.

*****did you know *****

Rudyard Kipling and Harry McLean met at a gathering where Kipling recited his poem the "Sons of Martha", about men who were destined to move mountains to do the work of man. From this McLean received the inspiration to erect monuments to the workers on his projects. As well as Deeks he built memorial cairns at his construction sites across Canada including, the Pas, Flin Flon and Churchill Manitoba .



McLean Cairn – Churchill, Manitoba

Burritts Rapids Walking Tour

You have probably noticed how the Village of Burritts Rapids is being spruced up by its caring citizens. Its historic properties are being beautifully renovated; the old Methodist Church, now a private residence, (St James the Impossible), the historically important Hurd, Kidd and French residences. And of course, the former French General store, now attractively restored and locally enjoyed as a Community centre. Thanks to a new walking tour brochure, available free at the Burritts General Store, you can enjoy an informative stroll through the streets of our charming neighbour.

*****Sunday rudeness*****

There was a strong but not exclusive congregation of tea toting Methodists in Burritt's Rapids in the late-19th century. Olive Mills and Renee Smith report in their Burritt's Rapids Scrapbook a 1897 quote from the editor of the Carleton Place Herald; "Some of the liquor sellers [in Burritt's Rapids] seem to delight in sending men out drunk on the Sabbath day to annoy their church-going people with blasphemous language and disgusting gestures."

John Johnston -Lockmaster

Most of us know of the career of Sergeant John Johnston who lived with his family in the Blockhouse while serving as Merrickville Lockmaster. Together Johnston and his son, Mathew served for over 70 years as, Merrickville lockmasters.

As a sergeant with the Royal Sappers and Miners he had overseen the construction of the eight Rideau Canal locks at Bytown. The Royal Sappers and Miners consisted of skilled miners, stone cutters and masons, blacksmiths, carpenters and construction experts used by the British military throughout the world for construction projects. On the Rideau, their job was to provide skilled assistance and supervision to the outside contractors who were hired to do the actual canal and lock constructions. For general labour, these contractors employed itinerant French Canadian and Irish immigrant labourers, and a considerable part of the supervising job of the Sappers was to keep this potentially unruly crew under control.



**Sergeant John
Johnston**

But Johnston was not destined to remain in Canada at this time. As the Rideau locks were being completed in 1831 the work of the Royal Sappers here was completed and many of the men and officers serving here were decommissioned. A number were offered the option of returning to England, or receiving land grants and possible employment in the canal area. Many chose the latter. Of the 23 lockmasters initially serving the Rideau, nearly half were former Sappers who had chosen this option. It is not clear whether Johnston had this option but, in any case, in 1831, Johnston, man of duty, instead of remaining in Canada, accepted the posting to Corfu in the Mediterranean.

Following completion of his assignment there and subsequent retirement from military service, he applied for the position on the Rideau which had eluded him, and due to his excellent reputation was promised "the first available position". He did not have long to wait.

He returned to Canada in 1835 with his thirty year old wife Margret, his daughter Mary Ann and three sons to become Lockmaster, not at Merrickville, but the isolated and problem ridden Hog's Back locks and dam, outside of Bytown.



**Hogs's Back Dam & Locks
c 1840**

The Hog's Back site was a desolate outpost which did not even have a defensible lockmaster's house until 1838. Compare this to the views of the already established, bustling and growing village of Mirick's Mills.

At that time a man named William Mitchell, a retired Sapper Colonel, was Merrickville Lockmaster. About a year later in the fall of 1836, for reasons unclear, Johnston and Mitchell exchanged positions, Mitchell going to Hog's Back and Johnston, taking over the much more strategically and commercially important post at Merrickville. In doing so he became the third holder of the lockmaster title at Merrickville, the first being a carpenter, Thomas Buck, one of the few non-Sappers recommended by Colonel By for a lockmaster position. Johnston however was the first to take up residence in the Blockhouse, and it would serve as his base for the next thirty-three years.



Mirick's Mills c 1840

From his appointment in 1836, John Johnston served as lockmaster until his death on August 24, 1869. In the Blockhouse museum, you may see his sword and watch, symbols of his proud military tradition, and his punctual attention to duty. Johnston was 78 when he died and his obituary, published in the Brockville Recorder & Times of September 2, 1869, described him as a man "who performed the duties required of him with extraordinary fidelity and singleness of purpose." But, if you look carefully, you may see his tombstone in the Union cemetery which describes his life even more elegantly and simply.

Digging into the past - The Archive Conservation Project

The project to conserve the Merrickville & District Historical Society archives is well under way. Thanks to the grant from the **Ontario Trillium Foundation** and the bequest from the estate of **Thomas H Manning**, we have begun the major task of documenting, preserving and recording in digital format, the large collection of important documents and artifacts that have been donated to the archives over the years.



**Dieter Raths, Samanth Moyes and
Kaven Baker-Volkes**

The project is headed Dieter Raths, a member of the Merrickville Historical Society and a computer engineer, specializing in digital imaging. Working full time for the summer on the project are Kaven Baker-Voakes and Samantha Moyes. Kaven has worked as a student for the past four summers in the Blockhouse and has demonstrated a keen interest in our Museum and its archives. He is a student 3rd year in Canadian studies and Political Science at Carleton. It is Samantha's first year with us and her focus is in creating the computer data base and images. Samantha is in her 2nd year of Applied Museum studies at Algonquin College in Ottawa.

As each of the articles is cleaned and restored it is being secured in an acid proof folders or container. After identification and logging, each article is photographed and a digital image is created. The ultimate goal is not only to conserve the material, but to have all archival documents digitized and accessible for research.

It is encouraging to see these bright young people so enthused about the project. Why not drop into the Blockhouse and meet them. They will be pleased to show you what they are doing. Kaven is doing most of the conservation activities and you will find him in the temporarily secured off section on the second floor of the Blockhouse. You will find Katherine working with the computer in the one room school house in the Blockhouse. It is kind of a nice convergence of old & new.

2005 Merit Award Recognition

This year, the Merrickville & District Historical Society presented three Heritage awards of Merit. This program was initiated four years ago to recognize individuals who have done an outstanding job in helping preserve the history and heritage of our district.

Thomas Manning, was recognized for his early appreciation of the value of local heritage and, specifically, for his generous bequest of \$25,000 to the Historical Society. This money is being used to assist in the conservation of our archives (see above).



Denis Faulkner presents 2005 Heritage Award of Merit to Rhonda and Ted Purvis

Rhonda and Ted Purvis received the Award in recognition of the care and attention they have provided in the restoration of their important heritage home. Associated with John Petapiece, its history in fact goes back well before the addition attributed to the important Merrickville builder. Originally the Purvis home was the home of Merrickville pioneer foundryman Henry Dolfus Smith whose foundry was located next door (now the Village liquor store).

The final 2005 award was presented to Dave and Beverley Ellis for their seventeen year project of historical renovations on the Baldachin Inn block and specifically for the conversion of the third floor into the elegant Baldachin Ball room. This floor originally was part of the Jakes department store. In the 1930's Harry McLean converted the third floor into a gymnasium for free use by the people of Merrickville.

Membership Matters

The annual membership fees for 2005 are now over-due. To continue your support as an annual member, and to ensure you continue to be updated on our activities, please send your cheque for \$5 per person or \$10 per family to the address below. Thanks for your help.

Congratulations to the Village and its bylaw enforcement officers for "encouraging" the removal of the huge unsightly trailer the Liquor Control Board had "temporarily" stored on their property awaiting its use in Kemptville. How audacious of them to think they could just park this ungainly structure on one of the most attractive streets in the Village.

Merrickville's Industrial Complex in its Prime

Visitors to the Village are usually amazed to learn that "the ruins" between the Canal and the River once were known as one of the most important industrial complexes in Eastern Ontario. Today only the Alloy Foundry reminds us of this early industrial era. At our first meeting in the Fall on September 27, we will revisit this area in its prime through an illustrated talk by Richard Tatley on: "the Industrial Complex of Merrickville". It should be a great start to our autumn season.



National Archives

Percival Plow c 1885-90

"In The Garden: Ruby Throat Hummingbird"



For those of you who have admired the beauty of the work of Merrickville artist Brenda Carter, you now have an exceptional opportunity to own one of her sensational Limited Edition Prints. And at the same time you will be benefiting the Historical Society. Brenda has donated an attractive full colour numbered print of a hummingbird feeding at a hollyhock in her garden. It will go to the winner of the raffle to be held at our annual meeting in the Fall. Tickets are \$5 each, three for \$10 and available at the Blockhouse. The print, unlike this inadequate illustration is in full glorious colour and is beautifully framed. Come in and see it!

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