

The Merrickville and District Historical Society NEWSLETTER

Spring 2006

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Super Spring Supper

On April 26, over sixty members attended our excellent Spring dinner at the Sam Jakes Inn. Following the dinner new Rideau Canal Superintendent Gavin Liddy spoke on Plans for Rideau 175.

Mr Liddy revealed that Merrickville, and specifically the Blockhouse, would be one of the four areas of the Rideau corridor which would be singled out for special attention and funding in celebration of the 175th anniversary of the opening of the Rideau Canal and its anticipated designation as a world heritage site in 2007. The other three are, the Commissary building in Ottawa, The Smiths Falls Parks Canada Rideau Museum and Fort Henry in Ottawa. There is no doubt the excitement generated by the promotion of these two events will draw attention to the Village. For the Blockhouse the intention is to "dress up" the exhibits to better show the purpose for which the Blockhouse was built and to better show off its status as a Canadian National Historic site. We welcome these upgrades and are pleased that experienced members of the Historical Society will be sitting with Parks Canada when the proposals for changes are being developed. It should be an exciting year in 2007.



photo by Gustave Pellerin

**Jane Graham, Mayor Struthers,
Gavin Liddy**

Whose Side Are You On Anyway?

A large audience of interested Historical Society members and guests braved a January evening to hear an illuminating lecture on the War of 1812 and its role in fathering the Rideau Canal. Most of us interested in the history of our area realize the Canal grew out of the perceived need of the British for an alternate line of supply and defense for Canada West following the end of the war.

But, thanks to the enlightening presentation by author and historian, Victor Suthren, we came away with better understanding of how close the war came to ending British rule in North America and how important was the war in shaping Canadian destiny. Without taking away from the brave conduct of the British, were it not for the enjoining of the Indigenous people on their side, and the clumsy conduct of the battles by the Americans, the war might well have been lost to the British.

It was the presumption of the Americans that their invasion would be well received and minimally opposed. After all they hugely outnumbered the British garrisons in North America, and most of the citizens of Upper Canada at the time, were American born, and were assumed to have been drawn to the new frontier as much by the enticement of free land as by loyalty to the Crown. The invasion would be "a matter of a stroll" across the border in the words of an American general.

But all did not go as planned. The invasionary force, instead of seeking support of the new-Canadian settlers, brutally slashed and burned their way into the British colony, alienating those who could have been sympathetic to their presence and turning them

into militia men.

Meanwhile, the Six Nation Indians, seething at broken promises of the Americans south of the border became a potent and frightening force and strong allies of the British. No stroll, the war raged fiercely for over two years and ended indecisively.

Following the war, the British also seemed less than totally convinced their subjects were loyal. (Philemon Wright, pioneer founder of Hull was referred to disparagingly as "the damned American", in spite of the fact he had settled on the Ottawa thirty years before the arrival of Colonel By.) Perhaps this is the reason many trusted ex-British veterans from the recently concluded European wars, such as Miles McGuigan, and Robert Nicholson were enticed to the Rideau with favourable land grants. And it is probably no co-incidence that so many of the Lockmasters along the Canal were ex British Sappers and Miners with unquestioned loyalty. In its aftermath the War of 1812 ensured the stamp of Britain on her North American colonies, for at least the next 150 years. In many ways, the War of 1812 was our "birth of a Nation" and it is unfortunate it is so often dismissed as a silly meaningless skirmish leading to nothing more important than an expensive redundant canal.

Brenda Carter Print - Draw winner

At the annual meeting in November, last year, the draw was held for the Brenda Carter print, "In the Garden: Ruby throated Hummingbird" and the lucky winner was Grant Wilkins from Ottawa. He had been in Merrickville visiting friends and purchased the winning ticket at the Blockhouse. A special thanks to Merrickville Artist, Brenda Carter who donated her lovely limited number print to the Historical Society for the draw. All proceeds from the sale of the print came to the Historical society. Thanks to all who purchased tickets and, better luck next time!

Historical Society Heritage Awards of Merit

It was doubly enjoyable to be able to present following the spring dinner the 2006 Merrickville & District Historical Society Heritage Awards of Merit. These awards were started five years ago and the list of recipients constitutes a who's who of individuals who care deeply about the history and heritage of our district and who have demonstrated their caring in their actions, past & present. This years winners stand tall beside those we have previously recognized.

Our first award recipient, the late Leonard Newman, was the grandson of Lockmaster Thomas Newman and was born in 1881 in the small stone cottage at Clowes Lock. In a paper presented to the Historical Society in 1967 Leonard remembered as a child taking grist grown on the Newman farm to the Cook's Mill in Andrewsville to be ground into flour. Perhaps it was this experience which led him to a distinguished career with agricultural research with Agriculture Canada . Following his retirement to the Newman Farm in Merrickville, and until his death in 1978 at the age of 96, Leonard Newman employed his research skills to delve into the history of the families, properties and institutions of the Merrickville area. His papers, on Andrewsville and adjacent properties, the Percival Plow and Stove Company, on Harry MacLean and the Merrickville United Church were presented to the Historical Society and have become important records of our heritage.

It was equally enjoyable to present this Award jointly to Dr. Leonard Newman's daughter Lenore, who, since retirement has followed in her father's footsteps to Merrickville and carried on his work in recording and preserving the history of our district.



photo by Gustave Pellerin

Lenore Newman and John Cowan

The second Heritage Award of Merit was granted this year to Elizabeth and Garth Wallace who, in the careful and considerate period renovations to their 1840's stone farm house have demonstrated that acquiring an historic house also means acquiring a responsibility to protect and to preserve it, not only for their own use, but for the ages.



photo by Gustave Pellerin

Garth and Elizabeth Wallace



Historic Wallace House

What a Shame. No Party, No Fundraising!

It has been our practice for the last five years to present the Heritage Awards on the occasion of the Blockhouse opening fund raising reception. This year, because of the Archives revitalization project which is occupying a large portion of the second floor of the Blockhouse, we have had to forego the fundraising reception. This event I am sure will be missed, not only by the coffers of our Society, but by the many attendees and supporters who have come to see it as a welcome portent of the summer. Not to worry. We expect to be back next year in our familiar location, bigger and better. In the meantime, it will be most helpful if you are able to ensure your membership dues are current. (see list of paid 2006 members below).

Blockhouse Opening, June 17

Although we have had to cancel the evening fundraising reception, the Blockhouse will of course be officially opened for the Summer on Saturday, June 17, 2006 at 2:00 pm. Mayor Struthers will cut the opening ribbon, re-enactors will be present to demonstrate pioneer ways, neighboring museums and historical societies will have demonstrations. The winners of our student historical essay contests will be announced. Please make plans to join us and bring all your family and friends.

Let Us Take Your Picture(s)



photo from scrapbook rescued from recent
Merrickville auction

Mary Pearson

Every once in a while we are disappointed to see family photo albums on tables at yard sales. Perhaps no longer of interest to family members, or found in the attic of the old house, these images of current Merrickville history are of vital interest to the Historical Society. If you have photos related to the Village as it was, say the Watchorn Wollen Mill or the Bandstand, or older photos of family members and friends, why not consider donating them to the Historical Society Archives. We promise to value them, and protect and preserve them.

Merrickville's Indomitable First School Marm

Lamira Dow, one of the most memorable women in Merrickville's history made her mark early. Thrust into independence at an early age, she overcame many disadvantages and at her death at the age of 83, as the wife of Bradish Billings, she personified pioneer fortitude.

Lamira Dow was born in 1796, the daughter of Samuel Dow who had settled what is now Kilmarnock. Samuel Dow was a blacksmith and due to his early death in 1805, has the dubious distinction of being the first person to be buried in Wolford Cemetery. At the age of fifteen his daughter Lamira, sought and obtained the position of schoolteacher in Merrickville for \$7 per month, room and board. Her students were mainly the children of farmers who were presumed able to pay an additional subscription fee.

Lamira showed her early grit in an incident recorded by Larry Turner in his "Jewell of the Rideau". Apparently, one year, she was unable to collect cash for her teaching and instead was offered promissory notes for wheat which she understood could be redeemed for cash. Not dismayed the young girl drove a buggy to Brockville where the wheat agent agreed to honour the promissory notes but, not for cash. Only for the value of trade goods from his store. Furious and unwilling to spend her entire year's earnings in the agent's store, the sixteen year Lamira, went back to Merrickville, borrowed a wagon and went farm to farm collecting in wheat the amount owed to her. She then went to Kingston, where she sold her wheat for cash, bargaining for the best price.

But, Lamira's teaching days were limited. Perhaps this incident was enough to end them. In any case in 1813 at the age of 17 she married Bradish Billings, a young United Empire Loyalist who had settled at what is now Hog's back on the Rideau. He was the first white settler in Gloucester township. It was a hard life and a tough location, isolated from the only nearby settlement, Philemon Wright's "colony" at Wrightsville (later Hull). Even by the time the Rideau Canal was built there was only one other family that had settled in the Hog's Back area.

As you pass by Hog's Back locks on (what used to be) the scenic route into Ottawa, on the right you will see the furious cascade of water where the Rideau River escapes the controlled course of the Canal and begins its rushing descent toward the Ottawa River. Robert Legget in his landmark book, "Rideau Waterway" gives this account of the area and the pioneer Billings family. "It is not easy to link this account of hardships in the bush with the Ottawa of today, so great have been the changes through the years. And yet there are still views of the Rideau River within the city limits which enable one to forget momentarily the city around and to imagine the river as it was when first seen by

(surveyor) MacTaggart.

One such view is to be obtained near Billings Bridge, and very appropriately so since Bradish Billings, after whom the bridge is named and who lived close to the south end of the bridge site was one of the two settlers on the Rideau when the Hog's Back Dam was built. Billings was the son of one of the first Loyalist settlers in the Brockville district; he came up the Ottawa early in the century and, after working for Philemon Wright, obtained land of his own on the banks of the Rideau and built a log cabin here in 1812. He then married a remarkable young woman, Lamira Day (Dow), the school teacher at Merrickville, and they settled down to a long and happy life together on this first estate of the Rideau country. There are many tales told about the Billings, especially about Mrs. Billings who lived to a great age, watching the metamorphosis of the construction camp of By town into the capital city of the Dominion. One anecdote only, however, is relevant to our story of the Waterway. . ."



John Burrows, Ontario Public Archives

Hog's Back Locks & Falls c 1845

"In 1814, Mr. and Mrs. Billings, with their young daughter Sabra, the first child to be born in Gloucester Township, were returning from a canoe trip to Merrickville. They came to the portage around the falls at Hog's Back and there met Philemon Wright who was also canoeing on the river. They talked before disembarking and became so interested in their discussion that nobody noticed that the Billings' canoe was edging towards the current which swept over the falls. Too late, Philemon Wright shouted his warning but the frail craft with the Billings family in it was caught in the swift water and carried over the falls before the eyes of Wright's horrified party. Wright rushed around the short portage road, expecting to find battered bodies and a wrecked canoe. Instead he found the canoe afloat and Bradish Billings still in control of it, his wife safe with the baby quiet in her arms. This is believed to have been the only occasion on which a canoe shot the Hog's Back Falls; even the most experienced Indian travelers would never attempt the feat. It is a measure of the character and skill of Bradish Billings as a woodsman that he was able to save his family by his handling of the canoe in this emergency. He prospered in his lumber business and eventually built a fine house near the site of his original cabin. The chimney only of this mansion stands today, clearly to be seen from Billings Bridge, but neglected and unknown to almost all passers-by." *Rideau Waterway, Robert Legget, p176*

Another Merrickville - Hog's Back Connection?

*******interesting speculation?*******

There is another intriguing connection between Merrickville and the Billings at Hog's Back. In 1835 when Sergeant John Johnston came to Canada to serve as lockmaster he came, not to Merrickville, but to Hog's Back . Here he would undoubtedly have become acquainted with the Billings one of two families living there. Through Lamira Billings' frequent canoe trips to Merrickville it is reasonable to assume the ambitious Sergeant Johnston would become aware of the booming Village of Merrickville. Compared to desolate Hog's Back it would seem like a metropolis. Perhaps then this is the reason why Johnston, in 1836, traded positions with then Merrickville lockmaster Tomas Mitchell and moved with his family to the Merrickville Blockhouse, commencing a Johnston-Merrickville lockmaster legacy that lasted over seventy years.

HELP! Where's Grandpa ??

Since our web page has gone on line it has attracted significant interest. To date it has had some 5000 visitors. Recently, a person contacted us from Vancouver to find information about ancestors who lived in the Merrickville area in the 1800's. We are very pleased to be generating this interest in our Community, but, there is a problem. More and more we are receiving such enquiries but, at this point we do not have anyone to respond to them. It is not a huge task, but it takes time, and a certain sleuthing instinct to track down the required information.

Sources are numerous and easily accessed, none more readily than the amazing records of hundreds of families researched by Alice Hughes and now in the safe custody of the Merrickville Public Library. Even the pioneers interred in the McGuigan Cemetery from 1806 to about 1830 are easily researched. Local Church and Cemetery records go way back and are another ready source for birth and marriage records. "Hatched, matched and dispatched", as Alice Hughes is heard to say.

Here is the challenge. We need someone from our area that enjoys such things to volunteer to help chase down Grandpa. If you are interested in spending a few hours a month in responding to these requests, please contact us at info@merrickvillehistory.org. Although we had a welcome response for Volunteers from our last newsletter, we did not have anyone come forward in this area. How about you? You will find it fun and be doing a great service to appreciative folks who are anxious to rediscover their Merrickville family roots.

Volunteers Wanted

Our Society is run entirely by Volunteers. They are what make things happen. And, with our increasing level of activities, we are always looking for folks to do a little, or a lot, to help out. Volunteers conduct walking tours of the Village for visitors, help in the Blockhouse cleanup, work on archival records, and help receive visitors to the Blockhouse on weekends before and after the official opening and closing. If you would like to get involved please contact Pat Molson at 269-4092.

Membership Matters

The annual membership fees for 2006 are now due. For the moment, our annual membership dues are unchanged at \$5 per person, \$10 per family and \$50 per person for life members. Please send your cheque to:

Merrickville & District Historical Society
Box 294
Merrickville, ON K0G 1N0

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

According to Gary Clarke - On Feb 6th, 1939, Harry McLean landed his single engine Stinson Reliant at the new, but unopened Port George VI Island Airport (Toronto Island). This was the first plane to land at the airport, then seen as Toronto's main airport.

2006 Executive

President - John Cowan
First Vice President - Pat Molson
Secretary /Treasurer - Andrew McKay

Committee Members : Beverly Burpee, Sheena Cowan, Fred Grodde, David Hammonds, Gillian Hammonds, Dick Hegan, Gustave Pellerin, Wayne Poapst, Dieter Rath, George Yap

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