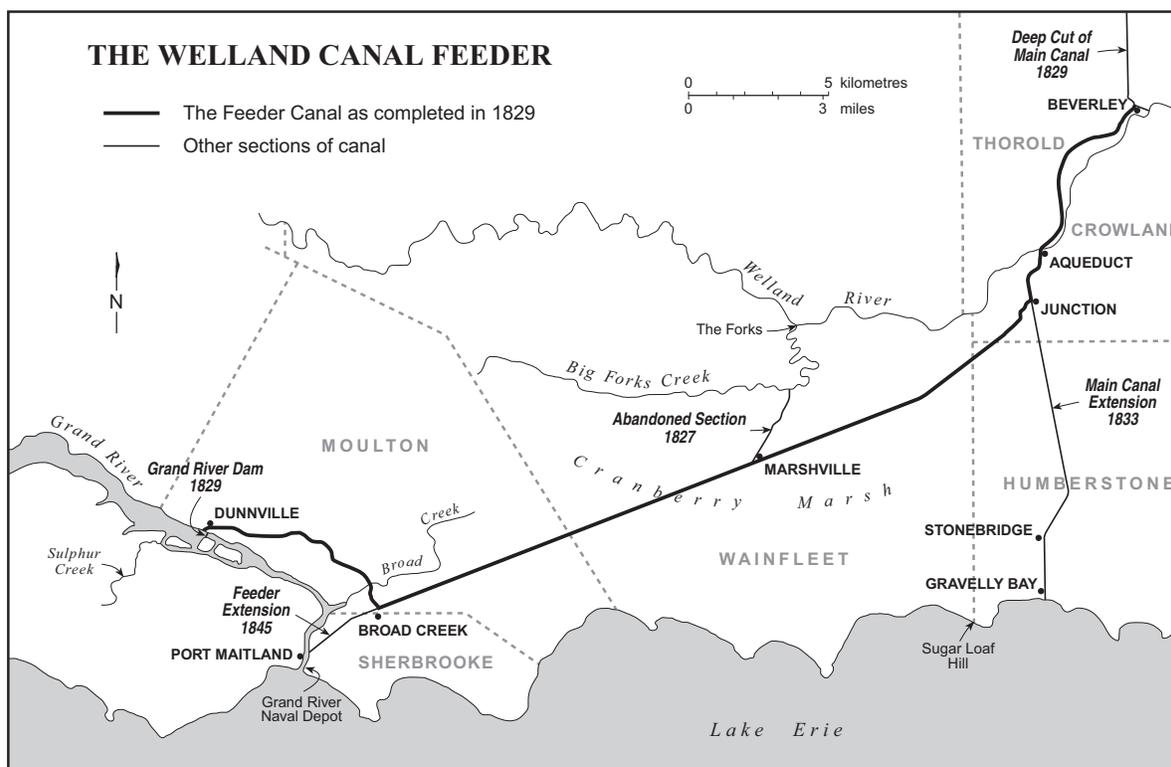


THE FEEDER CANAL AND ITS COMMUNITIES



When the First Welland Canal opened in 1829 it actually consisted of two canals: the main canal linking Lake Ontario with the Welland River at Beverley (later Port Robinson), and the Feeder Canal that supplied water to the main canal from the Grand River. My previous article looked at the origin and naming of the communities on the main canal; this article focuses on the Feeder communities.

The Feeder is less familiar than the main canal, and its early history is complex. When it opened in the fall of 1829 it differed markedly from what had been planned originally, and it was to undergo further changes. The map above shows the various sections of the Feeder, the communities that emerged along its line, the townships through which it ran, and the geographical features it connected. The communities, none of which existed prior to the canal, are given their original names. These are not necessarily the names in use today.

The central portion of the Feeder lay in Wainfleet Township, and in the early 19th century much of the township consisted of marshland. This was generally called the Cranberry Marsh, though it was also known as Canby Marsh, Tamarac Swamp, Black Ash Swamp, Great Marsh and Wainfleet

Marsh. It is now largely drained, and the small piece that remains is still called Wainfleet Marsh.

East of Wainfleet the Feeder ran mainly through Crowland and Thorold Townships. The boundary between them was the Welland River, which meant that Thorold extended south into the heart of what is now downtown Welland. West of Wainfleet Township the Feeder crossed Moulton and later Sherbrooke Townships, both of which were carved out of the Six Nations Tract along the Grand River, which had been reserved for the Six Nations Indians by the Haldimand Grant of 1784.

Prior to the canal, settlement of this area was very sparse, with just a few scattered farms. No recognizable communities existed closer than the villages of St. Johns and Canboro, a settlement at Sugar Loaf Hill on Lake Erie and the native villages along the Grand. One possible exception was the Grand River (or Sherbrooke) Naval Depot, established in 1815 on the east bank of the river at its mouth. Several early maps show what looks like a separate place called Sherbrooke just above the Depot proper, but this was likely an outpost or just a depiction of the buildings (barracks, storehouses, etc.) associated with the Depot.

A second canal was part of the Welland Canal project from the start, though originally it had no role as a feeder. It was to start at the estuary of Broad Creek on the Grand River, and follow a straight east-north-easterly course for 9 miles into the heart of the Cranberry Marsh. Then (at what became Marshville) it was to change direction and run north-north-easterly for another 3 miles to join the Welland River at The Forks, where Big Forks Creek met the main stream.

This canal, though secondary to the main canal, possessed certain advantages over the latter. Its Lake Erie outlet was ice-free earlier in the season than the Niagara River; it provided a link to the Grand River that avoided the hazardous passage along the Lake Erie shoreline; it made use of one of the best natural harbours on Lake Erie; it was far enough from the American border to be relatively safe from attack; and it would facilitate the draining of the Cranberry Marsh, 13,400 acres of which were in due course granted to the Welland Canal Company.

When canal construction began in 1824 the emphasis was on the main canal. By the fall of 1827 progress was sufficiently advanced that work could begin on the other canal. Monson, Simpson & Co. were awarded the contract on October 4 and promptly advertised for 1000 labourers. The advertisement was datelined "Cranberry Marsh, near Misener's Mills." This location was probably the future site of Marshville, for John Misener had a saw mill just to the north on Big Forks Creek. By the end of the year 2 miles of canal had been excavated towards The Forks and possibly a similar distance towards Broad Creek.

By November 1828 the main canal was almost complete — all that remained was two weeks' work on the Deep Cut that sliced through the ridge between the Welland River and Beaverdams Creek. Then disaster struck. A deep layer of quicksand caused the banks of the Deep Cut to collapse, and it became apparent that the Welland River could not be used as a source of water as originally planned. Since the Deep Cut could not be deepened any further water had to be brought in from a higher level.

The solution was to make the Grand River the source and to convert the secondary canal into a feeder. The Grand was already at a higher elevation than the Welland, and it was proposed to raise it even further by placing a dam near its mouth. This was already under construction when objections by the commandant of the Naval Depot forced the Canal Company to relocate the dam 5 miles upstream, to the site of present-day Dunnville. The new dam, composed of complete trees laid down in line with the current and packed with layers of gravel, stone and brush, was 600 feet long and raised the water level by 5 feet. An unfortunate consequence was the

flooding of over 2000 acres of bottom land for 10 miles upstream. The Company had built the dam without legal authority, and faced claims for compensation from almost 100 aggrieved landowners, half of them Six Nations Indians.

Water from above the dam was discharged into a new channel excavated from the Grand River to the line of the secondary canal near Broad Creek, while surplus water was diverted past the dam to the lower reaches of the Grand via Sulphur Creek. A lock was planned at the dam, but for some reason was not built. Since a proposed link to the lower Grand River at Broad Creek was not provided either, ships on the upper Grand were left without access to Lake Erie.

Changes also occurred at the Marshville end. The section that had been excavated towards The Forks was abandoned, and instead the canal was extended eastward in a straight line, eventually curving north to meet the main canal at Beverley. This necessitated crossing the Welland River, which was achieved by means of an aqueduct in what is now downtown Welland. It also required two new locks on the main canal at Beverley, allowing boats to "lock down" to the Welland River.

The Feeder opened for traffic on November 14, 1829 (two weeks before the main canal) when two scows made the journey from the Deep Cut to the Grand River. In 1833 the north-east portion became part of the main canal when the latter was extended south to Gravelly Bay on Lake Erie, and in 1845 a long-delayed cut to the mouth of the Grand River was provided. Use of the Feeder declined over time, and its demise was inevitable after 1881, when water for the main canal was taken directly from Lake Erie. The last recorded commercial use was in 1908.

Marshville

The first community to develop on the Feeder was Marshville, which probably served as the centre for operations when construction began in 1827. At first it would have been no more than a shanty town, but by the early 1830s building lots had been laid out by the Welland Canal Company. A saw mill and grist mill were erected on the Feeder, and the surplus water was discharged into the abandoned stretch of canal, which is known today as Mill Race Creek. In the early 1830s an attempt was made to change the name of the village to Milton (the origin of which is unknown), but Marshville prevailed. Over time, however, the inhabitants became less and less enamoured of that name, and in 1894 petitioned to have it changed to Wainfleet Centre. Though they failed they did not give up, and in 1923 the village took the township name, Wainfleet. This name comes from Lincolnshire, England, and has its origin in Governor Simcoe's county-based naming policy for Upper Canada, as explained in my previous article.

Dunnville

Dunnville came into existence with the building of the Grand River dam in 1829. It was named for John Henry Dunn, Receiver General of Upper Canada and second President of the Welland Canal Company. According to a contemporary observer, “Oliver Phelps ... of St. Catharines laid out the plot of the town” in 1829, but it is uncertain what this really means. Phelps was the principal contractor on the first Welland Canal and was given the task of constructing a lock at the Grand River dam. The lock was never built, but Phelps did acquire 5 acres of land on the Feeder just below the dam where he developed a complex of mills, together with storehouses that facilitated transshipment between the Feeder and the lower Grand River. No doubt it was this complex that caused the same observer to proclaim Dunnville’s “certain prospect of being the Manchester of Upper Canada.” Phelps sold his interest in 1834, and while he may have laid out village streets there is no proof of this. Also, the oft-repeated claim that Phelps had been engaged in a race with George Keefer of Thorold to be the first to build a mill on the canal is simply not true, for Keefer’s mill was up and running when Phelps had barely started work on his. Though Dunnville never became a Manchester, it did develop quite rapidly. It acquired a post office, always a good measure of growth, as early as 1830, with Phelps’ son-in-law as postmaster. In 1860 it became an incorporated village, and in 1900 a town.

Broad Creek

Broad Creek was named for the nearby creek, which in turn was named for its wide marshy estuary, though when and by whom is unknown. The community may have begun as a work camp during the excavation of the secondary canal, for there is evidence of a store there in 1827. From 1829 it was the point where the winding section of the Feeder from Dunnville met the straight section across the Cranberry Marsh. The importance of this location increased in the early 1840s when the Feeder was extended to the mouth of the Grand River, but though the village went on to acquire a modest shipbuilding industry it remained small. With the opening of a post office in 1859 the name was changed to Stromness, presumably by businessman and first postmaster Lachlan McCallum (later an MP and Senator) after Stromness in his native Scotland.

Port Maitland

Port Maitland is divided by the Grand River, with the main part on the west bank facing the mouth of the Feeder extension. It was named for Sir Peregrine Maitland, Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, 1818-28, and a strong supporter of the canal venture. The name — in reference to the harbour at the river mouth — appears on various maps between

1828 and 1840, but no community is shown. It is not clear when the village itself emerged, nor what its relationship was to the earlier Naval Depot. The Depot, located on the east bank, was in severe decline by the 1830s, but the land remained in government hands. The village probably emerged separately on the west bank, as there is early mention of a tavern and church, and it was here that the Welland Canal Company constructed a pier. A community may have developed on the east bank during construction of the Feeder extension 1842-45, but the present east-bank community dates from the 20th century.

Aqueduct

Aqueduct was the original name for Welland. It began in 1829 as a shanty town alongside the wooden aqueduct that took the Feeder Canal over the Welland River. Initially growth was very slow, and despite the head of water that existed between the canal and river, no mills were built until after the Second Welland Canal was completed in 1845. In 1844, no doubt in anticipation of better things to come, a meeting of the inhabitants proposed that the community’s name be changed from the prosaic Aqueduct to Merrittville, this in honour of “he who was justly called the Father of the Canal” but whose name “had not found a place in any of those villages which had arisen from his wisdom.” Their dedication to William Hamilton Merritt was not to last, however, and in 1858 Merrittville (or as it was more commonly known Merrittsville) was incorporated as a village and renamed Welland. This followed the creation of a separate Welland County in 1856 (previously it was part of the United Counties of Lincoln and Welland) and the selection of Merrittsville as the county seat. Welland is the name of a river in Lincolnshire, England, and was first used in Upper Canada for the Welland River, having been introduced by Governor Simcoe in 1792 in place of the earlier name Chippawa Creek.

Junction

The aptly named Junction (or The Junction) was located just east of where the Feeder Canal joined the main canal extension to Lake Erie. Its name appears on a map of 1833, the year the extension was completed, but it is doubtful that any community existed at that time. An 1837 map shows a tavern, but it was not until John Hellems, owner of 200 acres of land in Crowland Township, created building lots in the mid-1840s that a proper village emerged. Hellems operated a wharf on the canal, and the place was later known as Port Hellems, Helmsport or, more usually, Helmsport, though the name Junction also continued in use for some time. In 1917, when Welland sought to absorb Helmsport in its quest to become a city, it was described as “the naughty section” and “a hive of bootleggers and lawlessness.” But it remained a defiant part of

Crowland Township until 1961, when it was finally incorporated into Welland.

Stonebridge

Stonebridge and Gravelly Bay (which follows) belong to the Lake Erie extension of the main canal, not to the Feeder, but are considered here in order to complete coverage of the First Welland Canal communities. Stonebridge was located where an important early trail crossed a creek flowing south to Lake Erie. The trail ran north-east from the Sugar Loaf towards Stonebridge, and after crossing the creek split into two, one arm heading for Chippawa, the other for Fort Erie. Despite the name it is unlikely that there ever was a stone bridge at Stonebridge, but early settlers may have used slabs of stone from the Onondaga Escarpment to create a ford in the marshy creek bed. A bridge was provided once the canal was built, and in 1833 Catharine Merritt speaks of it as “the stone bridge.” However, she may just have been referring to the foundations. The bridge itself was probably a wooden swing bridge, for an all-stone bridge would have blocked canal traffic. By this time village lots had been laid out by local landowners, and the name Petersburg introduced in recognition of early settler Peter Neff, who died of cholera in 1832. In 1851 a post office was established under the township name Humberstone (another Lincolnshire name from England), and over time this supplanted the two earlier names, both of which had continued in use. Humberstone was incorporated as a village in 1912, and in 1952 became part of Port Colborne.

Gravelly Bay

The name Gravelly Bay presumably has its origin in the gravelly nature of the lakeshore, though in early times the bay was also called Steele’s Bay after a local settler. The first known references to Gravelly Bay date from 1830, when the Welland Canal Company was seeking a terminus for the Lake Erie extension of the Welland Canal. First applied to the bay, the name was soon given to the harbour and the community that evolved during construction. In 1831 the Welland Canal Company began using the alternative name Port Colborne, this after Sir John Colborne, the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, 1829-36, who had played a major role in securing financing for the canal extension. Two years later the Company sought Sir John’s approval for the new name. If this seems strange, it may have been in anticipation of Port Colborne being designated an official Port of Entry. Growth of the community, described in 1832 as a “sunken morass,” was delayed by problems with land ownership, and it did not become firmly established until 1834, when William Hamilton Merritt purchased land and laid down building lots. Port Colborne was incorporated as a village in 1870, a town in 1918 and a city in 1967.

Principal Sources: Aitken, *Welland Canal Company*; Carter, *Welland Canal*; Docker, *Grand River Naval Depot*; Jackson, *Welland Canals and Their Communities*; Merritt, *Merritt Biography*; Styran and Taylor, *Great Swivel Link*; local histories of Dunnville, Humberstone, Port Colborne, Wainfleet, Welland and Grand River Valley; historical atlases of Lincoln & Welland and Haldimand counties; post office inventories; travellers’ reports; trade directories; *Farmers’ Journal* and other newspapers; First Welland Canal plans and documents, Welland Canal Company *Directors’ Reports*; *Third Report* (of committee of inquiry into management of Welland Canal).

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