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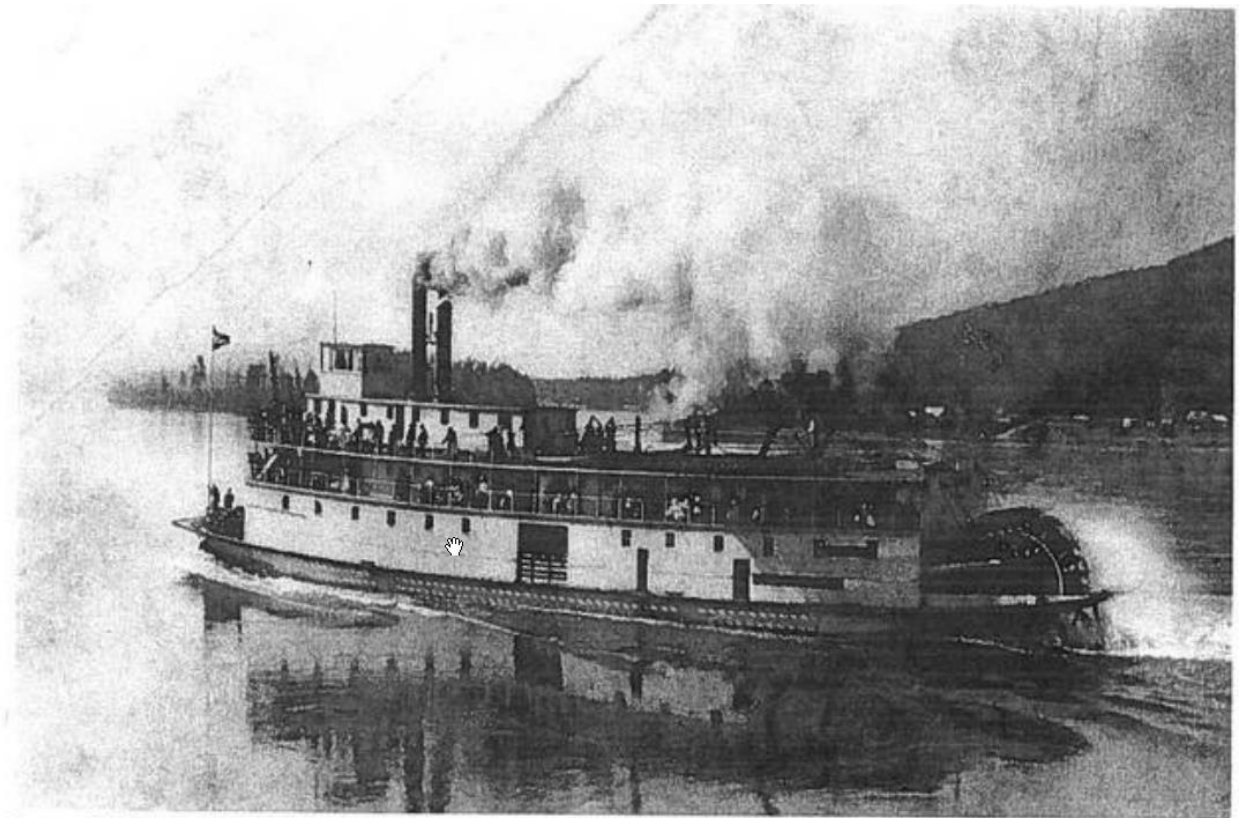
Steamboating on the Peace River

by Edward L. Affleck



The substantial 162-foot steamer *DA Thomas*, launched by David Alfred Thomas's Peace River Development Company in 1916.

Steamboating arrived late on the Upper Peace River and was soon overtaken by the frenetic settlement and railway development which took place prior to and during World War I. The topography of the Peace River country militated against the development of a chain of neat little communities nestling on the riverside. In these days of magnificent industrial highways sweeping over the plateau in the Peace River country, providing a speedy link with Prince George and other British Columbia centres, the era of meandering steamboats seems as far removed as that of the York boat.

The history of freshwater steamboating in British Columbia involves navigation on at least 20 different stretches of water. Many of these stretches have a similar history dating from the second half of the nineteenth century. Prospectors discovered gold on the banks of hitherto uncharted creeks and rivers and hordes of adventurers followed in on foot. Then the white man's inimitable invasion craft, the sternwheeler, steamed up the Pacific Coast to enter the mouth of major rivers and proceeded to work heavy cargo up white water to service the mushrooming mining camps on or near the river. This is true of watercourses which rise west of the continental divide and discharge into the waters of the Pacific Ocean such as the Stikine, the Skeena, the Fraser, and the Columbia. It is however, not true at all for the Peace River, which pierces the continental divide to join the vast Slave-Mackenzie drainage system to the Arctic.

Between 1794 and 1823 the Upper Peace River area was the scene of active fur trading and also of intense rivalry between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company. The massacre of five HBC men by natives at St. Johns in 1823, combined with a depletion of fur and food resources in the area, ended the Upper Peace River trade for four and one-half decades. Fort Dunvegan became the western outpost in the area for the Hudson's Bay Company.

In the 1860s and 1870s prospectors, fanning out from the Cariboo and Omineca diggings, scoured the Finlay and Parsnip, headwaters of the Peace, for gold, but no findings were sufficiently enticing to prompt a major rush to the area. In any event, had discoveries of gold triggered a rush to the Finlay and Parsnip the Peace River would not have permitted a sternwheeler invasion from the Pacific Coast. As said, the Peace River pierces the continental divide from the west to discharge its waters far from the Pacific Coast. The mighty waters of the Peace, flowing eastward, drain the southern part of the vast northeast corner of British Columbia. The huge body of water now backed up by the Peace River power

development today masks the turbulent water, which formerly poured through a wild canyon gouged through the Rocky Mountains. A few miles east of the canyon, at Hudson's Hope, the velocity of the huge volume of water slackened sufficiently to permit navigation. Over 100 miles into Northern Alberta, the River takes a broad sweep north, then east again to describe a wide arc through the vast northern plateau of the prairie province. Throughout the centuries, the relentless erosive force of the mighty waters of the Peace scoured out a huge trough, so that the upper part of the navigable reaches of the river lie several hundred feet below the level of the surrounding plateau. More than five hundred miles downstream, in the far north of Alberta, the River approaches basaltic formations near Fort Vermilion. Here the scoured trough becomes decidedly more shallow and the River more swift, until several miles further east it tumbles over the Vermilion Chutes. Below the Chutes, the River flows on serenely north and east to its confluence with the Great Slave River.

The Peace River thus has two navigable stretches; both mind boggling in their length when compared to the typical reach of most of British Columbia's other navigable rivers. The upper navigable stretch extends almost 600 miles from Hudson's Hope, BC to Fort Vermilion, far to the north and east in Alberta. The lower stretch, below Vermilion Chutes, forms part of the vast Athabasca-Slave River system which begins at Athabasca Landing. About 90 miles north of Edmonton the river tumbles over a series of rapids on its way northeast to calmer water at Fort McMurray, and then extends well over 1,000 miles in northeastern Alberta as it meanders its way north to drain into the Mackenzie River system. The navigable stretches are long, but the navigation seasons short in the vast subarctic plateau of Northern Alberta.

Steamboating around Peace River Crossing, a settlement on the Peace River almost midway between Hudson's Hope and Vermilion Chutes, was essentially a May-to-September operation. To avoid being crushed by the massive movement of ice during spring breakup, vessels had to be pulled out of the water over the winter, and then the winter-dried wooden hulls made watertight each spring before being launched for the coming season. This annual start-up procedure, common to steamboating in all freshwater areas of Canada experiencing long and rigorous winters, added greatly to the cost.

During the 1860s and 1870s, when the sternwheeler was invading the navigable reaches of the Fraser, the Columbia, the Skeena and the Stikine river systems, the Peace River remained serene. First Nations people in the Peace had long-developed trails, which skirted the southern shore of Lesser Slave Lake south to

the Edmonton area. Traditionally the Hudson's Bay Company during the short navigation season worked vessels propelled by large sweep oars, York boats, to ship goods to its forts located throughout the Athabasca, Slave, Peace, and Mackenzie river system and to bring out furs. Over the winter of 1882-1883, however, the Bay took a giant navigation stride by constructing at Fort Chipewyan, near the foot of Lake Athabasca, a small stout sternwheeler called the *Grahame.* In succeeding navigation seasons the *Grahame,* stuffed with cargo, steamed hundreds of miles up and down the Athabasca and Great Slave systems, including the 200-mile run up the Peace from its mouth to the foot of the Vermilion Chutes. Above the portage around the Chutes, York boats and canoes continued to move goods up the Peace as far as Hudson's Hope. To the eyes of the white man, the Upper Peace River area was gradually awakening again after decades of fur trade inactivity.

In the 1880s, the early years of settlement in what was then the Athabasca District of the Northwest Territories, the *Grahame* gave the Hudson's Bay Company a relatively free hand in setting transportation rates and conditions. By the 1890s, however, the black-robed missionaries of the Oblate Order of Mary Immaculate were encouraged by the doughty Catholic bishop, Emile Grouard, to establish a rival steamer service to afford themselves and some struggling settlers some defence against the HBC monopoly. The brothers built a fleet of small primitive steamers, extending by 1903 to the waters of the Peace above the Vermilion Chutes. In that year the pint-sized sternwheeler *St. Charles* began to work the 526 mile stretch from Fort Vermilion to Hudson's Hope, carrying lumber and supplies for the Mission at Fort St. John in British Columbia, as well as goods for the Northwest Mounted Police. One trip per season usually sufficed for the 60-mile stretch between Fort St. John and Hudson's Hope, but on one such trip the *St. Charles* could match the efforts of a whole fleet of York boats. The brothers worked the *St. Charles* until 1910, selling her to other interests in the face of increasing competition on the river.

In 1905, government took steps to open the Peace River area to settlement. The prospect of expanded settlement plus the competition of the Grouard fleet spurred the Hudson's Bay Company to expand its fleet on the vast Athabasca-Great Slave system. In 1905, the Company carried out an act of faith by calling up shipbuilder Alexander Watson, Jr. from Victoria to superintend the construction of a 110-foot sternwheeler, the *Peace River* at Fort Vermilion. Pint-sized by comparison with vessels in the Skeena River fleet of the HBC, the *Peace River* nonetheless was stoutly constructed of spruce lumber and possessed top class interior fittings which included linen sheets for stateroom bunks, and

linen table cloths and sterling silverware for the elegant little dining room. Freight and passengers destined for Fort St. John would now set out from Edmonton on the wagon road to Athabasca Landing. Freight would likely continue on by water down the rapids of the Athabasca River to Fort McMurray, then embark on the meandering Athabasca-Great Slave waterway, and would eventually end up at the foot of the Vermilion Chutes. A portage of some twenty miles would permit transfer of cargo to the main deck of the steamer *Peace River.* Passengers, however, electing a shorter route involving a series of wagon road portages and short steamboat hauls, would make their way up the Athabasca into the Lesser Slave Lake and Slave River system, thence into the Peace River area. At Peace River Crossing the traveller would thankfully abandon wagon road travel for the comforts of the steamer *Peace River* for a run of about 150 miles upstream to Fort St. John.

The little *Peace River* reigned supreme for a few years, but the pace of immigration to the rich plateau lands west of Lesser Slave Lake was ever quickening. Alberta, in company with its neighbouring Prairie Provinces, was now in the grip of the mad pre-World War I frenzy of railway building which was to criss-cross the expansive lands of the prairies. Mackenzie & Mann built a railway between Edmonton and Athabasca Landing in 1911. In the following year McLennan's Edmonton, Dunvegan & British Columbia line began to finger its way north-west from Edmonton towards the south shore of Lesser Slave Lake and the Peace River Country beyond. Early in 1915 this line was completed to McLennan, less than 50 miles by wagon road south of Peace River Crossing. In 1916, the last wartime year in which railway building was carried on, the rail reached Peace River Crossing. The establishment of a railhead at Peace River Crossing, now dignified by the streamlined name of "Peace River," altered radically the steamboating situation on the Upper Peace River. The long steaming stretch down to Fort Vermilion, the portage down the Chutes and the even longer steaming stretch up to Fort McMurray was no longer involved. Steamboating on the Upper Peace during the navigation season was now a matter of making shorter, more frequent runs upstream from the railhead at Peace River to Hudson's Hope and downstream from Peace River to Fort Vermilion. It was the upstream run from Peace River which belongs in British Columbia's steamboating annals.

On the freighting front steamboat competition really began to nibble at the Hudson's Bay Company's trade in 1912.The Peace River Trading & Land Co,, one of a series of lofty promotions organized to develop the wealth of the Peace River country, launched the spunky little sternwheeler *Grenfell* at West Peace

River. The *Grenfell* possessed few of the amenities of the *Peace River* but she proved a ruthless rival on the freighting front until, in September 1914, she grounded on a sandbar 15 miles above Fort St. John, caught fire, and burned to the waterline. In the winter of 1914-1915, the HBC, losing ground to the railways in other parts of the Athabasca-Great Slave system, retired the *Peace River.* The HBC winched its larger sternwheeler *Athabasca River* up over the ice-covered Vermilion Chutes. The steamer was built in 1912 for the Upper Athabasca trade between Mirror Landing and Grand Rapids. The *Peace River* maintained HBC standards of service on the Peace, but even in that area, she was shortly to be outclassed. In the meantime, in 1915, she had to fight competition on the freighting front from two screw-propelled diesel-powered vessels, the *Peace River Boy* and the *Pine Pass.* Potentially more irksome to the HBC was the action of J. K. Cornwall, a rival on the Athabasca River front, who organized the Peace River Navigation Company in 1915 and had the pint-sized 80-foot sternwheeler, the *Northland Call,* constructed at West Peace River. The *Northland Call,* however, proved to be a jinxed vessel, causing her owners a variety of griefs.

Hudson's Bay Company's steamer Peace River at Hudson's Hope, July 1912.

The really formidable rival to the HBC, David Alfred Thomas, Lord Rhondda, a Welsh coal millionaire, made his hand felt in 1916.Thomas was a man of sound vision, but his early death and the post-World War I recession frustrated his efforts. Thomas envisioned a railway from Prince Albert, SK through the heart of the Peace River Country and Pine Pass to the waters of the Pacific Ocean on Kitimat Arm. Such a railway would open up oil exploration in the Peace River and tap immense coal deposits in the Sukunka Valley. Thomas's company, the Peace River Development Company Ltd., launched two vessels at West Peace River in 1916: the substantial 162-foot sternwheeler *D.A.Thomas,* which approached the Canadian Pacific Railway's Okanagan and Kootenay District sternwheelers in class, and the 60-foot tunnel-screw-propelled motor vessel *Lady Macworth,* named after Thomas's daughter Margaret, built on the lines of vessels beginning to work on the Stikine River. At the time of the building of the *D.A. Thomas,* the powerful engines and fittings of the retired Kootenay Lake sternwheeler *Kaslo* were seeking a market, but for some reason similarly powerful engines were ordered from Polson Iron Works of Toronto for the *D.A. Thomas.* Lord Rhondda apparently was not a man to skimp on outlay.

The *Lady Macworth* was an instant success, proving to be a considerable boon to Peace River settlers on the British Columbia side of the border. She was easy to manoeuvre and economical to operate. On the other hand the superbly appointed *D.A. Thomas* was costly to operate and shared the fate of the CPR's World War I vintage Okanagan Lake sternwheeler *Sicamous* in being impressive to look at but somewhat out of sync with Spartan wartime conditions and decidedly out of sync with post-World War I labour costs. Thomas died four months before the 1918 armistice, leaving his estate to his only child, Lady Margaret Macworth. In 1919 she visited the Peace River Country, apparently willing to support her father's plans, but failed to receive much encouragement from the BC Government.

By 1920, the Peace River Development Co. by default had practically a monopoly on Upper Peace River shipping. The HBC had in 1919 converted the *Athabasca River* into a barge, the *Peace River Boy* had been wrecked in 1916, while the *Pine Pass* had been destroyed by fire at Peace River. The Peace River Development Company acquired the rival *Northland Call,* rebuilt her as the *Hudson's Hope,* but had no success with her and laid her up at the end of the 1920 season.

The Lamson and Hubbard Canadian Company, which had taken over the posts of the Peace River Trading Company in 1920, organized a subsidiary company, the Alberta & Arctic Transportation Company and in 1921 acquired the *D.A. Thomas*

and the *Lady Macworth.* In the same year the HBC, alert to trade prospects stirred up by the Fort Norman oil strike, re-entered the shipping picture with a modest 32-foot screw-propelled vessel, the *Weenusk,* capable of pushing freight barges. Utilizing smaller vessels of this class, HBC remained in the Peace River shipping picture until 1925, when it shipped out its steel-hulled screw-propelled vessel *Watson Lake* to Waterways on the Athabasca River. Lamson and Hubbard, finding the Alberta & Arctic Transportation Company something of a white elephant, sold its shares in the company to the Hudson's Bay Company in 1924. The HBC, apparently yearning to restore elegant pre-World War I standards of service, refitted the *D. A. Thomas* and proceeded to work her on the river, replete with linen sheets, linen table cloths, sterling silverware and all the trimmings. Railway development had reduced much of the trade upstream from Peace River [Crossing], but existing roads in cash-strapped British Columbia and Alberta were still so primitive that for heavy duty transport settlements not served by rail were largely dependent on horse and wagon, or horse and sleigh. Such were the perils of slogging through miles of gumbo that the steamboat service continued to be welcomed by settlements located near navigable waters. The *D.A. Thomas,* drawing far too much water for easy navigation on the Peace, enjoyed a fair trade over a brief navigation season in the 1920s, but costs for operating a labour-intensive sternwheeler were so high, that HBC elected to withdraw her from service. Two strandings, in 1927[1] and 1929, spurred on this decision. What river cargo couldn't be handled by the HBC freight service was taken care of by small outfits with very modest motor vessels. In June, 1930, during high water, the *D.A. Thomas* made an epic run down the Vermilion Chutes, suffering minor damage only. After some temporary repairs, she steamed on downstream, bound for Fort Fitzgerald, 300 miles distant. Approaching Fort Fitzgerald, she was caught in an eddy and stranded in the mud. Her boiler, engines and fittings were removed and her hull left to disintegrate. Her engines went to a lumber mill and

[1] Nigel Hannaford, in his article entitled "The *D.A. Thomas"* published in *Canada West Magazine,* Vol.6, No. 2, Spring, 1976, provides the following graphic description of the vessel's 1927 mishap:
"...The following year, under the command of Captain Myers, she failed to complete even one trip. On her way downstream from Hudson's Hope her pilot put her on the rocks in mid-channel while Myers was asleep. Despite the strenuous efforts of the frantic crew to plug the gaping hole with a tarpaulin, Myers was unable to beach her in time and she sank in deep water only 50 feet from the shore. By the time she came to rest she was submerged up to her main deck. A cargo of cattle was forced to swim to shore although her passengers left in style in her lifeboats...."

her upper-works went for firewood. Her ignoble end matches that meted out to a number of Kootenay District sternwheelers in the post-World War I era.

In 1930 the Hudson's Bay Company made a last brief foray into the passenger business on the Upper Peace River by commissioning an attractive double deck 90-foot twin-screw motor vessel, the *Buffalo Lake.* She proved to be a fuel hog, so in short order was cut down for the freight trade. One last sternwheeler, the motor vessel *Alcan,* appeared in 1940 to assist in the construction of the highway bridge over the Peace at Taylor Flats. She was later sold to Imperial Oil, ran down over the Vermilion Chutes, and put to work on the Mackenzie.

In this last year of the 20th century perhaps we can muster a few words of gratitude first to the Oblate Brothers for their pioneering steamboating efforts to open up the Upper Peace and secondly to the Hudson's Bay Company which took pains from the outset to operate a high-class steamer service, and later, in the face of rising costs, persisted in offering such service.

(This article originally appeared in BC Historical News – Volume 33 Number 1, Winter 1999/2000)

List of steam-powered sternwheelers and other vessels worked on the Peace River above Vermilion Chutes

ATHABASCA RIVER #130277 wood[en hulled] sternwheel [propelled, built in]1912 [in] Athabasca Landing,Alta. by and for Hudson's Bay Company. [Length of hull in feet exclusive of sternwheel] 136.0 x [breadth of hull in feet] 28.0 x [depth of hull in feet] 3.6. 341.21 Gr[oss tonnage]. 230.29. Reg[istered tonnage] Engines: [built in]1901 [by] Albion Iron Works two hor. h.p. cyl. [horizontal high pressure cylinders each] 12" [diameter by] x 48" [length] 9.6 NHP [Nominal Horsepower] from Skeena River sternwheeler *Hazelton #107834.* Winched up Vermilion Rapids 1914-15 and worked on Peace River run up to Hudson's Hope until 1919. She was then beached at Peace River Crossing and used as a warehouse.

BUFFALO LAKE #156567 (motor vessel) wood twin-screw 1930 Peace River Alta. by George Askew for Hudson's Bay Company. 91.0 x 19.5 x 4.55. 176.67 Gr. 157.55. Reg. Engines: 1930 Vivian Gas Engine Works, Vancouver. 4.5 N.H.P. Converted from passenger & freight vessel to tug, 1938. Register closed 1950.

D.A. THOMAS #138429 wood sternwheel 1916 Peace River, Alta. by George Askew for Peace River Development Co. Ltd. 161.9 x 37.0 x 6.3 1.114.45 Gr. 798.10 Reg. Engines: 1915 Poison two hor. h.p. cyl. 18" x 84" 21.6 NHP 1921 sold to Alberta & Arctic Transportation Co. Ltd. Acquired 1924 by HBC. Foundered 1927 but raised. 1930 hauled successfully over Vermilion Rapids, but stranded and abandoned at the approach to Fort Fitzgerald.

GRENFELL # ? wood sternwheel 1912 West Peace River by George Magar for Peace River Trading & Land Co. 139 Gr. 81 Reg. Engines: 2.7 NHP. Destroyed by fire September 1914 15 miles above Fort St. John.

HUDSON'S HOPE #138024 (ex *Northland Call)* wood sternwheel 1915 West Peace River, Alta. Acquired 1919-20 by the Peace River Development Co. from the Peace River Navigation Co., substantially rebuilt, reengined and renamed *Hudson's Hope.* Original dimensions: 99.5 x 18.0 x 4.0. 192 Gr. 111 Reg. Engines: 3.5 NHP. Not successful; abandoned after 1920 season; broken up 1924.

LADY MACWORTH #138621 (motor vessel) wood twin-screw 1916 Peace River Alta. by George F. Askew for Peace River Development Corp. 56.9 x 11.0 x 3.7. 21.05. Gr. 14/31 Reg. Engines: Auto Engine Works, St. Paul, Minn. 7.34 N.H.P. Sold Mar 21, 1921 to Alberta & Arctic Transportation Co. Ltd. of Edmonton. Dismantled and broken up, August, 1930.

NORTHLAND CALL #138024 wood sternwheel 1915 West Peace River for Peace River Navigation Co.99.5 x 18.0 x 4. 192.04 Gr. 111 Reg. Engines: 3 NHP. Engines, boiler and fittings from retired Athabaska River steamer *Northland Call* #134312, Sold 1919-1920 to Peace River Development Corporation, who substantially rebuilt and reengined her and renamed her *Hudson's Hope.*

PEACE RIVER #121777 wood sternwheel 1905 Fort Vermilion, Alta. by Alex Watson, Jr. for HBC 110.0 x 24.0 x 4.5. 282.02 Gr. 183.98 Reg. Engines: 1905 Marine Engine Works, Chicago two hor. h.p. cyl 10" x 48" 6.7 NHP Abandoned 1916 at Fort Vermilion.

PEACE RIVER BOY #134604 (motor vessel) wood screw 1915 Prudence Crossing, Alta. by and for Clifford Smith. 68.6 x 14.0 x 2.5. 16.49 Gr. 11.21 Reg. Engines: 1913 Brook Motor Works, Lowestoft, U.K. 6.6 N.H.P. Wrecked, 1917.

PINE PASS #134606 (motor vessel, ex *Beaver)* wood screw tug, 1915 Prudence Crossing by James Cooley for the Smoky & Peace River Boat Company Ltd. 74.0 x 15.1 x 2.5. 42.20 Gr. 29.70 Reg. Engines: one 4-cycle gas engine,1914 Sterling Engines Works, Buffalo, N.Y. 6.05 N.H.P. Certificate issued in 1918. Destroyed by fire, Peace River, Alta., 1920.

ST. CHARLES #_____ wood sternwheel 1903 Dunvegan for Bishop Emile Grouard, Vicar Apostolic of Athabasca. 67 x 12 x ___. 28.79 Gr. 19.5 Reg. Sold 1911 to Ford and Lawrence. *Peace River Record*, Apr 29, 1915: "Grounded on a bar in the river during freeze-up, was thrown high and dry on the bank when the ice went out and is undamaged." Dismantled 1916-17.

WATSON LAKE #175563 (motor vessel) steel(?) screw 1946 Edmonton 55 x 12 x 2.9 26. Gr. 21 Reg. Engines: 220 IHP

WEENUSK #138630 wood screw 1921 Vancouver for Hudson's Bay Company. 59.9 x 11.1 x 4.2.29 Gr. 18 Reg.

UNESCO and World Heritage Canals

Recently UNESCO added the Grand Canal of China to the list of World Heritage Sites. It joins the Canal du Midi and the Rideau Canal as World Heritage Canals.

As we seek to gain recognition of the Welland Canals as a National Heritage Corridor it is fitting to look at the criteria that UNESCO used in designating the Rideau Canal.

Two corrections have been made to the UNESCO document.

Rideau Canal

The Rideau Canal, a monumental early 19th-century construction covering 202 km of the Rideau and Cataraqui rivers from Ottawa south to Kingston Harbour on Lake Ontario, was built primarily for strategic military purposes at a time when Great Britain and the United States vied for control of the region. The site, one of the first canals to be designed specifically for steam-powered vessels, also features an ensemble of fortifications. It is the best-preserved

example of a slackwater canal in North America, demonstrating the use of this European technology on a large scale. It is the only canal dating from the great North American canal-building era of the early 19th century to remain operational along its original line with most of its structures intact.

The flight of eight locks at Ottawa Lockstation is the largest flight on the Rideau Canal. © Parks Canada Agency

Outstanding Universal Value

The Rideau Canal is a large strategic canal constructed for military purposes which played a crucial contributory role in allowing British forces to defend the colony of Canada against the United States of America, leading to the development of two distinct political and cultural entities in the north of the American continent, which can be seen as a significant stage in human history.

Criterion (i): The Rideau Canal remains the best preserved example of a slackwater canal in North America demonstrating the use of European slackwater technology in North America on a large scale. It is the only canal dating from the great North American canal-building era of the early 19th century that remains operational along its original line with most of its original structures intact.

Criterion (iv): The Rideau Canal is an extensive, well preserved and significant example of a canal which was used for a military purpose linked to a significant stage in human history - that of the fight to control the north of the American continent.

The nominated property includes all the main elements of the original canal together with relevant later changes in the shape of watercourses, dams, bridges, fortifications, lock stations and related archaeological resources. The original plan of the canal, as well as the form of the channels, has remained intact. The Rideau Canal has fulfilled its original dynamic function as an operating waterway without interruption since its construction. Most of its lock gates and sluice valves are still operated by hand-powered winches.

All the elements of the nominated area (canal, associated buildings and forts) are protected as National Historic Sites under the Historic Sites and Monuments Act 1952-3. A buffer zone has been established. Repairs and conservation of the locks, dams, canal walls and banks are carried out directly under the control of Parks Canada. Each year one third of the canal's assets are thoroughly inspected by engineers. A complete inventory thus exists of the state of conservation of all parts of the property. A Management Plan exists for the canal (completed in 1996 and updated in 2005), and plans are nearing completion for Fort Henry and the Kingston fortifications. The Canal Plan is underpinned by the Historic Canals Regulations which provide an enforcement mechanism for any activities that might impact on the cultural values of the monument.

Historical Description

As a result of the American War of Independence, thousands of people who remained loyal to the British Crown moved northwards to Canada. The government immediately began identifying areas suitable for the development of settlements for the loyalists. The Cataraqui and the Rideau rivers was one of the areas surveyed and by 1800, a number of mills had been built, the first, at Kingston Mills, in 1784. Within a few years, there were mills at most of the major falls along the two rivers. However the difficulty of navigation along the rivers north to the St Lawrence River, the main settlement area, hindered much concentrated development.

The impetus to improve the waterway came though not from agriculture or other economic stimuli but from the needs of defence. The War of 1812-1814 between Britain and the United States of America had brought into focus the vulnerability of the St Lawrence River as the main supply line for the colony. Not only was it slow with a series of rapids, but it was vulnerable to attack from America along much of its length between Montréal and Lake Ontario. After the end of hostilities, America was still seen as a potential threat and the need for a secure military supply route a key necessity. Accordingly military planners turned their attention to the Cataraqui and the Rideau rivers.

After an exploratory mission, at the end of the war, the canal project was really launched in 1824-1825, with two studies, one by the civil engineer Samuel Clowes, at the request of the authorities of Upper Canada, and the other at the request of the Duke of Wellington, then Master-General of Ordnance[1]. The strategic dimension of the canal led the British government to take charge of its realisation.

Lieutenant Colonel John By of the Royal Engineers Corp was appointed by the British Government to supervise the construction of the canal in 1826. Before his appointment, military engineers had mapped out a scheme to construct new channels to bypass the rapids and swamps along the rivers. This would have necessitated around 40km of new channels along the 202 km route. By took a different approach and persuaded the government to adopt a 'slackwater' system that raised the level of the water above the rapids and swamps thorough the use of tall dams. This created a practical route with the minimum of excavation. By also pressed for the canal to accommodate the then newly introduced steamships and this necessitated dams that were taller and wider than anything previously constructed in North America. Canal construction begun in 1826[2] and involved around 6,000 workers at multiple sites along the length of the canal. The whole length was navigable in 1832.

The choice of route for the Rideau Canal, and the use of a slackwater canal design, were influenced by the underdeveloped nature of the country through which the canal was to pass. In many parts of Europe, for instance, owners of riverside agricultural land, water mills and fishing rights would have resisted the alteration in river levels required by such a system. Slackwater canals are easier to build, and require fewer workers. Therefore this method will be chosen instead of a more costly conventional canal where the environment allows, as was the case with the Rideau Canal.

As with many canals, the Rideau Canal seems to have formed a catalyst for development. Ottawa grew around the canal as it runs southward from the Ottawa River, and elsewhere towns sprung up on the canal's banks. This is typical of economic development associated with canals, and mirrors the development of towns following canal building elsewhere in the world.

The Rideau Canal has survived almost in its original condition as it was by-passed following the improvement in relations between Britain and the USA and the development of the much larger St Lawrence Seaway. Its military capacity was never put to the test. It now functions mainly as a waterway for leisure craft.

Fall 2015 – Meeting and Presentations

The Society will hold its Fall Meeting in the Burgoyne Room of the St Catharines Museum at 1:30 pm on Sunday 9 November 2015. The meeting will be followed by two presentations. One on the Welland Canal community of Port Robinson and the other on the history of construction diving on the Welland Canal.

Note: the list of Officers and Directors reflects the results from the last Annual General Meeting.

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[1] The original UNESCO document states that the Duke of Wellington was the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, he was not appointed to that position until 22 January 1827, after decisions about constructing the Rideau Canal had been taken. As the Master-General of Ordnance he was responsible for the building of fortifications and the defence of the realm. Hence, his interest in the Rideau Canal as a military canal for defense.
[2] Incorrectly stated as 1828