

The Merrickville and District Historical Society NEWSLETTER

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Facelift for the Blockhouse

Forty years ago the Village of Merrickville leased the historic Merrickville Blockhouse from the Department of Transport for use as a Museum to be operated by the newly formed Merrickville & District Historical Society. Since 1966 over a quarter million visitors have passed through the Museum and the Blockhouse itself has become one of the district's most famous landmarks. Upon the initiative of Parks Canada and in time for the Rideau 175 anniversary celebrations, the Blockhouse soon will receive an upgrade to ensure its cultural integrity and provide visitors with a clearer understanding of its history and distinct status as a National Historic Site. At the time of the 1832 Canal's construction, Merrick's Mills was already a growing settlement. Located only 30 miles from the American border it was recognized as a strategic target of attack should an invasion from the south occur. Thus, the Merrickville Blockhouse, the largest defensive fortification on the Rideau Canal was constructed here. Although the Blockhouse was never used for canal defense it served many other purposes.



Lockmaster Johnston's Kitchen

The first congregations of most of Merrickville's Churches met here and Merrickville Lockmaster John Johnston and his family lived here. Over the years, its usefulness diminished and by the first half of the 20th century it was little more than a deteriorating equipment warehouse. Even so, the historical importance of the Blockhouse's was recognized in its being named a National Historic Site in 1939. But little was done to support this designation until the Village of Merrickville and a group of active and concerned citizens spearheaded its restoration. Its success since that time as a Museum and a community icon speaks to the wisdom of these important 1960's initiatives.

In the plan, developed in consultation with the Village and the Historical Society, Parks Canada has made it clear in its proposals that the Blockhouse will continue to be leased by the Village of Merrickville-Wolford and function as a community museum operated by the Merrickville & District Historical Society. Also that it will continue to display artefacts and Canadiana from the area and that the heritage presentation programming of both Parks Canada and the Merrickville & District historical Society will be complementary so as to provide a memorable visitor experience. Additionally, there are no plans, as some have suggested, that the trees surrounding the Blockhouse will be cut down or that extensive archaeological 'digs' will be conducted in lands adjacent to the Blockhouse. As the plans are implemented, some relocation will be necessary to the current displays of artefacts and documents in the Blockhouse but this will be carried out in a manner to preserve the community nature of the Museum. The Merrickville & District historical Society is currently working closely with Parks Canada in this regard.

The 175th anniversary of the Rideau Canal and its likely designation as a World Heritage Site can be expected to draw an increased number of visitors to the area including the Blockhouse. We believe that the timely Parks Canada management plan occasioned by these events represents a unique opportunity to improve the portrayal of our local history and significantly enhance the experience of those visiting the Blockhouse.

The Wickware Brickyard & Tannery



photo courtesy Alice Hughes

John McGrath and dog Tip with the Tanning stone

Most of us who live in old houses are curious about the history of our homes - who lived there and what did they do? Sometimes renovations or repairs unearth clues and start us down a path to the past. But few of us follow that path as far as has Alice Hughes, who spoke to the Merrickville and District Historical Society at a meeting in 2000. This retired teacher is well recognized in the district as a researcher and chronicler of local family histories and has paid particular attention to the history of her own family property in Wolford. At the meeting, Alice shared part of her research with interested Historical Society members. Her talk, entitled "The Wickware Brickyard and Tannery of Wolford", followed the history of her Wolford property, from its first grant by the Crown to its present ownership by her

McGrath family. Along the way Alice discovered interesting evidence that the property had been the location of an early tannery operation and a brickyard.

Much of the knowledge of the early tannery operation had been hidden in the fine detail of public records until the mid-1960s, when Alice recognized that an unidentified stone disk unearthed on her childhood property was a bark-grinding wheel used in a tannery operation. Some ten years earlier her brother, Sid McGrath, and her father, John, had noticed a circular-shaped burned-off area of grass.

Excavation had unearthed a mysterious large stone disk. It was about six feet in diameter, five inches thick and had a key slot hole cut in the centre. Unaware of its purpose, Sid and his father had used the stone to cover an old well on the farm. It was not until Alice, in researching a tannery at Easton's Corners, came across a description of a bark-grinding stone, that the purpose of the stone disk found on the family farm was revealed. A pole about twelve feet long was inserted through the hole in the stone projecting about two feet through. This end of the pole was mortised into a fixed upright standard, but allowed to turn on its axis. The tanbark was then spread on the ground in a circle where the stone was rolled by horsepower on the other end of the pole.



site of Wickwire Brickyard & Foundry

As you drive towards Easton's Corners on highway 16 look on the left side of the road. There you will see a sign erected by the McGraths marking the historic site of the former brickyard and tannery. A tannery is thought to have been in operation as early as the 1820's and the brickyard from 1860 to 1910. You will also see the tanning stone, beside the sign standing in approximately the same spot by Barber Creek where it was used nearly 200 years ago.*

**Ref. Alice Hughes presentation to Historical Society November 28, 2000*

From the beginning, the history of the McGrath property has been fascinating. Henry and Richard Arnold were sons of American Revolutionary War "traitor" (in the eyes of the Americans), Benedict Arnold. Each son was given a British Crown grant of 1200 acres in Wolford township in recognition of his father's patriotism.

The story of the McGrath property begins around 1802, when pioneer settler, Bengamin Barber, purchased from Henry Arnold the 200 acres of property which constituted Lot 20, Concession 111, Wolford. Barber settled and farmed the property, giving his name to Barber Creek and Barber Road. The industrial era of the property began in 1819 when Bengamin Barber sold a small 1½ acre corner lot to Stephen McEathron, who probably established and operated the first tannery on the property, subsequently passing its operation to Charles Wickware (pronounced Wickwire).

Upon Bengamin Barber's death in 1823 his land, except for the 1 ½ acre lot, was divided into four 50-acre parcels, one for each of his sons. While the Barbers worked the land, the Wickwares developed and expanded the tannery business on the small corner lot. Eventually the enterprising Wickware family acquired three of the four Barber sections, and by 1861 had added a brickyard to the tannery operation. Many of the homes and institutions in the district display the fine "white" bricks produced at the Wickware brickyard. Produced from white clay from a hill on the farm beside Barber Creek, the white bricks were considered of superior lasting quality to red brick and a major improvement over rough stone. They were used on prestigious buildings such as the church and schoolhouse at Easton's Corners and many homes in the area built in the 1860s.

If you suspect they were used in your house, the next time you are doing masonry repairs, check the bricks. Proud of the quality of their product, the Wickwares stamped each brick with the initials FBW: Francis Byron Wickware, son of the brickyard founder, Philip Wickware.

Thanks to Alice Hughes and also to Neil Huffman and Cathy Gibson for their report on Alice Hughes' presentation from which this material is drawn.

More Brick-Brack

Because of their durability, bricks such as the white bricks of Wolford, stand out as reminders of the industry of the pioneers in this area. But if your bricks are not yellow but red and marked MKL they came from Merrickville's own brickyard owned by Michael Keeler Lang. It was located on (what is now) highway 43, just east of the railway overpass in the field on the river where you usually see the white and the black horses grazing. The proximity of the two brickyards to their respective communities in the 1860's probably explains the preponderance of red brick in homes in Merrickville and the white (yellow) bricks of the Easton's Corners and Jasper homes.



polychrome Brick home

It also perhaps explains why so many of the finer red brick homes in the Merrickville area display ornamental yellow brick coins and details. Not only a pleasing appearance but, a statement that the owner could afford to "import" the fine white Wickware bricks from Easton's Corners, if not for his whole house, at least as a badge of prosperity. (In a apparent flaunting of affluence, or maybe an indication of a disagreement with a neighbor, one of the two totally white brick home in Merrickville, is located on the west side of the railway underpass almost across the road from the former Lang brickyard.) When the use of the two bricks was

combined with the Flemish bond coursing, a truly distinctive statement was made. Such was the case with the fine Georgian home built by Rideau Settlement surveyor John Burchill in the Village in 1861.

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

John Burchill 1822-1896 was a provincial land surveyor, among the first generation of his profession to be recognized as an independent professional. Following the passing of the Municipal Act of 1849, Burchill found much work defining the boundaries of newly incorporated villages, towns, and cities. As well, he spent time correcting mistakes in the original surveys, charting new roads and railways, and reaffirming lines on the land. His layout of the village of Merrickville in 1863, is still a standard reference plan at the Grenville County land record office.

Ref. Merrickville, Jewel on the Rideau, Larry Turner

The Remarkable Sam Jakes

It is not possible to spend any time in Merrickville without bumping into Sam Jakes, or rather an indication of his omnipresence. From his stately stone home, now an Inn named for him, to the dominating presence of the building that was his department store, Sam Jakes left his mark firmly on the Village. He exemplified the entrepreneurial spirit that made Merrickville flourish in the middle of the 19th century.

On March 28, 2006, Wayne Poapst shared his research into the life of Sam Jakes with an overflow gathering of members and friends of the Historical Society.

Samuel Jakes was born May 3, 1833 in Marlborough Township, the son of Robert Jakes from County Cork in Ireland. He married Sara Chester daughter of Merrickville pioneers John Chester UEL & Phoebe. Following Sarah's death in 1878 he married into another prominent local family when he wed Julia Newman.

Sam Jakes, well known as a merchant, is less well known as a school teacher when a young man and for serving as postmaster for the Village for 40 years. By 1852 he was already in the retail business offering a 5% discount for cash, but also accepting farm produce in exchange for goods. Advertisements of the day promised

*"Everything you want without looking around . . .
Get them Good and Cheap "*

By 1871 he had acquired the massive three story building built, next door to his home by E. H. Whitmarsh and for forty years operated it as a department store, said to be the largest between Montreal and Toronto. Long time residents have recalled the Jakes store with great fondness. It sold everything from farm supplies to marriage licenses, (but no furniture, perhaps in an agreement with John Mills). The first floor carried dry goods, groceries, men's ware and the post office. The second floor sold carpets, oilcloth, kitchen ware, china and dishes. While the third floor held a dressmaking shop, millinery shop and yard goods. (Today the Baldachin Restaurant and hospitality operations occupy the building. Adjacent to the wonderfully restored third floor Baldachin ballroom, you may see the elegant setting in a room, off the ballroom, which served as the millinery shop.) Remarkable for the age, the building was served with an elevator. Wayne Poapst told of Jakes descendents, Laura Knapp, Edna Jakes and Mrs. Bill Newman recalling . . .

"There was an elevator that went from the basement to the third floor. You could go in and buy cloth for a suit on the first floor, get in the elevator and go up to the third floor, and a seamstress would be there to measure you and make your suit "

For his home he had built in 1861 the imposing Georgian stone building on Main Street east now carrying his name as the Sam Jakes Inn. With heavily bracketed roof , ornamental trim and accents on the side gables and recessed fanlit doorways it spoke of Jake's proud prosperity. Remarkable for its time in the attic above the third floor was a revolutionary zinc lined water tank and system to provide pressure for the bathroom facilities. Downstairs in the sitting room was a black marble fireplace and huge windows all with recessed window seats and inside shutters and at the rear a large dining room. Five bedrooms and a sewing room were located on the second floor.

Following Sam's death the house fell to his eldest son, George and from then to a series of owners and uses, including in the 1980's a hotel, the "Colonel Merrick Village Inn".

Gary Clarke acquired the property in 1988 and with support from local investors undertook the refurbishment and expansion of the building to create the popular Sam Jakes Inn.

Although Jakes businesses and personal properties spoke of flamboyance, there is little to indicate the man himself exhibited these characteristics. In his presentation Wayne Poapst described Jakes as a conservative figure, a hard working efficient businessman serving the Village judiciously, both politically and economically, but, leaving few recountable anecdotes about himself.

"At noon each day, Jakes went home for lunch, sitting at a small round table in the parlour for a quick meal. After eating he sat back, put his feet up on the table, threw his head back for a rest. Now there would be nothing particularly odd about a noonday nap, except the the table was at least a foot higher than average, suggesting the man was either extremely flexible or had an impressive length of leg." Wayne Poapst

Together with his first wife Sara Chester Sam Jakes had twelve children, only seven of whom lived to adult age, still sufficient to grow a huge family tree. Some of his descendents still live in the area. Sam Jakes died on September 18, 1912 and is buried in the Union Cemetery, his place marked by an appropriately impressive monument for the Jakes family.

Hogwash at Hogs Back

In the last newsletter, I wrote of the heroic trip by Bradish Billings, and his wife Lamira, baby in arms descending the Hog's Back falls. This tale has been recounted by such luminaries as Robert Leggett and Larry Turner. I was thus surprised when Ken Watson sent the following comments on the article on the Billings' dramatic survival.

"Robert Legget's story about Hog's Back is a bit of Rideau mythology. I was sort of surprised in early research (on Canal planned routes) that none of the early surveys of the Rideau showed a portage around Hogs Back until I thought about it for a couple of minutes and realized that with a 41 foot rise of water, what we are looking at today bears no relation to the pre-canal rapids.

In the pre-canal era, Hogs Back was a wide gentle set of rapids (known as "Three Rock Rapids"), they fell about 6 feet over a distance of 2,000 feet. There was no portage around these rapids, they could be (and were) run by canoe. The Hogs Back falls that we see today are actually flowing through a man made waste water weir channel, blasted into the hillside beside the original rapids (the main part of which is now buried under the Hogs Back dam). The water in front of the dam was raised by 41 feet - this rise of water and the restricted weir channel created the man-made falls that we see today (which obviously can't be run by canoe)."

Mr. Watson discovered this information while researching his most recent book, **"Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's Transformation of a Wilderness**

Waterway."

For details see: www.rideau-info.com/canal/engineered

Archives Update

Last year with the support of the Thomas H. Manning bequest and the Ontario Trillium Foundation, work was begun on rejuvenating the Historical Society archives and copying them in digital form to preserve them and make them more accessible to interested parties. This summer, funded again by the Manning bequest, the work has continued with significant progress made. While last year concentrated on cleaning documents and copying early newspapers, this year's efforts by University museum study students, Samantha Moyes and Martha Thompson expanded the data base significantly both creating images of documents and generating searchable indexes to improve accessibility. Many of the documents had not seen the light of day in years and contained wonderful surprises.

For instance in a small bible, pressed between pages, was a dried red poppy with the evocative notation "Flanders poppy 1917" inscribed in the margin above. The New Testament bible, a well worn pocket sized edition on the opening page displays a label reading "With all Good Wishes For Your Welfare ~ From Lady White" . The opposite page bears the name J. H. Bennett, "16" platoon, "D" Co, 156th (Division). From its worn and handled condition, there was every indication the Bible had traveled with its owner to the fields of battle. Curious to know the fate of the writer, Samantha and Martha did some additional research and learned more of him and his Bible.



J. H. Bennett Bible
Merrickville & District Historical Society Archives

James Howard Bennett, a farmer from Spencerville, was born November 11, 1894 and enlisted February 4, 1916. He received the regimental number 639517 and fought in Ypres at Vimy Ridge. Fortunately, Lady White's invocation was obeyed and Bennett returned from the war.

In 1925 he married Edna Winnifred Derbyshire and continued to farm in the area until his death on Christmas day, 1986 at the age of 92. And the poppy? That remains a bit of a mystery. I would like to think he picked it from the field to use as a bookmark for his Bible during a moment of respite from the battles.

"In Flanders Fields", the famous poem by Canadian army surgeon, Lieutenant Colonel John McRae was written and published in December 1915 in the magazine Punch, and became an inspiration to recruits. It was also widely read by soldiers labouring in the dangerous Flanders fields around Ypres, where it is said, the glorious poppies bloomed in ironically bright contrast to the devastation around them.

Record Blockhouse Attendance

By all accounts we are heading for a record number of attendees at the Blockhouse. David Hammonds, Blockhouse manager reports we have every likelihood of reaching 10,000 attendees when the season wraps up on Thanksgiving weekend. We will also probably establish a new record for the number of summer days open to the public.

By Labour day we had said goodbye to the summer staff interpreters, Katherine Reynolds and Sara MacDonald, together with the aforementioned Archive staff, Samantha and Martha. All of the students did an excellent job of welcoming visitors and by all reports had an interesting and enjoyable work experience.

As usual, opening hours for the final weekends following the beginning of school will rely on availability of volunteers to greet the public and provide security. If you would like to help out in this area, please call Pat Molson. (269- 4092) He will welcome your call and provide the information you need.

Rideau 175 Lecture Series

For the celebration of the 175th anniversary of the opening of the Rideau Canal, we are planning a truly memorable series of nine special lectures which will be held in the historic Merrickville United Church, each on a Sunday afternoon from March through November.



The topics to be covered include; the Rideau before the canal, the war of 1812 which precipitated the canal, Colonel By and his construction of a canal through the swamp and rocky wilderness, the commerce that developed on the canal in its heyday, the social life of the folks who lived along the canal, the age of the steam boat, the hidden world beneath the canal and the outlook for the canal in the 21st century. To make the presentations an excellent field of expert speakers has been confirmed. These include Brian Osborne, Ken Watson, Vic Suthren, Mark Andrews, Robert Sneyd, Glenn Lockwood, Coral Lindsay, Jonathan Moore and Doug Stewart. There will be much more to say about this excellent series of lectures later in the Fall and an opportunity for current members of the Historical Society to obtain advanced pre-announcement series tickets.

See also our web site www.merrickvillehistory.org under "[Rideau 175 Lecture Series](#)"

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