

A History of the Tay Canal by Susan Code

A paddle down the Tay Canal from Perth to Lower Rideau Lake is a joy for the senses. A quick glance over your shoulder as you leave the town behind reveals the slender spire of St. James peaking above the trees. Ahead, a great blue heron stands gracefully on an old log, startled into flight only by the sound of an otter slipping into the water. Bullfrogs sing in full-throated chorus amongst the lily pads, while cattle graze contentedly in the adjoining fields. And, with each stroke of the paddle, you breathe in an exhilarating mix of scents—earth, water, and sky—which you slowly savour. A stone farmhouse stands sentinel.

While, today, the Tay Canal welcomes boaters from both near and far who seek a quiet idyll, its founders foresaw it as a conduit for commerce. When Colonel By bypassed the Tay and Perth as a route for the Rideau Canal in the late 1820s, the town fathers took matters into their own hands and established the Tay Navigation Company for the purposes of building their own canal. Road travel was hazardous at best, and non-existent at worst, preventing inland communities from establishing markets and procuring goods. A navigable waterway offered a fast, efficient and proven means of raising a community out of subsistence and into prosperity.

Plagued, however, from the very beginning with insufficient capital, political skulduggery, and inferior workmanship, the original Tay Canal never lived up to its commercial expectations, primarily because the five rubble locks and adjoining dams were built to smaller dimensions and lower standards than found on the Rideau. This was to change!

John Jackson, a miller, former army sergeant and quartermaster of the Second Lanark Militia, received the tender and did an admirable job under the circumstances. Although described as “a respectable builder of this place and whose professional practice in England had made him acquainted with the nature of levelling,” he left Perth in the Tay Canal’s stormy wake and eventually became superintendent of the Grand River Canal.

The aspirations of the directors of the Tay Navigation Company also prompted them to build a flagship, the *Enterprise*, for running between Perth, Bytown and Kingston, with occasional trips to Montreal. They awarded the shipbuilding contract to Captain William Richards, a colourful character who had cheated death more than once, both on land and at sea. A native of Wexford,

Ireland, he had survived the 1798 uprising at Vinegar Hill when his nurse claimed him as her own after both his parents had been piked to death. At age twelve, he went aboard a man o'war and sailed around the world, before coming to Canada to fight in the War of 1812; his ship formed one of the escorts of the *Chesapeake* when conveyed to Halifax. "Later," according to the Reverend William Bell, "he engaged in thrilling skirmishes with pirates, slavers and the like in various seas and although in many hand-to-hand fights was never seriously wounded." When he left the Royal Navy, he invested in a schooner to trade in the Bay of Fundy. He eventually built his own brig, *William and Mary*, in which he made several voyages to the West Indies. However, on a return trip with a cargo of molasses, he met a typhoon and was shipwrecked, losing everything. Captain Richards and his crew clung to the wreck until they freed a small boat and made their way to land. With his last few dollars, he purchased fourteen acres a half mile outside Perth, complete with brick cottage, where he lived quietly—other than the couple of years he spent as captain of the *Enterprise*—until his death in 1850.

The *Enterprise* was a truly fine steamship. It had approximately thirty cabins, room for one hundred steerage passengers and seventy-five tons of goods, and it could tow barges—anywhere except the Tay. That canal proved on the *Enterprise*'s maiden voyage to be too small and too shallow for just about any steamboat, so everything had to be transhipped at the Perth Landing on the west side of Stonehouse Point at the mouth of the river. Alas, this depot also proved a poor decision for the Tay Navigation Company. Surrounded by wetlands, it had no road access, except over the ice during winter, and was often cut off from the mainland during high water. Many forwarding companies opted to tranship their goods at Oliver's Landing (Rideau Ferry) where the Reverend Bell's merchant sons, William and John, arranged overland transfer to and from Perth, much to the Tay Navigation Company's indignation.

The Tay Navigation Company also ran into obstacles with Samuel Weatherhead and his son, Alexander, who owned all the land in the vicinity of Fishing Falls, or Pike Falls, a one-and-a-half mile stretch of river that dropped nineteen feet near the mouth of the Tay and over which the company had built four locks.

Samuel Weatherhead was born in Barbados, after which he named the small village he established beside the falls. Today, we know it as Port Elmsley. At an early age, he ran away from home and took passage on a merchant ship sailing for England. En route, pirates seized the ship. However, Samuel and all on board escaped certain death when, by a small majority, the captors voted to spare their lives. The pirates and prisoners were then divided equally between

the two ships, and the merchantman was tethered to the pirate ship. A few days later, a fierce storm severed the tow line between the two ships and the merchantman, presumably sunk, was never heard from again. Samuel, fortunately, was on the pirate ship.

While several of the prisoners opted to join the pirate crew, most of them, including Samuel, refused and were marooned with provisions on a small island. Luck continued in their favour, however, and they were shortly rescued by a ship in the lumber trade bound for Quebec.

Samuel decided to stay in Canada and eventually took up land near Maitland, on the St Lawrence River, where he established himself as a merchant and raised a family. However, danger and adventure stayed close to the Weatherheads. During the War of 1812, a band of Americans plundered their store, but Samuel's son John retaliated by leading successful skirmishes against the Americans during the Battle of Crysler's Farm. When his daughter, Margaret, married Richard Arnold, son of General Benedict Arnold of American Revolutionary War fame, the Weatherheads became agents of the Arnold family and responsible for many of the Arnold holdings in the Canadas. They eventually received 18,000 acres from the Arnold family for services rendered, including the land around Fishing Falls on the Tay River.

The Weatherheads placed themselves in direct competition with the Tay Navigation Company. They refused the company access to or permission to build wharves, quays and landing places on their land, despite the fact the Tay Navigation Company had rights of way spelled out in their Act of Incorporation. Twice, they incited villagers to tear down a company warehouse built on Weatherhead land, before the Tay Navigation Company retreated to Stonehouse Point. The Weatherheads then built a more conveniently located warehouse alongside Lock No. 1, effectively taking control of trade on the Tay Canal.

In 1836, the Weatherheads built a steamer, *The Tay*, which could tow sawlogs from their mill at Lock No. 3 and ply the Tay, as well as the Lachine and Grenville Canals, which were also small. This must have caused further embarrassment to the directors of the Tay Navigation Company and their flagship, the *Enterprise*.

The *Enterprise* started out with high hopes and well wishes from many in the town of Perth. The Reverend Bell had been persuaded by his sons to invest in the steamer, which he later regretted when he learned that it served spirits, and was among the guests on board during its official launch, May 2, 1834: "(We) resolved to go with it (*Enterprise*) to Jebb's Creek as we had never

seen the lock there. The boat was to start at 8, but it was ten before it moved off. Going with the stream it did not steer well, and we had some difficulty in getting through the first bridge. Here it took a barge, loaded with staves . . . in tow. Next we were detained at least one hour by the choking (sic) of a pipe belonging to an engine, first opposite to the spot where poor Lyon was killed, in the duel with John Wilson. But this was not all. Our promenade deck being too high in the air, came in contact with the over hanging branches of trees, by which the railing was damaged, the flag staff broken, and the stove pipes knocked down, besides a number of our passengers floored on the deck. At last we got to the first lock, where we landed, and as soon as the boat left it, we returned through the woods and had a pleasant walk home.”

This inauspicious beginning, unfortunately, set the tone for the *Enterprise*'s short, but ill-fated, life. After two seasons carrying sundry goods—including whisky, fruit trees, potash, household furnishings, tea, ploughs, molasses and furs—and occasionally leaving passengers stranded as it fell victim to mechanical failure, it got stuck in the ice at Black Rapids, forcing it to winter there. The spring freshets smashed the steamer beyond repair.

Although the Tay Canal's torturous channel, fluctuating water levels, many obstacles and numerous curves turned away most steamships travelling the Rideau, it remained a profitable and practical option for many years for barge traffic. Oxen towed these sturdy flat-bottomed craft, like the *Enterprise*, *Jolly Brewer*, *Harriet*, *The Old Countryman*, *Victoria*, *Pride of Perth*, *Waterwitch* and *Perseverence*, along a path between Weatherheads' depot and the warehouses that lined the Perth Basin. It still exists today, forming part of the Rideau Trail.

The Tay Canal eventually fell into disrepair, due to the Tay Navigation Company's ongoing financial and political problems, and by the mid nineteenth century was practically abandoned. In the 1880s, the Honourable John Haggart, Perth mill owner, member of parliament for Lanark South and a member of Sir John A. Macdonald's cabinet, convinced Public Works to purchase the assets of the Tay Navigation Company and reconstruct the Tay Canal to conform to Rideau Canal standards. This Second Tay Canal bypassed the village of Port Elmsley and reduced the number of locks from five to two by digging a cut that connected the river to Beveridge's Bay on the Lower Rideau.

The Second Tay Canal has enjoyed a more tranquil history. Up until the 1930s, steamships like the *John Haggart* and *Rideau King* carried goods and passengers up to Perth, for both business and pleasure. Sunday afternoon excursions to Portland and back, with the Perth Citizens' Band

on board to provide entertainment, were very popular for a time.

A canoe, however, remains the best way to explore the Tay. With each silent stroke you can hear the birds, explore the shallows, glide under the arching trees of The Avenue, and watch for the physical reminders of the days when commercial and political ambition tussled for control. Time, on the Tay, truly ceases to be.

This article was produced for the Perth Courier, by local historian, Susan Code, the author of several history books, including *A Matter of Honour and Other Tales of Early Perth* (General Store Publishing House).