

HISTORY OF THE RIDEAU FERRY ROAD

Smiths Falls *Record News* and the *Perth Courier*

The following 'History of the Rideau Ferry Road', researched and written by Mable Sinclair Coutts-Joynt (1883-1969)¹ of Lombardy, and Mary Elizabeth Walker-McLean (1896-1990)² of North Elmsley Township, was first published by the Smiths Falls Record News in early 1966 and then reprinted by the Perth Courier, in June that year.

When the early settlers from Ireland and Scotland arrived in this new land, they came to the settlement at Brockville. Here were stationed the supply depots and military headquarters³ from which the pioneer settlers received their supplies and equipment to help them carve out a home for themselves in this vast wilderness. There were trails through the forest from Brockville to Perth, and over these roughhewn trails settlers conveyed their scant belongings on foot or by ox cart, a long arduous journey fraught with dangers of wild beasts lurking in the dense shrubbery. From Brockville they walked on about 10 miles, then west to Portland where they were transported by scow on the Rideau to Oliver's Ferry coming thence on foot to Perth. The route was outlined by Captain Otty⁴, who gave his name to Otty Lake.

Perth was an English government enterprise and was well established as a small military settlement as early as 1815⁵. Hence there was continuous close contact with the government headquarters in Brockville and in the year several hundreds of loads of supplies passed over these blazed trails. Finally, in the year 1816 Peter Harris, M.P.⁶, had a road built beginning at what is now the village of Toledo through to Lombardy and thence to Oliver's Ferry, now known as Rideau Ferry.

At this point the enterprising young man Archibald Campbell⁷ eventually built a scow to transport horses, cattle, produce and people across the waterway. Operated by oars and cable, it was ably handled by a hired helper named John Oliver⁸, who gave his name to this crossing on the Rideau Lake.⁹

In the year 1832 this man Archibald Campbell built a store shop for the accommodation of settlers, so that stores that could not be transported could be stored and protected when they had to await a means of transport. Next, he enlarged his operation by putting teams for conveyances on the road to drive the produce to the new settlement in Perth and to other settlements which were eventually opening up in the district.

¹ Mable Sinclair Coutts married (1906) Edward William Joynt (1878-1951).

² Mary Elizabeth Walker married (1920) William John McLean (1889-1974).

³ The "supply depot and military headquarters" supporting the "settlers from Ireland and Scotland", was at Perth, not Brockville.

⁴ Royal Navy Captain Allen Otty (1784-1859).

⁵ The Perth Military Settlement was established in the spring of 1816.

⁶ Not Peter Harris, but Peter Howard (1772-1843), representative for Leeds in the Upper Canada Legislative Assembly.

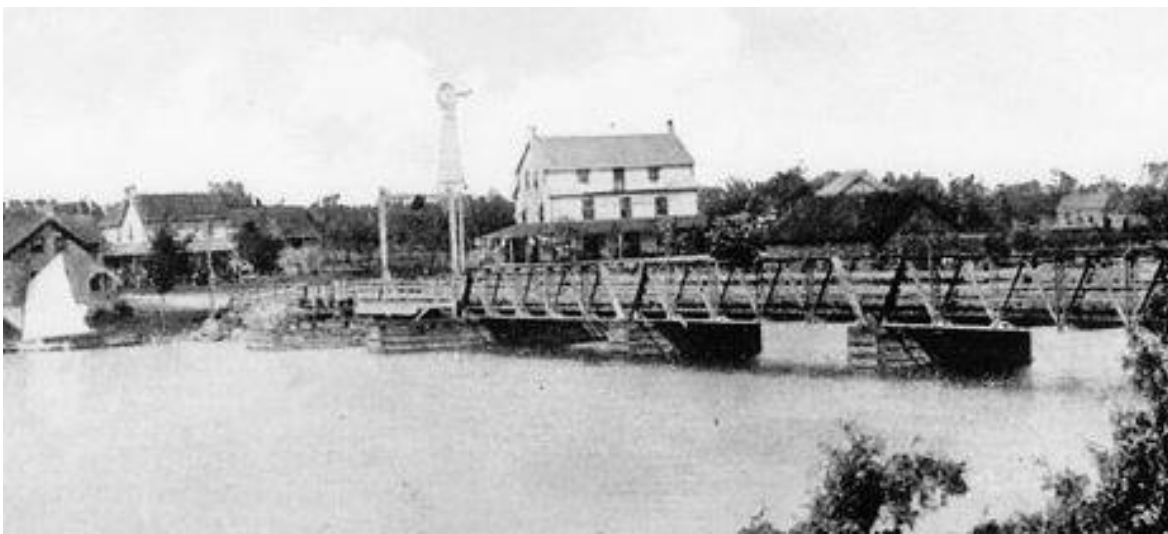
⁷ Archibald Campbell (c1798-1834), married (1832) Elizabeth Buchanan (1805-1875), daughter of Reverend George Buchanan (1761-1835).

⁸ John Oliver (1775-1822), married Mary Munn (b.1779).

⁹ The ferry was not established by Archibald Campbell, but by John Oliver (1775-1822) who received the land grant that included the ferry landing and who operated the service from 1816 until 1822 when he died by his own hand. His son, William, continued to operate the ferry until 1827.

The Campbell home later became the Coutts' House on the site of the present Rideau Ferry Inn¹⁰. In the year 1888, a general store was built by Peter Coutts¹¹ and a red brick dwelling was the home of Mrs. Ann Smith¹², an early post mistress.

In 1871, by joint actions of Perth and the government of Canada, a substantial wooden bridge was built across the Rideau thus ending the operation of the scow. In 1894 this wooden bridge was replaced by a 501-foot iron bridge—one section which swings open allowing the larger boats to go through.



Rideau Ferry Bridge c1895

The first bridgeman was Duncan Campbell¹³ a brother of Archibald. (Their wives were sisters). The bridgeman had no union time. He had to swing the span night and day and often in the dark hours the whistle blew, and if one happened to be prowling around some nearby cottage one would see Duncan's lantern bobbing along over the bridge to the little house which accommodate the windlass.

At times the boats would be blowing for the bridge quite a while before Mr. Campbell would hear them and would be right up to the bridge. He would call out "Why dida' you blow" and perhaps everyone one in the neighborhood would have been wakened. One boat, the *Colonel By*, would be hauling four or five barges loaded with lumber, coal or some other cargo and it took some time before they were safe through, and the bridge closed. Other boats were the *Shanly*, *John Haggart*, *Rideau Guy*, and *Rideau Queen*.

On March 3, 1894, Mrs. Smith, the post mistress and Mr. Woodward, a bridge inspector, walked across the finished span. On April 27, Sam Hall¹⁴ started painting the bridge; on May 18, Mr. Phillips, government inspector, surveyed the approaches to the bridge.

¹⁰ The Rideau Ferry Inn was destroyed by fire in 1986.

¹¹ Peter Coutts (1860-1928), married (1882) Margaret Ann Halliday (1860-1945).

¹² Ann Campbell (1820-1908), married (1850) Henry Smith (1827-1878).

¹³ Duncan Campbell (1814-1898), married (1841) Jessie Buchanan (1815-1900).

¹⁴ Samuel Hall (1865-1922), also drove the mail stage between Perth and Rideau Ferry.

A short distance from the Ferry on the road leading to Perth, was a swampy portion of road once infested by great black snakes and here one can still feel in imagination the old corduroy road built of logs laid side by side and one can visualize the oxcarts rumbling over it as they made their way along with their loads of supplies. Farther on was a log house owned by a frog catcher, but this has long since been replaced by a modern brick home. Across from it stands a shop where once a blacksmith plied his trade shoeing and repairing farm machinery, while his customers watched the flaming forge and listened to the ring of the steel being shaped on the anvil. Like so many other trades, blacksmithing is now a thing of the past.

Passing along over a culvert on the road through which the water flows freely in the spring towards the Rideau Lake, one comes to the farm of one of the pioneer settlers John Coutts¹⁵. It remained in the Coutts family from generation to generation until recently when it was purchased by Scott Burchell¹⁶, the present mayor of Perth. Across the road are the remains of a gravel pit from which were taken countless loads of gravel to be used in the upkeep of the nearby roads.

In those early days the system of maintenance was known as 'statute labour'. Each landowner had to provide a stated number of hours of labour, working with pick and shovel, and providing teams and wagons to draw the gravel used in the process of roadmaking.

Nearby is Hemlock Hill, one of the beauty spots on the Ferry Road in spite of its sharp, hazardous turn. Following along the winding road one comes to the Ferry Cemetery where lie the remains of many of the pioneers. The land was purchased in the year 1886 and the following year the first burial was made in it. Among those to find a resting place in the well-kept cemetery were Duncan Campbell and his wife Jessie Buchanan, who was a daughter of Rev. George Buchanan¹⁷, a pioneer minister in the township of Beckwith.

In her book 'The Pioneer Pastor' Jessie Campbell writes the story of her father's ministry, its trials, and its accomplishments. She relates an incident pertaining to the early days of Duncan Campbell.

As a young man well-known around Oliver's Ferry and Perth, he was making a trip on foot to Bytown, now Ottawa. In the evening he noticed a tavern sign and entered the house to seek lodging for the night. Some rough-looking fellows began talking in Irish, saying he was nicely dressed, must have money, and should be put out of the way during the night. Knowledge of Gaelic helped him to understand the conversation so after he had treated them a couple of times, he watched his chance to leave the room and hurriedly made his way into Bytown. An investigation showed that the premises had a room over the Ottawa River where strangers were lodged. During the night the ruffians would enter stealthily, throw their victims in the stream, and keep the money and clothing. As a result of Campbell's experience, the horrible place was torn down by the military authorities.¹⁸

¹⁵ John Coutts (1830-1904), married (1856), Helen Buchanan-Campbell (1828-1908).

¹⁶ Scott Ernest Burchell (1914-1979), Perth Mayor 1955-1969.

¹⁷ Rev. George Buchanan (1761-1835), married (1801) Catharine Menzies (b.1735). Buchanan arrived at Franktown in 1821, the first minister to serve Beckwith Township as pastor and doctor.

¹⁸ The more common version of this tale takes place at an inn operated by John Oliver at Oliver's (Rideau) Ferry.

Continuing along the road at the corner the road turns towards the right to Port Elmsley. A short distance along this road is the site of the old graphite mine on a property known to old timers as the 'Grierson' place. John Grierson¹⁹, a miner of early days, may have located the deposit of graphite but the mine was opened up and operated by Rinaldo McConnell²⁰ and later by the Globe Graphite Company. The ore was drawn by teams of wagons to a mill at Pike Falls²¹ where it was processed for shipment. The mine has been inactive and nonproductive for many years.

Previous to this, a factory was built at the Ferry and teams drew the ore here to be processed. In 1896 the 100-foot-long factory was torn down. Robert Miller²² bought sixty feet of this and used it in the building of a barn and Archie Coutts²³ bought the remaining forty feet. It is said for many years the fine lead dust could be seen in the barn. A huge stone roller was used to grind the ore and stands in front of the Ferry Inn used as a base for a flagpole.

Turning left at the corner we come to Bethel United Church, built in 1895. In the year 1888 a log church had been erected on a plot of ground purchased from William Richard McLean²⁴ for \$5 but this building was later moved to be replaced by the current structure.



Bethel United Church

Two years ago, a spacious Sunday School Hall was added, and the church serves the spiritual needs of the community. During the summer months, visitors from many parts of Canada and the United States join the regular worship – and comment on the friendliness and fellowship found in this little rural church. On a lot purchased from the late William McCue²⁵ for the sum of \$30, a comfortable brick manse was built, and its first occupant was the Reverend Neil Campbell²⁶ and his bride, who together served the congregation for eight years. His son, Wishart Campbell²⁷, was a well-known singer on radio in its early years, and now he resides in Scotland.

¹⁹ John Grierson (1865-1927), married (1890), Mary A. Gallagher (1861-1940). The graphite deposit on the Grierson property had been identified as early as 1870 by Perth physician and amateur mineralogist and geologist Dr. James Wilson (1798-1881). It was first mined in 1872.

²⁰ Rinaldo Walter McConnell (1851-1931) purchased the graphite mine and mill in 1902 and operated it until he sold it in 1916 to an American consortium. See *Plumbago: The North Elmsley Graphite Mine* elsewhere on this website <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/plumbago.pdf>

²¹ Port Elmsley.

²² Robert Munro Miller (1847-1913), married (1879) Sarah Dodds (1857-1935).

²³ Archibald Coutts (1863-1960), married (1885) Janet Cameron-Beveridge (1866-1935).

²⁴ William Richard McLean (1827-1909, married (1864) Mary Wilson (1844-1922). North Elmsley Township C-5/L-5.

²⁵ William McCue (1840-1916), married (1873), Eliza Weatherhead (1845-1923).

²⁶ Neil Campbell (1845-1941), married Edith Augusta Conner (1865-1953).

²⁷ Wishart Neil Monroe Campbell (1905-1983), married, Elizabeth Leitch Williamson (1910-1982).

The farm at the crossroads belongs to William Richard McLean and has been in the family since 1820. Opposite the church and high on a hill is the home of James Coutts²⁸. This land originally belonged to Archie Morrison²⁹ and was passed on to his son David Morrison and to his son James Morrison³⁰, born in 1823.

To the left of the Ferry Road is the McLean farm, now occupied by Ian McLean³¹, son of the late T. N. McLean³². This land has been in the McLean family for five generations having been granted originally to Dr. John McLean³³ of Dumfries, Scotland, a surgeon in the Royal Navy of England, a distinguished scholar and man of letters. In 1813 he came out on a commission appointment by the British government and headed by Admiral Bayfield³⁴. Their duties were to survey around Lake Superior and across the Canadian border into the State of Michigan.

In reward for his services, Dr. McLean was granted the land which he homesteaded and upon which he made his home until he died. Admiral Bayfield's sword and other personal possessions are in the Canadian Museum in Montreal and two cities in Michigan perpetuate his name.

Next on the road is the small one room schoolhouse formerly known as S.S. No. 6 which ministered to the early educational needs of the community. It replaced a small log school in which one of the early teachers was Miss Barbara Golightly³⁵ who served for the modest salary of £20 a year.

S.S. No. 6 was built in 1875 by William Kean³⁶ whose tender of \$500 was payable upon completion of the schoolhouse. He was authorized to make 16 desks with seats attached at \$4 per seat and desk. Among the early trustees were William Gould³⁷, William John McLean³⁸, and William Richard McLean. Early teachers were Margaret Halliday³⁹ (Mrs. Peter Coutts), Miss Weekes⁴⁰ (Mrs. John McCallum, mother of Mary McCallum⁴¹) and Miss Boone⁴² (Mrs. N. McVeety). The frame school is now not used, having been replaced by a modern township school built on the Port Elmsley [*Road*] to which the pupils are transported by bus. Verily "the old order changeth giving place to the new."

²⁸ James Coutts (1897-1976), married (1924) Elizabeth Allan McLean (1896-1983).

²⁹ Archibald Morrison (1779-1835), married Isabella Haggart (1851-1908)

³⁰ James Morrison (1823-1907), married Isabell McIntosh (1851-1908). The authors may have mistakenly added a generation to this family, James Morrison (1823-1907) was the son of James Morrison (1823-1907), not David Morrison.

³¹ Ian McGregor McLean (1934-2002).

³² Thomas Nicol McLean (1893-1958), married (1927) Jessie Mae McGregor (1893-1991).

³³ Dr. John McLean (1788-1840), married (1828) Mary Fergusson.

³⁴ Royal Navy Admiral Henry Wolsey Bayfield (1795-1885). Between 1817 and 1856, Bayfield surveyed and charted the entire Great Lakes, St. Lawrence River, and Gulf of St. Lawrence. Dr. John McLean served under Bayfield from about 1817 until 1825.

³⁵ Barbara Golightly (1809-1888), unmarried.

³⁶ William Kean (1833-1911), married (1862) Martha Nichols (1842-1900).

³⁷ William Clifford Gould (1887-1944), married (1915) Edith May Street (1882-1954).

³⁸ William John McLean (1889-1974), married (1920) Mary Elizabeth Walker (1896-1990).

³⁹ Margaret Ann Halliday (1860-1945), married (1882) Peter Coutts (1860-1928).

⁴⁰ Charlotte (Margaret) Weekes (1803-1981), married (1887) John McCallum (1861-1924).

⁴¹ Mary H. McCallum (b.1890).

⁴² Isabella Boone (1875-1965, married (1898) Nathaniel Edwin McVeety (1869-1938).

The area immediately surrounding the school and the church was known for many years as 'McCue's Post Office' because the first post office was located in the fine old stone home of William McCue. The mail was brought from Pike Falls Station⁴³ and later from Perth to be distributed in the office tended by members of the McCue household. With the advent of rural mail this office disappeared.

A stone building situated on the hill and commanding a fair view of the lake was the former Methodist Church in the area and served its purpose until Church Union in 1825 gathered Methodist and Presbyterians into one body.

Across the road in the valley was an ash kiln where ashes were converted into potash. The kiln was owned by Jack Buchanan who lived close by. He would go to nearby towns and throughout the country in the winter buying ashes and bringing them home in his high boxed sleigh. Incidentally Jack and his shaggy team were the first to cross the new swing bridge in 1894. There was no ribbon cutting nor speeches there; the barriers were removed, and Jack made his way across the new span. He was a familiar and popular figure throughout Perth and Rideau Ferry area.

Passing though a narrow swamp where the road is often flooded by the workings of the eager beaver, a driver must go cautiously as he rounds the Devil's elbow. This sharp turn has been the scene of several accidents when the person behind the wheel failed to obey the courtesy of the road and keep on his own side of it.

A left turn leads to Elmgrove, a picturesque, wooded settlement not far from Rideau Lake. Here were the farms of the McVeety's, the Hughes, and the Bests and across the line, the Gallaghers, and the Tullys all names well known in the history of Elmsley and Burgess. In this locality, too, are the summer homes and cabin resort areas catering to the summer tourist industry.

Following along the Ferry Road one comes to a long hill known to old timers as 'Moody's Hill' so called because the house and land was owned by a farmer of that name. Later, when John Menzies⁴⁴ had the land, it became more familiarly known as 'Menzies Hill'. From this height of land at night one sees the brilliant red radar lights at the Foundation Settlement⁴⁵ on the first line of Drummond.

Going down the hill and veering sharply to the left one enters the Gibbs Creek Swamp. In the summer it is gay and bright with the purple of the Loosestrife growing along the swampy road and in the autumn the red, gold, and green of the maples and evergreens which add beauty all along the trail road. The creek flows from Otty Lake into the Tay River and in the early history of the district was called Jebb's Creek after a Lt. Joshua Jebb⁴⁶ who took part in the early exploration of the route between Kingston and Ottawa. Across the bridge and up the hill, the land was owned in days gone by, by Luke McMullen⁴⁷. Now a residential area has grown up and several fine modern homes have been bult there in the last few years, adding to the interest of the old winding road.

⁴³ Port Elmsley.

⁴⁴ John Ritchie Menzies (1861-1916), married (1893) Margaret Ann Byers (1871-1950).

⁴⁵ Canadian Forces Station (CFS) Richardson, an adjunct to CFS Carp. See *The Other Diefenbunker* elsewhere on this website <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/cfs-richardson.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Lieutenant Joshua Jebb (1793-1863) of the Royal Engineers, later Major General.

⁴⁷ Luke McMullen (c1818-1906) married (1844) Ann Fraser (b.1817).



Gibbs Creek curve c2020

People of other days will remember Cyrus Davis⁴⁸, who operated a market garden, but the land has changed hands several times through the years. At one time, the farm was operated by the late Albert McVeety⁴⁹, son of Mrs. Thomas McVeety⁵⁰ of Perth; later it was acquired by Matthew Burpee⁵¹ who developed a modern farm and kept a fine herd of cattle.

Once more it passed into new ownership and now belongs to William Munroe who also operates two school buses. Opposite this farm is one which is an Elmsley landmark, since it was once the property of Mr. George Oliver⁵², a well-known and respected figure in this district. His grandson, Donald Oliver⁵³ now operates the farm and is an ardent agriculturalist.

The home at the brow of the hill was early owned by John McPherson and later by Louis Darou⁵⁴. His son, Roy Darou⁵⁵, occupied it for a number of years prior to his death. He served as clerk of the County of Lanark.

The steeples on the churches, and the tall smokestacks on the various industrial buildings of Perth come into view as we travel westward on the road. A thriving cedar post industry is located a half mil from the town and from it great truck loads of posts are shipped to the United States to be used in vineyards and for other purposes. On the left of the road, Perth has a municipal airport and, in the summer, particularly, many light planes land at this airstrip.

⁴⁸ George Cyrus Davis (1842-1919), married (1870) Harriet Burr, married (1907) Bertha Rosanna Moote.

⁴⁹ This may be James Albert McVeety (1862-1881) son of James Henry McVeety (1821-1914) and Jannet McLean (1831-1910) and thus a nephew, not a son, of "Mrs. Thomas McVeety".

⁵⁰ Mary Ann Burns (1858-1909), married (1879) Thomas Leonard McVeety Sr. (1849-1826).

⁵¹ Matthew Orme Burpee (1921-2003), married Elizabeth J. Murden (1919-2006).

⁵² George Oliver Jr. (1821-1878), married (1870) Euphemia Spalding (1850-1922).

⁵³ Donald George Oliver (1927-2006), married E. Grace - ? -.

⁵⁴ Louis Benjamin Darou (1860-1917), married (1890) Lydia A. McMullen (1856-1931).

⁵⁵ Roy Norman Darou (1891-1958), married (1914) Jane McKenney (1889-1986).



Perth Airport c1960
(Perth Matheson House Museum collection)

At the edge of the town several new homes have been built as the town seems to sprawl out into the countryside and along the Scotch Line many new houses are being erected. This road was originally settled by Scottish settlers who came out from Greenock in 1816 and established themselves on the 1st concession of Bathurst and the 10th of Burgess. They were thrifty, peaceful, and industrious people who toiled year after year to build independence for themselves and their posterity and many of the farms today bear their name. Their dominee⁵⁶ was John Halliday⁵⁷ who name is well-known one in the early history of Lanark County.

The Ferry Road intersects the Scotch Line on the south-east boundary of the town of Perth, the county seat of Lanark. We have left the township of North Elmsley and have entered Drummond Township.

In our reminiscing we have travelled over the road followed by these early pioneers as they made their way from Brockville to the settlement of Perth on the Tay River. Long number of years have passed and with them came changes in all things – in our mode of living, in transportation and communication, in human values.

Now a new road is to be built and surveyors are already at work mapping out its course. No doubt it will be designed to speed up traffic, but still keep in mind the safety element. Many people hope that not all the curves and hills will be eliminated. Not all the rural scenic beauty destroyed. Our neighbours to the south advertise their Indian trails, their pioneer villages, their 'famous name' parks. The counties of Lanark and Leeds have much attractive beauty to offer sightseers and we should advertise ourselves as 'Leeds the Lovely' and Lanark the Land of Lakes'.

⁵⁶ School teacher.

⁵⁷ John James Holliday (1778-1870), married (1801) Margaret Johnstone (1782-1860).

But most of all, we should practice those sterling qualities inherent in those earlier settlers who came to our shores – industry, integrity, thrift, respect for life and property, and active interest in spiritual things. Only thus will we be worthy of the land which kind Providence gave to our ancestors and which has been handed down to us for safe keeping.

Also see *Recollections of the Ferry Road*, an account of the Rideau Ferry Road c1845, published in the *Perth Courier* of January 24, 1896; found elsewhere on this site <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/rideau-ferry-road.pdf>

- *Transcribed and notated by Ron W. Shaw (2022)*