

Exploring Port Elmsley's Forgotten Past



For such a little place, Port Elmsley has managed to attract its fair share of attention over the past two centuries. Originally part of the more than 13,000-acre land grant awarded in 1803 to General Benedict Arnold for his defection to the British army during the American Revolution, it came to life in the 1820s and '30s with construction of Weatherhead's sawmill and dam, and the Tay Canal. Several warehouses also sprout up at this time, catering to the transshipment trade between Perth and Montreal.

Originally named Barbadoes, in honour of founder Samuel Weatherhead's birthplace, many saw potential over the years in the power generated here by Pike's Falls. By mid-to late-century, the village boasted two hotels, three stores, two blacksmith shops, two churches, a cooperage, a post office, a school, a railway station, a town hall, and several mills. However, when Port Elmsley was bypassed by the Second Tay Canal in the 1880s, that proved to be a sign of things to come.



Second Tay Canal

By the 1880s, canals still competed favourably with railways for moving freight, so political forces, led by MP John Haggart of Perth, secured public funding to rebuild the Tay Canal. Although the project was scorned in the House of Commons, the deal was sealed by the belief that the burgeoning local mining industry would benefit from cheap transportation and improvements would better regulate water levels down the Rideau to Ottawa.

Built in three stages between 1882–91, the Second Tay Canal bypassed Port Elmsley by digging a mile-long cut to Beveridges Bay on Lower Rideau Lake. Two locks, each with a 13' lift, were built to the same standards as on the Rideau, allowing steamships to rise to Perth. However, like the first canal, the second never realized its commercial potential. Yet, it did enhance the region's position in the newly emerging tourism and recreation industry.

For more information:
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From Barbadoes to Port Elmsley

Pike Falls' Storied Past



Settlement

Port Elmsley is a river town, its focus the Pike, renamed Tay when the Perth Military Settlement was established in

1816. Until settlers could clear land for farms, they fed their families by stretching nets along a length of the river that dropped 19' over 1.5 miles. Then, with construction of the Tay Canal, barges passed daily, carrying goods and people up to and down from Perth. Few travelled by road, for as one wayfarer remarked, "The road was . . . so rough that I learned it would knock my cutter to pieces."

Samuel Weatherhead and his son Alexander were the first to establish themselves here. Connected to General Arnold through business and marriage, they received land in payment for services rendered. Other early

families included Shaw, Sherwood, O'Hara, Moore, Dudgeon, Lavender, Findlay, McTavish, McVeety, Beveridge, Best, and Clements.



First Tay Canal

In 1829, Samuel Weatherhead erected a dam and mill at Fishing Falls, causing merchants in Perth to form the Tay Navigation Company to ensure access to the Rideau Canal, then under construction. By 1831, plans were drawn up for four locks of rubble masonry with wooden planking, 90' x 20', plus dams, between the Tay's mouth and Jebb's Creek.

Although lack of finances dictated smaller and poorer quality locks than those of the Rideau, most—including the Royal Engineers—considered them sufficient for the time. An unforeseen need for a fifth lock midway through construction, however, began a downward spiral for the canal that was soon plagued with allegations of corruption and cronyism, as well as vicious competing interests. After launch of the TNC's flagship *Enterprise*, in 1834, not another steamer entered the Tay, its 3.5' depth proving too shallow for this new technology. As the Weatherheads had shut the TNC out of Port Elmsley, the latter had to erect warehouses on Stonehouse Point in the Rideau to provide transshipment services. Traffic on the Tay Canal never generated enough revenue to ensure its survival, let alone upkeep, and the decision to construct slides for square lumber and sawlogs only hastened its deterioration. By 1866, all locks were in ruins.



Village Life

Fishing and lumber provided early employment for village residents, and with arrival of the railway in 1858, tanneries, woolen and cheese factories. However, the Globe Refining Co. proved to be Port Elmsley's most significant industry. In 1901, it took over the nearby graphite mine, bought the Shoddy Mill, installed \$100,000 worth of machinery, and built housing to accommodate nearly 50 employees. During the village's heyday, boardwalks lined the streets, the two-storey stone schoolhouse welcomed 120 pupils, fine churches and a town hall were built, and manufactured and processed goods were hauled daily to barges that plied the rebuilt canal. However, prosperity was short-lived, due to shallow graphite deposits, and by the time of the Great Depression, the mill and mines were abandoned, leaving many to seek greener pastures.

