Murray Canal in The Tobey Book

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The Murray Canal was the dream of early travellers. In 1796 the government granted 6,000 acres of which 6k acres were expressly set aside for a canal. The remaining land was to be used to finance the construction of the canal.

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Memories of the War of 1812 still lingered forty years later. Alex Begg in THE BRIGHTON SENTINEL of August 19, 1853 in speaking of the survivors who were living affectionately called them "stout hearted fellows". The article read:

"'THE LAST WAR

A meeting of the Militiamen who served in the War of 1812, held at Ste. Catharines, on 30 July, l853» resolved that it is expedient that the remaining survivors of the War of 1812 shall be invited to attend a meeting at Queenston, 13th October.'

We copy above from Niagara Mail of 10 inst. and we feel great pleasure in promulgating in our columns in furtherance of the object in view and we sincerely hope that there will be found lots of the stout hearted fellows of the War of 1812 ready and able to respond as in days of yore to the bugle call of "Turn out-the whole" on 13th October, the Anniversary of the Battle of Queenston."

During the war there was difficulty in hauling freight across the Murray Canal Isthmus.

"During the last war, numerous brigades of boats with detachments of troops, and munitions of war, had to pass by the route of the Bay of Quinte and for want of a canal, were obliged to be hauled across the Isthmus of Murray at an enormous cost, although the Isthmus is only a mile and a quarter broad at the Carrying Place, four pounds having to be paid for every boat and a dollar for every wagon load, besides the cost of a great many old or worn out horses and cattle that were conveniently put into teams employed there, either to be killed or injured, in the service of the Government and so to be paid for out of the Military Chest. But the expense was not the worst part of the business, there was the delay, which, under ordinary circumstances, might be attended with mischievous consequences, yet when it is taken into account that the invaders were vastly superior in numbers and very subtle, besides having the advantage of being the aggressive party, any delay was a very serious matter indeed, and it might have proved fatal, were it not that the sentiment of loyalty was immovably fixed in the breast of the valiant defenders of the country, which impelled them to quit their homes and submit to military discipline, and so they prevailed just as all such noble-hearted and spirited men ought to prevail, and ever will prevail."

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Rafts, canoes or Durham boats were employed mainly in order to carry provisions such as flour, pork and salt and for the transportation of furs and lumber to pay for these necessities. Concerning the period just after the War of 1812 I.M. Wellington said:

"Many hundreds of thousands of masts and sticks of square timber have been brought to Presqu'Ile Harbour to be put into rafts and taken down to Quebec. During this time the Murray Canal was the subject of common talk, especially among the lumbermen, for by that canal

there would be an inland waterway from Presqu'Ile Harbour to Kingston, then down the St. Lawrence to the ocean."

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In 1846 Mr. Keefer of the Board of Trade reported that the Murray Canal, if constructed would be:

"a means of strengthening the defences of the country by affording in time of actual hostilities, a secure inland route for vessels and munitions of war".

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In his paper Alex Begg showed great enthusiasm for the future of Brighton.

In his editorial of September 16 he said:

"The Good Time is Coming

There is every probability of the speedy construction of the Murray Canal. All parties are pushing and urging it forward.

Push the ball while it is rolling. We did expect to see the steamboat connection with Rochester accomplished before this

time.....To Rochester or Oswego we must have steam communication,

for our wants and business demand it. Thus with a railroad from Presqu'Ile Harbour to the back country we shall bring the whole produce of the back country to its natural outlet - Brighton Harbour.

Go ahead Brightonians: To anticipate the future for Brighton would almost be impossible.

The people in Brighton during 1853 believed that Brighton and Brighton Harbour were natural centres for trade by water or by stage between Belleville and Cobourg and for the northern areas such as Seymour and Percy Townships. THE BRIGHTON SENTINEL of May 20 said that Brighton should do a larger business than any other port between Kingston and Toronto.

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Alex Beggs speaks in his editorial of October 28, 1853 about recent lot surveys. ….

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Open your road to the back country, gentlemen, and Brighton takes the lead amongst surrounding Villages. At present Trenton with its majestic noble river-Colborne, with its rich population and their road to Percy and Seymour gives us a hard one. Never mind, keep the ball rolling. Keep an eye on Presqu'Ile Harbour and Murray Canal: get a good road out back and trust to Providence for the rest.

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MURRAY CANAL

In 1853 Alex Begg took up the cudgels for the canal construction saying:

"It ought to have been undertaken and completed many years ago, and it is truly incomprehensible why it has been neglected — it would be a great auxiliary to trade — it would, in time of war, enable troops and stores to pass to and fro between Kingston and Toronto without delay and in perfect security."

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BRIGHTON AND VICINITY CHAPTER XXII 1865

Records show a great deal of activity in the village in 1865. Many people made distinct contributions to the building of the town. Wilson W. Webb was Reeve of the village in 1865 and 1866. Later he became M.P.P. for East Northumberland from 1871 to 1875.

The Murray Canal was a lively subject about this time and quite a long record of the early debates concerning this waterway is available. Through research many old legal documents have been found. These papers serve to confirm names and dates as well as signatures of the citizens of the time.

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The Board of Trade for Montreal campaigning in favour of the Murray Canal in 1865 said:

* *An important cut-off was long ago proposed to connect Lake Ontario with the western extremity of the Bay of Quinte by a short canal. The land required for such a purpose is reserved by the Government. The distance to be cut through less than two miles; some additional dredging being, of course, required in the bay to perfect the communication. As no lockage is requisite, to expense of the work would be small, while the advantage would be great.

When it is remembered that the stretch between Presqu'isle Harbor and Kingston is the most hazardous on Lake Ontario, the advantages to be derived from such a cut-off will be evident, especially in the Fall when stormy weather is most prevalent. Had that little canal existed last year, a number of marine disasters might have been avoided. Anyone who examines the map may see at a glance how important the Bay of Quinte would thus become in the event of hostilities on the lake."

A committee of the House of Commons obtained the opinion of Colonel McDougall, Adjutant General of Militia. Naturally he enlarges on the advantages in his testimony to the Honourable Mr. Holton. Questioned by the Honourable Mr. Holton:

"Be pleased to state to the committee your views of the importance, in a military point of view, of connecting the waters of Lake Ontario and the Bay of Quinte by a Canal, navigable for vessels of the largest class in use on Lake Ontario.'*

To this Colonel McDougall replied:

"I am aware that the Defence Commission sent to Canada in 1862, to report on the general defences of the province strongly recommend the formation of a naval station in the Bay of Quinte. The natural features of that bay render it, in my opinion, admirably adapted for such purposes. In the event of the naval station being formed in the Bay of Quinte, it would be of great importance to have a short and secure entrance direct from Lake Ontario to the head waters of the bay. This is especially the case in view of the fact that the stretch …

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… between Presqu'isle Harbour and Kingston is the most dangerous and difficult on the lake. Judging by the map, and in ignorance of local peculiarities, it appears to me that the best means of obtaining such a short and secure communication as is above-referred to, would be cutting a canal between the head waters of the Bay of Quinte and Weller's Bay. The mouth of the canal would be covered and protected by the perfectly land-locked harbour of Weller's Bay, the entrance to which, from Lake Ontario is susceptible of being very easily defended against a hostile flotilla. If the case is considered of Canadian vessels running before a superior naval force of the enemy from the general direction of Toronto, it is obvious that if the first were obliged to weather the peninsula of Prince Edward, in certain winds they would run serious risks of being driven ashore or captured before they could make the entrance to the Bay of Quinte, whereas the same vessels, with the same wind as would expose them to destruction in the first supposed case, could enter the harbour of Weller's Bay under full sail, and reach the head of the Bay of Quinte without molestation. Even though it may not be in contemplation to establish a regular naval station in the Bay of Quinte, that bay in case of war, afford an admirable harbour of refuge, which would be made perfectly secure in a military, or rather naval sense. Again in case of war, the proposed canal would supply the means of far safer communication by water, without the sacrifices of time between Kingston and Toronto, than could be afforded by the open lake.'*

On the basis of such a favourable report for the construction of the

Murray Canal, a recommendation was made to the House of Commons in 1866,

signed by James L. Biggar, Chairman. A part of the report is given:

''The Select Committee appointed to enquire into the expediency of constructing a canal to connect the head waters of the Bay of Quinte with Lake Ontario, usually called the Murray Canal, and also to enquire and report whether any money or lauds are applicable to that purpose, and if so, what may be the amount or value thereof, beg to leave to report:

That it appears a grant of land was made for the above purpose as early as the year 1796, and that said grant, which was then ascertained to contain some six thousand acres, was afterwards repeatedly acknowledged and confirmed;

That a reservation of sixty-four acres has been made between Presqu'isle Harbour and the Bay of Quinte, and which said Canal was intended to be constructed;

That the value of the original reservation was estimated by the Crown Lands Department, in 1839, at 3 (pounds) per acre, or 1800 (pounds) currency.

That besides providing an admirable harbour of some seventy or eighty miles in length, capable of being made almost impregnable against attack, the great natural facilities for ship building and for obtaining supplies of timber, would enable the Bay of Quinte to be used to great advantage for the repair or construction of ships of war;

That on reference to the journals of the Legislative Assembly of 1845, your Committee found the record of a letter dated 7th …

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… January, 1840, signed by R.B. Sullivan, then Commissioner of Crown Lands, which was furnished as a report on the whole question of the Murray Canal, for the information of the House, in reply to an address to His excellency, under date of the 17th January, 1845.

That under these circumstances your Committee would recommend that a survey be made of the neck of land lying between Lake Ontario and the Bay of Quinte, and also of the harbours of Presqu'isle and Weller's Bay, for the purpose of ascertaining the cost and feasibility of said canal, and that the survey should be commenced with the least possible delay.

The construction of the Murray Canal resulted from these deliberations.

In 1882, the first sod was turned by a Mrs. Joseph Keeler, in the presence of a multitude of delighted guests. By 1884, construction was in active progress.

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Certain groups were still pushing for the construction of the Murray Canal.

In 1866, a committee of the House of Commons — after obtaining the opinion of

Colonel McDougall, Adjutant General of Militia that the construction of

the canal:

In case of war would supply the means of far safer communication by water, between Kingston and Toronto — recommended that a survey should be made of the neck of land and also of harbours of Presqu'ile and Weller's Bay, and that such survey be commenced with the least possible delay.

It was not until 1882 that the first sod for the construction of the canal was turned.

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MURRAY CANAL September 15, 1884

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The sailing ship was, in due course, followed by steam navigation Earlier in the century The Quinte and The Norseman, or North King, were still remembered. The Varuna, whose captain was Mr. Porte, took many excursions through the Bay of Quinte, past Deseronto, and past Dr. Oronyateka's island to the Thousand Islands. Those were indeed grand and glorious days for young and old. Navigation was greatly facilitated by the completion of the Murray Canal in 1887. The construction of this canal had long been desired, as it was first proposed by John Graves Simcoe, the first Lieutenant Governor of the separate province of Upper Canada.

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Dreamed of and longed for by our forefathers, the Murray Canal was finally finished in 1889. I.M. Wellington said:

"How wonderful that after the year 1794 nearly every representative of the East Riding of the county of Northumberland rode into office on the sure promise of the Murray Canal; but, after securing their seat, they either forgot their pledges, or for personal interest endeavoured by every possible means to have the route changed; but when they found their scheme would not work, they then purposely passed their promises by, unfilled - until the late Joseph Keeler, Esq., knowing the benefits to the commercial interests of the country, dared to fight it through, and assisted by the Hon. Sir Mackenzie Bowell, took this long-promised and much needed canal in hand, urging it before the Government, and obtained the charter and a grant of money to commence the work immediately, and on the 31st day of August, 1882, the first sod was turned by Mrs. Keeler, widow of our M.P. The canal has since been completed, and the Government report tells us that it is in length, between eastern and western pierheads 5 1/6 miles; breadth at bottom, 80 feet; depth at low water, 12 1/2 feet; width on the surface of the water, from bank to bank, about 140 feet; with riprap wall, from four feet below the water to nearly the top of bank, and about two feet thick on either bank, extending from end to end. It is perfectly straight and has no locks.

The maximum depth at entrance is sixteen feet. It has four swing bridges crossing the canal, built of iron and standing on heavy masonry nicely dressed, and giving sixty feet in the bridge clear for boats to pass."

Ontario Historical Papers and Records Vol V, 1904

I will briefly summarize the events which led to the building of the Murray Canal. In 1796, a grant of land of 6,000 acres was made. This land was to be used to finance the construction of the canal. Of the 6,000 acres, 64 were set aside for the canal itself. In 1839 the value of the land was estimated by the Crown Lands Department at 3 (pounds) per acre. R.B. Sullivan, Commissioner of Crown Lands, reported on the whole question of the Murray Canal for the information of the House of Commons in 1845. (see Canniff - Settlement in U.C.) In 1846, Mr. Keefer of the Board of Trade in a report said:

"I have always looked upon it as a project designed for the especial benefit, accommodation and safety of steamboats and vessels navigating the Lakes, as a means of strengthening the defences of the country by affording, in time of actual hostilities, a secure inland route for vessels and munitions of war.

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Taking a more extended view, it would appear to be intimately connected with Welland-St. Lawrence Canals."

SENTINEL of August 12, 1853

After Mr. Keefer's report he inserted the words: "We'll win the prize at last, and glory be to him who helps us." In l853i agitation for the Canal became acute. This in the SENTINEL of April 8th, we read the following arguments:

"But there is another work that ought to have been undertaken, and completed, many years ago, and it is truly incomprehensible why it has been neglected. It appears to me that there is no single work of equal weight, as regards the interests of trade on Lake Ontario, and perhaps eventually, the defence of Upper Canada, which could be engaged in at the present moment. I allude to a communication between Presqu'Isle Harbour and the Bay of Quinte, by means of a ship canal.

Such a work was strongly recommended to the attention of the people of Upper Canada by that skillful and far-seeing officer, the late General Simcoe, during the period of his administration, about 60 years ago. It would not be a great auxiliary to trade, but it would likewise powerfully facilitate and cheapen the defense of the country, and by the means, in all probability of abridging hostilities by rendering more certain, and secure our operations. In stormy weather, especially in the Spring and Fall of the year, all the vessels navigating Lake Ontario on the British side, would prefer going by the way of the Bay of Quinte, as it would be the most safe route, and Presqu'Isle Harbour would be "right on the line of march" which would be no trifling consideration, as it is decidedly the noblest harbour, either on Lake Ontario or Lake Erie and perfectly easy of access to any experienced and prudent navigator. The Canal in question would, in time of war, enable Troops and Stores to pass to and fro between Kingston and Toronto without delay and in perfect security when it might be impracticable, owing either to storms or an enemy's having temporary command of the Lake, to sail around the south point of Prince Edward District.

The proposed Canal would not cost much in its construction, as it would not require any Lock and the length would only just about five miles, and besides being the means of rendering more secure the Lake navigation, it would open up to the towns and villages along the very extensive and picturesque Bay of Quinte a direct water communication to the West without being compelled, as at present, to make in the first instance a very considerable retrograde movement to the East; in the event of war, it would in addition to innumerable other advantages, enable the co-operation of Flotillas of Gun Boats and other craft for the defence of the shores of the Bay and Presqu'Isle Harbour, and their respective vicinities, either towards Cobourg and Port Hope on the west, Wellington to the south east, or Picton, Bath, and Kingston eastward; and from the central position of Presqu'Isle Harbour between Kingston and the head of the Lake the contemplated Canal would cause it to become a powerful link in the Naval or Military operations of the country, should an exigency arise, besides being a great saving of money for transport.

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It is therefore, sincerely to be hoped that the important work of connecting the Bay of Quinte with Presqu'Isle Harbour, in add of the other defences of Canada, will no longer be delayed, and that no feeling of parsimony shall prevent its speedy completion in the most ample manner. It is a work of defence which the Provincial Government can undertake, and accomplish without any reference or add, to or from the Imperial Government; it would reflect great honor and at the same time be very profitable, and as it would be adike applicable to the best interests of the country in Peace or War, it would be a perdurable disgrace not to accomplish it."

On August 26, 1853 Alex Begg printed an editorial telling that Belleville was interested in the canal.

"The Council of Town of Belleville: "That a Committee consisting of Messrs. McAnnany, Flint, Benjamin, and the Mayor be appointed to enquire into and report upon the best means to be taken to construct a Canal to connect the waters of Lake Ontario with the Bay of Quinte."

On November 11, 1853 Alex Beggs quotes the STAR:

"If the Townships of Brighton and Murray do not send delegates to the next session of Parliament to advocate their claims to money long since granted for the purpose of constructing their Canal, they will deserve to remain without the important work. If they want anything, they must do what everyone else does, agitate for it, and not sit still and suck one's fingers."

On December 10, 1853, W.H. Ponton, F. McAnnany, and John O'Hare of Belleville gave notice that they would make application to the Legislature of this Province for an Act to incorporate a joint stock company for the construction of the Canal (see SENTINEL of Jan 13, 1854). In 1865 the Montreal Board of Trade emphasizes the need for safer sailing. It says:

"It was long ago proposed to connect Lake Ontario with the Western extremity of the Bay of Quinte by a short canal. The land required for such a purpose is reserved by the Government. The distance to be cut through is less than 2 miles; some additional dredging being of course required in the bay and lake to perfect the communication.

As no lockage is required, the expense of the work would be small, while the advantage would be great.

When it is remembered that the stretch between Presqu'isle Harbour and Kingston is the most hazardous on Lake Ontario, the advantages to be derived from such a cut-off will be evident, especially in the fall when stormy weather is most prevalent. Had that little canal existed last year, a number of marine disasters might have been avoided. Anyone who examines the map may see at a glance how important the Bay of Quinte would thus become in the event of hostilities on the Lake." (see Canniff Settlement in U.C.)

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Thus the Montreal claim ends up in the War Hazard, which all the previous claimants have stressed.

In 1866 the Committee of the House of Commons obtained the opinion of Col. McDougall, Adjutant General of Militia. He was greatly in favour of the Canal's construction for naval purposes. A part of his evidence is:

"...if the case is considered of Canada's vessels before a superior naval force of the enemy from the general direction of Toronto, it is obvious that if the first were obliged to weather the peninsula of Prince Edward, in certain winds they would run serious risks of being driven ashore or captured before they could make the entrance of Bay of Quinte, whereas the same vessels...could enter the harbour of Weller's Bay under full sail and reach the head of Bay of Quinte without molestation... The Bay would, in case of war, afford an admirable harbour of refuge which would be made perfectly secure in a naval sense. Again, in case of war, the proposed canal would supply the means of far safer communication by water, without the sacrifice of time, between Kingston and Toronto, than could be afforded by the open Lake." (See Caniff)

In 1866, James C. Biggar, Chairman of the above-mentioned Committee of the House of Commons, presented his report embracing that a survey should be made of the neck of land lying between Lake Ontario and the Bay of Quinte, and also of the harbours of Presqu'Isle and Weller's Bay for the purpose of ascertaining the cost of and feasibility of said canal, and that such survey be commenced with the least possible delay, (see Canniff)

I am not able to say when that survey was made, but 16 years later the first sod was turned, on August 31, 1882, by Mrs. Joseph Keeler, in the presence of a multitude of delighted people, (see ENSIGN of August 5, 1902)

In 1889 the Canal was formally opened by Sir John A. Macdonald. This opening took place at Twelve O'clock Point, where the rejoicings were for a few moments turned into grave apprehensions for the safety of Sir John when the platform on which he was sitting suddenly collapsed. The splendid humour of Sir John is preserved for us by Fred Cook, an Ex-Mayor of Ottawa, who wrote the following article:

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"It was a beautiful day of the ceremony, and in view of the importance of the occasion, town and country folk had assembled by thousands, near and far, at Twelve O’clock Point, about midway along the new Canal. A platform had been erected for the speakers, but it was of such insecure nature that it would not stand the strain of the people who sought to crown upon it.

Hardly had the meeting convened, when there was an ominous cracking of timber, and suddenly, I saw that portion of the platform on which the speaker's table was standing sink out of sight, carrying with it Sir John A. Macdonald and a dozen other people. The reporters' table, which was on the right of the platform, retained its position, although one or two of my colleagues also slid into the gap. Fortunately, the drop was only about five feet and none of those who went in the hole were hurt, although everybody was alarmed for the safety of the Old Chieftain. When he was pulled out from among the fallen timbers we could see he was all right.

Standing on the steps leading to the platform, the Old Man, pointing his finger to the audience, had to have his little joke. He remarked, "I have been in worse holes than that.

This indicates to you folks the strength of the liberal platform. It takes more than a Grit to keep me down."

The sally was greeted with uproarious cheering, and I am certain that the Liberals present did not take offence."

(see MAIL AND EMPIRE of July 26, 1934)

On August 15, 1889 the yacht Surprise, was the first vessel to pass through the Canal (see ALPHABET OF FIRST THINGS IN CANADA by George Johnson).

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