

HAMILTON MOUNTAIN AND THE CANAL BUILDING AGE

By Robert Williamson

Recent stories for Mountain Memories have described the role played by Railways and Electricity in Hamilton Mountain history. With the new year of 2016, we find ourselves entering the 200th anniversary of the Canal Building Age in this region. Everyone should be familiar with the escarpment's role in the building of the Welland Canal. However, I wager that no one knows about a canal building scheme promoted by the venerable Allan MacNab on the Hamilton region escarpment.

It all started with the construction of the Erie Canal (1817-1825) between the Hudson River and Lake Erie at Buffalo. That inspired William Hamilton Merritt to start a canal system in 1820 on the 12 Mile Creek at St. Catharines to bypass Niagara Falls. That evolved into the Welland Canal.

By 1822, the canal building mania spread to the Grand River when an initial survey proved that by building a series of dams and control locks at key points on the river, navigation was possible all the way upstream to Brantford. Furthermore, it was recognized that the topography between Brantford and the Dundas Valley showed promise in linking the Grand River to Burlington Bay.

While no record of that proposed link has survived, the geographical clues are evident on a modern map. It is easy to see that the headwaters of Big Creek, which enters the Grand River between Caledonia and Brantford, are located near Copetown on Governor's Road, just a few kilometers from the watershed flowing eastward into the Dundas Valley. The map also shows that Big Creek meanders excessively, indicating that it has a low or flat gradient, making it ideal for canal building and diverting water from the Grand River. Thanks to the ice age, the escarpment face at the head of the Dundas Valley was buried by debris as a lobe of ice pushed westward from the Lake Ontario basin, creating a natural ramp; perfect for building a series of step locks down to the valley floor.

About the same time as the Burlington Canal was completed, connecting Burlington Bay to Lake Ontario (1826), the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada authorized the formation of a stock company to finance the Grand River Navigation Company (GRNC) scheme proposed by Welland Canal builder, Wm. Merritt.

The stock holders held their first public meeting in a Brantford school house in 1827 to elect their directors. Absalom Slade, MPP, became Superintendent. Allan MacNab, MPP, was elected GRNC's director/solicitor. Ever the financial promoter, he had invested in a steamboat venture as well as land along the Grand River. He also played a major role in completing the Desjardin Canal connecting Dundas to Burlington Bay. However, the remainder of the link to the Grand River was never undertaken, primarily because of opposition by Dundas businessman James Crooks.

There is no recorded reason for his opposition except that the proposed canal system would bypass his Crooks Hollow industrial venture on the upper reaches of Spencer Creek in Greenville. This new canal focus of commerce and industry presented a serious threat to his business empire.

By 1846, ten dams and associated navigation locks had been completed on the Grand River providing navigation upstream as far as Brantford, but within 25 years, railways, which were far more efficient, sounded the death knell for canal transportation systems. By 1890 the GRNC was bankrupt due to the cost of recurring flood damage and the picturesque riverboat way of life came to an end.



Ironically, today, the main line of the CNR follows the route that was once proposed through the Dundas Valley for the canal link to the Grand River.

Photo by Garth Chivers, Hamilton Spectator

Mountain Memories is written by historian **Robert Williamson** for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society and appears monthly in the *Mountain News*.