

## WOLFE ISLAND CANAL by Henry R.B. Jack (Inland Waterways Association of Ireland)

Wolfe Island, which had several names, was eventually named after General Wolfe who captured Quebec from the French in 1759, lies where the St. Lawrence River begins at the eastern end of Lake Ontario at 44' 10" N and 76' 20" W, on its journey east to the Atlantic Ocean. The island is 21 miles long and 7 miles at its widest part, the west end, and is the largest island of the so called "Thousand Islands". Actually there are more than 1,800 if you count every little island. It lies between Kingston (Canada) and Cape Vincent (U.S.A.) a direct distance of 11 miles between the two places.

The early ferries sailed around the west end of the island, out into the open Lake Ontario, a trip of 18 miles or more if the wind was unfavourable. With gales from the west coming down the lake over a fetch of over 180 miles, sailings would be disrupted completely even with steam vessels. The route to the east of the island is much longer.

In 1852 a canal was started across the narrowest part of the island between Barrett Bay on the north shore and running south east to Bayfield Bay on the south shore but not completed until 1857 due to financial problems. It was built by the Wolfe Island Canal & Railway Co., with assistance from the locals with labour and buying shares in the Company. The railway did not materialise and was dropped from the name at some stage later.

The canal was nearly 2 miles long, 100 feet wide and 4 feet deep with one wooden swing bridge over the road to the east end of the island. Bayfield Bay is shallow so a dredged channel was needed which made the total length of the new navigation to deep water a distance little over 3 miles. The original estimated cost was £18,000 sterling. This opened a direct route between Kingston and Cape Vincent avoiding the long and often difficult journey around the west or east of the island. This canal was free of tolls and open to all users.

In 1858 the *S.S. Pierrepoint* was the first steam driven boat to use this canal on a direct service between Kingston and Cape Vincent. The ship was built by Mr. G. Hinckly of Kingston, Campbell & Hinckly with unseasoned wood from Wolfe Island so it did not last long and was replaced by the *S.S. Gazelle* in 1864 and she was in turn replaced by the *S.S. Watertown* within the year and this vessel maintained the service for 8 years.

In 1872 the canal was deepened to 7 feet at a cost of \$10,000 (Canadian) by the Wolfe Island Canal Co. The ferry company was bought out by the St. Lawrence Steamship Co. in the same year, with the Folger Brothers the main owners, and this firm ran until 1904 when the islanders gained control of the ferry service to Kingston. The canal had become blocked with weed and silt closing the waterway to commercial traffic in 1892 but was used by private boats until 1935 when the swing bridge was replaced by a road over two culverts 3 feet in diameter and under great protest from the locals. This would have needed permission from the body controlling navigations but I did not find any reference of this!!

After World War II, moves surfaced to reopen the canal with the cost at C\$3,000,000 including a new swing bridge on what was now the Route 96 but nothing happened. Again in 1988 there was some activity about re-opening the canal with dredging to 7 feet at a cost of C\$6,700,000 and there the matter rests. It would appear that "the future of this canal depends on commercial need (marinas and boating) and political interest and will.

Wolfe Island has a historical link with canals elsewhere as from a quarry near the only town, Marysville, cut stone was supplied for the Rideau and Welland Canals while a stonemason working there in 1844-45 was an Alexander Mackenzie who later became Prime Minister of Canada.

When the islanders gained control of the ferry service in 1904 their first ship was the *S.S. Thomas Fawcett* which was renamed the *S.S. Wolfe Islander* by the Wolfe Island Township in 1905. She ran until condemned in 1946 and for some months the service was carried on with two ex-army landing craft carrying four cars each until replaced by the *Wolfe Islander II* which in turn was replaced in 1976 by the *Wolfe Islander III* which is still in service and carries up to 55-60 vehicles and 400 foot passengers, still toll-free and ' continues the life-line between Kingston and the Island taking 20 minutes for the run. In summer it lands at Maryville but when the ice forms the landing is at Dawson Point, three miles east of the town and the route is kept free of ice by a "bubble system" installed in 1975.

This route is one of the crossings between Canada and the U.S.A saving the long run east to the high level bridge and cars arriving from Kingston drive across the island on route 95 the seven miles to

Horne Point and take the ten minute ferry across the main shipping channel to land at Cape Vincent. This ferry has a toll charge and is in operation from spring to the late fall.

The notes above were written from information found in the minutes of the Wolfe Island Committee lodged in the Library in Kingston, Ontario and from a booklet written by Rennie Marshall in 2000 and revised in 2003 titled "Ganoukouesnot", ( Translated from the Iroquois meaning the The Island Standing up)