

The Brantford Canal

Introduction

The preservation of heritage also includes protecting tangible objects other than buildings. It also encompasses such things as ruins, lakes, rivers, landscapes, relics, bridges and other engineered, man-made works. Examination of such items allows us to learn about the history and development of our surroundings. The remnants of the Brantford Canal and the city's first hydro electric station allow us to understand the settlement patterns in the development of the city and how the coming of electricity sustained that development once we no longer navigated the river for transportation.

The development of the canal system built between 1830 and the 1860's from Dunnville to Brantford is part of the industrial history of the Grand River valley. Paddlewheelers and other crafts used the system to transport wheat, other goods and passengers to and from the United States and other Canadian ports. Access to other cities was facilitated by the construction of a feeder canal between the lower Grand and the Welland canal.

The area located south of Lock Road at Beach Road, which runs along the Grand River, played a very important role in the development of Brantford. The area is rich in history of navigation and the origins of hydro electric power. The site was the location of the old locks which were necessary in operating the Brantford Canal. The canal increased the efficiency of navigating the Grand River by eliminating 12 miles of meandering of the waterway. As large scale navigation developed, the City benefited as industries and people were attracted to the area. This area was a major component in the link created by the Grand River Navigation Company between Buffalo and Brantford.

The coming of the railroad to Brantford led to the fall of the Grand River Navigation Company and reduced the dependence of the Grand River for shipping and transportation. This area continued to play an important role in the economic development of Brantford, as it became the site of Brantford's first Hydro Electric Generating Station. Electric companies came and went but with each of them electrical developments progressed continuously. The availability of cheap hydroelectric power continued to attract industries and Brantford became a prosperous industrial centre.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the opening of the Brantford Canal. On November 6, 1848, The Grand River Navigation Company officially opened the canal and the navigation of the Grand River for a distance of fifty seven miles from Brantford to Dunnville was made possible. The Grand River Navigation Company played an important role in the development of the City in that it formed a commercial link with outside markets. It provided for the haulage of goods and later expanded to passenger service from Brantford to Buffalo. The ability to navigate the Grand River was the catalyst for settlement and economic development in the region. Remains of the Grand River locks are quite visible today.

Brief History of the Grand River Navigation Company

In the early 1800's, people living in the area were looking at the river to improve extremely poor land transportation routes. During this time, North America was experiencing "canal fever". In 1824 the Welland Canal Company was incorporated and people in this area studied the feasibility of a canal to improve the navigation of the Grand River.

The potential of large scale navigation on the Grand River came in 1829 with the construction of a dam at Dunnville and a feeder canal to supply water to the just completed Welland Canal. This led to the formation of the Grand River Navigation Company. As part of the Act, which incorporated the Grand River Navigation Company, the company was given total authority to appropriate any land which was necessary for navigation purposes. By 1832, the company began the construction of eight locks and dams.

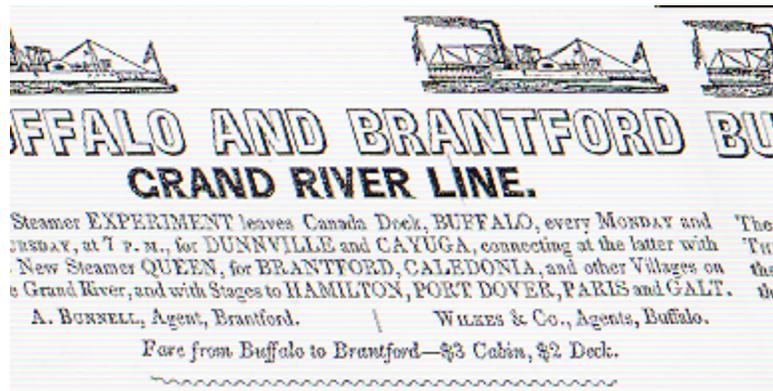
Construction of the river project consisted of a series of locks and dams. Dam and Lock #1 was built 22 miles upriver from Dunnville, later known as the Town Of Indiana. Lock and Dam #2 was built further 3 miles upriver at Nelles Rapids. This area later became the site of the Village of York. Lock and Dam #3 was known as Sim's Lock. The fourth lock and dam was located a further mile and became the site of the Village Seneca, at Stoney Creek. A series of other locks and dams were constructed two miles apart. An extra two locks were later necessary for the Brantford Cut, a three mile canal built to avoid twelve miles of meandering of the river between Bunnell's landing and Brantford.

Construction of the canal progressed very slowly. Factors which contributed to such difficulties included financial, cholera outbreaks and inexperienced contractors. Despite the money drawbacks in construction, the canal officially opened on November 6, 1848, making the Grand River navigable for 57 miles from Dunnville to the heart of Brantford. The landing wharf and the company's offices were located west of the former Market Street Bridge.

The Grand River Navigation Company enabled local businesses to ship and receive goods from their own warehouses and provided the means through which the produce of the surrounding area could be sent to outside markets. The Town of Brantford benefited immensely. The bringing of the canal to Brantford increased trade and attracted new businesses to the area.

By 1850 there were over 100 steamers on the Grand River. Paddle wheel steamers with names such as "Queen", "Red Jacket" and "Messmore" provided 48 hour round trips from Brantford to Buffalo. At Caledonia, connections were made with stage coaches to Hamilton and Port Dover. Steamers made stops at Newport, Caledonia, Cayuga and Dunnville.

A Ticket for the steamers



With the opening of the canal, there was a high level of prosperity as new mills were established and businesses increased. Despite this era of prosperity, it is ironic that the Grand River Navigation Company remained in deep financial trouble. From the company's inception, financial problems persisted. This problem resulted in cheap construction of the works and did not allow the company to complete the necessary repairs. The poor state of finances led to deterioration of the waterway system. An assessment done in 1851 revealed the need for extensive and costly repairs to the locks and dams. The only alternative solution to maintain this waterway system from deterioration and continue to benefit from navigation was to seek government ownership. In 1853, the Government agreed to take over the Grand River Navigation Company but only if the County Councils of Brant and Haldimand raised sufficient funds to support the work. The Counties were unsuccessful in their attempt and the company lost their chance for government ownership.

In 1859, the company could not go on any longer financially and the Town of Brantford foreclosed on the mortgage. In 1861, the court decided that the ownership would go to Brantford. Later that year, the Haldimand Navigation Company purchased all the assets of the Grand River Navigation Company except the Brantford Cut, which included the Canal and three locks.

The financial factors combined with the coming of the railways in the 1850's marked the end of the company. On January 13, 1854, the Buffalo, Brantford and Goderich railway line was opened and thus navigation on the Grand River declined. Those settlements along the river that depended on navigation for survival had to find alternate means of support. Some of these settlements stagnated while others died.

By 1880, the locks were not in use, became neglected and were abandoned.

Brief History of Hydroelectric Development

The Grand River lost its importance for transportation with the coming of the railroad. The Town of Brantford legally owned the Brantford Cut (Canal) and was responsible for its maintenance.

Mr. Alfred Watts was interested in this land and saw the possibilities of the canal for the development of hydraulic power and for providing energy to operate his manufacturing enterprise. The Town of Brantford was more than glad to deed this land to Mr. Watts in 1875, for the cost of one dollar. As part of the agreement, Mr. Watts agreed to maintain the canal property in a condition satisfactory to the Town and protect the banks against the encroachments of the Grand River.

Several mills were established along the Grand River but the amount of water that was utilized was quite low. In an attempt to improve this situation Mr. Watts was able to make use of a thirty-three foot difference in level between the river and the canal. Directly next to the locks Mr. Watts erected a small building to house a small dynamo. This building remained standing until the early 1920's and the ruins are still seen today at the historic site of Brantford's first hydro electric plant.



HP-1642--This 1919 photo features the old power house at Brantford.

Hydro electric power was first generated at this site in 1885 and within a short period of time, Brantford's entrepreneurs pushed for a pole-line to the city centre to light the main streets and stores.

By the late 1800's many improvements were made to electrical power and the production of power increased. A tremendous amount of money was necessary to keep pace with the improvements and the quality of lighting and therefore a company known as Brantford Electric Light Company was formed. This company was incorporated in 1890 and was operated by Mr. Watts, his two sons, Mr. William Buck, Mr. Robert Henry and Mr. George Wilkes.

Shortly after, a series of companies were formed to deal with the rapid progress of electrical technology. The Brantford Electric & Power Company with Mr. Buck as president was formed in 1893, followed by Brantford Electric & Operating Company operated by Mr. Wilkes.

In keeping up with progress the water power plant at the locks was continuously improved. By 1905, this power plant had a water power capacity of 1200 horse power and was supplying power to many large industries.

By the early 1900's, power consumption had increased and a new modern steam plant was built to supplement the water power plant and act as a standby station. This new steam plant was built by Waterous Engine Works Company.

The next major event in electrical development occurred on March 14, 1908 when Brantford linked its electrical network with the "Dominion Power" system. Hydro electric power in Brantford was no longer supplied by the old power house, next to the locks but instead came from DeCew Falls, 52 miles away. The new transmitted power was found to be so cheap and reliable that the old power house at the locks was closed on May 15, 1911. Brantford's first hydro electric power plant had played an important role in starting industrial development in the area. However, due to the limitations of the of the power plant and the Grand River, along with the tremendous demand for more power, the switch to the DeCew Falls system was proved necessary.

This article was written by City of Brantford Planning Department staff.