

The Queenston Canal

Sometimes historians play a little game of 'what if'. One of those moments came the other day when looking over a Bill "To improve and Amend the Communication Between the Lakes Erie and Ontario, By Land and Water". It was a proposal by Robert Hamilton, George Forsyth and Thomas Clark to administer a canal and road system that ran from Queenston to the Chippawa Creek near Fort Erie and was proposed by the trio in 1799. The construction of such a system would have dramatically changed the landscape of Niagara. In 1799 Hamilton was already the head of a group of individuals who had a very profitable business moving both private and military goods up the escarpment onto Lake Erie, making Queenston a very important location and village. For British goods to move onto Detroit and further up the Great Lakes system it almost always had to go through Queenston. A Canal would have amplified the significance of the community, changed the landscape as we know it and probably would have had an impact on the War of 1812 as well.

Obviously, the group was looking to profit greatly from this venture and no doubt the Americans were busy trying to get funding to build the Erie Canal (not getting it until 1817), the trio wanted a 21 year monopoly on the tolls and lockage fees, in exchange for constant repairs and maintenance. The canal was to be open day or night, every day except Sunday's, Good Friday and Christmas Day (I am not sure how well it would work in February).

As we know, the group failed to get the funding from the government to construct such a canal. There were hints that such an operation should not be monopolized by a small group, Hamilton and Forsyth already had most of the private contracts for the carrying trade and had secured the military contract to do so, Clark was a cousin of Hamilton's, owned a shop in Queenston and was at the same time applying for permission to construct storage and portaging facilities on government land along the Niagara River.

No doubt, the threat of American attack was also on the minds of the government, the cost of construction and the fact that the Americans hadn't provided funds for a corresponding canal also probably contributed to the lack of support for this massive undertaking. However, the development of the community would be very different should this initiative been undertaken.