

Beckett's Landing - A Bridge to the Past

These days, Beckett's Landing is a quiet place on the banks of the Rideau, and it is hard to believe that for more than a century it was a pivotal point in the economic and transportation life of North Grenville in general, and Kemptville in particular. As with so many places in North Grenville, it was originally settled by an Irish family. Thomas A. Beckett arrived from Ireland in 1823, receiving a land grant on the Rideau in the years before work began on the Canal. His son records that, when rumours of the Canal project reached Thomas, he immediately has his brothers and father move from Ireland to take up land beside his along the Canal route. It was to prove an inspired move.

Beckett himself worked on the Canal, and after the various locks and dams began to operate from 1832, water levels were raised, and the river widened along its length, making it even harder to find safe crossing places. As settlers arrived in the area opened up by the Canal, Beckett established a ferry crossing on the Rideau. About 1833, Beckett and his brothers joined with the people of Kemptville, still "The Branch" at that time, to cut a road from the village to the Canal. Beckett's Landing became the main crossing place for people following the road from Prescott to Bytown, the point at which they joined the Rideau passenger boats that would bring them into Bytown. As early as 1835, maps of the area showed Beckett's Landing, now a major commercial centre. Aside from operating the ferry across the river, Beckett had built a wharf where river boats stopped for fuel. The increasing number of lumber companies running log rafts through the Canal began to use Beckett's Landing as a stopping place, and Beckett built a frame hotel back from the river where the lumber workers could stay. A water colour from 1835 shows the Landing, with the wharf and Hotel, and the scow used as a ferry moored nearby.

His successful business venture at the Landing allowed Thomas Beckett to invest in the village of Kemptville. In the late 1830's he bought Mahlon Beach's hotel on the corner of Clothier and West (now Sanders) Streets, and later opened a brewery which operated successfully until 1865, when he officially retired. Court proceedings were conducted in Beckett's hotel, and he himself was a central character in the moves to counter the Hunter's Lodges in Kemptville in 1838. But that is a story for another day. The site of his hotel in Kemptville is now a parking lot. As the area developed and the population grew, the dependence on the Beckett's Landing ferry for crossing the Canal became an obstacle to travel and commerce and cut Kemptville off from its natural hinterland north of the canal during times when the ferry could not operate. In 1858, the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada was petitioned by the new Kemptville Village Council to have a bridge built on the site to replace the ferry. This was approved and a new swing bridge was erected in the 1860's. Thomas A. Beckett was appointed the first bridge master, appropriately enough, and served until his death in 1889. He was replaced by his son, William, and the job remained in the Beckett family until 1919.

Beckett's Landing became Beckett's Bridge, and traffic across the swing bridge increased annually as the road from Prescott to Ottawa became more traveled with the advent of cars and trucks. In 1919, the road became the third of the new Provincial Highways to be established by the provincial Government. Known at first as the Prescott Highway, it officially became Highway 16 in 1925. This Highway, not fully paved until 1929, became a King's Highway in 1930, an important link between the Capital of the Dominion and the main commercial artery of Highway 2, connecting Toronto with Montreal. The increase in traffic led to concerns about the safety of the old bridge, and in the early 1930's a major survey was conducted of the size and weight of vehicle using the bridge. The results were surprising and the bridge was closed to

vehicles over five tons in weight. Amazingly, these vehicles were detoured through Burritts Rapids, across the swing bridge there. The old Beckett's Bridge was removed, and plans were in place to replace it with a newer, fixed bridge. During the winter of 1935-36, cars passed through gaps cut in the snow along the banks of the Rideau, and crossed over on the ice. Before a new bridge could be built, however, surveyors were sent in to consider a new location further to the east. The line of road from Kemptville to Becketts and then joining the highway on the far side, contained a number of sharp curves and there had been many serious accidents as a result of vehicles failing to make the corners. IT was decided to change the road layout and allow the highway to run in a straight line across the Rideau beside the golf course instead. The bridge across the Rideau was built in 1937 and Beckett's Landing was bypassed, ending a long history of use that had started with Thomas Beckett back in the 1820's. The present bridge was erected in 1991, just 4.2 meters west of the 1937 bridge. The old approaches on both banks can still be seen to the east of the bridge today. From being a major artery in the Ontario Highway network, Beckett's Landing Road is now a dead-end leading to old stone supports where a bridge once spanned the Rideau.

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