



A Bridge Over Moir's Waters

By John Lowry

Produced by Hastings County Historical Society



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- Provide information about Hastings County
- Promote research into the history of Hastings County
- Support the work of the Community Archives of Belleville and Hastings County
- Promote activities and events relating to the history and culture of the people of Hastings County.

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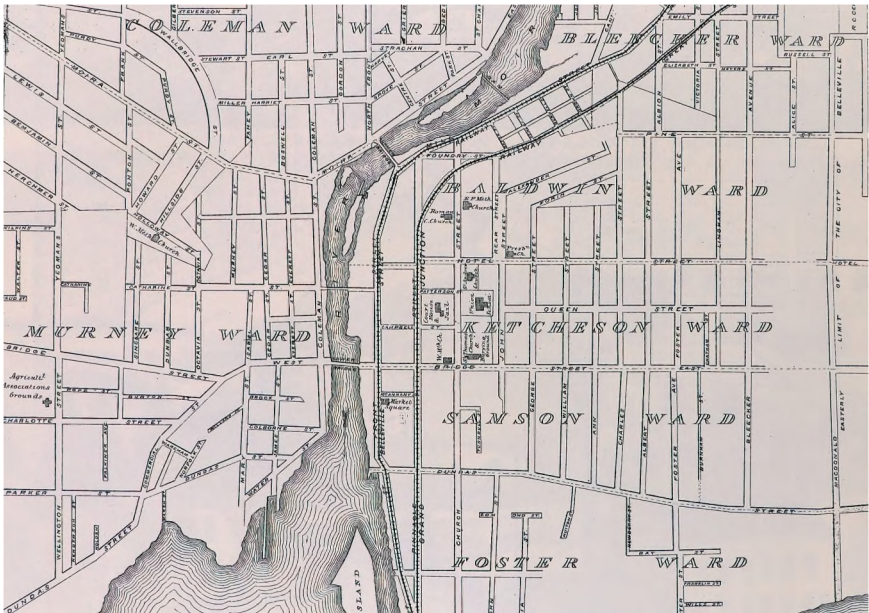
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A Bridge Over Moira's Waters

Geography

It takes only a quick glance at a map of Belleville to realize that the Moira River is the dominant geographical feature of the city's downtown. The "Mighty Moira," as it is affectionately called, cuts through the heart of downtown Belleville and empties into the Bay of Quinte.

Originally called the Sagonaska by the local indigenous peoples, the river was referred to by various names including Singleton's Creek and Meyer's Creek before it was officially renamed by the colonial government as the Moira River in 1807, in honour of Francis Rawdon-Hastings, Earl of Moira, a British general of the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783).

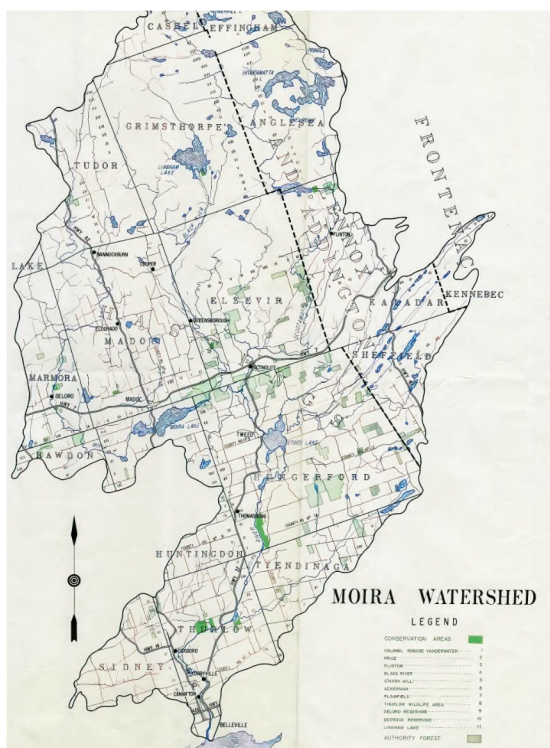


Street map of Belleville, 1878. Belden's Historical Atlas of Hastings and Prince Edward Counties

The Moira has its source in tiny Jordan Lake, located on the Canadian Shield in Tudor Township. The river, which drains a watershed area of 2,888 sq. km. (1,115 sq. miles), follows a meandering course southward for 98 km. (61 miles) before emptying into the Bay of Quinte.

In downtown Belleville the Moira has carved a channel through the Ordovician limestones that constitute the geology of its lower watershed and formed the flat, level plains on either side of the river.

The Moira is a temperamental river that experiences wide fluctuations in its flow through the annual cycle of seasons. The river goes from a raging torrent in springtime to a trickle in the drier summer months. It is often so dry by August that you can walk across its downtown stretch without getting your feet wet.

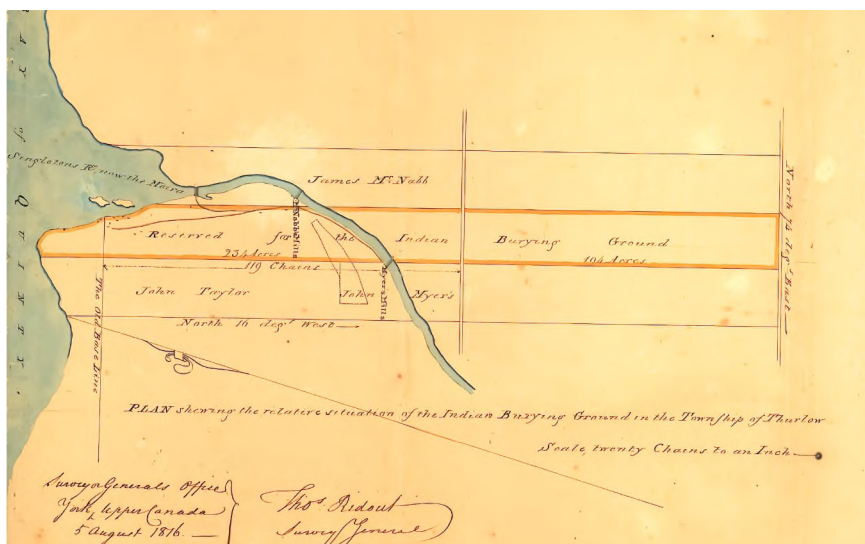


CABHC: M410-266 Moira River Watershed Map
by Moira River Conservation Authority, c.1950

European settlement

A seminal moment in local history was the arrival of United Empire Loyalists (UEL) in the Quinte region in 1784. The influx of settlers was due, in part, to the British government's desire to settle what was then considered the western frontier with their loyal and dependable followers from the recently concluded revolutionary war. The lands in the Quinte region were included in the Crawford Purchase of 1783 which was among the earliest settlements in the newly established colony of Upper Canada.

The early settlers chose the mouth of the river for practical reasons. Rivers and waterways provided transportation routes for the new inhabitants and a ready source of power for the many mills that sprang up along their banks. A settlement was established at the mouth of the river with the permission of the Mississauga First Nation, on Anishinaabe lands, part of which had been used as a burial ground. By 1816 the government of Upper Canada negotiated the purchase of the land and set about surveying a grid system of streets that would form the basis of the new village of Belleville.



Library and Archives Canada: RG10, Vol. 1842/IT052 Plan by Thomas Ridout, Surveyor General, "Shewing the relative situation of the Indian Burying Ground in the Township of Thurlow" 5 August, 1816.

Early bridges

While rivers have long been used as transportation routes they also posed challenges for land travellers. Since time immemorial humans in their ramblings have sought out the easiest routes whether it was crossing a stream on a fallen log or crossing a river by a shallow ford. The early inhabitants of the newly renamed Belleville were no different and they were faced with the challenge of establishing a reliable crossing of the sometimes tempestuous river.



Archives of Ontario: C 1-0-0-0 "Belleville, looking east" by Thomas Burrowes, 1830

The settlement's earliest wooden bridges were built for both vehicular and pedestrian traffic but due to the river's changeable nature, were vulnerable to being swept away by springtime freshets. By 1806, a more substantial bridge was established at the present Bridge Street location, one of the narrowest points in the river's lower course.

Flooding

But even then the situation was not without its challenges. The Moira was infamous for its almost annual springtime floods. One of the first recorded floods of the Moira occurred on March 26th, 1816, when the surveyor, Samuel Wilmot, and his work party had to scramble to the

safety of higher ground to avoid the rapidly rising waters of a swollen river.



CABHC: 2013-56/1/36 Children play on ice in floodwaters on James Street, Belleville, 1918

Each year, depending on the snow pack and weather conditions, the Moira could be relied upon to threaten the community with inundation. Some years would prove to be more severe than others. The history of downtown Belleville is filled with a litany of damaging floods. While posing a threat to the structures along the river's banks, the raging Moira could also prove to be a danger to the inhabitants themselves. There are several recorded instances where the river claimed a life. One of the most famous was John Strickland Moodie, the five-year-old son of famed author Susanna Moodie, who drowned in the churning river in 1844.

The violent flooding of the Moira in the springtime made such an impression on Susanna Moodie that it warranted several pages in her 1853 book, *Life in the Clearings*. The Moira was eventually somewhat tamed. A series of six ice control dams were installed between 1978 and 1990 to minimize the future risk of flooding.

Despite the threat of annual floods, Belleville continued to grow and prosper. The village was surrounded by rich farmlands and was conveniently placed to access the vast timber resources of the hinterland. The river, besides powering local mills, provided the highway for lumber barons to transport their cut logs to local sawmills and further

on to markets in the U.S. and England.

The last recorded log drive through downtown Belleville occurred in 1915. On June 10th *The Weekly Ontario* marked the passing of the annual event by remarking that “year after year for nearly a century enormous drives of timber have been floated down until the country has been depleted of all the floating marketable timber that stood in reach on the Moira or its tributaries.”



CABHC: RATHCO-06-51 "Moira River Drive" by Harold Rathbun, 1907

Need for a footbridge

The eastern bank of the river developed quickly and Front Street became the commercial core of the community. A wide variety of commercial businesses and industries flanked the thoroughfare, serving not only Belleville's inhabitants but those in the surrounding district. By the latter half of the 19th century the western side of the river was beginning to fill as well. Residences and business structures were raised on the flatlands and up Murney's Hill and Vinegar Hill.

In order to make it more convenient for west side residents to access the commercial district, the town council decided to erect a pedestrian footbridge across the Moira from Coleman Street. On October 6th, 1873, Council passed a by-law authorizing the raising of \$2,000 for the construction of the footbridge. In addition, land from property owners

either side of the proposed bridge was acquired by the City to provide a “highway to a footbridge.”

By 1874, a suspension footbridge was in place and proved to be a popular means of accessing the downtown area. However, despite being suspended well above the riverbed, the bridge was still vulnerable to the damaging waters of a flooding river, particularly when those waters



CABHC: HC00457 Valentine postcard of the footbridge, c.1910

carried enormous chunks of ice. *The Intelligencer* reported damage to the fragile structure on several occasions, including the severe floods of 1918 and 1936.

The Daily Intelligencer reported on March 21st, 1918, that ice pressure had caused great damage along the banks of the Moira. The article indicated that “The picturesque Foot Bridge, a suspension structure which for years has withstood floods, is a total wreck, the greater portion being broken up in small pieces.” However, by April 1 *The Daily Intelligencer* was able to report that “Repairs to the footbridge, which was considerably damaged by the recent flood, have been vigorously prosecuted and the structure will be open for traffic tomorrow. This will be welcome news to pedestrians, who have been compelled for some days to use either the upper or lower bridge.”



CABHC: HC01197b Damage to the footbridge in the floods of March 1918

The reconstructed footbridge suffered a similar fate during the dramatic 1936 flood with damage so severe that it required that a replacement span be installed.

A blueprint, submitted to the City in April 1936 by the Patterson Construction Company, showed a new structure, complete with wooden decking, to be installed while using the existing support cables which were anchored via stone block pedestals on both banks of the river. The cost of the replacement bridge, a total of \$1,800, was shared by the City and the merchants on Front Street.

The replacement bridge served the city until the summer of 1941. On the 14th of August, while several pedestrians were crossing the footbridge, the ageing steel cables snapped and the bridge structure slowly sagged and came to rest on the riverbed. The river's water level was very low at the time and the pedestrians escaped with no injuries.



CABHC: 2021-007/5/13 Collapse of the footbridge in August 1941

The City quickly recognized the need to replace the structure but faced the challenge that, because the nation was at war, critical materials such as steel were strictly controlled. Despite the supply challenges, plans went ahead to replace the footbridge but this time with a more substantial concrete structure. By February, 1942, the newly completed bridge was open for traffic and residents had a stable and convenient route to the downtown once again, though they would have to wait until March for the installation of the steel hand railings.

Known for years simply as “the footbridge,” the well-travelled walkway was named in 2003 as the Ben Corke Footbridge, in honour of J. B. (Ben) Corke, the long-serving alderman and Mayor of the City from 1975 to 1980. The bridge was formally dedicated in October of 2003. The footbridge would see the banks on its east side enhanced substantially in 2005 with the completion of the Parrott Riverfront Trail.



CABHC: HB 07-24 Footbridge Arcade, c.1975

Another feature of the pedestrian lane leading to Front Street was a string of small retail outlets that became known as the Footbridge Arcade. Located on the northern side of the laneway what began as several small stores as early as the 1910s, had evolved into a small strip mall of six businesses by the late 1940s.

Long-time residents of Belleville will remember the variety of businesses that occupied the arcade over the years including Footbridge Shoe Repair, Choy's Fish and Chips, Burkholder's Bakery, Adam's Shoe Repair, the 30 Minute Economy Laundry and Roma and Beverley's Beauty Salons. However, with the passage of time the buildings became dilapidated and were eventually cleared away to be replaced by an attractively manicured space complete with interlocking brick and bench seating.

The passing years also took their toll on the footbridge and chunks of concrete could be seen spalling off the venerable structure. In July 2018, the City closed the bridge for safety reasons. However, like the situation in 1942, it was determined that the much-used access route should be maintained and plans were drawn up to replace the crossing with a modern structure.



August 2018 Photo by Gerry Fraiberg shows deteriorating condition of the footbridge

Tenders were called for a new design in 2015. The engineering firm Read Jones Christofferson was awarded the contract on June 16, 2016.

A conceptual drawing illustrated that the profile of the new footbridge would emulate the two 1930s road bridges found upstream and downstream from the footbridge. The design of the new, wider footbridge would also incorporate improved lighting and enhanced landscaping elements.

Demolition of the deteriorating concrete footbridge began in July 2021. The new footbridge was opened on October 17, 2022 at a total cost of \$4.1 million.

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CABHC: HC01140 Reproduction of a stereoscopic view of the 1886 flood on the Moira River in Belleville, Ontario, showing ice to the height of the footbridge, and Christ Church in the background. From a photograph loaned by Mrs. E. Bell.



Aerial photo of the Catharine Street Footbridge
Photo Credit: Doug Knutson | Windswept Productions



Catharine Street Footbridge, looking west
Photo Credit: Gerry Fraiberg