

WILLIAM HAMILTON MERRITT AND PELL'S CANAL

It is not entirely clear when William Hamilton Merritt first had the idea of building a canal between Lakes Erie and Ontario. According to his son and biographer Jedediah, it was while he was patrolling the Niagara River during the War of 1812, but Merritt himself recalled late in life that the idea came to him after the war when water-supply problems plagued his milling operations on the Twelve Mile Creek. The solution he envisaged — a supply channel to carry water from the Welland River (or Chippawa Creek) into the headwaters of the Twelve — soon evolved into a canal to carry barge traffic. In 1817 Merritt presented the case for a canal as part of Grantham Township's response to Robert Gourlay for this *Statistical Account of Upper Canada*, and in September 1818, with the help of others, he used a borrowed water level to survey the rise of land between the two creeks to assess the idea's feasibility.

The results showed that a canal was practicable, and a month later Merritt delivered a petition to the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada, requesting a proper survey by "some scientific men" from the Welland River to Lake Ontario. The timing was opportune, for a joint commission of the two Canadas had just reported on the urgent need for improved water communications in light of the start of work on the American Erie Canal. But though some initiatives were pursued at the provincial level, nothing happened locally until February 1823, when Merritt resolved to press forward with his own scheme — this after a visit to Chautauqua, New York.

The Chautauqua Connection

Early in 1823 Merritt's wife and son were staying with her parents in Mayville, on the shore of Chautauqua Lake. Jedediah, then only a toddler, had broken his leg, and Merritt went down to be with them. Returning to Upper Canada on February 22, he crossed the Niagara River from Black Rock just below Buffalo and rode north towards the Falls. As he passed Bridgewater, a former mill site located at the upstream entrance to today's Dufferin Islands, he was reminded that his canal project had lain dormant for over four years. We know this from an entry in his *Journal*, in which he reflects ruefully on the 1818 canal survey and petition, both of which cost money and caused "much trouble for no benefit." What had brought them to mind was "thinking of Pells Canal as I passed Bridgewater ... on my return last from Chatauque." He then adds the prophetic comment, "it is my determination at present to pursue the object steadily."

Who was Pell, and what was Pell's Canal? The answer is of more than casual interest, because the reminder clearly spurred Merritt to action. In early

March he wrote to his wife that "The waters of Chippawa Creek will be down the 12 in two years from this time as certain as fate." Later that month he held a preliminary meeting at Shipman's Tavern, and in April a subscription was opened to pay for a professional survey of the canal route, which took place in May. In June a public meeting was held at Beaverdams, and in July Merritt and eight others announced their intention to apply to the Legislature for incorporation of what became the Welland Canal Company. The required act was passed in January 1824, and construction began that November.

One authority suggests that the answer to the mystery of Pell's Canal lies in Chautauqua, in a proposal made around 1800 to replace the ancient portage road between Lake Erie and Chautauqua Lake by a canal of that name. If this is true, then Merritt could have learned of Pell's Canal from his in-laws in about 1815 when he got married, and this might even have been the "eureka moment" that gave him the idea for the Welland Canal. However, though suggestions were made to link the lakes by canal, none was ever built, no plans for a Pell's Canal are known to exist, and historically the name Pell is unheard-of in the area. It is reasonable to assume therefore, that Pell's Canal was in Upper Canada, somewhere near the Niagara River. But the origin of the Pell name itself lies elsewhere.

The Pells of Pelham Manor



Pell Coat of Arms granted in 1594

If the name Pell is unfamiliar in Chautauqua County in western New York, the opposite holds true on the eastern seaboard in Westchester County, for here the Pells were a leading family of Colonial times. They claimed descent from Roger de Pelle, who supposedly came to England from the "grim mountain fastness" of Peille in south-eastern France with William the Conqueror, and settled in Water Willoughby, Lincolnshire. The first Pell to emigrate to America was Thomas, former Gentleman of the Bedchamber to Charles I, who came in about 1635 while in his early twenties. (Interestingly, his branch of the family may be descended from an earlier Thomas Pell who married the daughter of Sir

William Thorold of Marston, Lincolnshire, which if true means that many North American Pells have Thorold blood in their veins.)

Thomas Pell eventually settled in Fairfield, Connecticut, where he became a prominent member of the community. In 1654 he purchased, for £500, over 9000 acres of land from the Siwanoy Indians in the contested territory between Connecticut and the Dutch province of New Amsterdam (later New York City). The exact boundaries are uncertain, but they included an expanse of what is now the Bronx and southern Westchester County. It is said that the purchase was encouraged by Connecticut as a means of promoting English interests over the Dutch, for the land was part of New Netherland, the fur trading domain of the Dutch West India Company. In 1664 England seized New Netherland, and two years later Pell's purchase was confirmed by royal patent from Richard Nicolls, Governor of New York. With it came a significant measure of local autonomy.

When Thomas died childless in 1669 his estate was inherited by his nephew John Pell, son of his brother, the Rev. John Pell. The latter is regarded as possibly the most prominent Pell in the entire history of the family. Graduating in mathematics from Cambridge University at age 18, he went on to do major work in the field (despite an "almost neurotic inability to publish"), and is credited with introducing [+], the sign for division. He taught mathematics at Amsterdam and Breda, and during the Commonwealth period played a vital diplomatic role as Cromwell's ambassador to the Swiss Cantons. In 1661, after the Restoration, he accepted church ordination, though less from religious conviction than from financial need, and two years later was elected one of the first Fellows of the Royal Society. (Possibly only Claiborne Pell, who died in 2009 after a distinguished 36-year career in the U.S. Senate, approaches this John Pell in significance.)

The younger John was living in England when his uncle died, and he moved to America in 1670 to claim his inheritance. In 1687 his estate was elevated to the status of a manor, when New York Governor Thomas Dongan issued "a more full and firme grant" for "the lordshipp and manner of Pelham." With manorial status came additional rights, including the authority to hold "one court leete and one court baronn" (responsible for criminal and civil matters respectively) and the power of advowson (selecting ministers of religion), though it is doubtful that these rights were ever exercised. Other manors were created in the Hudson Valley around the same time, all modelled to a degree on the patroonships established earlier by the Dutch.

The term manor, of course, comes from Medieval England, where the "lord of the manor" exerted strict feudal control over his "subjects." Though no such manors had been created since 1290, this did not stop the proprietors of the New

York manors from seeking to emulate their predecessors, if only in style. Technically they had a right to the title Lord of the Manor, but John Pell also went by Lord Pell and Sir John Pell, honorifics that had no basis in law. And though he was indeed First Lord of Pelham Manor, that title was later bestowed posthumously on his uncle Thomas, so John is usually referred to as the Second Lord.

In 1689 John Pell sold over 6000 acres of land for the new Huguenot settlement of New Rochelle, and in recognition was promised "one fatted calf on every fourth and twentieth day of June, yearly, and every year, forever, if demanded." He died in about 1700, and his son Thomas, the Third Lord, divided what remained of the estate among his sons. It was a much reduced tract that was inherited in 1752 by his grandson Joseph, the Fourth Lord, and with his death in 1776 the dynasty came to an end.

The Pells of Humberstone and Stamford

By then the Revolutionary War was in its second year, and this caused a major split in the family, with some supporting the rebels and others the British, and occasionally even fighting against each other. Noteworthy among the Loyalist Pells was one Joshua Pell, grandson of the Third Lord, who eventually found his way to Niagara. When war broke out he was an officer with the Militia of Pelham and New Rochelle, but he refused to oppose the Crown. Instead he supplied intelligence to the British in New York City, and commanded a company of the loyal City Militia. When the British evacuated New York in 1783, he and his family went to Nova Scotia.

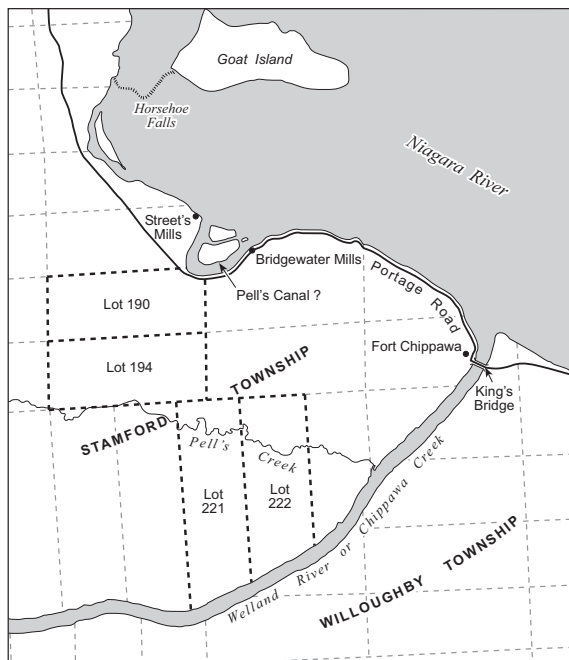
Joshua Pell's 146-acre farm in Pelham was confiscated by the Commissioners of Forfeitures for New York State, and in 1784 was sold. A year later he filed a claim for compensation with the Loyalist Commissioners appointed by the British Parliament. Proclaiming his "honesty & unshaken Loyalty & ... sufferings in the Cause," he reported numerous losses, including a "200-acre" farm in Pelham and "20 lots in the suburbs of New York." But compensation was slow in coming, and in 1788 he had to travel to Britain to expedite matters.

At least two of Joshua Pell's three sons also fought for the Crown, and the exploits of one of them, Joshua Jr., are recorded in detail in his war diary. He was on the losing side in the Saratoga campaign of 1777, where he fought, probably unknowingly, against his cousin Samuel. (Ironically, Samuel had been engaged to Joshua's sister Abigail, but the outbreak of war put an end to that romance.)

The return of peace in 1783 saw Joshua Sr. and his family in Nova Scotia, but life there was not to their liking, and ten years later they moved to Niagara (though without Joshua Jr., who eventually returned to Pelham, New York). The move was no doubt prompted by Governor Simcoe's offer of free

land grants in Upper Canada to worthy settlers. In 1794 Joshua petitioned for land in Willoughby Township in the vicinity of Lyon's Creek, and was given the maximum amount of 1200 acres — but his grant was in the 2nd and 3rd concessions of Humberstone Township rather than Willoughby. His sons Jonathan and Joseph received 600 acres each in the same concessions, which made the Pells by far the largest landowners in Humberstone.

It was not good land, however, and it is perhaps no surprise that in 1799 Joshua and his son Joseph each purchased 200 acres in Stamford, Joseph acquiring lots 221 and 222 on the Welland River, and Joshua lots 190 and 194 to the rear. Though Joshua, by now in his 60s, transferred these lots to Joseph the following year (together with all his land in Humberstone), his home thereafter was in Stamford, possibly even in the village of Chippawa.



The Pell lands in Stamford Township in the early 19th century

The Pells are barely mentioned in local histories of Niagara — just one reference to their land grants in a book on Humberstone. This is strange, for they were evidently a significant local family at the turn of the 18th century. In 1794 Joshua may have operated stables in Chippawa, and by 1795 he is known to have been dealing in flour. He might have been manufacturing iron also, had his petition to build a “forge and furnace” on the Niagara River below Chippawa been successful. (His aim was probably to process limonite or “bog-ore” from a deposit on the Welland River, but since all minerals and mines were Crown property he was turned down.) He was appointed a magistrate in 1796, and in 1800 he was the principal signatory of a petition by almost 70 Stamford residents opposing a plan put forward in 1799 by Robert Hamilton and others to upgrade communications between Fort Erie and Queenston. Meanwhile in 1794, Joshua's son Jonathan

had the important role of special emissary carrying correspondence between Simcoe and George Hammond, British Minister to the United States, who was based in New York City.

One reason for the Pells' anonymity may be the fact that they did not remain in Niagara. The first to go was Joseph, who left for Pelham in 1811, transferring his land to his father. In 1818 Joshua followed suit, and in 1820, one year before he died, he returned the land to Joseph by quit claim. Then Joseph and Jonathan died, and it was left to Jonathan's son Joshua L. Pell, of Saratoga, New York, to dispose of the family lands in Niagara, selling them to Samuel Street in 1825 and 1828.

The Mystery Explained

Thus there were no Pells in the area when William Hamilton Merritt rode past Bridgewater in 1823 and thought of Pell's Canal. What then was this canal? It was certainly not a canal in the normal sense. Indeed Joshua Pell's only involvement with canals was a negative one, when he opposed Hamilton's plan of 1799, which included a short canal at Fort Erie to bypass the rapids on the Niagara River. It is equally unlikely that Pell's Canal was really Pell's Creek, which still flows into the Welland River from today's Marineland, for it ran nowhere near Bridgewater. A more plausible explanation is that the “canal” was a channel or raceway conveying water to and from a mill. Raceways serviced the Bridgewater Mills and Street's Mills located just upstream and downstream of the Dufferin Islands embayment, but even though they may have been referred to as canals they never belonged to Pell. And though Pell dealt in flour, there is no evidence that he had a grist mill, certainly not one anywhere near Bridgewater.

The most likely explanation is that Pell's Canal was the torrent of water that used to flow through the embayment before the area was “tamed” to create the trickling creeks and tranquil ponds of today. As the map shows, one corner of Lot 190 in Stamford, which Joshua Pell bought in 1799, extended over this torrent, and though the overlap was small it may have been enough for the watercourse to become known informally as Pell's Canal. After all, Pell was an important person, the torrent was quite dramatic, and his land overlooking the embayment occupied a very prominent location. If this argument seems far-fetched, consider the case of Dick's Creek in St. Catharines, which is almost certainly named for Richard Pierpoint, one of the area's earliest black settlers, even though the creek barely touched one corner of Pierpoint's land.

Principal Sources: These are far too numerous and varied to list here, but are available on request.

Credits: map and layout (Loris Gasparotto); editing (John Burtiak); Pell lineage (Craig and Mary Hanyan); Chautauqua history (Michelle Henry and Devon Taylor).

Reproduced from the *Newsletter* of the Historical Society of St. Catharines, March 2010
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