

# The Grand Dispatch

A brief history of Beckley Beach and the surrounding area.

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## Our Piers have been Reconstructed Numerous Times!

### There is Joy in Hunting and Finding just the Right Pictures!

Patience my friends! Shortly before my good friend Earl Siddall died I noticed sitting on a desk in his den, a photo-copy of a great photograph. As I almost always did, I said, "I would love to have a copy of that someday." His response was something in the manner of "patience my friend!" It must have been obvious that I was turning inside out just jumping to get a hold of it! Earl had a way of knowing those things and loved to tease you if he thought he could string you along a bit.



This photo was taken on June 24, 1909. You are looking north from the top of the lighthouse. The men in the water are preparing for the large concrete coping blocks (on left) to be placed inside the excavation.

Photo courtesy June High nee Pyle

A few short months and he was gone and in the confusion that follows, so was the picture. Then recently I received a phone call from one of my many thousands of subscribers telling me he had some great pictures of the 1909 reconstruction of the west Port Maitland pier. That is what the subject was in Earl's

photo! To make a very long and complicated story considerably shorter, I was at the Dunnville District Heritage Association display in February showing a number of Stromness school photos and met June High, formerly June Pyle of Stromness. One thing led to another and she offered me some great Stromness photos. That led to a visit to her home and a discussion about Port Maitland photos. It seems that she was the owner of the aforesaid 1909 Port Maitland pier photos. She thoughtfully loaned them to me and I will share a couple of them with you.

With the expected reconstruction of the piers at Port Maitland this is a good time to review some of the history of these piers.

There remains the question as to when the first piers were built at the mouth of the Grand River. It is hard to imagine it would have been later than 1842 when the Feeder Canal was opened to the river. There are indications that one pier may have been much earlier. As early as 1816 according to Jack Docker's recent book, *The Grand River Naval Depot*, we can find reference to a pier at Port Maitland. The question is the meaning of the word *pier*! Jack tells that the ships Tecumseth and Newwash - which I wrote about in the my August 1999 Grand Dispatch, were grounded on the sandbar at the mouth of the river in 1816. They were then replaced with the ships *Confiance* and *Surprize*. Captain William Bouchier of the *Confiance* and captain of the Naval Depot is reported to have been prepared at all times to defend our borders, while erecting buildings and constructing piers. Here the question is, was the use of the word pier meant to mean pier(s) as we think of them or was it meant to imply docks?

A few years after the closing of the war of 1812, John Howison, (Jack Docker does not tell us who John Howison was.) visits the Naval Reserve and makes some recommendations. One of the recommendations is; . . . *"The mouth of this river must form a post of some importance when we are at war with the United States, and might be rendered far more effective than it is at present, were government to strengthen it by raising piers and fortifications; and this seems very necessary, for the Americans must always derive a vast naval superiority on Lake Erie, from the many excellent harbours which abound in its southern shores."*

This statement would imply that there were no piers present during his 1812 visit.

And again from Jack Docker's book, Lieutenant Colonel Dunford offered a solution to the problem of the annual sand bar at the mouth of the river. Here is what Dunford had to say about this problem and the potential solution.

*As I was made acquainted with the great importance of rendering the entrance into this River available for the Naval department, I thought it my duty to see the nature of it. . . . A natural bank extends along the shore and side of the river fronting the establishment covering a deep swamp, the surface of which is nearly on a level with that of the water.*

*I therefore conceive that a canal of communication may be cut in a perpendicular direction to the river and running within and parallel to the natural banks until it arrives in a suitable part of the Bay for construction two pier heads at sufficient distance apart to admit the vessels.*

*By this plan I expect that no portion of the sediment or sand that forms the shifting bar now preventing the access to the river will ever lodge in this canal.*

*The current of the river will not be interfered in the least and the pier heads can be situated at such a distance from the bar as not to operate on the causes that produce that barrier.*

*The expenses of this undertaking would not, I think be very considerable, but without further investigation, I cannot take upon myself to state it with any degree of accuracy as lumber is on the spot, workmanship would*

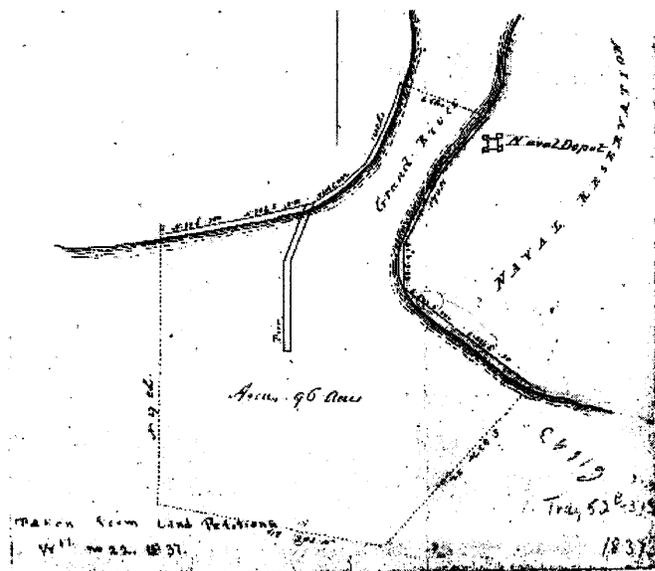
*be the greatest expense.*

From various sources we learn that on May 2, 1831, the Directors of the Welland Canal Company proposed the building of a pier at the Port Maitland. This eventually did happen but only on the west side, thus allowing shallow-draught vessels access to the river most of the shipping season.

### Early Maps give a few clues!

Yet again I find information in Jack Docker's book that shows us that all is not known about the piers which we might wish to know. Quoting once again from his book we read.

*"A 1837 map of the mouth of the Grand River shows only one pier, on the west side of the river, however a second pier must have been built around that time for a petition dated 7 December, 1839 signed by Col. John Johnson, William Imlach, and "exactly" one hundred "freeholders and other inhabitants of the County of Haldimand," requested Lieutenant-Governor Sir George Arthur "in his legislative capacity" to erect new piers and a light house at Port Maitland. The petition "Humbly sheweth"*



1837 map of Grand River.

Reprinted by permission of National Archives of Canada.

*That the Piers erected at the mouth of the River Ouse or Grand River by the Welland Canal Company are now in a dilapidated condition; that a Bar has again formed a*

*the entrance of the River into Lake Erie which they were originally intended to prevent and effectually did so for a time.*

*That the remains of one of these Piers are now only a few feet under water and has been the occasion of several accidents during the present summer and greatly increases the risk of entering a now shallow and contracted harbour.*

*That an important trade in Sawed Lumber and in wheat has grown up between the mills on the different improvements on the River and the Ports of the United States on Lake Erie and Michigan which is now seriously interfered with and liable to be entirely stopped by the increasing dangers of the only harbour through which it can be carried on.*

*That the vessels belonging to the Royal Navy have also suffered inconvenience and met with accidents and the Officers are doubtful how long they can continue to use this harbour as their principal station should no steps be taken to improve the harbour.*

*That a moderate outlay of money in the erection of sufficient Piers and a Light House at its mouth would render the Grand River a safe harbour in all weathers with sufficient water and room for any number of vessels to ride in safety.*

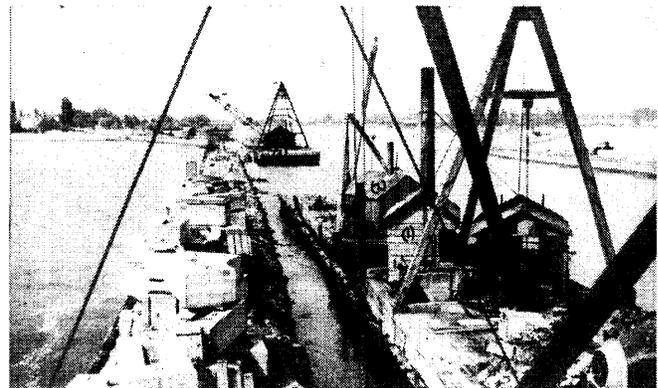
*Your Petitioners therefore pray that Your Excellency would take this into your early consideration and make such an appropriation of money for this specific purpose as would secure the erection of a sufficient harbour and Light House to be continued under the management of the Government or of the Welland Canal Company, ..."*

As you can see, there is considerable confusion about when, where and if one pier, two piers or no piers were built, or conversely when one pier or two piers and a lighthouse were built.

### **If we make it, You can bet the lake will break it!**

Let us get past all this and move to a time when we know for sure what was what. What we know for sure is that if we make it, you can bet the lake will break it! Sometime she will be as Earl recommended that I

should be. She will be patient, while other times show no mercy. From records found at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa I found a note dated June 10 1869 reporting the sinking of a portion of the east pier. It tells us the pier is two to three feet below the water surface. Repairs are recommended and it is estimated it will cost four thousand dollars. In May of 1881, five hundred thousand feet of very fine pine timber was towed down the Grand River to be used for the new piers at Port Maitland. Then, from another source I learnt that the tug Humming Bird was contracted to a stone scow (presumably to fill the cribs) to be used in the construction of the pier during the summer of 1881. Unfortunately it is the wording that creates confusion for someone who wants definitive answers. Were the former piers repaired or totally replaced.



1909 Reconstruction of West Pier

Photo courtesy of June High nee Pyle

Within five years a storm carried away the covering of the new west pier. Also lost was the catwalk leading to the lighthouse. The cribs must have sustained considerable damage as large quantities of stone were also carried out by the heavy sea. The planking and stringers were scattered along the beach for two miles. The lighthouse keeper at the time was Fergus Scholfield who estimated that the damage was in the area of eight thousand dollars.

In an earlier story I told you about a fish that seemed too big to be true as was the story that went with it. That took place in 1888 and was reported by Mr. John Taylor who along with a gang of workmen working on the pier noticed this unusual fish. I am not aware of what construction was taking place in the summer of 1888, but apparently there was work being done on one of our piers.

## Work completed in the Twentieth Century.

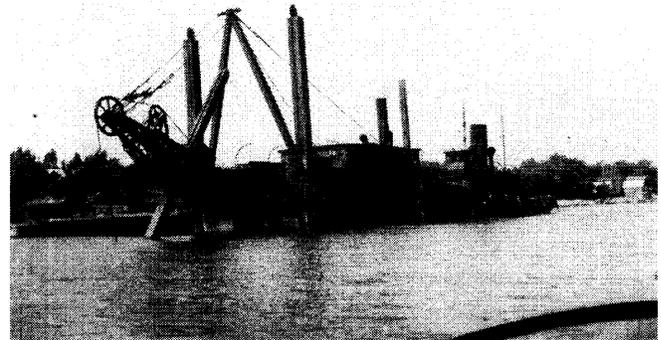
The summer of 1904 saw considerable construction performed on both piers. In an article from the Reform Press, I find mention of eight cribs being sunk to form the east pier. The story tells us that a ninth crib which would not form any part of the pier was first sunk, presumably some distance from shore. This crib would be used only as a marker to line up the other eight cribs.

I have a number of postcards, some showing the west pier with a catwalk while other did not show it. After considering the dates of these cards I was befuddled to say the least. It was there, then it wasn't! The answer comes in part from a 1904 Reform Press article. It reads; *The tug Eleanor of Port Maitland ran to Port Colborne the other day and took aboard the upright irons that had been used on the elevated walk leading along the pier to the old light house. The elevated walk is not needed since the construction of the breakwater.* This explains why the catwalk is missing from some my postcards. What it does not do is tell me when and why it was replaced.

Now it gets hectic. In the Dunnville Chronicle of 1905, I find a very short note that tells that the east pier is being rebuilt. That is the extent of my information for the year 1905. But wait a minute in an article dated 1906 in the same paper there is an estimate that the cost for the renewal of the entrance pier will be thirty thousand dollars. A few more details come to light a couple months later when in May of 1906 I discovered that Superintendent Weller of the Welland Canal was in Port Maitland and Dunnville, making preparations for rebuilding the east pier at Port Maitland which was partly washed away the previous fall. Mr. Weller granted permission to the members of the Lower River Knockabout Boating Club to build a dock at the north end of the long bridge and will let them have the timber and planking required from the pier to which is to be torn down.

Construction continued into 1907, when the Chronicle reports that Ed. Martin and Mr. LeRoy, the foreman at the work on the pier left on Friday for Cobalt. Then in the fall "Mr. Big Dipper and Mr. Redskin were reported to have completed their work and left for Thorold. I can only guess who or what Mr. Big Dipper and Mr. Redskin was!

Finally to the photos mentioned in my opening paragraph. In 1908, there were a series of advertisements in the local papers requesting sealed tenders for repairs to the west pier. They were to be sent to L. K. Jones Secretary for the Department of Railways and Canals by August 14<sup>th</sup>. In one of the 1909 construction photos you will see the wood planking and stringers from an earlier attempt to build something that hopefully this time Mother Nature will not destroy. Large cement coping blocks were placed on and around the old wood-beam pier in hope of finally holding back the ravishes of the many storms to hit our harbour.



Not only did the harbour need a pier but dredging took place a number of times. I believe this photo was taken around 1927 to 1928.

Photo courtesy of the late Harley Edwin Brown Family

Then in 1920, we would see improvements to the west pier when the lighthouse was modernized. The improvement was described as "the enlargement of the fog horn house and the installation of more powerful machinery." In addition to the rebuilt lighthouse a sixty-foot tower was added. This was the range light which has only recently been removed.

The summers of 1924 through 1929 saw the construction of the Port Colborne and both Port Maitland piers. The construction of Port Colborne and east Port Maitland piers took place on the north side of the Feeder Canal near the former coal docks. Concrete cribs were built and floated into place and sunk, resting on the lake bottom. This story could take a full article, and maybe that should be a project for the future. However, it was during this time that the old wooden east pier was removed and the present dilapidated concrete one was built. We are all familiar with our "Break," It occurred on February 25, 1930 when ice jammed between both piers forced the water to go under the ice and the east pier. It has been suggested that

there was insufficient consideration given to a foundation for the east pier. Some believe a small hole may have been left under the cribs allowing the water to undercut the cribs causing them to collapse. Others suggest that undercutting also took place from the sand suckers which pulled sand from the lake bottom, sometimes within jumping distance from the east pier. Whatever the cause, it collapsed nearly as soon as it was built, providing a great swim challenge for all the youngsters who have grown up at or near Port Maitland. A few, including myself and my bother Robert have nearly drowned at that soon to be removed "Break."

The summer of 1929 saw a major reconstruction project take place on the west pier when a contract for nearly one hundred thousand dollars was awarded to Cameron and Phinn of Welland. I have no information what was repaired or built during this job.

Other work has been done to save the west pier in the years since 1929, though I am not familiar enough with what that has been to tell it here. The 1929 project seemed to be the one that has lasted the best of all the efforts. This summer we will once again witness a major reconstruction project when the west pier will be completely overhauled and the crumbling remains of the east pier will be replaced with a stone break wall.

### From Old Newspapers and Books

When looking for this months "Old Newspaper Items" I put the word *ship* into my computer and found one disaster after another. In an attempt to lighten things up a bit I then put the word *happy* in and found a few light-hearted items. Below you will find items of both descriptions

**The Dunnville Gazette; 118 years ago (1884)** Port Maitland; The body of a woman apparently about 45 years of age was washed ashore at Port Maitland. When found she was almost in a nude condition only having on a chemise and thick jacket, and a slipper on one of her feet. She is supposed to have belonged to the Erie Wave, which vessel is thought to have been lost with all hands. A yawl boat filled with water also drifted ashore at the Port. No clue to the identity of either.

**The Dunnville Gazette; 118 years ago (1884)** Port Maitland; Two more bodies have been washed ashore

near Port Maitland from the sunken vessel New Dominion, which lies off Mohawk Island. On Thursday last a man one of the crew, was washed ashore near Burgess's Point, and on Monday morning the body of Captain Griffith of the ill-fated vessel also came ashore near the same place. The Captain when found, had on his person \$67 in money, a pocket knife, and some keys. Captain Griffith was a resident of St. Catharines and it is said owned on interest in the lost vessel.

**The Dunnville Gazette; 115 years ago (1887)** Port Maitland; In the evening our American friends invited a number of townspeople *from Dunnville* to take a trip to Port Maitland on their elegantly furnished yacht and partake of their hospitality. About 7 o'clock the gay little craft left the wharf with the happy party on board. In about an hour and a half returned, highly delighted with the pleasures encountered. A short time after our American friends left for home.

**The Reform Press; 112 years ago (1890)** Dunnville; Dominion Day Celebration. . .The day's doings will partake of an international character as the steamers Mascotte and Niagara, of the Baxter Line, will bring over to our shores 1,000 of Buffalo's best citizens to help us enjoy the sports of the day. Look out for great fun and happy time on Tuesday July 1<sup>st</sup>. Bring along your whole family.

**The Dunnville Gazette; 111 years ago (1891)** Port Maitland; The congregation of Christ's Church Port Maitland gathered together at the residence of Mr. F. Splatt, on the evening of the 7<sup>th</sup>, for the purpose of meeting their pastor, it being the evening previous to his departure for Colorado, also wishing him a pleasant, beneficial journey and safe return. The evening was spent in singing, games and also in a presentation to Mrs. Hornibrook for her able and constant services as organist and choir leader of the church. The following lines were read by Miss M. Splatt and the presentation which consisted of a beautiful hanging lamp was made by Miss M. E. Logan. To Mrs. S. W. Hornibrook, Jr.,  
Dear Madame - The congregation of Christ's Church, Port Maitland desire to wish you a Happy New year, and also to testify their appreciation of your faithful services as organist. We thank you for your able efforts to improve the rendering of the choir part of the service of the church. We know that constant attendances involves self-denial, but are sure that in serving God we find the source of true satisfaction. . . Both Mr. and

Mrs. Hornibrook made able and appropriate replies. . .

**The Dunnville Chronicle; 74 years ago (1928)** Port Maitland; The body of Patrick Varona was recovered from Lake Erie Monday afternoon. The deceased was drowned September 9<sup>th</sup>. He was on the ship Umbrella and was swept into the lake when the deck cabin was torn off by a tow rope attached to her sister ship the Maroma. The body was found floating face down about three miles out from Port Maitland by the crew of the fish tug Franklin owned by Ed Franklin of Dunnville. In spite of its long immersion the remains were easily recognized. After an examination Coroner Dr. Abbott decided that an inquest would not be necessary. Provincial officers Elliott and Peel were also on the job.

**The Dunnville Chronicle; 46 years ago (1956)** Port Maitland; For the first time in at least two years a large cargo vessel is docked at Port Maitland, unloading her cargo for a Hamilton firm. The ship S.S. Jack Canuck belongs to the Manzutti Line of Duluth Minnesota and is loaded with 33 to 35 carloads of scrap steel rail consigned to the Burlington Steel Co. of Hamilton. The Jack Canuck is no small vessel, and must draw at least 16 feet or more when loaded, proof of the value of Port Maitland, for larger ships when the seaway project is completed.

**Canadian Football Hall of Fame and Museum!**

I volunteer at the CFHFM and offered to insert a flyer in this issue re their Induction Weekend in September. Hope to see you there.

**In Memoriam**

**Prestney, Thomas James:** Died March 30, 2002. Mother of Maribeth Prestney of St. Catharines, Ritchie Prestney of Grimsby, Paul Prestney and his wife Lori and their children Thomas and Scott of Smithville. (Lot 48)

**Do you know anyone who wants a Dispatch?**

If you know anyone who wants "The Grand Dispatch," please let me know.

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