

Focus On Chaffey's Lock

Chaffey's to 1900 by Sue Warren

Chaffey's Lock was originally named Chaffey's Mills. In the early 1820's, a Mr. Samuel Chaffey settled at the present-day site and erected a saw mill, a grist mill, a woolen mill and a distillery. At the time, a series of rapids existed between Indian and Opinicon Lake, a perfect source of power to run the mill wheels. Local tradition claims that the locust trees which border the road into the locks grew up from seeds mixed in the mash used in the distillery. Around the area of the locks, there were a few farmers, recently arrived from the United States and England. Some of their descendants still live in the Chaffey's area. We know next to nothing about these people. Clearing the land and survival seem to have been their major concerns. Most were illiterate. In the township records, many had to witness their names with an X. In 1820, for example, one township record states "Hogs is not to run wylde."

In 1826, the British government decided to construct a canal route along the Rideau system. Since war was feared with the United States, this system was regarded as a military and commercial alternate to the vulnerable St. Lawrence River. Surveyors came through the area. Mr. Chaffey's mill complex was assessed at £2000. The mills and two hundred acres of property were sold to the government and Mr. Chaffey was hired to help construct the locks.

Construction began immediately under the direction of Haggart, described by a contemporary source as a jolly bachelor, well-known for his hospitality. One can imagine, knowing the drinking habits of Upper Canada. However, he was also an experienced practical mason. By 1827, excavation and clearing were underway.



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In August of 1828, the malaria epidemic struck the labourers. Haggart and all the men were ill and for a while all work ceased. Mr. Chaffey died of the disease that same summer. Bad air from the swamps was blamed for the malaria. Actually, it was brought from tropical climates by soldiers and spread by the mosquito. It is said that there is a mass grave in the Chaffey's cemetery of workers who expired in 1828. As well as difficulties with malaria, the site was plagued with work-hungry Americans. A number of people had crossed the border seeking employment on the massive canal project. "Seven speculating, calculating and sloping" Americans lay siege to the works at Chaffey's Mills. The recently bereaved Mrs. Chaffey complained about this sort of harassment.

In 1828, half the wing-wall was finished and most of the cut stone drawn from a quarry near Elgin. Local tradition claims the sandstone was dragged piece by piece through the bush with oxen teams. About this time, also, it was necessary to destroy the four mills as they stood in the proposed channel.

By 1832, Chaffey's Mills had been transformed into Chaffey's Lock. In this year, Colonel By, engineer of the canal, passed through the lock station on an inspection tour. He met a group of Indians in Indian Lake who saluted his boat and towed their canoes behind it all the way to the Isthmus.

The first lockmaster, William 'Pammy' Fleming, was one of the Sapper and Miner Corps, the military regiment brought from England to help construct the Rideau. His stepson was James Simmons, son of a man killed in a gunpowder explosion at Newboro. For the next one hundred years, the lockmaster position passed

Recipes from Chaffey's Lock

This is the standard recipe for fish chowder from the Chaffey's Lock Guides Association. This particular meal would be cooked for a shore dinner.

GUIDES FISH CHOWDER++++

1/2 lb. bacon
1 med. onion, chopped
3 stalks celery, chopped
1 can each, corn and peas
(fresh if available)
4 or 5 potatoes
2 bass steaks per person
Plenty of butter

Fry bacon; when partially cooked, add onion and celery and cook until tender. Drain fat. Cook fresh vegetables or open canned ones. Dice and boil the potatoes. Add cooked potatoes and vegetables to the onion-celery mixture. Add the bass steaks, and cook gently until fish is flaky. Season with salt and pepper and lumps of butter.

back and forth between the Fleming and Simmons' families.

In 1834, Edward Barker, a Kingston doctor, travelled through the locks. He mentioned that the Chaffey home and several log cabins were the only dwellings. The land was bare and desolate, not suitable for crops. By 1838, rumours were circulating that groups of rebels were plotting to destroy various lock stations. The Upper Canada Rebellion was in process and a number of local boys were called up to defend the lock station. Rowsells, Stedmans, Moores, Leggetts, Flemings, Simmons and Warrens all did guard duty on the locks during that year.

In the mid-1840's, the lockmaster's house was built on the highest point of land above the locks. Its purpose was twofold: a residence for the lockmaster, a military structure worthy of withstanding siege. Loopholes were built for muskets and a tin roof was put on for protection from fire. During this period, a blacksmith shop and lime kiln are mentioned but there is little information on this.

From around the middle of the century, Chaffey's ceased to be of military concern. Instead, steamboats plied the canal carrying cheese, iron ore, maple sugar, wheat and other local produce to outside markets. Logging, during this period, was important. There are stories of log booms filling the lakes from shore to shore and lockmen working 24 hours a day to send the logs through. Passenger boats brought new settlers. There were a number of local industries - ship building on Lake Opinicon, a cheese factory near Clear Lake, mining of phosphate and mica.

JENNY'S SHORTBREAD COOKIES

Jenny Laishley died in 1976 but is remembered by the people in Chaffey's. Most of us at one time or another have eaten her shortbread cookies.

1 c. butter
1/2 c. fruit sugar - finer than granulated
2 c. pastry flour

Use a pie blender to mix the above three ingredients. With freshly washed hands, shape the dough into 3 rolls, each about 1 1/2" in diameter. Chill well. Slice, trimming each cookie with a scrap of maraschino cherry. Bake only until light brown in a med. oven.

PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE

Anyone who has old pictures, letters, documents or stories about Chaffey's Lock or area, contact Laurel Fleming, R.R.#1 Elgin, 359-5633. She is desperately in need of material for the Women's Institute Village Book.