

Focus On

Davis Lock to 1900

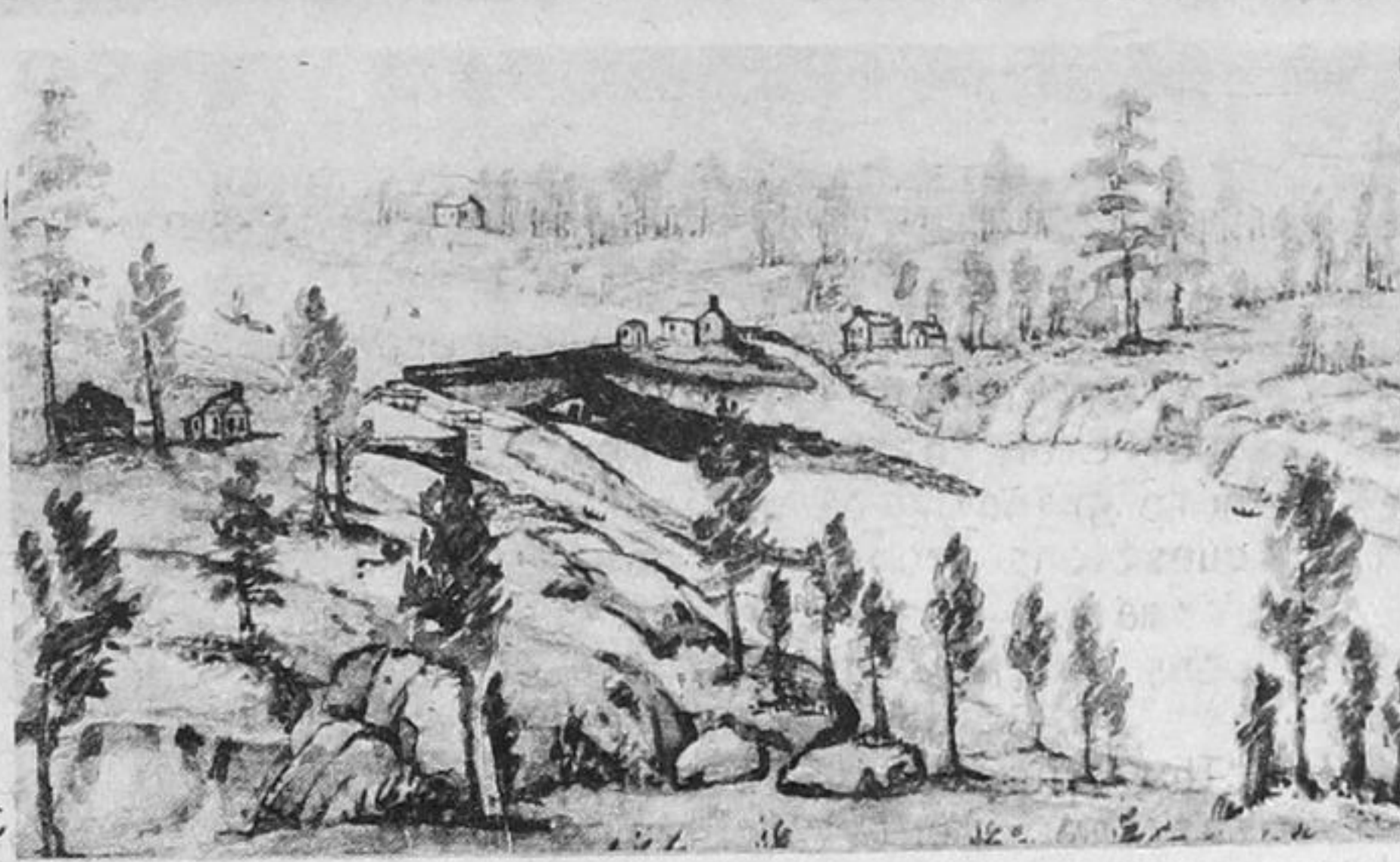
Davis Lock is one of the most untouched lock stations on the Rideau. Settlement in the area of the lock station has always been sparse - the lock staff and a few neighbouring farming families. About 1800, Walter Davis, an American settler, arrived at Lot 9, Concession 2 in South Crosby Township. He erected a small sawmill described in an old source as a 'primitive stump mill'. (More complicated sawing operations were done in Ganonoque). Davis was the first settler in the entire region. His closest neighbour lived seven miles away in Bastard Township according to an early history of Leeds County. One story tells that when the family fire died out one evening, poor Davis had to walk a round trip of 14 miles to bring back a new supply of hot coals. It seems unlikely though that the family did not own a tinder box. The Davis family consisted of one adopted son, Thomas Ripley and several daughters. Ripley served as a soldier in the War of 1812 and after returning home, married one of his foster sisters. (There really weren't too many other women available.) Their son, C.L. Ripley, became the Township Clerk and Justice of the Peace for the area.

In the late 1820s, Mr. Davis was forced to sell his land to the government after it was decided to put a lock station at the mill site. He was also hired to find a stone quarry and to begin some preliminary excavation. Another man, Donald McLever, was awarded the contract, however, McLever had a mad scientist personality. He built a complicated machine powered by a water wheel to

pump out the area of the lock pit. Observers claimed that the machine was impressive but failed to operate. Eventually, McLever was fired for mismanagement of his contract. Robert Drummond, the contractor at Kingston and Brewer's Mills took over the work. By 1832, a neat little lock with one dam was ready to operate.

John Purcell, a stone mason, was appointed as the lockmaster. He was supposed to have laid the first stone at Davis Lock. From 1831 to 1857, he held the position until he retired on the great sum of \$48 a year. Purcell was a friend of Peter Sweeney, the lockmaster at Jones Falls, and took on Sweeney's son Tom, as a worker when his father would not keep him on the other lock.

Early maps and sketches of Davis Lock show that there were anywhere from three to seven log buildings on the site. Three were probably occupied in the 1830's - one by the lockmaster, one by his helper and the other by



Davis Lockstation, 1829-1832, by W. Clegg, PAC

an unnamed farmer. During the 1840's, a stone building was erected for the lockmaster's family. Like other lock houses it had gun slits and a tin roof. John Purcell was even given three muskets to defend the lockhouse in case of attack. However, nobody bothered to give him any ammunition. A small log watchhouse was also erected about this time but disappeared over the years like the other log buildings at the lock.

After 1857, Purcell was replaced as lockmaster by John Johnston, a former lock worker from Smiths Falls. Johnston remained at Davis Lock for 14 years, but there is little information on him.

In 1871, Alfred Foster, took over the locks. People began to call the station 'Foster's Locks' after a while. Foster seems to have been a strong character. He was born in Newboro, the son of the lockmaster there. At the age of sixteen, he took over the Newboro Locks when his father died. A few years later, he was transferred to Davis Locks. When he first arrived, Foster had difficulties with a lockman who refused to obey orders. He promptly fired him. A few years later, he wrote a letter to the government complaining of his own low wages. He requested an increase of salary to \$38 a month. Foster was even responsible for a law suit. In the 1880's, he accused local farmers of destroying the dam at Rock Lake. An investigation was launched. When no information could be found, one of the farmers sued for libel. Foster left the lock in 1897.

I have very little information on the families near Davis Lock at this time. Dick Mahoney of Chaffey's Lock stated in an interview that his father, Dennis, farmed and worked at the lock station in the late 1800's. A John Weaver, husband of Kitty Sweeney, daughter of the lockmaster at Jones Falls, was also a lock worker about 1850.

As well, the son of the first lockmaster at Chaffey's, William Fleming married a Margaret Doyle and in 1870, built a house near Davis Locks. 'Captain Billy' was the captain of the 'D.C. West', one of the steamboats that travelled the Rideau at that time.

After 1900, a few cottages were added to the station and the characters changed but in appearance the lock is very similar to the way it was one hundred years ago.



Lockmaster Roger Gallerneault

A Barrel of Gold

Davis Lock is one of the few lock stations with a legend. There are at least five different versions - all about buried treasure. With the price of gold going up, it might be a good idea to take a bulldozer to Davis Lock and start digging.

One legend claims that Mr. Davis, the original landowner, buried the money he received for his property, somewhere near the lock station. He died before he could tell anyone where it was buried. Another version states that the money was in a keg sent to pay the men building the lock. It was supposedly stolen by one of the workmen who died of malaria, without disclosing the hiding place of the gold coins.

Two of these stories involve Barrel Point on Lake Opinicon. Some say a barrel of gold was buried on this point and that is how it got its name. Another story involves pirates and a man casting the gold overboard in the area of the point. And - according to one old timer - American businessmen during the Depression actually launched a business venture to find this legendary treasure.

