To commemorate the 175th Anniversary of the opening of the Rideau Canal and in celebration of the declaration that the Rideau Canal is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Society presents;

Steamboating on the Rideau Canal

by

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About the Author

This publication by Mike Nelles, a student at Carleton University, is the second of his works published by the Historical Society of Ottawa. In 2006 Mr. Nelles won the Col John By Award for his work Pre-Confederation Health Care in Bytown, Bytown Pamphlet No 70.

Rideau King rounding Devil's Elbow, Rideau Lakes. Courtesy, Parks Canada
INTRODUCTION

In the days before modern methods of travel and communication, the Rideau Canal was constructed in great urgency.¹ When the region was populated only by a handful of pioneers, the canal was devised to provide an alternate route for military transport and communication between Kingston and Montreal. Eschewing conventional canal tow-paths, Rideau planners believed the Rideau would become a lucrative artery for traffic connecting the St Lawrence to the Great Lakes. By the time construction began in 1826, steamboats were fast becoming the principal method of transport on the lakes and rivers of Upper Canada. The first primitive steamer had appeared on Lake Ontario in 1817,² and by 1826, there were nine steamboats running on the Lake and the Upper St Lawrence.³ While the 1823 surveyors led by Samuel Clowes did not consider passenger traffic on the Rideau, Colonel By estimated an annual flow of 8,000.⁴

Once completed, the Rideau served “a vital function as the principal avenue for regional commerce,” until transport developments of the 20th Century rendered the system obsolete.⁵ Early traffic involved an increasing variety of steamers moving merchandise and travellers between Montreal and Kingston.⁶ Beginning in the 1830s, a massive influx of immigrants travelled up the Ottawa River from Montreal to Bytown, and from there up the Rideau Canal to Kingston, where they would depart for destinations beyond on the steamers of the Great Lakes.⁷

“The golden age of river steamboating” is a term usually applied to the 1840s, when zenith levels of passengers and freight travelled down the waterway. This “golden age” ended when the speed of the railway system and the improved St Lawrence Canals made travel by the Rideau less practical, and beginning in the 1850s Rideau steamer traffic declined significantly.⁸ However, steamboating survived thanks to a variety of favourable conditions unique to the waterway. Navigation companies operating on the Rideau system were able to promote the variety of attractions offered by the lakes, and worked to change standard public conceptions of
canal travel," which was typically thought to be slow and monotonous.\textsuperscript{9} What had previously been little more than a utilitarian line of transport and communication evolved into "a network of exciting lakes with potential for outdoor recreation."\textsuperscript{10} The small and unattractive transport steamers of the early Victorian age were replaced by progressively larger and more luxurious palace steamers that marketed the Rideau far and wide to attract tourists to the area—dramatically boosting passenger traffic as a result.\textsuperscript{11}

As Parks Canada Historian Edward Forbes Bush explained, the introduction of the luxury passenger steamer led to the dramatic expansion of the Rideau passenger trade.\textsuperscript{12} Beginning in the 1860s, the utilitarian transport vessels of the mid-Victorian age "gave way to an increasing number of specialized steamers whose purpose was to ferry tourists and run excursions on the waterway."\textsuperscript{13} In order to outwit the unattractive public image of transport canal steamers, late-Victorian excursion boats were improved, with modern staterooms and lavishly carpeted dining rooms, gradually evolving into "romantic luxury liners of the Rideau route."\textsuperscript{14} Navigation Companies competing with the railways and the St. Lawrence used these posh palace steamers to combine the relaxing monotony of canal travel with the beautiful scenery of the Rideau Route, and sold the trip as a relaxing vacation in itself. Canal use shifted from transport to recreation.

The lucrative combination of opulence and indolence resulted in heights of patronage unseen on the waterway since the zenith of the immigration trade, and the handsome palace steamers attracted a great deal of public interest and detailed press attention. Beginning slowly in the early 1900s, a dramatic increase in personal mobility brought by automobiles and motorboats changed the conventions of group travel. After the First World War, the slow-moving public spaces of steamers were finally outclassed by the more autonomous private experience of travel using an internal combustion engine.
EARLY YEARS

In the early years, the Rideau Canal was the easiest route from Lake Ontario at Kingston to the bustling centres of Lower Canada on the Ottawa River and St. Lawrence. The steamers of the day were underpowered paddle-wheelers that could offer only slow and irregular service. The journey from Bytown to Kingston during the 1830s took about a day and a half, and at first there were few local companies able to offer a reliable transport service. Captain Robert Drummond was among the first to inaugurate a weekly run along the canal with his 1833 steamer Rideau, which departed Kingston on Monday mornings, and left Bytown on the return journey Thursday afternoons. The Rideau Corridor was an undeveloped wilderness and roads were "far from numerous;" forwarders such as Drummond did brisk business that attracted the attention of competitors.

During the 1830s, traffic on the Rideau Canal multiplied exponentially. In the second year of operation, for example, the Narrows lock station recorded more than one hundred sixty steamers travelling the system—an early-stage record caused by the fact that there was simply no other way to move lumber, goods or travellers. The isolated pioneers of the valley relied on the primitive canal boats for transportation and all of their household essentials. The steamers brought flour, sugar, coffee, chests of tea, bags of fine salt, matches, tobacco in caddies, and countless boxes of 'do nuts.' Drugs for the doctors and barrels and kegs of beer and whiskey to keep the local innkeepers in stock also came by water. Merchants and tradesmen in the area used the river boats for almost all of their requirements, importing such varied objects as a blacksmith's anvil, platform scales, organs, cases of glassware and household furniture.

Within ten years, there were six forwarding companies operating a total of 19 steamers on the Rideau Route, all of them vying for a share of the trade. The primary attraction for consumers and merchants alike was the "efficiency in forwarding goods by the
safest, quickest, and cheapest means,”\textsuperscript{24} and for this reason passenger steamers operated without any provisions for the comfort or attractiveness of their interiors. With no transport alternative beyond the waterway, shipping companies on the Rideau operated in a densely competitive climate that prized only the cheapest bottom line.

Because the early steamers represented such a new means of transportation, “nobody had much experience with them,”\textsuperscript{25} and safety regulations governing their design and operation were unspecific and lax. Beginning in the late 1830s, some provinces such as New Brunswick began to pass legislation requiring steamers to carry more lifeboats, but complex engineering and technical issues were left to the discretion of the Captain and the Navigation Company.\textsuperscript{26} In 1838, Upper Canadian legislators responded to “many fatal accidents” and passed an act compelling navigation companies to build “good and substantial guards” around the machinery on their vessels in order to prevent curious passengers from coming too close.\textsuperscript{27} While passengers were then less likely to become entangled in the churning engines, the technical specificities of the machinery itself continued to be unregulated until the 1850s, and all steamers remained mildly hazardous as a means of transport. Steamboat passengers were forced to accept some degree of risk when travelling, and when something occasionally did go wrong with the machinery on board, the results could be both catastrophic and gory.

In 1844, the Brockville \textit{Recorder} printed a letter from the town’s Coroner, Gavin Russell, who had just completed an inquiry into a boiler explosion on board the steamer \textit{Dart} that had scalded one young man to death and severely injured two others. According to Russell, the rigors of routine operation combined with non-standardized engine inspections resulted in common practices that were “imminently hazardous to the public safety.”\textsuperscript{28} Russell described how, at one o’clock in the morning, all the lanterns on board the \textit{Dart} were suddenly extinguished by the force of a wild explosion coming from the boiler room. The Captain and the firemen “were compelled to run aft by a rush of steam issuing from the hatchway with great violence.”\textsuperscript{29} Two crewmen who had been in the furnace room at
the time of the explosion staggered on the boiler doors, which had instantly filled the fire room, and escaped deck, convulsing in pain.

After the fireman had relighted his lamp and returned, he found Hoople [a deckhand] on deck, screaming and crying, "O Lord, I am killed." Poor Willis [a fifteen-year old] had also made his way upon deck but he was so blind and distracted with pain, that he was staggering overboard by the gangway, when the fireman caught him and he was carried to the Engineer's room. When he was stripped, it was found that his body was literally broiled; his skin was hanging about his raw flesh in shreds...³⁰

Once the Dart reached Smiths Falls, Dr. Burritt raced to the scene. It was too late for poor Willis—he died of his injuries five hours after the explosion. Hoople, on the other hand, had only suffered scalding injuries to his arms and legs, and it was expected that he would almost fully recover from the wounds.

At the inquest, presided over by Coroner Russell, the Dart's engineer testified that he had noticed several leaks in the steamer's flue valves prior to their departure from Montreal. Apparently, while the steamer's boiler was designed to bear 80 lbs of pressure, the Engineer had reckoned the boiler would bear 100 lbs of pressure with safety after he inserted 16 additional bolts to rectify the flue leaks. For this reason, the Engineer testified, he had not been concerned when the steamer kept a weight of 85 lbs on her boiler during a race lasting all the way from Long Island to Burritt's Rapids the very day before the explosion. The Dart had run under such pressure before, he stated—and also, the boiler had been inspected before the boat left Montreal.³¹

The inquest concluded, among other things, that there appeared to be many engineers "who had the management of steamboat engines, who were altogether incompetent to perform the duties of their respective stations."³² Coroner Russell underscored in his letter to the Recorder "the necessity of establishing a Board of and the stability of work, the incompetence of which has so often caused the destruction of property, and the most appalling scenes of Engineers qualified to examine and judge the qualifications of men
human misery." It was not until 1851 that there were specific guidelines to control boiler pressure, eliminate fire hazards, and provide lifesaving gear. With such rudimentary technology, the fine print on shipping contracts protected the navigators from every conceivable waterway misfortune, including Acts of God, the Queen's enemies, or any "perils on inland waters...explosions, bursting of the boilers, breakage of the shafts, or any latent effect in hull, machinery... or...error in judgement of the pilot...or any other servants of the ship."
“GOLDEN AGE” OF THE CANAL TRANSPORT STEAMERS

During the 1840s, immigrant ships clogged the nation’s waterways and the Rideau became one of the primary routes for immigrants heading west. Beginning in 1835, companies such as the Ottawa & Rideau Forwarding Co. had begun to compete with the steamers of the St. Lawrence for a share of the lucrative immigrant trade that continued to expand. The Rideau benefited from several distinct advantages over the more arduous route of the St. Lawrence. The primitive steam engines of the 1840s and 50's were inefficient, underpowered and unable to make much headway against the rapidly flowing St Lawrence. Rideau steamers travelled faster using less fuel. Significantly for travellers, the Rideau route did not require the tiring and strenuous portage on foot around the wild rapids that marred the St Lawrence. Passengers could relax through the calming continuity of the longer Rideau—or they could “rough it...in a Durham boat ascending the St. Lawrence, walking over rough portages around the numerous rapids.”

Compared with the dire inconveniences of the St Lawrence, the austere and spartan Rideau steamers were indeed more “comfortable.” The triangular Rideau route from Montreal to Kingston was “favoured by immigrants because it was cheaper than the more direct but difficult route...on the St Lawrence” that was complicated by the necessity for portages and stagecoaches. Passenger traffic on the waterway exploded—from 12,000 in 1840, to 30,000 in 1841, to a dramatic height of 90,000 seven years later. Navigation companies fought desperately for a share of the immigrant spoils, and the steamer trade expanded and developed as a result. As steamers multiplied, routes were lengthened, and more and more villages along the Rideau built wharves to serve the steamers. Service was expanded and increased—and so was the competition. Operators were “hard put to survive” the ensuing rate wars.

Serving a primary demographic of destitute foreigners, steamboats at work during this period remained unattractive and utilitarian, and travel by canal steamer was unpleasant. There were
no saloons, no cabins on the deck, and the cabins on the main deck were cramped and small. Compounding this were abysmal facilities at the wharves on shore, described by an anonymous correspondent in a letter to the *Kingston British Whig* in 1847. The tired and miserable immigrants reaching Kingston were left to fend for themselves on a crowded wharf “that would have never been selected but for the convenience of the steamboats, at the expense of the comfort of human beings already too unhappy.” One traveller using the “dirty little canal steamers” in the 1840s insisted, “None who has ever travelled that route will try it again.” Compounding the austerity of the steamboats in their “golden age” of navigation, the stoic and industrial Rideau corridor was no lush paradise to look at either. Recalled one 1846 traveller

Little of the land bordering on the Rideau Canal is under cultivation; much of it is poor and rocky; and of that fit for cultivation, thousands of acres have been flooded by damming of the rivers to form the Canal, and immense quantities of timber have been consequently destroyed. Great numbers of trees are still standing, dead, and surrounded by water, and give these portions of the banks of the canal a deserted, miserable appearance.

British writer William H.G. Kingston (1814-1880) travelled through the provinces of Canada during the 1840s, and his *Western Wanderings* includes a vivid account of a voyage down the Rideau aboard the transport steamer *Prince Albert*. The city of Kingston at the time had the largest population of any city in the Canadas; the writer found it “a much more bustling place than we at first thought it. Steamers were coming in and going out; some were from the United States, others up from the St. Lawrence, or down the river...the numerous quays all along the lake-shore were covered with casks and cases, and thronged with carts transporting foods of every description.” The world Kingston observed was in flux—within a decade, the new St. Lawrence and the development of the railway system would spark a pivotal shift that would end the age of transport steamers and the bustling quaysides, and send the city of Kingston on its rapid descent down the urban hierarchy of Canada.
The *Prince Albert* was typical of the period before slow travel by steamboat became less practical. Operated by Forwarders Hooker and Henderson, the *Prince Albert* had begun service in 1838, lauded for “accommodation described as the most commodious ever stationed on the Rideau Route.” Kingston disagreed - even checking back into a hotel when he learned the steamer would not be able to depart until dawn.

An 1844 watercolour by George Seton depicts the early Rideau steamer *Pilot* progressing down the canal. Courtesy, the National Archives of Canada.

She had an upper open deck. Under it was the ladies’ cabin, very narrow, with narrow berths, and a passage outside round it, and a small gallery at the after part. Beneath it, again, was the gentlemen’s cabin, with rows of sleeping places at the sides, and a narrow dinner-table down the centre. The accommodation was very confined, and rather less airy than we could have desired.
At daylight, the *Prince Albert* steamed round the Martello Towers at Kingston and into the Rideau, beginning “a series of twists and turns, and zig-zags and wriggles, among swamps and sandbanks, our bow often being in the zig, while our stern was in zag.” In many places, Kingston recalled, the paddle wheels had barely a few feet of clearance on either side of the narrow waterway.

On the first of the lock-throughs at Kingston Mills, the writer and his wife ascended “the summit of the highest eminence in the neighbourhood, whence we looked down the wild ravine through which we had come, at Kingston and the lake in the distance.” The novel magnificence of such views waned as they progressed down the canal, and after they got underway the monotony of the journey became unmistakable. The writer Kingston described the dull tedium of the lock-throughs lasting several hours each, blended unhappily with the middling melancholy of drowned forests and barren rocky decay. “We went through some very dreary spots during the morning,” he wrote, “half-lake and half-drowned land, with dead stumps and leafless trees...and here and there, a dark unpainted frame house or log-hut, and at rarer intervals a brick tenement.” Against this gloomy backdrop, the Rideau Corridor was largely unpopulated and the journey highlighted for all travelers an indistinct sense of isolation as they progressed down the Canal in the enclosed social world of a steamboat. A day later, Kingston was relieved to find riverbanks lined with stately cedars and twisting pine-trees, and then to see the buildings of Bytown in the distance from the locks at Hog’s Back. The final leg of the journey down “the long cut” to the bustling city in the distance “happily proved the termination of our voyage which had become somewhat tedious.”

We reached a quay on the high level ground in the centre of the city, whence we could look down over eight locks into the Ottawa, which flowed nearly a hundred feet below us. It looked almost as if we could have leaped off the deck of the vessel into the Ottawa. The eight locks by which the canal is joined to the river look like as many huge steps up the centre of a ravine in the cliff. The scene itself was very grand and very unusual but still more curious was to find ourselves
in a steamer on the summit of a lofty eminence with a mighty river far, far down beneath our feet.53

Shortly after Kingston’s voyage, the Rideau system was bypassed when improvements to the St Lawrence canals were completed. Vessels could now travel more directly to the Great Lakes from Montreal, ending the practicality of the Rideau as a principal artery of commerce.54 The refined development of more efficient steam engines during the 1840s and 1850s also opened the stronger currents of the St. Lawrence to competitors.55 The Rideau retained a considerable regional traffic moving between Kingston and Ottawa, but a general decline set in when the shift in travel patterns conspired with the Great General Depression of 1847 to send Canal traffic plummeting to its lowest level since 1836.56 The regional stagnation that followed57 was worsened when the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) began to develop stronger railway infrastructure around the Rideau Corridor.58 Slowly, the St. Lawrence and the railway culled the practicality of the Canal as a transport route. Financial problems that had plagued the waterway since its construction intensified as faster transport methods were developed.59 By 1872, a direct rail line ran from Kingston to Ottawa, and the Rideau Canal ceased to be an efficient route of transport.

While the outmoded canal steamers struggled through their lowest levels of patronage ever, Federal authorities debated abandoning the Canal altogether. During the summer of 1874, a despairingly meagre total of 874 passengers booked steamer passage60—almost 50% less than 1873.61 The obsolete route became the subject of dichotomous debate in the House of Commons, where the Members were unable to agree the Canal should even be maintained at all. In an 1876 debate, Prime Minister Alexander MacKenzie indicated that the future of the Rideau “would soon require a complete investigation by Parliament since the system was no longer of practical value.”62 In the Prime Minister’s view, the Rideau had become a subsidiary to the St. Lawrence that was increasingly confined to a moderate regional trade.63 As the House
considered an allocation of $6,000.00 to maintain the Rideau system, an ambivalent Prime Minister said the work "would undoubtedly require the attention of Parliament at an early day." The Canal's usefulness "was now nearly at an end, the railways having taken away all its traffic. It cost the country a considerable amount more than its revenue, and it was neither useful nor ornamental." The following year, the Liberal Member for Addington County, Schuyler Shibley, argued that the Rideau had outlived its usefulness by a number of years. The construction of the St. Lawrence Canals, of the Grant Trunk, of the Brockville, Perth and Ottawa, and recently of the Kingston and Pembroke Railroad, now finished for forty-six miles... [has] so materially altered the state of affairs existing when the Canal was undertaken, that the reasons which originally justified its being constructed no longer existed.

During the previous two years, the Rideau had shown receipts for all purposes amounting to a paltry $8,000—in the face of Federal investment totalling more than $48,000 annually. "Should the government abandon this worse than useless Canal—and they would be compelled to do so sooner or later; the sooner it is done.... is better." According to Shibley, the Canal would only be useful if the "arable land of the very best quality" that had been drowned for its construction were reclaimed for active use.
THE AGE OF PALACE EXCURSION STEAMERS

While the House of Commons debated closing the Canal permanently, the slim minority of forwarding companies whose steamers had not yet abandoned the route were intensifying their efforts to restore their margins back to the black. New ideas for the comfort of passengers were introduced into the design of vessels in a bid to offer travellers a more pleasant alternative to the crowded bustle of the soot-soaked railway system. One of the more successful of these visionary navigators was M.K. Dickinson, the “King of the Rideau,” a leading citizen of Bytown who served as mayor from 1864 to 1866. Dickinson was an American who had settled in Bytown during the “golden age” of steamboating on the Rideau and established himself as a well-known forwarder of freight, operating a fleet of sixteen steamers at the height of his activity. In 1863, he introduced the 110-foot City of Ottawa, a vessel unique in its construction specifically for the Rideau Route during a period of dwindling Canal traffic. Far from the standard offering of plain and cramped accommodation, Dickinson lavishly outfitted the City of Ottawa in hope of attracting wealthy travellers to the sagging Rideau. The steamer was one of the earliest vessels to include provisions for the comfort of her passengers, and sharply contrasted with every steamer to run the route before her.

Historians such as V. Alan George (1972) have concluded that during the early stages of Rideau navigation, “little research had gone into the designing of a vessel to suit the waterway.” Recognizing that the cramped interiors and underpowered engines of the slow-moving Canal steamers were being rapidly outclassed by the modernization of the railway system, Dickinson’s company sought to assure travellers that “having to run all night, the comfort of passengers has been specially studied.” The vessel boasted a 90-foot saloon and appointments fitted “in a most recent and improved style.” Raved the Ottawa Citizen during Dickinson’s tenure as Mayor, the City of Ottawa was proof “of the increasing prosperity of the Rideau Canal business, and the corresponding enterprise of our principal forwarder.” The steamer was hailed as “the best boat
that has yet ridden on the Rideau,” and raised basic standards of passenger comfort. The intensified emphasis on the comfort of passengers was a new idea during the 1860s, and one that gained greater prominence as the Rideau forwarders sought to cope with the loss of more and more of their business to the railways. Forwarders hoped new notions of spaciousness and comfort aboard steamers could offer a decisive alternative to the cramped railway compartment—an alternative that just might lead some travellers to take the slower Canal route. However, as the City of Ottawa was designed primarily for the waning transport passenger and freight market, none of the surviving promotional material hints at the lazy excursions that would become a staple of the steamer trade in later years. When the Kingston-Ottawa Railway Line opened, the new challenges it brought for Rideau steamboating would again force navigation companies onto the defensive.

In 1872, an enterprising Public Works employee examined the rapidly declining returns of the waterway, and saw potential for a future tourist influx in the region. In a December memorandum, he “suggested that the region would become popular with vacationers once the Canal could be negotiated in 10 to 12 hours, but noted that under the present slow and uncertain conditions even the wondrous beauty of the landscape attracts few visitors.” The Federal government was slow to realize the Rideau corridor as a primary tourist destination, even at a time when the navigation companies were looking to the passenger trade to survive the impact of new regional transport methods. Shipbuilding continued, and in the doldrums of the 1870s several significant new steamers were introduced on the waterway that contrasted many of their predecessors.

In 1873, the 99-foot Ella Ross was launched in Montreal, and designed with the “latest considerations” for the comfort of passengers in an updated style that had been started by the City of Ottawa. During the triangular voyage to Quebec, passengers would recline in a lounge seventy-five feet in length with plush carpeting throughout. They would sleep in beds fitted with patent-spring
mattresses, and dine in a saloon “magnificently fitted up with plush chairs and carpets” that seated fifty at a time. Significantly the *Ella Ross* appealed to both travellers and excursionists and marketed several scenic diversions that were taken along the route. The voyage would take passengers down the Rideau Canal after the river journey from Montreal and highlight a daylight cruise through the Rideau Lakes and the Thousand Islands, on one of the earliest vessels to promote such cruises. On vessels such as the *Ella Ross*, the closing years of the 1870s would begin a slow but steady increase in public patronage.

Passenger traffic began to multiply on the Rideau during the early years of the 1880's, when a new variety of recreational excursion steamers appeared on the waterway. On the heels of middling excursions offered by dual-purpose freight and passenger vessels such as the *Olive*, the touring industry matured in 1885 with the debut of the *Rideau Belle*, a 131-ton steamer driven by a 40-horsepower compound steam engine. The latest addition to the canal fleet “set the climate for the enjoyment of tours and excursions.” In unprecedented luxury, passengers travelled down the waterway in a steamer decorated with “cherrywood panelling adorning the dining room and staterooms, ceilings painted sky blue and curtains of green, highlighting settees and sofas and satin cushions.” Regarded “the last word in elegance,” the steamer made twice-weekly journeys down the Canal between Kingston and Ottawa, taking seventy-six hours to complete a round trip. As the “first of the purpose-built luxury steamers,” the *Rideau Belle* became very popular with excursionists during the late Victorian period.

The arrival of the purpose-built *Rideau Belle* heralded significant changes in conventional use for the waterway. No longer was the Canal simply a means to an end; steamboats now sought a new breed of leisured summer excursionists who would passively gaze out the window at the passing scene. The transformation of the Rideau corridor into a popular tourist sight initially depended on the ability of the steamers to “gratify the yearnings for beauty, romance and adventure that drew travellers in the first place”—and at this, they succeeded. During the 1880's, a steadily increasing volume of
Very few photographs exist of the early palace steamers. In this view, the Rideau Belle is locking through. Courtesy, the National Archives of Canada PA-141345

Excursionists found cruise steamers such as the Rideau Belle “had unique sounds and unique sensations of motion...that could amplify the sense of being in a unique environment, and of being on a unique adventure.”^ The banks of the Canal enclosed them and unfurled a “continuous landscape panorama,” that was fragmented depending on the speed of the vessel and traveller’s span of attention. Excursions were marketed to heighten environmental impressions in the enclosed social world of the steamer—a world that “reflected all at once idleness, expectancy, anxiety, complacency and the thrill of travel.”^* The Rideau Belle’s plush satin cushions and cherrywood panelling were the “perfect setting for a gracious lady in leg-o-mutton sleeves, bustled skirt and wide-brimmed hat.”^2 Passengers on the steamers could “leisurely bide their time in relative comfort, either oblivious to the passing scene, or glued to the window as mood dictated.”^3 On these slow-moving public spaces of group travel, excursionists could interact with each other but were neither autonomous nor involved with the passing scene they saw—aside from brief stops, the landscape of the Canal could only be viewed as a series of rapidly fleeting impressions from which the excursionists
remained fundamentally isolated. They were unable to explore what they saw at their own pace, remaining “always within a world enclosed.” Passive travel by steamship “heightened the sense of dependency since there was clearly no escape on route.” In the days before the increased personal autonomy offered by the motorboat and automobile, these conventions reigned across all methods of travel.

The man behind the Rideau Belle was a leading figure in the Canal shipping scene for many years. In 1869, Captain Daniel Noonan had begun his career as a seaman on the Rideau on board the tug Francis. His “admirable little steamer” the Rideau Belle “really commenced the passenger traffic between the limestone city and Canada’s capital.” Succeeding steamers would seek to outclass the standards of comfort and elegance that were set by the Rideau Belle—a watershed vessel that provided a “sharp contrast with the spartan quarters aboard the early steamers.” As the excursion service expanded, the Rideau Belle made connections with railways and in Kingston, with the steamers of the Great Lakes. Across Lake Ontario, she met evening trains at Clayton, New York. The Rideau Canal connected with a growing national travel infrastructure in North America to offer to everyone with a sufficiently disposable income the opportunity relax in the comfortable lounge of a steamer and gaze at the distinctively pleasant passing view.

Captain Noonan’s success on the Rideau was promising enough that the Rideau Belle was rebuilt and enlarged in her second year, reflecting a new public taste for luxury and indolence aboard excursion steamers. In 1887, the “faster and more powerful” John Haggart was launched as a running mate for the Rideau Belle and the steam excursion industry in the region geared to meet a steadily increasing demand for reservations. The venerable Ella Ross was renovated in 1887 to accommodate the refined public taste for luxury. Canal patronage of 5,300 in 1880 had slowly increased to 7,500 by 1892, but this was still a far cry from the immigrant heights of the 1840s, in which hundreds of Canal steamers had ferried as many as 90,000 immigrants to the Great Lakes in a single season. An 1892 writer who had travelled the Rideau during the
1850s complained in the Smiths Falls Rideau Record that the Rideau "had once been ..crowded with people intent on business and pleasure," and now only the Rideau Belle was cruising the route in its entirety. Where small villages had once depended on the steamers, the writer noticed how the "wharves have vanished from their shores," and the steamers of the late Victorian period were no longer the supplying lifeblood of corridor villages that they had once been. Navigators on the Rideau route would have to rely almost exclusively on the passenger trade to succeed, and in the watershed years of the early 1890's a number of the older dual-purpose Canal steamers were transformed into elite single-purpose passenger vessels.

The standards of canal travel on the Rideau were decisively raised by the James Swift, built at Kingston in 1893. At the time of its construction, the progressive luxuries of Captain Noonan's excursion vessels were helping to lift Rideau traffic out of the doldrums that had followed the consolidation of the St. Lawrence system and the rise of the railways. With the James Swift, Captain Noonan intended to raise the standards of Canal travel and ensure the continued success of the fledgling excursion industry in the region. As local historian Coral Lindsay has explained, the 1890's were "a romantic period in Canadian history, and the river steamer came to symbolize the leisurely and elegant way of life enjoyed by the people of that time." Captain Noonan ensured that his new excursion steamer would boast a refined opulence to match her era—and in so doing, he deliberately presented the public with a vastly different image of the "canal steamer" than had previously been conceived.

The large and handsome James Swift first sailed down the Rideau in June of 1893, attracting large crowds of people along the shoreline as she made her way. The boat was so large that it barely passed through Colonel By's locks, but "on the open water ... made such an impression that housewives left their clotheslines and schoolboys left their games" to watch the vessel pass by. In addition to her handsome outline on the water, inside the Swift was "a first class craft," with sizeable passenger capacity of 100 that would accommodate large parties.
Record praised Captain Noonan’s new steamer and lauded the Lavishness of her fine interiors.

The new boat is without doubt the finest that has ever plied the Rideau, and is in particular a first class craft...She is beautifully finished in every particular, and the woodwork is painted white throughout. There is a handsome canopy over the staircase. The passenger cabins are all on the saloon deck and are handsomely finished. The dining room is very neatly fitted up and has a capacity for thirty-two. The ladies and gentlemen’s toilet rooms are most conveniently arranged and are supplied with hot and cold water.¹¹³

At a time when the luxury of indoor plumbing was still confined to a slim elite, novel conveniences such as hot and cold running water on board combined with the size and handsomeness of the Swift to underscore its unsurpassed floating opulence—a powerful

The watershed palace steamer James Swift. Courtesy, Parks Canada/Queen’s University Archives.

attraction for idle summer citizens in the age before popular personal
watercraft. The Swift's powerfully attractive exterior and hertechnological modernity were marketing dynamite that attracted widespread public interest.  

So starkly did this contrast with the public image of the “dirty little canal steamer” of previous decades that perceptions of the “canal steamer” were decisively recast. The extravagant comfort of the James Swift demonstrated to citizens that the monotony of canal travel could in fact be comfortable and relaxing. Steamers now enticed idle excursionists with the promise that they would be travelling in comfort and modernity surpassing what was available even in many of their own homes. Press attention focussed on the modernity of the palace steamers and the lush greenery of the route, renovating the waterway’s old industrial prominence into the background. “From the hurricane deck a splendid view can be obtained,” reported the Rideau Record from Smiths Falls. “One could not well imagine a pleasanter holiday than to take the round trip through the magnificent scenery of the Rideau Lakes on this beautiful and commodious steamer...” The magnificent “naturalness” of the post-industrial Rideau Canal concealed the less-attractive ghosts of the old industries in its overgrowing lagoons—lagoons that had only been able to regenerate their greenery during the three decades of stagnation and decline. Public understanding of the utilitarian purpose behind the canal’s original construction was swept away as relaxation and recreation became the widely accepted primary uses for the waterway.

Several times a week the James Swift brought excursionists slowly chugging down the way, using a horizontal compound steam engine of only 12 horsepower to make the trip from Ottawa to Kingston in twenty-seven hours. Where the cold and cramped travellers of the 1850s were greeted with the ugly congestion of sawdust and millwheels, the idle excursionists of the 1890s could breathe deeply, enclosed on either side by the greens on shore. In this way, excursion steamers such as the James Swift promoted the Rideau as a new and pleasing urban escape. Travelling down the Canal at night, “passengers in frock coats or lace shawls could enjoy
the pleasures of the summer air, moonlight on the water, and music and dancing on the decks.” Such was the popularity of the James Swift that within two years, the vessel was renovated and passenger capacity increased to 150. Passing by, the Swift made an impression so striking that even routine stops at the lock stations made small-town headlines, and drew crowds of gawking locals at her sides. All were awestruck by her large and handsome silhouette, sumptuous interior and floating modernism—the calculated equation her owners exploited to attract leisured tourists to an otherwise obsolete waterway.

On the arrival of the James Swift on her regular trip from Kingston last Monday evening, a large number of people had gathered at the locks to inspect her. A great many improvements have been made on her during the winter and she is now one of the very finest crafts that has ever traveled by this route. She has been fitted throughout by electricity, new steam heaters have been placed in the various apartments, and several other changes have been made which are calculated to insure further comfort and pleasure for the passengers...She left the same evening for Ottawa.

Excursion steamers led by the James Swift boosted group tourism on the Canal—but also raised the interest of more autonomous vacationers who wished to enjoy the regional scenery on their own. Government historian Larry Turner identified a “change in orientation in recreational boating” that began around 1895, when there began a slow increase in the use of smaller personal crafts along the waterway. The first private motorboat powered by an internal combustion engine appeared on the River Seine in France during the summer of 1887, and its revolutionary technology was quickly refined and adapted in personal watercraft elsewhere. The Rideau Record was among the first to point out the increase in “private picnic parties using smaller personal crafts” that seemed to threaten the luxurious accommodations offered in group settings on cabin steamers such as the James Swift. Waterway trends favouring increased private space and greater personal autonomy can be traced back as early as 1875, when the 56-foot
private steam yacht *Marquis of Lorne* appeared on the Canal.  

While steam yachts were undoubtedly limited to an elitist few during the 1870s and 1880s, as the decades progressed an increasing variety of vacationers would come to have access to the autonomy offered by smaller private vessels with internal combustion engines. The early steam yachts such as the *Marquis of Lorne* are regarded by historians as the "precursors of this numerous progeny which now constitute almost the sole traffic on the Rideau Canal." Small private vessels would demonstrate to excursionists that in order to travel they no longer needed to abdicate their autonomy and trust others to move them from destination to destination. Beginning with the arrival of the first personal watercrafts, "the nervous energy of the motorboat eroded confidence in the slow moving public steamer." The passiveness of group travel methods that had once been the norm was slowly transformed into an insatiable thirst for speed and control that was antithetical and corrosive with the slow moving public steamers. However, this process and the popularization of the private motorboat was slow enough that excursion steamer tonnage on the Rideau trebled from 1890 to 1894.

The Canal scene began to change in 1895, around the time *Rideau Belle* was destroyed by a spectacular fire on the west shore of Sand Lake. By the following year, the Canadian economy had recovered from national doldrums that had prevailed for the previous twenty years, and passenger traffic on the Rideau continued to increase. Federal authorities took notice in 1896 when Captain Noonan threatened to remove the *James Swift* on the Rideau unless urgent repairs were made to the channel—and the repairs were made. "Since the *James Swift* was the only passenger vessel on that route," explained Judith Tulloch, "the loss would have been particularly severe." Shortly afterwards, Captain Noonan incorporated his shipping concern in to the Rideau Lakes Navigation Company (RLNCo), and became the managing director and principal shareholder. The company began its reorganized operations in 1899 by mobilizing stock capital of $100,000 to begin the construction in Kingston of a massive palace excursion steamer the likes of which the Canal had never seen. Slated for completion by the following season, the *Rideau Queen* would be fitted out in a style to outclass all
of her predecessors—the most luxurious palace steamer to ever ply the route.

Early in 1900, the RLNCo "took officials of the New York Central Railway on a tour of the Rideau in an obvious bid for the American market, in return for which the railway granted to RLNCo ample advertising space in its timetables." 133 The Rideau steamers would continue to meet evening trains carrying passengers for the cruise across the Lake Ontario and down the Rideau to Ottawa.134 In Ottawa, passengers could transfer to Pullman sleeping cars on overnight trains that would whisk them through the night back to their city of origin. With this arrangement—and the company’s new flagship steamer—the RLNCo would generate consistently large-scale returns for almost fifteen years.135 While passenger levels on the Rideau fluctuated sharply in the 1890s, at the turn of the century they soared to levels unseen since the great influx of immigrants during the 1840s.136 "The boat service on the Rideau next year promises to be everything that could be desired," reported the Merrickville Star as the summer of 1899 drew to a close. Designed to carry 300, the palatial Rideau Queen was set to substantially boost the passenger capacity the waterway—and Captain Noonan was already planning her successors.

The Kingston papers of last week report that Captain Noonan, that well-known skipper of the Rideau, has given the contract...for a handsome new steamer to run in conjunction with the James Swift. There is no more delightful summer resort in the Province than the Rideau, and it is bound to grow in favour. Sufficient hotel accommodation and adequate steamer service will help it wonderfully.137

Local optimism obscured a resort industry on shore that was far from adequate. The waterway was viewed as a summer resort destination in itself as insufficient hotels and boarding houses had developed along the canal to engage vacationing excursionists who were travelling on the steamers. The mild multiplicity of summer resorts on the Rideau such as the Opinicon and Garrett’s Rest never did grow into more than rustic lodges, and there were very few on the waterway with a guest capacity of more than fifty.138 According to Larry Turner, "the Rideau lodges were relatively small scale with an
orientation on sightseeing, pleasure boating and fishing” without the elaborate programming of resort hotels in larger-scale tourist regions such as Muskoka. It would fall entirely to the fleet of ships led by Captain Noonan’s new palace steamer to maintain the Rideau Canal as a resort destination.

In the spring of 1900, the Rideau Queen was completed in a Kingston shipyard and readied for a June debut on the waterway. Larger and more opulent than its predecessor the James Swift, the Rideau Queen was designed with even more lavish interiors and a capacity of three hundred that anticipated the tremendous upsurge in tourist traffic that was to follow. Mildly faster than the James Swift, the Queen was fitted with three-cylinder triple-expansion engines rated at 25 horsepower that moved the ship fast enough to make the journey to Kingston in just less than a day. The Queen’s maiden voyage was greeted with unsparing praise in the local press that matched the extravagance of her interior.

A preoccupation with modernity again reminded contemporaries that the voyage down the obsolete waterway on the state-of-the-art Rideau Queen would be as comfortable as a stay at one of the finest hotels on shore. The striking outline and white decks of the Rideau Queen were highlighted at night by 350 incandescent lights that illuminated the “roomy and neatly finished” sleeping accommodations for 75 passengers. Advertising campaigns informed travellers the steamer had “steam heat, electric lighting, electric fans, and cabins priced from $1.00 to $5.00, with meals at 50¢.” The James Swift had already boasted both hot and
cold running water almost a decade before, but on the Rideau Queen the water spouted into marble wash-basins. 145

“There will be no lying awake o’nights on the Rideau Queen because of the oppressive heat of the staterooms,” a syndicated report from the Kingston British Whig assured readers. 146 In the days before air conditioning, the Queen used cold air ventilation to ensure tourists would be comfortable in staterooms furnished with “spring bed, snowy linen, pretty coverlets and bright carpets.” 147 The RLNCo spared no expense to ensure their new flagship was a “most inviting” steamer, and such was public fascination with the new Rideau Queen, the story of her maiden voyage made headlines in many markets ahead of the latest news from the South African battlefield. 148 A month after her debut, the steamer was being visited by so many curious villagers during her regular trips through the local locks that Captain Noonan was forced to bar visitors from coming on board “for the convenience of the passengers.” 149 With an increased regional passenger capacity brought by the new palace steamers, tourism in the area was substantially boosted. 150 “The Rideau Queen is proving that a good passenger steamer on the Rideau will pay,” commented the Rideau Record as the season of 1900 drew to a close.
The Queen has done a splendid business right from the start and shows a comfortable surplus over all expenditure. Captain Noonan with his able assistant, Purser McGlade, are popular with the traveling public and they are leaving nothing undone to make the Rideau route and the Rideau Queen popular.151

Captain Noonan told the daily Kingston British Whig in the midsummer of 1900 that “a number of American tourists, sent by the New York Central, have been passengers on the Queen in the past few weeks.”152 The intensifying foreign tourist appeal of the region had appeared to ensure that all the Americans had “gone back enthusiastic advertising agents of the route.” As the tourist trade intensified, more cottages and lodges appeared in the region.153 “Rideau Lake was never as well patronized as it was this year,” reported the Rideau Record in the watershed summer of 1900. “At last it seems as if its charms were being discovered...This year almost every island and every inviting looking point are occupied by cottagers or campers, and row boats, sail boats, canoes, yachts or steamers are everywhere in evidence.”154

As the busy season of 1901 began, the RLNCo suffered a setback. After tying up for the night in Ottawa, the James Swift burned to a crisp in a devastating midnight fire at the Canal Basin (today the site of the National Arts Centre). Robert Ireland, fireman on the Swift, was suffocated and three others were seriously burned.155 A Canadian Atlantic yard engine, steaming directly across from the Swift on the canal, saw the boat was on fire and the engineer “opened up his whistle and tooted a warning to the occupants of the boat which incidentally served as an alarm to the firemen of the No. 8 station, who got out with commendable rapidity.”156 When the firemen arrived in the chaos at the foot of Albert St, “the scene was an exciting one.”157

On the upper deck two young women stewardesses, half clothed, were screaming for help, three men were struggling in the water, while others were jumping to the dock. Cap. Burnett’s men ran a ladder up the deck and brought down the two girls who were nearly frantic, and by that time the injured deck hands, half naked and shivering with cold, with assistance climbed out of the water to places of safety on the dock.158
Rebuilt after the fire of 1901, the James Swift resumed service as the Rideau King. Courtesy, Parks Canada.

The boat was considered a partial loss, but fortunately, the hull and portions of the deck remained intact. Although the fire started in the boiler room, the Swift’s machinery was not seriously damaged, and the loss of $2,000 was “fully covered by marine insurance in a Kingston company.” Over the winter, the charred hulk was rebuilt and substantially enlarged—emerging the following summer as the Rideau King, with an expanded new capacity to match the Rideau Queen.

Tourism boomed in the Rideau Corridor and its surrounding network of lakes and rivers. Beginning in 1902, figures for the Rideau passenger trade climbed dramatically. In 1905, 24,394 excursionists travelled down the waterway—a dramatic improvement from the nadir of the 874 who booked passage in 1874. The following year, tourist patronage of the canal steamers reached its all-time peak with reservations totalling 27,417. Historians credit the “popularity of the comfortable steamships that offered luxury staterooms and dining facilities, and deck space from which to view the scenery,” to explain the increase in patronage. In addition, “the prosperity and increasing leisure of the more affluent classes” were
ripe socio-economic conditions for the success of Captain Noonan's enterprise. As lock size restrictions barred the grander St Lawrence and Great Lakes steamers from plying the route, the regional supremacy of the Rideau Lakes Navigation Company was assured. The *Rideau King* and *Rideau Queen* maintained a virtual monopoly as the only luxury cabin steamers running the full length of the route, providing cabins and meals for a voyage that lasted about a day.

As the century turned, the excursion steamer became the focal point of summer activities in the corridor area. Private motor craft were still "primarily a plaything of the well-to-do, had yet to come on to its own and was none too reliable as a means of transportation." Steamers catered to the local population and some such as the *Olive* were used primarily to ferry groups of townspeople to special events in neighbouring towns, such as baseball games or bazaars. The *Rideau Record* reported an idyllic Dominion Day in 1893, when "the weather was glorious, and as many as could took
advantage of it by spending the holiday on the River, a large number going on the excursion steamer Olive, while others went in yachts and row boats." On one exemplary weekend in 1900, residents of Smiths Falls could choose from a "diversity of excursions," ranging from an overnight cruise of the Thousand Islands on the local steamer John Haggart, an outing to Oliver's Ferry on the Swift, and a moonlight cruise on the lakes the night following. Various local community groups were in the habit of chartering the steamers to host their events, and in the broad community spirit of the age, such events often earned a fair amount of local press attention. According to the Rideau Record, one of the "pleasantest" excursions of the 1900 season was a cruise to Jones' Falls aboard the John Haggart. "The weather was perfect and the beautiful scenery of the lake was seen at its best... An orchestra accompanied the party and furnished excellent music throughout the day."

From Perth, the local Masons organized a high-profile outing in 1904 that earned considerable attention. "The much heralded excursion to Newboro under the patronage of the Perth Masons was the leading way the citizens of this lively town spent their Civic Holiday this year," reported the Perth Courier. The excursion had nearly been a fiasco; initially, the Navigation Company had announced the chartered Rideau King would not be able to make it up the old Tay Canal without getting stuck, and called off the plans. "The Masonic Committee "would not hear of the matter in that way" and made strong..." representations to the steamboat company, with the result that Saturday night about six o'clock it was definitely announced that the excursion would surely be pulled off on Monday." With 250 excursionists on board, the Rideau King slowly "groaned and scraped down the Tay," but got stuck only once, near the old abandoned lock. Passengers were entertained on the way by an orchestra led by local musicians Mel Kennedy and Lloyd Gorman.

The journey, though slow, was a pleasant one, as the scenery was bewitching. Once the locks were passed the boat shot ahead under full steam to the ferry, where about fifty more passengers were taken aboard. The most enjoyable part of the
trip then began and for nearly fifteen miles the eye of the traveller gazed on a pretty expanse of water and islands and cottages and verdure-clad shores.  

At Newboro, the excursionists from Perth were met at the wharf by “a large deputation of Newboro citizens headed by their good band.” In the bright afternoon sunshine, townspeople from Newboro entertained their Perth visitors with ice cream and lemonade during a well-attended riverside picnic, and Newboro hospitality ensured “the Perth people were made welcome wherever they went.” A starring feature of the afternoon was a baseball game between Perth and Elgin, attended by 300. The team from Perth managed to score 13 runs in 5 innings, but the game had to be ended early to allow the excursionists to catch the *Rideau King* for the cruise home. “Everyone is well satisfied with the trip,” reported the *Courier*, and credited the organizational efforts of the local Masonic Committees, “whose determination it was that the day would not be otherwise than pleasant.”  

Capable of handling large crowds, canal steamers such as the *Rideau King* came to symbolize group recreation, and in the water the vessels continued to attract attention. Recalled a contemporary from Perth, “One whistle...is always the signal for a gathering together of all and sundry. When the *Rideau Queen* blows for the bridge, from every quarter the boats shoot out, and by the time it has reached the wharf a very pretty scene is presented.”  

Ironically, the fascinated motorists who raced to to follow the enormous palace steamers were playing a starring role in their demise. In a story from the *Rod and Gun* magazine published in 1905, readers were informed, “gasoline launches are now all the rage and no wonder. Their simplicity, speed and safety and reliability commend them to all who can reside near water...they are fast becoming an everyday necessity.” In 1900, Perth carriage maker Thomas Hicks ran the first motorboat up the Rideau Lakes, and private gasoline launches began to multiply in the region. At the same time the *Rideau Queen* and *Rideau King* were enjoying the
height of their popularity, “the market for motorboats exploded as the technological change in motors produced a self-propelled vessel that could be built at moderate costs,” increasing accessibility to all parts of the waterway for everyone.\textsuperscript{177} The motorboat gave holiday makers the autonomy, agency and the means to travel down the waterways in whatever direction at whatever time they pleased, without the passiveness and isolation of group travel.

The slowly increasing popularity of the motorboat, along with the extensive consolidation of regional railway networks, undermined the popularity of the passenger steamer.\textsuperscript{178} Kingston papers had warned in 1907 that the unprecedented travel on the railways would threaten steamship service in the region, but at the time the palace steamers were enjoying the zenith of their popularity, and such warnings had little impact.\textsuperscript{179} The Rideau palace steamers continued to enjoy fluctuating levels of patronage as the Edwardian age drew to a close—but after 1912, their popularity decisively waned.
Promoting the Rideau, 1912. Courtesy the National Archives of Canada

Navigators in 1914 found themselves contending with a sharp decline in patronage that plummeted even faster with domestic social changes brought by the First World War.

Steamers in 1912 carried five thousand passengers less than in 1911. To combat this, Captain Noonan and the RLNCo sought to boost the declining public profile of their vessels, and turned to the
press and the Ottawa elites for assistance. "The steamer Rideau Queen had on board a distinguished company of Cabinet ministers and transportation men on her trip from Ottawa to Kingston on Friday night," reported the Rideau Record. Along with the reporter, the RLNCo invited Minister of Railways and Canals, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Customs, the Provincial Treasurer, a variety of Senators and Members of Parliament along with the Superintendent of the Canal—and when greeted by reporters at Kingston, the "distinguished party of well-known Canadians" agreed they were "simply amazed" by the charms of the route. Frank Cochrane, the Minister of Railways and Canals, "said he would seek to develop it for the pleasure of Canadian people and tourists," but by this time the Rideau's halcyon days were already drawing to a close.

To combat the threat posed by private watercraft, the RLNCo sought new means of marketing their vessels. As the Kingston British Whig reported a new "element of rush" in the patronage vacation patterns of urbanites, the RLNCO first printed a fifty-page stapled booklet describing the opportunities for rest and recreation to be found in and around the waterway, compete with dozens of ads from local merchants. Rest and Sport Among the Rideau Lakes was published for the next four successive years, but did little to shore the slowly ebbing popularity of the steamers. Promoting the "Finest Scenery and Best Fishing in America," the brochure advertised a Rideau resort industry operating at its Edwardian height.

Beginning with a brief history of the region, Rest and Sport outlined the canal's military origins but ignored the route's old-world industrial prominence and focused exclusively on its tourist attractions. "Beyond the Martello Towers of Kingston," it began "lies an historic military waterway, which for varied natural beauty and the opportunities it affords for sport, fishing, shooting canoeing and yachting is simply unrivaled." Prospective tourists were taken step-by-step through the small villages along the Rideau route and their restful and sporting attractions. The brochure described the "delightful" situation of the Clayton terminal amidst beauty of the Thousand Islands and praised the modernity of the steamers using the phrases and a lexicon that had first arrived with the City of Ottawa in
1864.

The steamers performing this service are modern and adapted the requirements of first-class tourist travel, with steam heat and electric lighting, and nothing has been neglected which would add to the comfort of the passengers. The dining rooms are in the charge of competent stewards and every effort is put forth to make the service perfect in every respect.\textsuperscript{184}

The modern innovations, the studied provisions for the comfort of excursionists, the "first-class" standards of customer care—all were major selling points for the excursion steamers dating back to the industry's earliest efforts to stave the decline brought by the railways during the 1850s. Reviewed the Kingston British Whig, the RLNCo "published a nicely illustrated pamphlet," but its reach was "too small for major Canadian and American distribution, and advertising campaigns."\textsuperscript{185} The Rideau Record suggested the region was failing to attract the attention it deserved "owing to a lack of suitable summer resorts."\textsuperscript{186} While the brochure was in print, private use of motorboats skyrocketed. More and more tourists were able to explore all the quaint offerings of the Rideau route on their own time—and at their own pace. By 1914, passenger traffic on the palatial steamers settled into a steady decline.\textsuperscript{187}

With the limited range of the annual Rest and Sport among the Rideau Lakes motor boating was "taking over the system" between 1910 and 1915—a period that saw private lockages increase on the system by more than ten thousand.\textsuperscript{188} Reported the Kingston British Whig in 1914, "the steamboat, palatial and clean...has been a powerful attraction heretofore. The day is coming when the observation car drawn by noiseless and smokeless...electric engine, will capture the people's imagination and secure their patronage."\textsuperscript{189} The Rideau Record pointed to the motorboat and the motorcar as "the most serious cause of revenue losses in steamboats."\textsuperscript{190}

Faced with rapidly diminishing popularity, the Rideau steamers were more vulnerable to problems caused by the weather. The vagrancies of the weather had long posed an occasional problem
for navigators, such as the time in 1911 when “wild winds” on Big Rideau Lake had forced the cancellation of several days of passenger and excursion service.\textsuperscript{191} Water levels, for example, had prevented an occasional problem as early as 1895, when the \textit{Ella Ross} cancelled an excursion to Jones Falls, fearing low water would drive the vessel aground.\textsuperscript{192} The problem returned in 1913, and complicated an already difficult season for the canal steamers. “If the level falls another foot,” reported the \textit{Rideau Record} in August, “there will not be enough water in the lower sill of the locks to float a canal boat. Then navigation between the Ottawa and Rideau Rivers will be stopped. And this is almost certain to happen.”\textsuperscript{193} Compounding this after 1914 was the plummeting dearth of patronage, caused in part by the “suddeness of the transition from bustling recreational activity to burdened war effort” that brought lasting changes to travel patterns all over the province.\textsuperscript{194} It soon became apparent that the tonic of a slow journey by steamboat had been decisively overlooked by home-front citizens worrying about loved ones fighting in the European trenches.

Captain Noonan died in 1914, and so much was he the “moving spirit”\textsuperscript{195} of the company, the excursion steamer trade on the Rideau Lakes rapidly disintegrated following his departure. Low water levels caused such consistently acute problems that the Navigation Company was forced to end their entire season early. In the spring of 1915, the steamer \textit{Victoria} “went up to the Rideau Lakes and reported that unless the water level would rise, the boat would be docked for the season.”\textsuperscript{196} The same year the \textit{Victoria} was laid up, the \textit{Rideau Queen} was forced to “abandon the Rideau route forever...when it could not navigate to Smiths Falls because of the low water.”\textsuperscript{197} After a decade spent running freight service on the Bay of Quinte,\textsuperscript{198} the \textit{Rideau Queen} finished her days working as a cargo steamer on the lower St. Lawrence, spending some time laid up in the depression before it was pulled up on shore and dismantled sometime subsequent to 1933.\textsuperscript{199}

Still running through 1916, the \textit{Rideau King} was laid up in mid-season “far spent” after twenty-five years of service.\textsuperscript{200} Passenger traffic had dropped by more than six thousand from 1915,
Years of decline: the *Ottawan* at the canal basin (today the site of the National Arts Centre) during the 1920s. Courtesy, the National Archives of Canada.

and the *Rideau King* had become “structurally unsound”—both her boiler and engine were in need of a complete replacement. Sold for scrap and partially demolished, the decommissioned *Rideau King* was left to rot in a lagoon near Garden Island, where the hull may still be “dimly discerned in shallow water on a calm day.” With the smaller dual-purpose steamers running in service elsewhere or barred by low water levels, the Rideau Canal fell silent.

Traffic on the Rideau Canal this season is the lightest on record. Only the [freight steamer] *Ottawan* once a week, goes up and down. The head lock-keeper believes that the absence of big pleasure crafts from Ottawa, Montreal and other cities on the Rideau this season is because most of the young fellows of the wealthy families have gone to the front.

The *Ottawan* continued a dwindling freight service to Montreal until it was withdrawn in 1936, ending 104 years of commercial navigation on the waterway. At the time, the *Ottawan*
“hadn’t carried a passenger in 20 years,” and the steamer’s Managing Director explained, “You may think you’d like to travel by boat if you aren’t in hurry, but you always are.”

Rideau navigators such as Captain Noonan developed a lucrative excursion trade in the region that used floating opulence and modernity to change dated public perceptions of canal travel by steamboat. In so doing, they preserved steam navigation on the Rideau for nearly five decades after the waterway had ceased to be a practical means of transport, ending only when the increased personal autonomy of motorboats and automobiles allowed tourists to explore the “natural beauty” of the Rideau route at their own pace without the rigid scheduling and enclosed mini-urban isolation of steamer travel. Today, the “well-appointed steamer with its panelled lounges and dining saloons...tempting cuisine and unhurried progress is a thing of the past on our inland waters, banished by the ubiquitous automobile.” The steamboats lost the battle with the internal combustion engine, and their decline was compounded by poor weather conditions and social changes brought by the First World War. By 1926, Rideau Canal maintenance crews were focussed increasingly on the clearing of “unusual weed growth” that was blamed on the stagnation caused by the absence of large passenger steamers.
Rideau Postcard 1905, Courtesy Parks Canada

Passing under the Bridge at Newboro. Courtesy, Parks Canada.
ENDNOTES
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8 Ibid.
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12 Ibid, p120
14 Coral Lindsay, *Kars on the Rideau*. Kars, ON 1972, p59
17 George 1972, p115
18 Forbes Bush 1981, p95
20 V. Alan George 1972, p192
21 Ibid, p193
22 Lindsay 1972, p173
25 Lamirande 1982, p3
26 *Acts of the General Assembly of His Majesty’s Province of New Brunswick passed in the year 1837*. Cap. VII—“An Act to provide for the greater safety of passengers on board Steam Boats—Passed 22d July 1837.” Fredericton: J. Ryan, 1837
27 *Statutes of Her Majesty’s Province of Upper Canada*. Chap. XVIII—“An Act to protect the Public against accidental injury from Machinery used in Mills, and for other purposes—Passed 6th March, 1838.” Toronto: Robert Stanton, 1838, p48.
28 Gavin Russell, “To the Editor of the Brockville Recorder.” *Brockville*
Recorder, May 23, 1844, p3
Russell 1844
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Forbes Bush 1982, p57
Lindsay 1972, p174
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Ibid
William H. Smith, quoted in Lindsey 1972, p163
William H. G. Kingston, Western Wanderings or, a Pleasure Tour in the Canadas, vol2. London: Chapman and Hall, 1856, p112
Forbes Bush 1981, p112
Kingston 1856, p59
Ibid, p60
Ibid, p61
Ibid, p66
Ibid, p67
Ibid
Ibid, p93.
V. Alan George 1972, p195.
George writes that the early years of the “Middle Period (1850-1885)” were years of “lull and stagnation for most of the system.” George 1972, p196.
George explains, the ‘Ottawa and Prescott’ line was the first railway in the region, constructed in 1854. “The second and more westerly line was the Brockville and Ottawa,’ also called the Almonte-Brockville Line, which was constructed in 1859 and which ran north from Brockville to Smiths Falls and then on to Almonte. A spur line connected Smiths Falls to Perth.” George 1972, p197.
Judith Tulloch writes, “Financial problems continually plagued the Canal...The tolls and rents received never met the expenses of maintaining the works of the Canal and of paying for the required staff.” Tulloch 1981, p9.
In 1873, 1,500 travellers booked passage “on some part of the Rideau.”


Forbes Bush 1981, p73

House of Commons Debates 1876, p1003.

Ibid.

House of Commons Debates 1877, p623.

Ibid.

House of Commons Debates 1877, p624.

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Ibid

Ottawa Citizen, July 8 1864, p2

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Ottawa Citizen, July 8 1864, p2.


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“Capt. D. Noonan—The Father of the Rideau Passenger Trade.”
Merrickville Star, August 9 1900, p4.

Jakle 1985, p84

Ibid.


100 Jakle 1985, p95.

101 Forbes Bush 1981 p38

102 Ibid


104 Ibid, p93.

105 Turner 1986, p25. Steamers such as the *Ella Ross* cruised between certain points on the Canal only.


108 Lindsay 1972, p175


110 Lindsay 1972, p175.

111 "The James Swift." *Rideau Record*, June 8, 1893, p9

112 Forbes Bush 1981, p41

113 "The James Swift." *Rideau Record*, June 8, 1893, p9

114 Lindsay 1972, p175

115 "The James Swift." *Rideau Record*, June 8, 1893, p9


117 Lindsay 1972, p177


119 Turner 1986, p255.

120 Ibid, p97.

121 Ibid, p255.


123 Ibid.

124 Jakle 1986, p84.

125 Ibid.


127 In what some historians have termed a "rather unfitting epitaph to the career of the well-known and popular excursion steamer," lockmaster Fleming of Chaffey's salvaged some of the steamer's charred cherrywood to build a luxury outhouse not far from the shore. (Forbes Bush 1981, p38). In the face of insufficient public investment into Canal infrastructure, authorities did not replace the makeshift privy for nearly forty years (PAC, RG43 B29a, Vol. 219, File 17007. Dept. Of Railways and Canals, Rideau Canal to Col. A.E. Dubuc, D.S.O., Cheif Engineer, September 11, 1931).


129 Tulloch 1981, p20

130 Ibid.


132 Ibid, p141.

iv
133 Ibid, p144.
134 Turner 1986, p245.
135 Ibid.
137 Merrickville Star, August 24 1899, p5.
138 “Lake Notes,” Rideau Record, August 22 1911, p2.
139 Turner 1986, p179.
142 “RIDEAU QUEEN—Initial trip of this handsome new passenger steamer.”
Merrickville Star, June 21 1900, p4.
143 Ibid.
145 RIDEAU QUEEN—Initial trip of this handsome new passenger steamer.”
Merrickville Star, June 21 1900, p4.
146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
149 Merrickville Star, July 12, 1900, p1.
151 “The Rideau Queen.” Rideau Record, August 30, 1900, p4.
152 Kingston British Whig, August 2 1900, quoted in Turner 1986, p37.
154 “HOLIDAYING ON THE RIDEAU—Campers and Cottagers Everywhere.”
Rideau Record, August 23 1900, p1
155 “THE JAMES SWIFT BURNED—Disastrous Fire on the Popular Steamer.”
Merrickville Star, June 13 1901, p5.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
159 Moore 1982, p49.
160 “THE JAMES SWIFT BURNED—Disastrous Fire on the Popular Steamer.”
Merrickville Star, June 13 1901, p5
162 Moore 1982, p44.
163 Forbes Bush 1981, p9. This was roughly one thousand more travellers than
had steamed down the canal in 1848 during the great immigrant influx.
166 Turner 1986, p247.
169 “Local Notes.” Rideau Record, August 23, 1900, p4
“Masonic Excursion to Newboro.” Perth Courier, August 19, 1904, p1

Turner 1986, p240

“Masonic Excursion to Newboro.” Perth Courier, August 19, 1904, p1

Ibid


Turner 1986, p17.

Ibid

Turner 1986, p19

Ibid

“Seeing the Rideau.” Rideau Record, June 18, 1912, p4

Turner 1986, p19

RLNCo, Rest and Sport Among the Rideau Lakes, 1914.

Ibid p4

Ibid p7


Rideau Record, July 28 1914. Quoted in Turner 1986, p20

Turner 1986, p254

Ibid

“Water is Getting Low.” Rideau Record, August 19, 1913, p1


Turner 1986, p254

Ibid

Turner 1986, p254

Forbes Bush concluded the Rideau Queen was dismantled sometime after 1931, while in the collection of the National Archives are the steamer’s logbooks up until 1933.

Ibid, p42.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Perth Expositor, August 5 1916. Quoted in Turner 1986, p20


Ibid.


Ibid, p42.
The Historical Society of Ottawa

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