

Rich History


Four

Welland

Canals

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY ART WEAVER

With the Niagara Escarpment in the background, this is part of the third Welland Canal south of Lock 17 as it heads north to the current fourth Welland Canal.



Driving over the Garden City Skyway on the QEW, few people realize that the canal they are passing over is actually the fourth Welland Canal.

A canal is needed to connect Lake Erie and Lake Ontario while avoiding Niagara Falls. Locks are necessary for ships to navigate the Niagara Escarpment. St Catharines and Thorold have a rich history of canals starting in 1824 when William Merritt incorporated the Welland Canal Company. Welland Canals #2 and #3 have sections still visible, that run down the Niagara Escarpment to Lake Ontario.



▲ One of the best preserved locks of Canal #2, Lock 7 is around 170 years old. This view looks north from a pedestrian bridge on the hiking loop in Canal Valley Park, St. Catharines.

The southern route of all four canals is quite similar from Port Colborne through Welland to Thorold. At this point, there are two distinctly different routes taken for canals #1 and #2 versus canals #3 and #4. There is very little remaining of the first canal since the locks were made of wood and much of it was later incorporated into the building of the second canal. The only confirmed section remaining is located on private commercial property and basically resembles a large curved ditch.

Welland Canal #2 (1845–1886)

Much of the second canal

can be accessed via the Merritt Trail starting near the top of the Escarpment. This canal basically followed the route of the first canal but was made wider and deeper. The locks were made of limestone quarried from the local Escarpment. This canal, like #1, was designed to accommodate the narrow sailing ships of the day. Locks 22 to 18 are accessible via the Merritt Trail running down the Escarpment to Mountain Locks Park on Glendale Ave. in St. Catharines. This series of locks were nicknamed Neptune's Staircase.

At the base of the Escarpment, the canal disappears under Glendale Ave. It resurfaces, along with

Locks 14 to 6, a few 100 metres north of Glendale. and can again be followed via the Merritt Trail into Canal Valley Park. This park has parking and a short hiking loop where you can see Locks 6 and 7 and on the east side, stacked massive Douglas Fir timbers which are the remains of wooden gates.

Lock 5 was used as an aqueduct running beneath Westchester Ave into Richard Pierpoint Park where the canal connects with what is left of Dick's Creek. This park also has a loop trail and a parking lot. At the west end of the park Lock 4 was used as an aqueduct, travelling beneath the Hwy 406 extension and resurfacing at Lock 3. From

here the canal joins 12 Mile Creek heading for Lake Ontario. Lock 2 is clearly visible further down the creek while Lock 1 is partially visible in Port Dalhousie at the south end of the harbor.

Electricity was not readily available until the early 1900s, making water power extremely desirable. Canal #2 was a magnet for industry needing water power to drive machinery. Thorold became a mecca for paper mills, some of which are still in operation. Many mills were built with three of particular interest:

St Catharines Light & Power (1884) at Lock #5 supplied the city with arc lamps for the city streets.

Wilson Carbide Works of St



▲ Looking south at Lock 10 of Canal #2, during spring's high water, from a narrow steel footbridge that is part of Merritt Trail.



▲ Lock 8 of Canal #2 is well preserved and shows the contouring of the stones to accommodate wooden gates. This view looks south from a narrow footbridge.



▲ This view looks north at Lock 12 of Canal #3. This is the last accessible lock before this canal turns west to cut diagonally across St. Catharines. The next accessible lock is 4 on the far side of the city. Open water in the background is a reservoir for the current canal, #4.



▲ Here is Lock 16 of Canal #3 in spring. It is possible to stand right at the edge of this lock, which is in good condition. The high water is flowing north.



▲ Welland Canals 2, 3 and 4. Map by *Niagara Escarpment Views*.

Catharines (1896) at Lock #10 was an experimental factory producing acetylene for use in lighting, producing 15 tons per day by 1900, selling out to smaller towns who could not afford electricity.

Whitman & Barnes Knife Works (1880) at Lock #6 manufactured cutting parts and agricultural machinery. The foundation of this plant has been preserved in Canal Valley Park.

The Merritt Trail is a well-kept local secret and makes it easy to forget that you are actually hiking through the centre of St. Catharines. It can be accessed via Richard Pierpoint Park on Oakdale Ave., or Canal Valley Park on Westchester Cres. at Oakdale Ave.

Welland Canal #3 (1887-1931)

This canal is located adjacent to the current canal near the edge of the Escarpment in Thorold. It was built

considerably wider than Canal #2 to accommodate the more popular steamships of the day. Locks 23 to 19, responsible for the critical descent of the Escarpment, have been incorporated into Canal #4. Locks 18 and 17 are accessible south of the CN railway tracks, while Locks 16 to 13 are easily accessed along the Bruce Trail heading along the canal south from Glendale Ave.

North of Glendale Ave, Lock 12 is the last visible lock until the far side of St. Catharines. The canal had run diagonally across the city from lock 12 to what is now Jaycee Park on Ontario St. This section of canal and locks is buried but the line of the canal can be clearly drawn straight across the city. There are numerous long thin park spaces defining the old canal route, and several streets running at strange angles that used to be horse trails for pulling the ships through the canal.

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Jaycee Park itself is long and narrow and at its west end the canal took a right turn through the now partially visible Lock 2 toward Lake Ontario. Finally, Lock 1 is fully intact and forms part of the flow control of a mini-generating station at Port Dalhousie.

Unique Experiences

Two unique features of Canal #3 are the Merritt Tunnel between Locks 18 & 19 and the swing bridge north of Lock 17. In 1875, the Great Western Railway Company needed a way to cross the canal without disruption of service. The Merritt Tunnel, a 713 ft single track tunnel was constructed. The tunnel still exists, with spooky stories giving rise to the local nickname of the “Blue Ghost Tunnel.” The tunnel was easily accessed up until 9/11 when security was tightened. The swing bridge was constructed in 1887 as part of the new double track system of the Grand Trunk Railway. This steel bridge is used today by CN Rail in a fixed position but the enormous drive gear is still visible underneath.

The histories of these canals are woven into the fabric of St Catharines and Thorold. These historical green spaces provide nature sightings, including deer, Red Fox, Golden Eagle, kingfisher, heron, egrets and Weasels. **NEV**

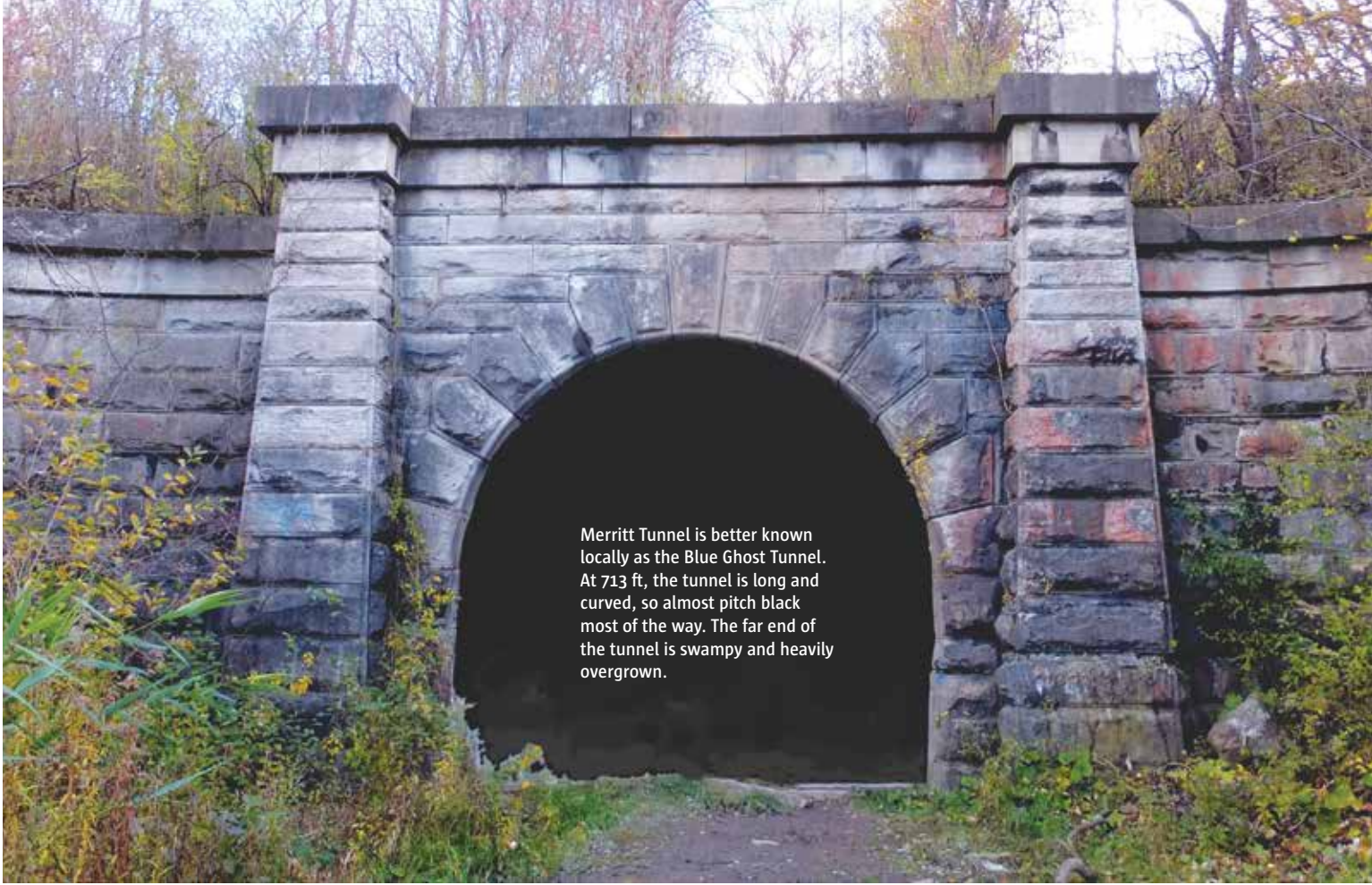
Art Weaver's last feature for this magazine was "The Challenging Beauty of Niagara Glen," Autumn 2019.



▲ Built in 1887, this double-track steel bridge is still used today by CN Rail. The enormous steel gear used to drive the bridge when it rotated to allow ships to pass.



Lock 17 of Canal #3, seen from the old steel swing bridge. This lock is only accessible via an informal trail running south from where the Bruce Trail turns east. Here, the view shows that the canal turns right, or south-west, to run along the base of the Escarpment.



Merritt Tunnel is better known locally as the Blue Ghost Tunnel. At 713 ft, the tunnel is long and curved, so almost pitch black most of the way. The far end of the tunnel is swampy and heavily overgrown.



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