

“Where Rails and Water Meet”: Industry and the Canal Community at Welland

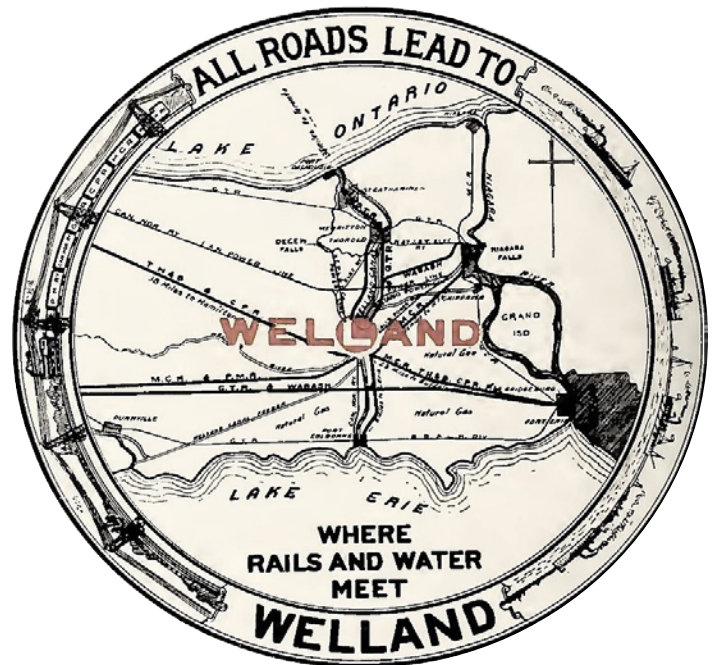
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The establishment of a community at Welland began in 1788, when United Empire Loyalists settled along the banks of the Welland River, focused on agricultural production and export. Construction on the First Welland Canal, between 1824 and 1829, required labourers to build the first aqueduct in order to convey the Welland Canal over the Welland and Chippewa River. This led to formation of a shantytown, housing workers and their families, that was aptly named “Aqueduct”.

The community would gradually grow in importance, particularly as settlement increased during construction of the Second Welland Canal, and businesses were established to support canal developments. By 1844, the settlement was renamed “Merrittsville”, in honour of William Hamilton Merritt, supporting 100 inhabitants, with five stores, three taverns, two tailors, and two shoemakers.¹

The opening of the second canal in 1845, affording increased hydraulic power for industrial developments, would set the community on a more prosperous track. The establishment of mills and factories provided new labour opportunities that led to quick population growth, becoming the second largest canal community (behind St. Catharines) with 1,500 persons by 1851.² The population was primarily English, Irish and German in origin.

Incorporated as a village in 1858, and renamed Welland, early industrial and marine establishments include Matthew Beatty & Sons, which began in 1862 and expanded its workforce of 12 in 1871, to 200 by 1907. These businesses contributed to the village's growth and reputation.³ The rise of railway developments in the 1850s led to several lines constructed across Welland between 1853 and 1883, positioning the canal community with crucial transportation links to expand its commercial networks.



Brand marketing for the town of Welland in *Turn Wellandward*, Welland Board of Trade, 1909.

The construction of the Third Welland Canal would lead to expanding infrastructure and increased construction, which contributed to its incorporation as a town in 1878. Expanding shipping and rail services, combined with new hydroelectric developments, would rapidly transform Welland over the next 30 years. Seeing this opportunity, the Welland Board of Trade was created in 1889 to promote the town and expand its industry and commerce—importantly, negotiating cooperative efforts with the power, railway and shipping concerns to supporting manufacturing and commercial enterprises. Its savvy marketing campaign “Where Rails and Water Meet” reinforced how geographically well-positioned the town was, with all roads, rail lines and water routes leading to Welland.

Between 1891 and 1911, Welland increased its population from 2,000 to more than 5,000 persons, tripled employment from 215 to 684 workers, and saw its capital increase from \$175,000 to \$1.88 million.⁴ The community were primarily English, German or Scottish in origin.

The board highlighted not only the benefits for Welland, but also for its community. It emphasized the advantages of the town, including the excellent quality of life for workmen and their families, with affordable housing, low mortality rates, clean water, and good weather. The Honorable John M. Gibson, Lieutenant Governor of Ontario stated in 1909,

“ Welland has entered upon a remarkable period of progress and growth. I regard Welland as being situated more favorably with its power facilities, railways and canal, than any other town or city in this province.”⁵

Its growth due to manufacturing, led to incorporation as a city in 1917.

Favourable tariffs and trade agreements motivated U.S. businesses to establish branches and facilities at Canadian towns, including Welland. Demand for steel, automotive, and textile industries led to establishments such as the Plymouth Cordage Company (1905–1969), the Empire Cotton Mills (1913–1984) and Union Carbide (1914–1997). Construction on the fourth canal, which began in 1913, spurred marine businesses including Canadian Dredge and Dock in 1915, that were crucial for excavation of the new canal, before its opening in 1931. The First World War led to new firms such as British American Shipbuilding (1917–1920) establishing an emergency shipyard to construct cargo ships, while other wartime contracts were let to establishments that included Lakeside Steel (1909–2012), to produce piping and munitions.

The interwar years led to Welland’s population growth increasing 45 per cent from 8,700 to 12,500.⁶ Increasing immigration led to a more ethnically diverse workforce that included French Canadians, Italians, Hungarians, Poles, and Ukrainians, all contributing to manufacture.⁷ The Second World War would expand the industrial workforce quickly. Companies such as Atlas Steels (1928–2000) which started with a few dozen workers, doubled its workforce between 1941 and 1942, from 1,600 to 3,000 workers. The post-war boom would lead to a significant 190-per-cent population increase from 15,400 to 44,400, by 1971.⁸

The opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959 led to increased transportation infrastructure, including new docks and wharves at Welland to support shipping by manufacturers such as Union Carbide. While the construction of the Welland Canal By-Pass would better facilitate shipping and road traffic at Welland, it would irrevocably change

its rail network. The By-Pass diverted all rail tracks to the Townline Tunnel, and forced Welland to lose its central passenger terminal, and adjacent rail facilities.

Welland’s expansion slowed after regional amalgamation in 1970, while deindustrialization precipitated by the introduction of free trade in the late-1980s, contributed to the end of several large industrial enterprises in the 1990s. Despite these setbacks, Niagara’s canal communities have, during periods of recession and decline, found new directions to spur development and transition brownfield sites for new enterprises. Companies such as Valbruna ASW, which purchased the Atlas Steels site in 2019, are investing in \$80 million in upgrades by 2027, continuing a long legacy of steel production at Welland.⁹ New transportation connections, such as Welland-based GIO Rail (through switching agreements with HOPA Ports and Bioveld Canada, owner of the Thorold Multimodal Hub) enables the use of track owned by Canadian National to provide first- and last-mile delivery and transload services.¹⁰ These are cooperative efforts that ensure Welland continues to be well-positioned “where rails and water meet.”

¹ Alan Hughes, “The Feeder Canal and Its Communities,” *Newsletter of the Historical Society of St. Catharines*, September 2007, 8; W.H. Smith, *Smith’s Canadian gazetteer: comprising statistical and general information respecting all parts of the upper province, or Canada West* (Toronto: H. & W. Rowsell, 1846), 113.

² W.H. Smith, *Canada: Past, Present and Future Being a Historical, Geographical, Geological and Statistical Account of Canada West*, vol.1 (Toronto: Thomas Maclear, 1851).

³ Canadian Industry in 1871 Project (CANIND71), University of Guelph, Ontario, 1982–2008; *The Hub of the Peninsula* (Welland: Welland Telegraph, 1907), 12.

⁴ *Canada Yearbook* (Ottawa: Census and Statistics Office, 1913), 59.

⁵ Turn Wellandward (Welland: Board of Trade, 1909).

⁶ Statistics Canada, *Census of the Canada for 1921–1941* (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics).

⁷ Carmela Patrias and Larry Savage, *Union Power: Solidarity and Struggle in Niagara* (Athabasca, AB: Athabasca University Press, 2012), 45.

⁸ Statistics Canada, *Census of the Canada for 1951–1971* (Ottawa: Dominion Bureau of Statistics).

⁹ *Welland’s Industrial Renaissance* (Welland: City of Welland, 2023), 6.

¹⁰ “GIO Rail to provide service to industrial complex in Thorold, Ontario”. *Trains Magazine*, June 13, 2022.