

FERRYING NIAGARA

Black Rock to Fort Erie

The Early Years

This article is the first of two parts contributed by Branch member Tom Kennedy.

The History of Welland County (1887) records that Christian **Steiner** from the Susquehanna River Valley of Pennsylvania scouted the Lake Erie shore around Sugar Loaf in Niagara in 1778. His crossing of the Niagara River is not described but he probably crossed by a canoe, raft or bateaux as no ferries were recorded operating in the Niagara River area. The first reference found is 1784 when a ferry service is claimed in a short history of Fort Erie in 1931, noting that it docked 2 miles below the Fort proper which places it at about Bertie Street. The History of Welland County also credits 1784 as the beginning of an organized ferry service that continued for 30 years. The area of the docking was called Fort Erie Mills/Fort Erie Rapids. The ferry was described in "Travels in Canada in 1795" as a British vessel capable of carrying 5 horses besides people and baggage. This time frame is consistent with the memories of Silas **Carter** who had settled in Bertie in 1787. He claimed it was operating during the Revolutionary War.

Silas **Carter** served in the Revolutionary Army under George **Washington** but voted for land rather than liberty and applied for a land grant on Lot 13, BF Lake Erie in 1787. The Buffalo Historical Society in an 1863 meeting, mentions his memories of this and says he was held in high regard by his contemporaries. **Carter** eventually built a mill on this site on Lake Erie. Canadian records also vouch for his veracity.

Many historians and article writers have dated the existence of the Ferry any where from 1796 to 1800 however they may be referring to timetable service. There are many first person accounts that differ with the above 1796 to 1800 dates. John **Kennedy**, who settled in Grimsby Township says in a family history they were ferried across on June 8, 1795. The Duc de **la Rochefaucoult-Liancourt**, a touring French noble, wrote in his "Travels in Canada" that he crossed the Niagara at Black Rock on June 29, 1795. He said it took about 5 minutes one way and the return was about 15 minutes. He described the general detail of the vessels and the dock that was 2 miles below the Fort. He also mentioned that the Master of the vessel recorded the names of all the passengers coming and going. This was required under the 1793 Executive

Council directive setting up ferry service regulations.

J. C. **Fretz** in his articles on Early Mennonites in Niagara gave 1788 as the year Jacob **Sevitz (Zavitz)** and his family crossed into Niagara. Those who drove Conestoga Wagons converted them to serviceable quasi boats as they were water tight and floated across. D. W. **Smith**, the Surveyor General, says in his 1799 memoirs he observed 19 wagons crossing at Fort Erie in this manner.

Thomas **Choates**, UEL, who had pioneered in Glanford Township in 1796, went back to New Hampshire in 1798 to bring back his 3 brothers and 2 cousins of the **Burnham** branch back to Glanford via the Niagara River. Thomas when he had first come had travelled via the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario to reach Glanford. The Niagara route was more amenable with baggage and animals. When Choates arrived at the River, the men in his party built a flat bottomed scow and fixed poles at the bow of the scow. They then lashed the horns of the oxen that had been pulling their wagons to this pole and the swimming oxen powered them across the Niagara.

Silas **Smith** crossed in 1787 with 3 horses and two cows in a similar fashion settling in Saltfleet Township with many of the 46 families that accompanied him.

In 1793 the Executive Council of Upper Canada passed regulations concerning ferries. They laid down the duty of the Ferryman to record his passenger names, the fares to be charged and the quality of service. Henry **Windecker** was granted a lease in 1793 for the ferry service at Fort Erie. In 1786 Col. John **Warren**, the elder, was appointed Inspector of Immigration at the International Ferry which had been established at Fort Erie. He was later appointed Collector of Customs at Fort Erie which post he held until his death in 1812. A son, John **Warren**, the younger petitioned for the ferry lease, complaining the holder at that time Hugh **Gilmer** (sic) was giving poor service. He was given the lease in 1802 at a rent of 10 pounds sterling a year. This lease was renewed 4 times. On his death his wife was granted the lease. John the younger was also Collector of Customs till his death in 1832.

Various persons became ferry operators, as Master of the vessels or the lessee including Col. James **Kerby**, Benjamin **Hardison**, and William **Forsyth** who operated from the Canadian side. George **Seibel** in his "The Niagara Portage Road", Charles