

A Short (Political) History of the Trent-Severn Waterway

- 1615 Samuel de Champlain, guided by the Hurons, becomes the first European to travel the network of inland waters from Lake Huron's Georgian Bay to Lake Ontario at the Bay of Quinte.
- 1785 Discussion of the need for a route from Lake Ontario to Lake Huron begins in Upper Canada.
- 1793 The War of the First Coalition in Europe causes concern that the newly formed United States might support France and interfere with navigation in British North America. Access to the upper Great Lakes is exposed to potential blockade along the U.S. border at Detroit and Lake St. Clair.
- 1794 Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe begins construction of Yonge Street north from Toronto to build a secure land route to connect the lakes.
- 1812 The War of 1812 leads to calls for inland waterways for military use, and leads to the construction of several along the Ottawa River.
- 1815-27 Surveys of routes between Lake Ontario and Lake Huron are carried out, but the estimated costs are considered high and no action is taken.
- 1832 The Rideau Canal linking Kingston and Ottawa is completed, 55% over budget.
- 1832 Coburg businessman James Gray Bethune, operator of a steamship company working Lake Ontario, launches two small steamers on Rice Lake to provide service to Peterborough via the lake and the Otonabee River.
- 1833 A group organized by Bethune contracts for construction of a lock at Bobcaygeon in the middle of what are now known as the Kawartha Lakes.
- 1833 Three members of the Legislative Assembly promote competing routes north from Lake Ontario – one from Coburg, one from Port Hope, and one via the Trent River.
One MLA, George Strange Boulton of Coburg, hopes to kill the Trent route by ordering a complete survey, assuming the costs would make his case, and he succeeds in getting the Legislature to fund a survey.
Nicol Hugh Baird of Montreal is contracted for the Trent route survey, which is completed in November, and is then countered a few months later by a lower estimate by a different surveyor for a route from Port Hope.
- 1835 Baird completes work on a second commission, surveying a route to connect Rice Lake west to Lake Simcoe.
Supporters of the Welland Canal, connecting Lake Ontario to Lake Erie, sense possible competition and launch opposition. Their supporters in the Ontario Legislature, then in the grip of the Family Compact, block any further western progress for many years.
- 1836 Support for the inland routes remains strong among the populace so as a compromise measure the government contracts for three more locks in the interior.

- 1837 The Upper Canada Rebellion halts work on the new locks. Political changes follow. Lord Durham recommends joining Upper and Lower Canada, and his recommendation is accepted. Other administrative changes make the new government more responsive to regional influence.
- This creates an opening for central Ontario lumber barons to oppose any further extension of the canal system. They use the rivers to float logs to their mills and locks would get in the way and require them to resort to more expensive modes of transportation.
- The government board in charge concludes that the lock system would be too slow for military purposes and need not be pursued. It allows the locks under construction to be completed, but permits all the other lock locations to be turned into timber slides.
- 1840s With four locks completed, the central Kawartha lakes are open for navigation for most of the year, but there is no marine connection to the Great lakes.
- 1850s Through the 1850s and 60s a series of rail and road ventures are launched to connect to the inland waterway – including nine rail lines and two new roads. Some are successful, others not.
- 1867 Confederation gives the new Province of Ontario control over construction, but lacking the power of federal financing it can only afford small projects.
- Between 1867 and 1879 Ontario rebuilds the lock at Lindsay which had been converted into a timber slide, and adds two new locks.
- 1879 A group of Conservative politicians form the Trent Valley Canal Association, attract the support of Liberals and neutral parties, and eventually come to represent almost every riding from Trenton to Midland. Their campaigns convince John A. Macdonald to provide funding for four more locks.
- 1881 Oversight of the expansion is assigned to Tom Rubidge of Peterborough. He feels that any work on the project is a waste of money and is unhappy to be put in charge. He proceeds to be arrogant and disruptive and to make life hell on earth for everyone in sight for the next six years.
- 1887 Macdonald wins an election with no further canal promises, and it's realized that his earlier support was just a short-term political calculation. Macdonald forms the Trent Valley Canal Commission ostensibly to study options, but in fact to delay any further work.
- 1891 As the 1891 election approaches suddenly Macdonald senses that he needs to use the Trent to shore up any seats he could, and announces a decision to proceed with completion of the scheme. He dies three months later.
- 1895 Despite oft repeated promises the remaining Conservatives do nothing until the next election approaches. Suddenly two new canal contracts are announced. But the game's obvious, and it doesn't work this time. Wilfred Laurier's Liberals win the 1896 election.
- 1896 Because the Conservatives had used the canal projects to get votes in the past the new Liberal government immediately cancels all on-going work.

- 1897 The Trent Valley Canal Association organizes a massive campaign by businessmen to convince the government of the case for the completion of the Trent system, culminating in bringing 270 delegates to a meeting in Ottawa in April. Laurier concedes and announces that "The government has adopted the completion of the Trent Valley route as part of their policy."
- The timing of this apparent victory is not ideal. The era of the barge canal as a commercial system is over. Traffic on the formerly hugely profitable Erie Canal in New York State has dwindled. The railways originally intended to connect to the inland waterway now bypass it and move freight faster and cheaper.**
- 1898 Even so, Toronto, where the railway routes converge, is taking no chances about possible competition so it tries to stop further work on the canal. When the first contract for completion of the system is announced, the Member of Parliament for Toronto West (and a director of the Canadian Pacific Railway) opposes it with scorn in Parliament, and manages to get the government to budget for only the completion of work already in progress. The government really didn't want to have to proceed anyway.
- 1900 With another election looming it's time for the Liberals to devise a new strategy, and they propose a wide variety of public works, especially those that take place in Conservative ridings that are subject to swaying. This is the case for all of the Ontario counties involved in the Trent system, and suddenly the Trent becomes a centrepiece of the Ontario strategy (again). With their election win, the party begins the final completion of the Trent system.
- 1904 The Peterborough Lift Lock, which raises boats 65 feet (20m), opens and sets world engineering and construction records.
- 1907 The Kirkfield Lift Lock opens and extends travel west beyond Balsam Lake.
- 1914 Contracts are let for three locks to connect the Severn River to Georgia Bay, but World War I brings a shortage of manpower and resources, and delays.
- 1917 Instead of a conventional lock, a temporary marine railway with cradles to carry boats up an inclined plane is completed at Big Chute.
- 1919 A second marine railway is built at Swift Rapids, bringing the (then) total of locks, lift locks, and marine railways in the system to 45.
- 1920 The first boat to travel the Trent-Severn Waterway between Lakes Ontario and Huron completes its voyage in July, 87 years after construction on the first lock started.**
- 1932 The opening of the Welland Canal, capable of handling oceangoing ships, renders the Trent-Severn system obsolete for commercial purposes.
- Today The Trent Severn Waterway has become a National Historic Site, an important component of Ontario's tourism industry, and a constant joy to the recreational boaters who ply its scenic, meandering route.