LESSON THREE

CANADA’S CAPITAL TREASURES

Seven classroom-ready lesson plans and five introductory videos highlight and explore the significance and importance of Canada’s Capital Treasures. These treasures represent knowledge, sacrifice, commitment and ingenuity. This series of lesson plans is available for download at canadascapital.gc.ca/education.

RIDEAU CANAL LOCKS

MATERIALS

Rideau Canal Locks video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iKfbnaKaCk

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The learner will:

- Discover more about Canada-US relations, particularly in the 19th century;
- Use mapping skills to outline an annotated journey;
- Use writing skills to create a brief historical narrative based on the building of the canal;
- Find out more about planning a commemorative monument;
- Understand that a variety of places, including waterways and landscapes, can reflect aspects of heritage, history and culture;
- Explore the storyboarding of informational videos.

KEYWORDS

Rideau Canal; Colonel John By; Rideau Canal locks; Bytown Museum.
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BYTOWN MUSEUM AND RIDEAU CANAL LOCKS

One of the first buildings John By built was the Commissary; today, it is the Bytown Museum and the oldest masonry structure in Ottawa.

INTRODUCTION

Can a stretch of water be a national symbol? If it’s the Rideau Canal, it can! Defined by a series of 47 locks and two-dozen dams, the Rideau Canal connects Kingston to the Ottawa River, a distance of more than 200 kilometres. Built between 1826 and 1832, it remains an engineering marvel, and the longest continuously operating waterway in North America—not to mention its winter transformation into the world’s largest skating rink!

But this UNESCO*-designated World Heritage Site is more than just a series of facts and figures: the canal defined a nation, created a capital and symbolizes Canada’s dedication to preserving its historical past.

The city of Ottawa grew at the confluence of the Ottawa, Rideau, and Gatineau rivers. Long used as transportation corridors by Aboriginal peoples, the waterways led into the vast hinterland of the Canadian Shield. After the War of American Independence, Britain feared that supply lines along the St. Lawrence River could be easily disrupted by any conflict with America. In 1826, the British government sent Colonel John By to build an alternative transportation route linking central Canada with the Atlantic, via Montréal.

Over the course of the next six years, Colonel By and his team of Royal Engineers mapped out a daring course through wilderness, swamp, and tough Canadian Shield rock. French Canadian and newly immigrated Irish workers supplied most of the backbreaking labour. Accidents and illness claimed the lives of many.

The canal joined the Ottawa River with one last engineering miracle: the step locks just below what is now Parliament Hill. At the locks, the Rideau Canal is more than 24 metres above the river. Without a solution, the canal would have ended in a waterfall. Instead, By built a series of eight hand-winched step locks that raise and lower watercraft like a slow-moving escalator. Attempts to modernize the mechanism were met by the vocal opposition of the heritage community; today, the locks are still opened and closed by hand. You can see an example of this in the video, Rideau Canal Locks.

In creating a transportation corridor linking central and eastern Canada, John By accomplished a close-to-impossible task. Surely, his British taskmasters celebrated his military and engineering triumph? Unfortunately for By, unauthorized expenditures led the British government to blame him for canal cost overruns. Today, By is regarded as the ingenious hero who created Canada’s Capital, but his final years were spent attempting to clear his name of accusations of financial mismanagement.

Thanks to By’s tenacity and an influx of canal workers, the little lumber town on the shores of the Ottawa River became Bytown. By 1855, the growing community was renamed Ottawa and, a few short years later, Queen Victoria selected Ottawa as the capital of the province of Canada. The queen had five cities to choose from: Toronto, Montréal, Kingston, Québec, and Ottawa. But Ottawa’s advantages were clear: the city was on the boundary between Upper and Lower Canada; it was a safe distance from the U.S. border; and it was easily accessible, mostly because of the Rideau Canal.

ACTIVITY ONE: WRITE A SHORT PAPER

The British government was worried about disruptions to their supply lines if a war with America broke out.
Using library and Internet resources, find out why the British were worried about this. Did they have a strong case? Argue your opinion in a short paper outlining the British position and exploring any alternatives to a massive construction project like the Rideau Canal.

ACTIVITY TWO: TAKE A VIRTUAL TRIP!

Is the Rideau Canal used today? Draw a map of the canal from Kingston to Ottawa and include the types of activities that visitors can experience along the way. Imagine the region 50 years from now. What would the canal be like in the future?

ACTIVITY THREE: A COLONEL BY MONUMENT

In his lifetime, Colonel John By went from hero to villain. Remembering his ingenuity and dedication can be done in many ways, from monuments to special events. As a class, discuss the pros and cons of permanent monuments versus more transient events or commemorations. With a small group, propose an event, monument, or other commemoration to celebrate By’s achievements.

Alternative activity: Many others helped Colonel By, including the labourers who built the canal and the Royal Engineers who came up with solutions to the various technical challenges. Propose a method to commemorate their achievements.

ACTIVITY FOUR: MAKING A CAPITAL

Capital cities around the world are selected for numerous reasons. As a class, brainstorm some of them. Some cities are created specifically to become capitals, others are the oldest or most successful cities in the country. Think about why Queen Victoria chose Ottawa as the capital. What other cities were considered? Imagine that a new capital was needed for Canada. Divide into five or six groups. Choose a potential city such as Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montréal, or Halifax, or suggest another location (including a purpose-built capital) and, as a team, argue the benefits and potential of your city. How do you think a decision should be made?

ACTIVITY FIVE: INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH AND CLASS DISCUSSION

a) Building the Rideau Canal involved many engineering firsts. Research the scientific aspects of building the canal and present them to the rest of your class.

b) Preserving our history is an important way not only to remember the past, but also to learn from it. Research UNESCO world heritage sites. What types of sites receive the
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designation? Are any heritage sites near your community? In a short paper, discuss a Canadian UNESCO heritage site and outline why it received the designation.

ACTIVITY SIX: RENAMING COMMUNITIES (GRADE 1 OF HIGH SCHOOL IN QUEBEC OR GRADE 7 IN ONTARIO)

The settlement of Bytown was founded in 1826 and named after Colonel John By, but then, in 1855, it became a city and was renamed Ottawa. Find out the reasons for this change. What is your opinion about that decision? Many places in Canada have been renamed over the centuries. Many places originally had Aboriginal names, but were renamed by English or French settlers. More recently, place names have been changed for political reasons. Find out whether the name of the place where you live, or any places near you, have been renamed, and if so, why. How would you feel if the place where you live now was renamed next year? If the place had to be renamed, what kind of a process would you want put in place to decide on the new name?

ACTIVITY SEVEN: BRIDGING THE RIVER (GRADE 2 OF HIGH SCHOOL IN QUEBEC OR GRADE 8 IN ONTARIO)

Canals are created in order to facilitate the movement of boats and other water transport. However, engineers also had to consider how to provide opportunities for land transportation, such as railways, cars, horses and carts, as well as pedestrians, to cross the waterways. When the Rideau Canal was built, the engineers built several types of causeways or bridges, including elevated railway bridges and swing bridges. Look for photos of these online and research how these bridges worked and whether or not they have all been replaced with newer designs. With a partner, make an annotated diagram or model of a specific bridge that crosses the Rideau Canal and locate it on a map.

ACTIVITY EIGHT: WRITING ABOUT THE BUILDING OF THE CANAL (GRADE 3 OF HIGH SCHOOL IN QUEBEC OR GRADE 9 IN ONTARIO)

Write a short story or script that is set during the building of the Rideau Canal (1826-1832). Include at least one dramatic scene. Research to find out more about the history of the Canal to jumpstart your ideas. For example, about 2000 people worked to build the Canal during each year of its construction. Most came from Ireland, fleeing poverty and famine. More than 500 workers died during the building of the Canal due to blasting accidents, drowning, or disease. (A monument to honour these workers now stands close to Parliament Hill.) Be sure the historical details in your narrative are accurate.

MEDIA LITERACY ACTIVITY

View the video “Rideau Canal Locks.” One way that videographers create films is to prepare a storyboard before filming. Of course, they may change their minds after they have completed the recording and include or delete elements, but the storyboard provides them with a basic framework in which to work. View the video again, pausing it when you wish. What are the main scenes in the video? Jot down a brief description of each main scene with some details, for example, first there is a close-up summer scene of the locks, etc. Then, create a storyboard in simple panels to show the basic sequence of shots that make up the scenes of Rideau Canal Locks and approximately how many seconds each scene takes. Reflect on the decisions made by the creators. If they needed to reduce the video down to 40 seconds, what would you suggest they cut and why? Block this out on your storyboard and see whether it would work. If Rideau Canal Locks could be increased by 60 more seconds, what would you suggest be included? Adapt your storyboard to show this additional content.

*UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization