

The Malagawatch Canal

In the early days of the island's settlement there were no roads; only footpaths and trails for horse-drawn wagons. The main mode of transport was by water.

Schooners and later steamers plied the Cape Breton waterways serving the Bras d'Or Lakes and coastal settlements. In winter horse and sleigh served the land and the lakes.

With the coming of the railroad in the 1880s, Orangedale became a major rail depot on Lake Bras d'Or. Orangedale had deep water access right up to a wharf in Blues Cove, just a few yards from the track, and through it goods were shipped in and out. At that time, Marble Mountain was a “boom town” with the extraction of marble from its huge quarry. Getting supplies to the village was important. The deep-water open-lake route from the wharf at Marble Mountain to Orangedale is almost 19 miles (30.5 km) and subject to strong winds and rough water.



A shorter, more protected route, could be taken through Little Harbour and the boats hauled over “The Crossing” into Malagawatch Harbour and then hauled over the narrow isthmus connecting Big Harbour Island to the mainland. At the head of River Cove the isthmus was less than 20 yards wide and only a barachois¹ separated it from the Denys Basin.

¹ A word used in Atlantic Canada and St-Pierre & Miquelon for a shallow lagoon formed by a sandbar. The term comes from a Basque word, “barratxoá”, meaning “little bar”.

Here, in the late 1880s, on their own initiative and with their own ingenuity, residents of the area banded together, to excavate the Malagawatch Canal through the barachois: approximately 1000 feet long, 17 feet wide, and 4 feet deep, connecting Malagawatch Harbour to the Denys Basin. In this way they could navigate among the islands from Marble Mountain to Orangedale on a route that was safer and saved about 5 miles².

The trail to Big Harbour Island was maintained by a wooden bridge with a 4-foot clearance to allow small craft through the canal. With the advent of good roads and motor vehicles, the bridge was removed, and the breach filled with solid material; but the outlines of the canal remain in silent tribute to the industry of the early settlers of Cape Breton Island whose survival depended on the construction of such time- and life-saving facilities as the Malagawatch Canal.

Adapted from “Cruise Cape Breton: The Yachters' Guide to the Bras d'Or Lakes, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia” written by Roy Mac Keen, 1974

² Some authors claim that this route saved 20 miles. This is clearly an error since the total distance between the wharf at Marble Mountain and the one at Orangedale, via the open-water route is less than 19 miles.