

St Peters Canal National Historic Site of Canada

St Peters Canal is one of the most important historic sites on Cape Breton Island. The village of St Peter's sits astride a narrow isthmus, barely half a mile wide, between Lake Bras d'Or and the Atlantic Ocean. Long before the Europeans came, this narrow strip of land was a natural gathering place for the Mi'kmaq people: it provided an easy portage for their birchbark canoes between the lake and the ocean.

Europeans arrived in the 1630s and built a trading post here, naming it Saint-Pierre. They traded trinkets, fabric, and tools with the Mi'kmaq for furs. An early arrival was an Acadian merchant, Nicholas Denys. Pioneer, explorer, and trader, he established a settlement on the isthmus. Trading with the Mi'kmaq, he understood the potential of the portage route. In 1650 he built a 20-foot wide road across the isthmus for a haul-over, and used oxen to haul large rowing and sailing vessels on skids over the half-mile span, thus opening up the Bras d'Or Lake route to larger boats.

In 1669, the British burned the trading post to the ground and Nicholas Denys left and resettled in New Brunswick. At that time, there were no permanent European settlements on the island. There is a museum dedicated to Nicholas Denys close to the canal.

In 1713, under the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht, France ceded most of its North American territories to the British, retaining only Cape Breton Island, which they renamed Ile Royale; Saint-Pierre became Port Toulouse; English Harbour, Louisbourg. As the French strengthened their defences against the British, Port Toulouse was a major staging post for the construction of the fortress at Louisbourg, and Fort Toulouse was built to guard the entrance to the port. Louisbourg was to be France's major foothold in North America. But that dream was short-lived. In 1730, when the British defeated the French at Louisbourg for a second time, Fort Toulouse was also destroyed.



Southern Entrance to the Lock

By the end of the 18th century, the French had left or been deported and the British had resettled Port Toulouse, renaming it Saint Peter's. The inhabitants soon began petitioning for a canal to replace the haul-over. A feasibility study was ordered in 1825 and after much discussion, construction finally began in 1854. It took 15 years of

government wrangling and digging through solid rock before the canal was completed. A tidal lock with double gates at the seaward end of the cut, allows

passage of vessels at any state of the tide. Since its original construction, the canal has been deepened and the lock enlarged to allow its use by larger vessels. Parks Canada undertook a major renovation of the canal in 1985, and new swing bridge was completed in 2017 to provide two-way traffic over the canal.



The Lock

The canal was designated as a National Historic Site in 1929 in recognition of its important role in the settlement of the island. It is maintained and operated by Parks Canada.