Rockcliffe portage around Rideau Falls – analysis of location and traces

The Rideau Falls present a major obstacle for travellers going between the Ottawa and Rideau Rivers. A portage around the falls is known to have existed, used by thousands of years by Indigenous people before the arrival of Europeans and then for a short while by settlers. Little information has been found of such a portage. There are a few European surveyor notes relating to the portage and despite the long history of use by Indigenous people none of their information seems to have survived except for the Algonquin name for the river - *Pasapkedjinawong* - river that passes between the rocks.[1]

This analysis looks at the historical records and present-day information to speculate where the portage was located.

The Rideau Falls are part of a long-standing indigenous presence in the Ottawa area

The falls of the Rideau are in an area that includes the mouth of the Gatineau River, the Chaudière Falls, the Ottawa River, the cliffs along the south shore and relatively flat land on the north shore. Archeological excavations have found evidence of long-standing Indigenous burial sites and summer gathering places as indicated by large amounts of pottery and projectile points. These sites go back several thousand years. As well, the Chaudière Falls were a place of spiritual significance for Indigenous people. The Gatineau, Ottawa and Rideau Rivers were travel routes and their juncture was an obvious location for meeting people.[2] During the summer months, fishing at the falls and the mouths of the rivers provided easy food. There were also groves of maple trees which Indigenous people used to make syrup in the early spring.[3]

From the Ottawa River, to access the Rideau River the large lakes that form its headwaters and several routes that lead from the river to the St. Lawrence River, travellers had to first portage around the Rideau Falls

Where was the portage around Rideau Falls?

To better understand the nature and length of a portage around Rideau Falls, a description of the river above the falls will shed light on where the portage ended on its shores.

The pre-contact shoreline of the Rideau River upstream of the falls has been completely modified. First by the clearing of the land for New Edinburgh, the construction in 1854 of the Bytown and Prescott Railway and later by the construction of berms to prevent flooding of the houses in New Edinburgh. More recent modifications include infilling that joined several islands in the Rideau to the shore of New Edinburgh. These shoreline modifications destroyed any Indigenous archeological sites that may have existed. In contrast to the expansive archeological sites in Jacques Cartier Park, archeologist have found limited archeological evidence of Indigenous presence in New Edinburgh, and that was along the Ottawa River, not the Rideau River. In Figure1, the 1816 map of the Rideau Falls area shows a number of islands, which have disappeared in the more recent Google Earth image.



Figure 1 Left side – "Plan of the Rideau River from its Mouth to the Head of Long Island", by Lt. Joshua Jebb, June 20, 1816. Library and Archives Canada, NMC 59324 1/2 as cited in Watson, Ken W., Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's Transformation of a Wilderness Waterway, Ken W. Watson, Elgin, Ontario, 2006, digital edition (www.parkscanadahistory.com/publications/rideau/engineered-landscapes-2006.pdf) p. 93; right side is current Google Earth view of the same location. Note the current lack of islands just above the falls.

Before European settlement, the Ottawa and Rideau Rivers had greater variations in water levels than today due to the absence of dams on both rivers. At the end of summer, water levels were much lower in both rivers while spring floods raised the water levels much higher than those of today. The average water level of the Ottawa River at Rideau Falls is now higher consequent to the completion of the Carillon Dam in 1964. Not only has this dam flooded many Indigenous sites that bordered the shores of the river, but it has all but eliminated the once plentiful American eel that was a major food resource along the Ottawa River.

The Rideau River in Ottawa has also been changed since settlement. To cite one extreme example, the construction of the Rideau Canal included the dam at Hog's Back in Ottawa which raised the upstream water level by about 13 metres to form what is now Mooney's Bay and drowning what was then known as Three Rock Rapids.

Just above the Rideau Falls, rapids used to stretch upstream to the head of Porter Island. These have now been drowned as the water level of the Rideau River in this section has risen by several feet due to the low dam and stop logs at the lip of the Falls.

Going upstream from these rapids, a sluggish current is interspersed by about 4 rapids until the rapids at Carleton University, and then Hog's Back Falls. The total rise from the head of the falls to the bottom of Carleton rapids is about 8 metres over 9.6 kilometres.

Early descriptions of the portage

The first mention of a portage around Rideau Falls was made by Samuel de Champlain on June 4 in his 1613 voyage with Indigenous guides upstream on the Ottawa River to approximately Pembroke. At Rideau Falls:

> *At the mouth of this river [the Gatineau] there is another [the Rideau] coming from the south…There is an island in the middle of this river which like all the land round about is covered with pines and white cedars. When the savages which to enter this river they climb the mountain, carrying their canoes, and go half a league by land.*[4]

Champlain does not indicate which side of the falls the portage was taken. Nor does he mention any Indigenous gatherings on the shore opposite the falls. He describes the route as climbing a mountain, which is apt as the shores of the Ottawa River on either side of the Rideau River are mostly cliffs with a few small valleys. Undoubtedly, Champlain was referring to such a valley as a way to climb the mountain. The length "half a league" is clearly a record of what his Indigenous guides told him and there is no record of Champlain travelling the portage. It is not clear if these guides could measure the distance, rather than the time it took. In addition, Champlain used different measurements for a league varying between 2.95 kilometres and 3.38 kilometres.[5] A best guess is that half a league for Champlain is approximately 1.5 kilometers, slightly less than one mile.

In 1783, one hundred and seventy years later, Lt. Gershom French surveyed the Rideau River from its mouth to its headwaters and then down the Cataraqui River to Lake Ontario to assess the agricultural potential of the land along the banks. On 2 October he wrote that in leaving the Ottawa River *"by a carrying place of a mile entered our canoes into the Rideau"*.[6]

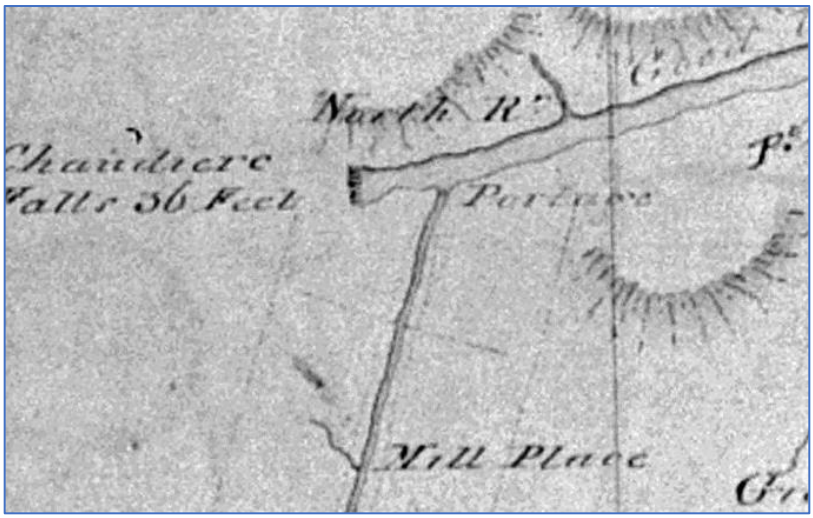

Figure 2 extract from Lt French's map of 1783 as drawn by Chewett. The portage is shown on the east side of the Rideau River, which itself is only indicated as a straight river. in Watson, Ken W., Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's Transformation of a Wilderness Waterway, Ken W. Watson, Elgin, Ontario, 2006, digital edition p. 73 (www.parkscanadahistory.com/publications/rideau/engineered-landscapes-2006.pdf)

Lt. French's map (Figure 2) does not give the exact location of the portage or its length. That the map shows the word "Portage" on the east side of the falls may indicate the location of the portage. One hopes that the length of "1 mile" is relatively accurate as Lt. French was a surveyor and might have paced the length.

The water level in the Rideau River in early October was likely to have been low although autumn rains could have raised the level somewhat. The current view of the Rideau River water level just above the falls in late summer is somewhat misleading as the stop logs at the lip of the Rideau Falls have raised the water level by several feet. Lt French's journal said that he travelled up stream "*south 15 degrees west five miles in deep still water*".[7] Ken Watson speculates that this "still water" which would have started at the upstream end of the portage took French to the bottom of what are now called Carleton Rapids. Lt. French's mention of still water would have been a somewhat accurate description of the current in low water.

A later surveyor, Samuel Clowes, indicated in his 1825 report of his survey of a canal route from Kingston to Ottawa that there were rapids just above the falls.[8] "*At the head of the Cascades [rapids] we are compelled to forsake the River altogether there being nothing but a succession of Rapids from thence to the Ottawa River*". Clowes' use of the term "forsake" refers not to the navigability of the river for

canoes but for larger boats that he forecasted to use the canal. Smaller canoes may have been able to navigate part of the Cascades rapids. Clowes proposed a canal from the head of the Cascades Rapids to Governor's Bay in the Ottawa river, a total of "1 mile and 17 chains". As the surveyors' chain was 66 feet long, this would make the canal a total of 6402 feet (1.95 km) along the east bank of the Rideau River. Clowes noted in his journal that this measurement was finished 1 September 1824, a time when the water levels in the Rideau are at their summertime low.

Location of the portage route. There are three historic maps which show a "road" from what is presumably Governor Bay to the Rideau River. The first (Figure 3) is an 1820-ish map of Gloucester township, drawn to record the concession and lot lines and their owners.

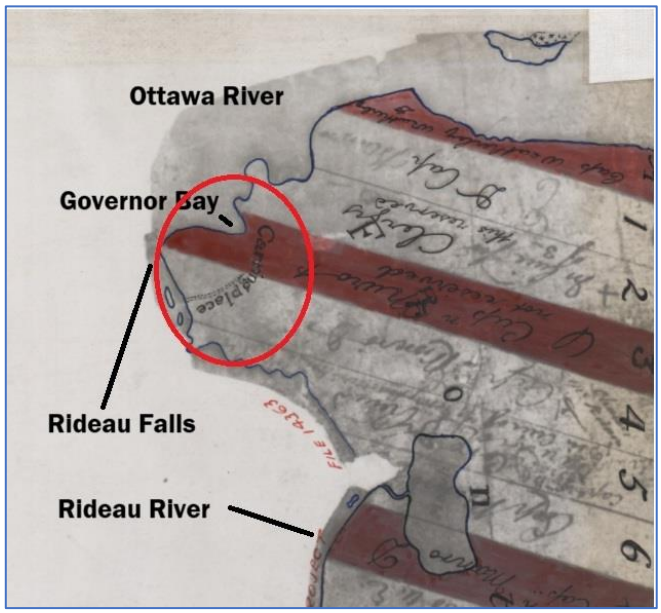

Figure 3: section of the 1820-ish patent plan map of Gloucester township showing the "Carrying place" and a trail around Rideau Falls. Annotations by author. North is at the top of the map. Source: Gloucester Township, [patent plan], RG 1-100-0-0-766 Patent Plans, I0043686, Archives of Ontario.

It is clear from the Gloucester township map that a portage trail had a landing in what is now Governor Bay on the Ottawa River and that the landing on the right bank (eastern side) of the Rideau River was opposite three small islands slightly downstream from a notice bend to the east (coming downstream) in the river. Though no distance is marked on the map, the marked trail is about 0.7 kilometres long or about 0.4 miles long (distance measured on Google Earth by author).

The second map (Figure 4), drawn by Lt. Joshua Jebb dated 20 June 1816 as part of the planning for the Rideau Canal, shows his proposed route from the Rideau Falls to Long Island.[9] The map shows a "road" from likely Governor Bay to the Rideau River. Instead of a specific terminus on the river as in his July map, the "road" curves at that location to continue to "Three Island Rapids". Likely this road was to avoid hauling canoes and freight up the seven rapids (Jebb numbered them) on the Rideau River between the Falls and Three Island Rapids, including Three Rock Rapids (now Hog's Back) and Stegman's Rapids (Carleton Rapids).



Figure 4 Plan of the Rideau River from its Mouth to the Head of Long Island", by Lt. Joshua Jebb, June 20, 1816. Library and Archives Canada, NMC 59324 1/2 as cited in Watson, Ken W., Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's Transformation of a Wilderness Waterway, Ken W. Watson, Elgin, Ontario, 2006, digital edition (www.parkscanadahistory.com/publications/rideau/engineered-landscapes-2006.pdf) p. 93. North is at the bottom. The Ottawa River is at the bottom left.

This map shows rapids on the west of Porter Island, but not to the east. This is likely due to the west side as the main channel of the river, and where fast water can still be observed during the high spring water levels. The east channel does not show rapids. Lt. Jebb's map also shows rapids about 300 metres long just upstream of the current Cummings Bridge where Montreal Road crosses the Rideau River. These rapids have been reduced to a fast flow in the spring run-off and to almost still water during the summer, as the dam at the lip of the Rideau Falls has raised the water level just upstream of the falls by several feet.

The third map, also prepared by Lt. Joshua Jebb dated 8 July 1816 (Figure 5) shows a road or path leading from a location that is most likely Governor Bay on the south shore of the Ottawa River to the east bank of the Rideau River just upstream from Green Island.[10]



Figure 5 Plan of the Water Communication from Kingston to the Grand River" by Lt. Joshua Jebb, July 8, 1816, Library and Archives Canada - NMC 21941 3/3 as cited in Watson, Ken; Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's Transformation of a Wilderness Waterway, Ken W. Watson, Elgin, Ontario, 2006, digital edition (www.parkscanadahistory.com/publications/rideau/engineered-landscapes-2006.pdf), p. 105. North is at the top.

The length of this route is about 0.3 miles and roughly follows the modern-day Thomas Street. The map also shows a turnoff from this road sharply to the south at that location and continue to the head of the "Black Rapids", not "Three Island Rapids as indicated in his 20 June 1816 map.

That Lt. Jebb shows this road in his 1816 maps is interesting as few settlers had established farms on the Ontario shore where Ottawa now stands. However, land upstream on the Rideau River was attracting settlers, such as Roger Stevens who had built a mill at Merrickville on the Rideau River in 1790.[11]

Using Lt. French's estimate of a portage of 1 mile (1.6 kilometers), starting from Governor

Bay and following the "road" on the map results in the upstream end of the portage between the head of Porter Island and the eastern bank abutment of the current St. Patrick Street Bridge.

These "roads" around Rideau Falls were drawn in maps made by settlers. Quite possibly these roads traced an existing Indigenous portage route. Could there have been other Indigenous portage routes? While the Rideau River end of the portage seems to be more or less in the area of the Beechwood bridge, there may have been several Ottawa River landing spots.

A different location for Ottawa River end of the portage is proposed by Jean-Luc Pilon.[12] The portage started from the Ottawa River at what he proposes be called "Portage Bay" and supports this with archeological evidence of Indigenous camping grounds at that location. Whatever the merits of the camping ground, starting a portage in this bay would require a trail of about 1.1 kilometers, almost double the length of the shortest portage (0.5 kilometers) to the Rideau River at the lip of Rideau Falls (Figure 3). If the end point of the portage was Cummings Island, the differences in the distances are almost identical at 2.6 kilometers.[13]

Pilon does point out that the Governor Bay location for the start of a portage has been very heavily disturbed by quarrying and later activity so that any archeological evidence of Indigenous use is extremely difficult to find. He also states that Governor Bay presents "no good significant camping area" as the slope would have been steeper before the quarry was built.

There is a single reference to a third Indigenous portage trail around Rideau Falls.[14] Martha Edmond's Rockcliffe Park – a History of the Village describes:[15]

> *A descendant of Thomas Mackay [founder of the New Edinburgh], Nini Keefer, recounts that according to family lore Indians summered on the eastern shore of Mackay Lake to fish and hunt. They used a portage route between the Ottawa River and the Rideau River, passing through Mackay Lake, and following the swampland along present-day Beechwood Avenue.*

This trail would have started on the Ottawa River slightly downstream of the current NCC River House, passed by the eastern side of McKay Lake and then approximately followed the current Beechwood Avenue to the bank of the Rideau River, about where the St. Patrick Bridge is today. Such a route would have avoided a steep climb from the Ottawa River at Governor Bay and gone between the higher land of present-day Rockcliffe Village and the Beechwood Cemetery. At 2.5 kilometers, it was longer than the portage from Governor Bay. See Figure 6 for a summary of the possible portage routes.

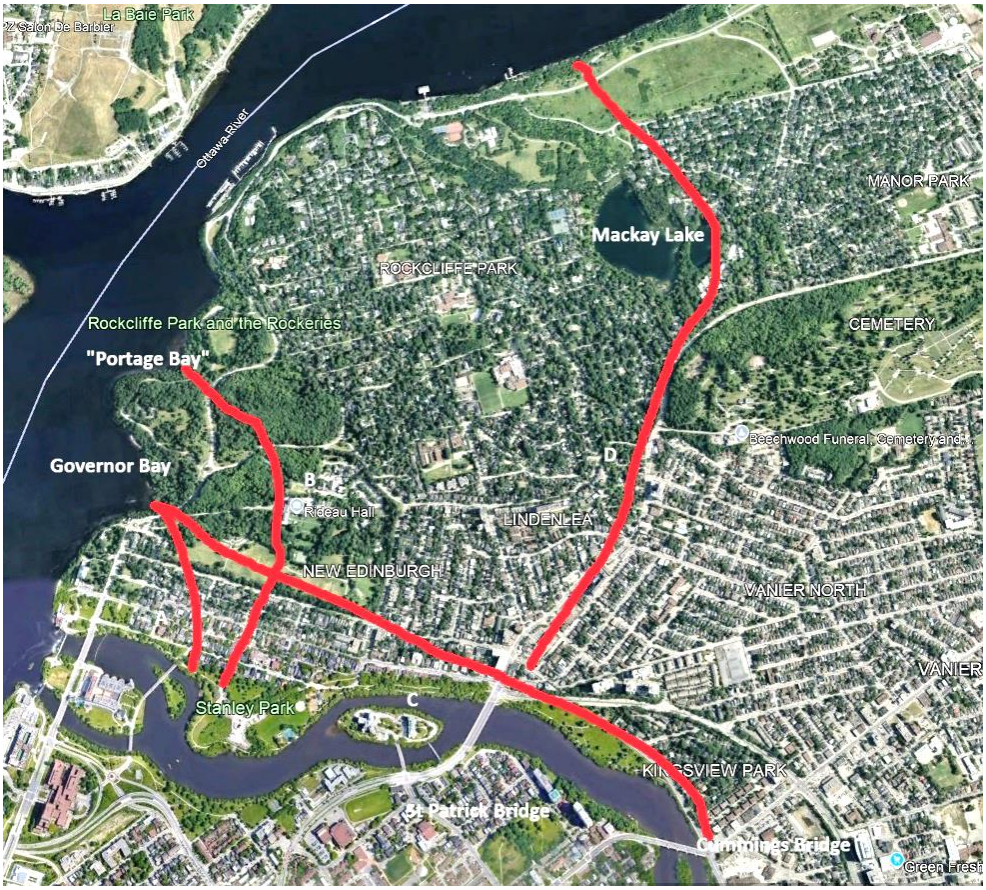

Figure 6 Possible portages around Rideau Falls; a portage to the top of Rideau Falls at Stanley Park from Portage Bay (B) would be about twice as long as from Governor's Bay (A). From Governor's Bay to Cumming's Bridge(C)) is about the same length as from Governor's Bay (C). The portage through Mackay Lake is the longest.

As a canoer and portager, my experience is that portages tend to be as short as practically possible, even if the footing is rougher. This would indicate a Governor Bay start of the shorter portage. Generally, if there is a choice between a short and steep portage or a longer but less steep portage, the choice is usually for the first option. As well, the presence of the "road" on Jebb's maps in this place is evidence that access to the Ottawa River was possible in 1816, even for horse drawn wagons carrying settlers' goods. Lastly, if there was no camping spot Governor Bay, Lt. French does record a camping place at the Rideau River end of the portage.

Conclusion and implications

First a word about sources. This analysis relies heavily on the "road" that was included in three maps drawn between 1795 and 1820 indicating a portage from Governor's Bay to the Rideau River. Archeological evidence shows an Indigenous camp site in "Portage Bay" likely at the start of a portage. A third possibility indicates a longer trail leading past McKay Lake.

It is unlikely that any current trace of these portages trails still exists today. A plaque on the east side of the Rideau River in Riverside Park indicates the existence of the portage and the last Algonquin chief whose hunting grounds were located in the Ottawa area (figure 7).



Figure 7; plaque indicating the portage and Chief Pinesi.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rideau_River

[2] Pilon, J-L and Boswell, R; "Below the Falls; An Ancient Cultural Landscape in the Centre of (Canada's National Capital Region) Gatineau"; Canadian Journal of Archeology 39 (2015) pp 257-293. https://www.academia.edu/20229070/Below_the_Falls_An_Ancient_Cultural_Landscape_in_the_Centre_of_Canadas_National_Capital_Region_Gatineau

[3] Philemon Wright, the founder of the city of Hull, received protests from two chiefs while he was cutting down their maple bush in 1820. Wright, P. An Account of the First Settlement of the Township of Hull on the Ottawa River. Lower Canada. Delivered in 1823 to the Committee of the house of Assembly, appointed to take into consideration that part of his Excellency the Governor-in-Chiefs Speech of the 16th December, 1820, relative to the Settlement of Crown Lands in Lower Canada. NL FC 2495 H84 W75 1970z fol. Philemon Wright's account is also found at The Canadian Magazine and Literary Repository, Vol 3, 1824, pp 234-246 https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.319510007340292&seq=246

[4] De Champlain, S (edited by Biggar, HP); The Works of Samuel Champlain, Champlain Society, University of Toronto Press, 1933 reprinted 1971; vol 4, p 166; https://archive.org/details/worksofsamueldec0004cham/page/166/mode/1up?q=rideau&view=theater

[5] Montgomery, D; "The Lost Seven Leagues: Samuel de Champlain's Landfall in Huronia"; Ontario Archeology 1991 #52, pp 7-9 https://ontarioarchaeology.org/wp-content/uploads/oa052-01_montgomery.pdf

[6] National Archives of Canada, Reel C-11893, MG 11, "Q" Series, Vol. 23, pp. 10-22 as cited in Watson, Ken W., Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's Transformation of a Wilderness Waterway, Ken W. Watson, Elgin, Ontario, 2006, digital edition (www.parkscanadahistory.com/publications/rideau/engineered-landscapes-2006.pdf).p. 76

[7] National Archives of Canada, Reel C-11893, MG 11, "Q" Series, Vol. 23, pp. 10-22 as cited in Watson, Ken W., Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's Transformation of a Wilderness Waterway, Ken W. Watson, Elgin, Ontario, 2006, digital edition (www.parkscanadahistory.com/publications/rideau/engineered-landscapes-2006.pdf).p. 76

[8] 1823 survey (Report of 20 December 1823) Handwritten original - NAC, RG5, A1, Vol.63, Reel C-4612, pp. 33631-33647 – Typeset version - NAC, MG11, CO/42, Vol.372, Reel B-305, pp. 160-168 as cited in Watson, Ken W., Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's Transformation of a Wilderness Waterway, Ken W. Watson, Elgin, Ontario, 2006, digital edition (www.parkscanadahistory.com/publications/rideau/engineered-landscapes-2006.pdf). p. 126

[9] Plan of the Rideau River from its Mouth to the Head of Long Island", by Lt. Joshua Jebb, June 20, 1816. Library and Archives Canada, NMC 59324 1/2 as cited in Watson, Ken W., Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's

Transformation of a Wilderness Waterway, Ken W. Watson, Elgin, Ontario, 2006, digital edition (www.parkscanadahistory.com/publications/rideau/engineered-landscapes-2006.pdf) p. 93

[10] "Plan of the Water Communication from Kingston to the Grand River" by Lt. Joshua Jebb, July 8, 1816, Library and Archives Canada - NMC 21941 3/3 as cited in Watson, Ken W., Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's Transformation of a Wilderness Waterway, Ken W. Watson, Elgin, Ontario, 2006, digital edition (www.parkscanadahistory.com/publications/rideau/engineered-landscapes-2006.pdf), p. 105

[11] Watson, Ken W., Engineered Landscapes: The Rideau Canal's Transformation of a Wilderness Waterway, Ken W. Watson, Elgin, Ontario, 2006, digital edition (www.parkscanadahistory.com/publications/rideau/engineered-landscapes-2006.pdf), p. 22

[12] "Getting Over the Falls: The Archeological Heritage of Rockcliffe Park" (in (PDF) Getting Over the Falls: The Archaeological Heritage of Rockcliffe Park | Jean-Luc Pilon - Academia.edu).

[13] Distances measures by author using Google Earth

[14] Edmond, M; Rockcliffe Park – a History of the Village, Friends of the Village of Rockcliffe Park Foundation, Ottawa, 2005. P. 3

[15] Edmond, M; Rockcliffe Park – a History of the Village, Friends of the Village of Rockcliffe Park Foundation, Ottawa, 2005. P. 3