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1973 Oct

Reference Papers

No. 40
(Revised October 1973)

Dept. of External Affairs
Min. des Affaires extérieures

MAY 28 1998
MAY 28 1998

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THE ST. LAWRENCE SEAWAY AND POWER PROJECTS

In April 1959, a 400-year-old dream was realized when ships began using the St. Lawrence Seaway. In the broadest sense the Seaway is a deep waterway extending some 2,300 miles from the Atlantic Ocean to the head of the Great Lakes in the heart of North America; strictly speaking, however, within the meaning of the legislation that permitted construction to begin, the St. Lawrence Seaway extends from Montreal Harbour to Lake Erie.

In the early part of the sixteenth century, the French explorer Jacques Cartier was turned back by the turbulent waters of the Lachine Rapids just west of what is now Montreal and forced to abandon his dream of finding the Northwest Passage and the route to the Far East. At various times during the intervening years, canals have been dug and locks built round the natural barriers to navigation that exist in the St. Lawrence River and the waters connecting the Great Lakes in the effort to make possible the use of the economical route provided by the Great Lakes basin for the transportation of goods in and out of this important part of the continent. The first such canals, built in 1783, were only two feet deep. By 1850, nine-foot canals had been completed in Canada right through to the Upper Lakes. By 1900, 14 feet was the regulation depth in these canals, though certain of them -- at Sault Ste. Marie, for example -- were deeper. In 1932, Canada completed the Welland Canal, 27 miles in length with a depth in some reaches of 25 feet. This canal and its eight locks overcome the difference in level of 326 feet between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. Its construction may be considered as the first step -- a decisive one -- in the construction of the present Seaway.

The needs of commerce pointed to the desirability of providing even greater depths in the St. Lawrence canals, locks and connecting channels, and by 1959, as a result of the joint efforts of the Canadian St. Lawrence Seaway Authority and the United States Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation, 27-foot depths existed from Montreal to Lake Erie. The improvements to the Welland Canal between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie round the barrier of Niagara Falls have been the sole responsibility of the St. Lawrence Seaway Authority. Deepening the channels above Lake Erie to Seaway standards was done by others, and now 27-foot depths are available into the Upper Lakes.

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