History of Barnhart Island
by Ian Bowering

First Native, then British, then American and finally a park, Barnhart Island, was leased to Loyalist George Barnhart from the Mohawks at St. Regis 1796 and renewed in 1806 for 999 years for $60 a year.

Originally, stretching a kilometre from old Maple Grove to the foot of the Long Sault Rapids, the island was more than 2 kms wide. Formerly Palatinate (German) farmers for the Catskill region of New York State, the Barnhart family provided four privates and one sergeant for Sir John Johnson’s King’s Royal Regiment of New York.

Settled in Cornwall, George Barnhart saw his future in farming on the 1,700 acre island owned by the Mohawks near the south shore of the St. Lawrence, just west of Cornwall.

Settling here with his wife and four children, Barnhart’s hopes were nearly dashed when the island was exchanged for strategically important Wolfe Island, protecting Kingston Harbor, as part of the provisions of the Treaty of Ghent, ending the War of 1812. In the ensuing territorial exchange the title to the island was given to American brothers named Ogden, in 1823. Immediately the Ogdens made the Barnharts purchase the homesteads they had pioneered for $10,000.

In 1850 the State of New York realized the injustice of this sale and recompened the Barnharts.

One of the “perks” of this territorial, change necessitated by the fact the south channel of the river to the American side was impassable throughout the winter, while the north shore was accessible, was the special waiver on customs duties for the “necessities of life” for bona fide island residents.

In its heyday, the island boasted two roads, a school/church, saw, grist and woollen mills, and cheese factory. Two general stores, a horse ferry to the Canadian shore and treadmill scow to the U.S. Boasting 20 families, 2,000 maple trees and 700 cows, other island names were Hickey, McDonald, Layo, Gallinger, Pitts, Cline, and Seldon.

The end, however, was foretold as early as 1906 when the Frontier Corporation began making surveys to dam the Long Sault Rapids. In 1922, the island was purchased with plans to build the dam. During World War II the U.S. government built a small power plant and barracks. Finally in November 1950, the last permanent island resident Edgar Mullarney moved to Massena.

Now uninhabited, the island was destined to become the American anchor of the Moses Saunders International Power Dam when the Seaway was finally built in 1958, while the island was turned into a park.