

Toronto Telegram, June 20, 1953
Schooner Days MCX (1110)
by C.H. J. Snider

Happier Bride's Diary - Water Taxies of 1805

On June 17th 1805, Mrs. Anne Smith MacDonell, the young wife of Col. The Honorable Alexander MacDonell, of the ancient Toronto family, reached Schenectady, N.Y. on her long journey to her parents in Long Island, N. Y. whom she had not seen for five years.

This was one week after leaving Oswego, and the sixteenth day since she had left her home in York, in the new province of Upper Canada. She had had sixteen days of lake sailing and wilderness travel in a four man boat, propelled by sail, oars and poles. The nightly accommodation had been of the rudest. Schenectady, a Dutch-English frontier settlement of long standing, seemed in the heart of civilization after what Anne had been through. It is now a city of over 100,000 population.

Anne Smith, now Mrs. MacDonell, had girlhood acquaintances here. Among them were the Dutch patron family of Van Rensselaer's, active in early transportation affairs, which included steering the new American ship of state Col. Van Rensselaer's "Schenectady boats" propelled by oar and sail, and provided a packet service between Albany and Niagara about this time.

Transport

What was a "Schenectady boat?" They are mentioned so often in 18th Century accounts of transportation, that they must have been a distinct type. The Upper Canada Gazette advertised in 1796 "an excellent five handed boat Schenectady built, well painted, allowed to equal any running to or from that place. Enquire at the Printing Office, Niagara." Matthew McNair's boat which brought Mrs. MacDonell from Oswego in this place, with much toil, was probably a Schenectady boat. It may be remembered that she started out with four hands, and a fifth had to be employed at Wood Creek.

The Schenectady boats had to have been shallow, probably flat bottomed, perhaps shaped like a dory or sharpie, and to have used poles, oars and sails. It may have originated with Capt. John Bradstreet's expedition which relieved Oswego – temporarily - in 1756, although Bradstreet, himself a Nova Scotian whaler, also used whaleboats, a very different type. It seems to have been displaced by the York boats, which were like our north country pointers, and the Durham boats, larger and heavier, in the first half of the 19th century.

Capt. Van Cleve of Oswego, recorded, May 31, 1797, a decked boat built by Col John Van Rensselaer of Lansingburgh on the North river, New York, arrived at Niagara. In this year Van Rensselaer built another, each capable of carrying 50 barrels, about 10 tons burden, and employed coasting between Niagara, Oswego and Kingston.

Earlier Schenectady boats were not decked, and this may have been an improvement for

lake navigation. In December 1805, about the time our heroine Anne was getting back (by land) from her New York journey, a small vessel, which may have been one of the Van Rensselaer packets, was lost near the mouth of the Salmon river, where Port Ontario later arose, at the foot of the lake forty miles east of Oswego a shall sandy spot.

“Four were drowned,” recorded Capt. Van Cleve. “One body and article of the lading were washed ashore, the remainder buried in the sand. The drowned were John McBride, whose body was found, John Kendrick of York, Alexander Miller and Jessamin Montgomery;

John Kendrick was a member of a sailing family in early Toronto. His father or brother Joseph Kendrick was master and part owner of the Toronto schooner *Peggy*.

The Schenectady boat of John Fellows was actually the first American trader to navigate Lake Ontario after the revolution.

On with the Diary

But our happy bride of six months, Mrs. Anne McDonell, did not bother her pretty little head overmuch about Van Rensselaer’s decked boat or Schenectady boats either. She thus happily continues her free spelling diary. June 17th - Arisen at five in 17th and arrived at Schenectady 10 o’clock. Since we entered on the Mohawk River we passed through a delightful country. Villages every and few miles, a great number of churches, fine hills at a distance covered with grain, and the flats with fine meadows, from which the air was sweetened. Nothing could possibly be more delightful, the eye could never tire with such a scene. We could not choose a better season to view the country in its full beauty. The heat tis true was a little disagreeable, but we must expect to be burnt, travelling in an open boat so far.

“On our arrival at Schenectady we went to the Coffee House, breakfasted, and changed our habits, and dispatched the letters we had to Mr. Walton, Sr. He lived in Schenectady.

“He soon called, and was very attentive, regretting Mr. W. was not at home to offer us a room. After dinner I went a-shopping. I do not think the improvements are very great here since I passed thro before. A paltry looking market for so large a town, a City indeed.

“I took up my pen to write this day, but not feeling very well and being told my letters must at all events go to Albany I put it off.

Old Time Courtesies

“June 18th – Mr. Walton called to offer his family carriage to take us to Albany. Dined at two when M. Constable called saying the ladies would wait on us immediately if we would promise to go to his house, which we could not, as the carriage would wait for us at three. All the acquaintances I had here were gone, Mr. Shane’s family, Mrs. VanRensselaer and Miss Yates who I wished to see. We rode to Albany in a short time, the road being turnpiked 14 miles – went to the City Tavern – to bed early, but it was too warm to sleep.

“Albany 19th – To leave this tomorrow, so appropriate today in writing to Mr. McDonell and my brother. After dinner I walked around the City. ’Tis much improved.”