

Toronto Telegram, May 5, 1934
Schooner Days CXXXVII (137)
By C.H.J. Snider

OLD NEVER-WET

IT reminds me, said that practical mariner, Capt. James Cannel, of the C.P.R. steamer *Assiniboia*. "It reminds me of boys trading marbles at this time of year."

"This time of year" was the service at Cherry Valley two weeks ago, when Prince Edward County, in the presence of nine veteran captains, was bidding Godspeed for the season to the native sons who were leaving for their shipping ports all over the lakes.

Captain Nelson Palmateer, the octogenarian lakesman who inspired these annual services six years ago, was not able to be present at this one, owing to doctor's orders, but notwithstanding a presentation was made to Mr. Philip Dodds, editor of the *Quinte Loyalist*, on his behalf, of a stout walking stick, brass bound and suitably inscribed, made from the timbers of that staunch old heart-of-oak, *H.M.S. St. Lawrence*, which won the War of 1812 without firing a shot! The presentation was intended as a little surprise for Capt. Palmateer by the compiler of these "Schooner Days." The big surprise was sprung by Mr. Dodds, on behalf of Capt. Palmateer, for in accepting the remembrance for his venerable friend he produced a whopper of a walking stick, made from the timbers of the *U.S.S. New Orleans*, and asked the donor of the *St. Lawrence* one to accept this with Capt. Palmateer's best wishes.

"Now you'll surely have to come back to Prince Edward," added Amos McDonald, the county warden.

This *New Orleans* walking stick has a history as interesting as the *St. Lawrence* one, though different in character, and for one who treasures the memorials of old-time ships on the lakes it is simply priceless, in addition to its value as coming from Capt. Nelson Palmateer, whose sailing career began seventy years ago.

As already told, when the Americans learned that the British had "put one over" – and such a one! – by launching the *St. Lawrence*, they threw up their hands. They called all their fleet into their naval base at Sacket's Harbor in New York State, and abandoned Lake Ontario to the British for the rest of the season – and, as it proved, for the duration of the war. As Lossing, the American historian, wrote of Sir James Lucas Yeo, the British Commodore, "the baronet, with his great ship, was lord of the lake."

The hope of the Americans was that they could build, by the time navigation opened in the following spring, ships as powerful as the *St. Lawrence*, which overmatched, with her three decks of guns, the entire American fleet as then constituted. Henry Eckford, the master carpenter who later built a Czar of Russia, toiled his mightiest. Two keels were laid. The earliest was set up on the shingle-spit forming Navy Bay in Sacket's Harbor, but when the Americans saw how powerful the *St. Lawrence* really was, and recalled the two descents upon Sacket's Harbor which

Sir James Yeo had already made before he had this monster to help him, they laid the second keel four miles inland, at Dexter, up Black River Bay. This bay used to bother shoal-draught centreboarders nine feet, in the peace days half a century later. The warship begun at *Dexter* would draw at least 20 feet, loaded with guns and stores, although Eckford was a magician when it came to lightness of draught. The sloop-of-war *Saratoga*, which won the Battle of Lake Champlain the fall the *St. Lawrence* was launched on Lake Ontario, only drew seven feet of water but mounted thirty guns, and it was Eckford who built her. It is probable that this Dexter dreadnought would have been floated down to Sacket's Harbor on camels or pontoons, as were the earlier United States brigs-of-war, *Lawrence* and *Niagara*, built at Erie, Pa., in shoal water.

But the experiment was never attempted, for the war was over long before the ship was completed. Peace terms were signed on Dec. 124th, 1814, at Ghent, but Lake Ontario and much of America did not know of this till the following spring.

The ship begun at Sacket's Harbor grew more rapidly, partly because she was close to the base of supplies. Some of Eckford's brigs-of-war were launched in forty days from standing timber; that is, trees growing in the forest were floating keels six weeks later. The Sacket's Harbor ship did not grow quite as fast as that, principally because of the hugeness of her timbers, which denuded the immediate forests, and possibly because the winter kept the harbors icebound, both against an invading *St. Lawrence* and this intended match for her. But by April she was ready to take to the water within a week, and a name had been chosen for her.

The British had been repulsed with heavy loss in an attack on New Orleans in January, 1815; almost a month after the war was "over," but as no one on this continent knew the fact it did not save gallant British sailors and soldiers from losing their lives in useless slaughter. To commemorate the victory the Americans decided to call this new ship *New Orleans*.

Then came word of peace, stormily crossing the Atlantic in a sailing packet.

The builders left off building. Captains at Cherry Valley who had seen this *New Orleans* told the writer at this Sunday night service that sixty years afterwards the oakum was still hanging in her seams where the caulkers had left off work. There was no finishing up. All the carpenters did was gather up their tools.

A great house was built over the the ship, probably during her construction, so as to keep the snow out of her and allow the work to go on through the depth of winter without interruption. An open shipyard in a January blizzard is one of the coldest spots known to man. The great ship was left standing under her great house, year after year, surrounded by lignum-vitae gun-carriages which were to have mounted her hundred and twenty guns. She was pierced for one hundred and ten broadside guns on three decks, and like the *St. Lawrence* she had, in addition, bow and stern-chasers. She was larger than any vessel of war yet built in the United States, either for salt water or fresh, and her dimensions exceeded the *St. Lawrence's*, as will be noted:

| | New Orleans | St. Lawrence |
|-----------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| Length of keel | 187 feet | 174 ft. |
| Breadth of beam | 56 ft. | 52 ft. 7 in. |
| Depth of hold | 30 ft. from upper deck | 18 ft. 6 in. from lower deck |
| Guns | 120 | 112 |
| Tonnage | 3200 | 2,304 tons. |

The comparisons are not very accurate, for those of the *St. Lawrence* are from her Admiralty plans, while those for the *New Orleans* are approximations, and the systems for measurement differed somewhat in the two nations. Still, the *New Orleans* was larger than the *St. Lawrence*, or was intended to be; but there was this most important difference: The *New Orleans* never floated. The *St. Lawrence* swept the lake.

The *St. Lawrence* served the humble but useful purpose of a fuel dock long after her warfare had been accomplished; until, indeed, about 1885.

Sometime about then the *New Orleans*, which had never left the stocks, also disintegrated. Dry rot set in, both in the house that sheltered her, and in her sheltered timbers. A thrilling piece of fiction has been written about her suddenly collapsing and burying in her ruins, either the star-crossed lovers or the villain of their tragedy; but as far as is known her end was less dramatic. The house which covered her was removed and she was pulled apart. To this day, that shingle-spit in Navy Bay, in Sacket's Harbor is named Ship-house Point, though few there be who know why.

The old shiphouse and its monster occupant was a great centre for captains' gatherings in the old schooner days, when Sacket's Harbor was an active shipping port and harbor of refuge in westerly gales, and many a yarn was spun beneath the looped festoons of oakum hanging from the unfinished seams of the *New Orleans*. When the old man-of-war was broken up the captain of the Oswego Lifesaving Station, who knew all the vesselmen on the lake, obtained one of the huge cedar deckbeams – it was fourteen inches square – and had it cut up into walking sticks. Capt. Nelson Palmateer, then probably in the schooner *Kate*, was given one of these. Capt. John D. VanAlstine, then commanding the schooner *Huron*, was given another. It was this fine piece of cedar – fifty years a walking stick, seventy years a deck-beam, and no one knows how many centuries before that a tree in the forests on the south shore of Lake Ontario – it was this remembrance of the vanished *New Orleans*, the ship that was never wet, that was presented, with such generous courtesy, to the compiler of Schooner Days at this Cherry Valley service.

As for the still drier man-of-war, the one which was never finished at Dexter and could not have floated had she been finished, I have never seen relics of her, or even a picture. It is probable that her timbers, as far as they had been assembled, found their way into foundation sills and floor beams of farmers' barns long before the *New Orleans* perished of dry rot and the cross-cut saw.

Caption: USS New Orleans on Shiphouse Point as the last of the shiphouse was being removed.

Caption: Navy Bay, Sackett's Harbor, and dismasted war fleet, 1815. The vessels lay as moored when chased into port by the advent of HMS St. Lawrence, in October, 1814. The "shiphouse" built to cover the New Orleans was new when this drawing was made.