

Toronto Telegram, September 5, 1931
Schooner Days, XXVI (26)
By C.H.J. Snider

“of WELLINGTON SQUARE”

Before going on with the Azov, last fore-and-after on Lake Huron, would you care to make a voyage to a vanished port?

“When father got her in 1900,” said Redfern Macdonald, of Goderich, “‘AZOV of WELLINGTON SQUARE’ was on her stern, and he left it there. We didn’t know where the place was. We knew she was Lake Ontario built, but couldn’t find any such name on the map. Years later a man came along from the Department of Marine and Fisheries and told us there was no such place as Wellington Square any more, and we’d have to take the name off. The nearest port of registry, he said, was Hamilton”

“JOSEPH THE BRANT, Great Captain of the Six Nations,” that staunch leader of the Mohawks who in 1785 hung the first church bell in Upper Canada, received a grant of land from the British Crown in recognition of his services and sufferings and those of his persecuted people, in the War of the American Revolution. It was this which brought the Mohawks from their tribal valley in New York State to Ontario.

The Brant Block was on the north shore of Lake Ontario near its head, or Burlington Bay. Here Capt. Brant, some years before his death, which occurred in 1807, built a commodious dwelling house, two storeys high. Indians brought red cedar logs from the Thousand Islands for its walls. It was the ancestor, in a sense, of the present Brant House of Burlington and was known by that name. The later Brant House, summer hotel, incorporated part of Joseph Brant’s mansion.

In 1810 James Gage purchased from Catharine Brant and Augustus Jones, trustees under Capt. Brant’s will, 338 1/2 acres of the “northeast angle of Brant’s Military Tract”. On this quarter-mile block, east of the Burlington sandbar, Gage laid out a village in Waterloo times, and called it from patriotism and its shape, Wellington Square.

Benjamin Eager, native son of Halton, built a big grist mill and a wharf and warehouse, and Wellington Square became a grain mart and shipping port for the farmers of Halton, Wentworth, and Wellington counties. After the fall threshings their creaking wagons would line the rutted roads for miles back from the projecting pier as they waited their turns to back up and unload into the warehouse bins, or straight into the hatches of anxious schooners. There was little ease at the wharf when the wind blew from the south and east, and many a hooker had to cast off and scurry for Hamilton or Gibraltar Point with her hold half full and the farmer’s wagon half empty.

All the traffic was by water in these times; the railways had not been built and the trucks and busses which were in turn to rob them had not been dreamed of.

Torrance and Co., Montreal merchants, were the great forwarders of the first half of the nineteenth century, and on into the second half. Their agencies were in many of the lake ports. They quickly recognized the importance of Wellington Square and established Thomas Baxter as their buyer there. Wellington Square became one of the best grain markets in Canada West.

The first schooner to have “of WELLINGTON SQUARE” on her stern was, as far as records go, the *John A. Torrance*, built in 1842.

It is believed that she was a “standing keel” vessel originally, and that a centreboard was added when she was enlarged in Toronto in 1861 and renamed. Her new dimensions were 112 feet on deck, 19 feet 9 inches beam – very narrow – and 9 feet depth of hold [with a shear?] and she registered 179 tons. Archibald Taylor, of Toronto, then owned her. She had been owned by McDonald and McClain, and James McDonald was her master in 1853, when she was carrying flour for the Torrance firm from Wellington Square and Whitby to Cape Vincent, down the river.

Her name after the Toronto rebuild became the *John A. McDonald*, but whether that commemorated the rising Conservative chieftain – whose name was often spelled with a Mc instead of a Mac – or whether it was a relation of her captain who was honored, tradition saith not. She was on the register of 1874.

Another Wellington Square schooner was the spoon-bowed *Baltic*, built there in 1851, and afterwards rebuilt in Toronto. She was lost at Oswego in November, 1894, by a Capt. Andrew Baird – not related to “Old Andy” and “Young Andy”, who were Toronto captains of similar name, but spelling it Beard. Capt. Baird was a deeply religious man, and would not start on a voyage on Sunday. The *Baltic* was the centre of some interesting adventures for Capt. David Reynolds, late of the Royal Canadian Yacht Club launch, and his account of them will be given some time. She was of about the same tonnage as the *Torrance*.

Melancthon Simpson, of Oakville, built the *Ellen M. Baxter*, of 283 tons register, for Baxter, Henderson and Co. at Wellington Square in the winter of 1860-61. It is probable that she was named after Thomas Baxter’s daughter. She was a fine schooner and reported at Collingwood in Sept. 1861, with 13,000 bushels of western wheat from Chicago.

It was the railways that killed Wellington Square’s shipping trade; the railways, the slump following the wheat boom of the Crimean War, and the further slump in the grain trade when the reciprocity treaty expired in 1866.

There was less grain to carry down the lake when Russia got back into the world market after the Treaty of Paris in 1856; not unlike today. And the railways were carrying in increasing quantities what the lake vessels had looked upon as their reason for existence.

The enterprising Benjamin Eager had already established the Brant House as a summer resort. He rallied business in Wellington Square with a lumber boom. Old Ontario was still rich in trees. Holds that hungered for wheat and barley were packed with pine and oak plank, and decks were high above the bulwarks with stave bolts and shingle-squares. The lumber boom kept Wellington Square busy as before. But it could not last.

Lake Ontario bristled with ports. Between Hamilton and Toronto were a dozen active harbors or loading places – sometimes merely a roadstead, but patronized by vessels in the stone or grain or cordwood or lumber trade. Now there is not one.

The lights are still maintained at Oakville and Bronte, but the trade is gone. Other ports are only names, or forgotten names. Wellington Square, Port Nelson, Bronte, Oakville, the Anchorage Farm – at the turn of the Toronto-Hamilton highway – Port Credit, Duck’s Bay, the Etobicoke, Hooten’s Point and the Dutchman’s Bar, Mimico Creek, the Humber – all these once had their lake commerce, and now have nothing.

John Waldie, native Scot who settled in Wellington Square in 1842, came forward with the remedy of amalgamating the village with its neighbor Port Nelson, two miles down the shore. When we get around to it there is going to be something about that vanished port and its vanished fleet, too. Accordingly a petition was presented by the freeholders of both villages to Halton County Council in 1873, and the pair passing off the screen in a final hug, were replaced by the incorporated village of Burlington. John Waldie was the first reeve, and Benjamin Eager, Jas. Allen, Geo. Murison, and Chas Hales, the first councillors.

Burlington has prospered; but its prosperity has not been along shipping lines. The old wooden pier and breakwater of Wellington Square were replaced by concrete; but the old wooden sailing trade never came back.

The *Ellen Baxter* was the biggest vessel built in Wellington Square. The white painted *Azov* was the next biggest, and, as far as can be learned, the last. She was launched in 1866, five years, after the *Baxter*. Wm. Buntin, merchant, was her owner. Although her birth place declined and vanished the *Azov* did well in the general lake trade. On towards the end of the century she went "up above," that is, to the Upper Lakes, and Ontario knew her no more.

The advent of the *Azov* on the Lake Huron market was the big chance for that enterprising mariner, Capt. John Macdonald of Goderich, who in 21 years had hammered out a respectable bank account with the schooner *John G. Kolfage*.

Here was a big fore-and-after that could walk away with four hundred and fifty tons of dead-weight although she only registered 195 tons. She was 108 feet long on deck, 23 feet 7 inches beam, 10 feet deep in the hold; a good "burdensome vessel" as the phrase goes, but capable of being handled by four active men forward. Older than the *Kolfage* but well built in 1866, and in good shape.

"That night all the vessels were lost" on Lake Ontario, the 7th of November, 1880, the *Azov* was one of the fleet which came through. John Macdonald was in the "barque" *Thomas C. Street* that night, a three-masted topsail schooner built in St. Catharines and owned in Toronto. Capt. Ben Tripp had taken her across the Atlantic with square timber four years before, and had brought her home safely through the ocean storms. But Lake Ontario proved too much for her this wild night, and she drove in on the Prince Edward County shore, somewhere between Long Point and Weller's Bay. The crew took to the rigging and clung there in the freezing spray. It was too dark to tell where they were, or how far from shore. When day broke they saw the land close aboard with a raging swirl of breakers between and farmers with teams lining the beach, ready to help but helpless.

John Macdonald and Carridice, the mate, floated the end of the heaving line ashore on a fender, and the farmers hauled on it until they got the end of the fore peak halliards, and with this as a "messenger" they got one end of the *Street's* towing hawser on to the beach. The other end Macdonald carried up to the cross-trees, so that the heavy rope, hove taut, made a steep incline from the shaking mast to the shore. On this he rigged a boatswain's-chair, on an endless purchase; and so, man after man, the *Street's* crew slid down from the foremast head to safety on the shore. Soon after the last man landed all three masts went and the ocean conqueror broke up.

The *Azov's* sails were blown to ribbons in this gale, but she made Kingston in safety. John Macdonald had a very good idea of the stuff that was in her. So he sold the *Kolfage* and bought her.

The *Kolfage* became a tow barge and was in the end burned somewhere on Georgian Bay.

He kept the *Kolfage*'s yawlboat when he sold her, getting her purchaser another one in its place. It was of white cedar. He knew what it would do – and he was justified as you shall hear.

And he kept his boys. His daughter Ettie was growing up too. Her he took along in the *Azov* to cook; and cook she did, to the king's taste, for four hungry sailors – some of them her own brothers – and the captain and mate, who were also in the family.

Nothing gets more criticism than home cooking, because the critics are right at home for their task. But there breathes not the lake sailor, Goderich man or "foreign," who ever found fault with the output of Ettie Macdonald's galley.

Ettie Macdonald was cook in the *Azov* when the *Azov* was lost. She was only twenty then. How the *Azov* went out will be told next week.