

THE LOSS OF THE SPEEDY

(The following account by C.H.J. Snider includes the known historical facts of the Speedy disaster, but also adds the imaginative embellishment that is helpful in interpretive presentations of Park Histories. Many of the recorded conversations are imaginative, but not on that account unimportant; Snider is following an old ploy in the telling of history (it was first used by Thucydides), that of casting the principle personages and 'outering' their attitudes and situations by means of dialogue. One has severe reservations about the menesis theme which Snider incorporates into the tale, but on the other hand, few people can substantiate with evidence the view that the Speedy's loss was an accident rather than sabotage. Snider's is certainly the most exhaustive account of the incident on record, and it gives this important event the human interest and enhanced dimension which a 'bare-bones factual account' might not.)

Honest Lieut. Thomas Paxton brought the Provincial Marine schooner Speedy into the new port at Presqu'ile with a sigh of relief, one fine day in 1804.

Wherever the French voyageurs sailed or paddled on all the Great Lakes they left Presqu'ile placenames behind for the English. This one was towards the northeast corner of Lake Ontario, where Prince Edward County juts out. Its French name survives in the summer cottage colony of Presqu'ile Point, five miles south of Brighton, Ontario. In 1804 it was beginning to boom as the site for a new capital in Upper Canada, to be the county town of the District of Newcastle, and to outshine York. Lieutenant Paxton had passengers and freight from Niagara for this new metropolis, for the Royal Navy on the lakes was still a common carrier, although there were a dozen small freight vessels on the lake.

The speedy's pumps were going as she came in, though the weather was fine. Built at Kingston eight years before, the government packet soon showed signs of that curse of the early lake marine, dry rot. Unseasoned timber, hard winters, hot summers, and poor ventilation were the causes. Paxton had had trouble keeping her afloat these last three seasons. He looked with envy on the new trading schooner which Captain Charles Selleck, the enterprising Englishman who had commanded the Duchess of York, had built and fitted out. She lay snug in Presqu'ile Cove, loading pearl ash from the log piles the new settlers had burned. She was new and staunch and tight as a drum - and prospering. Selleck had done well, he reflected, since coming to this wilderness with his ship carpenter father-in-law from the Woolwich dockyards. They had built this schooner, and called her the Lady Murray, and got their share

of government contract work. And now he could see the new courthouse rising by their efforts among the pine stumps. It was to be three stories high, fifty feet long, thirty feet wide....

Paxton's naval service had not been happy. Nobody's was in the Provincial Marine. He had been appointed second lieutenant, equivalent to a mate's berth, in 1791; three shillings and sixpence a day. It was 1797 before he was promoted lieutenant, and given command of this leaky transport. Two of his crew, Thomas Dobbs and Wm. Young, stole the ship's boat and deserted at Kingston. Paxton was censured because he was sleeping ashore that night; another of the trials of a family man. Fast rowing-gigs probably from the Swift or Duke of Kent, recovered the abandoned boat, but not the absconding men. Paxton was ordered to take the Speedy out with the cargo of Indian goods for the west when the wind was fresh in his teeth and demurred. On it being urged, he set sail and soon came back to Kingston with his main topmast carried away and his vessel leaking so badly that the stores were damaged. He was blamed for this, and packed off again after repairs with a cargo of pork and a flea in his ear. A dog's life for six shillings a day, the pay for a captain's rank, dangled always for the future, like a carrot ahead of a donkey. He had often said that if he hadn't a wife and seven children to support he would chuck the service. He remembered how 20 years before His Majesty's brig Ontario, rotten when she was four years old, had drowned a whole regiment, the 8th King's. He would rather have a freighter to sail. But lieutenants in this Upper Canadian navy got their six shillings and the master of a merchantman only got four. What could a man with a wife and seven children and 13 years' seniority as lieutenant do?

Captain Selleck himself put off in a boat to meet the Speedy, hailing His Majesty's servant respectfully and asking if he might pilot the schooner in.

"No, I thank you," said Paxton, stiffly. He needed the pilot's fee for himself.

"I've news for you, sir," said Selleck, unruffled. "Notice anything strange coming in? Well I did last trip from Niagara, and you should know it."

In a glassy calm one morning recently, with the crew singing and yarning on the hatchcovers, he had sighted a dark object under water close aboard. Putting down his yawlboat he and his mate and one sailor had pushed off from the vessel and found a sunken rock not half a fathom

below the surface. It was about forty feet in diameter, and the leadline went down plumb to eight fathoms on all sides of it. This was about four miles off shore. Selleck had taken a compass bearing, lining up three tall trees on the land with the south end of a point once called Milligan's Beach.

With boats and sailors from each vessel next day they pulled south along Selleck's range and found the rock without difficulty, although the water was very deep all around it.

"Devil's Horseblock, I'd call it," said Selleck. "Whoever steps on this in the dark mounts for heaven or hell."

"Or his Hitching Post" amended Paxton. "It stands up like a chimney, and the sides go down as straight."

Five months after this Captain Selleck and the whole Presqu'ile settlement searched and searched in vain for this Devil's Horseblock.

So, too, did Admiral Bayfield in 1817, -when making the great survey which is the basis of present lake charts.

So, too, did this writer, in 1948, and annually for five years before, and found only this:

Four miles south of the mainland shore, and a mile south of Proctor Point, an island once known as the Bluff, 60 feet high and connected with Presqu'ile by a sunken causeway, is the Camel Shoal of the charts, showing 2-1/4 fathoms least water over it, and seven on its fringes.

These are chart records. The least water we got on either was 3 fathoms, eighteen feet. The lake level has been high since 1943. It has been suggested that the Devil's Hitching Post or Devil's Horseblock discovered by Captain Selleck of the Lady Murray and shown to Captain Paxton of the Speedy in May, 1804, but never seen since was a 'flowerpot' rising almost to the lake's surface, and cut away at its base until, topheavy, it collapsed and formed the reef's Camel Shoal or Gage Shoal, now three fathoms under water off the Point.

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Ogetonicut of the Chippewa Muskrats insisted on showing the band how he had beaten the brains out of a white man on the reedy reaches of Lake Scugog, to still the cry of Whistling Duck, his brother, killed by some unknown whites the year before.

"Thus did I!" he boasted, pounding a rotten stump with a pine knot till the dust rose in clouds. "And now no more does Whistling Duck complain that his blood is still wet on the grass though twelve moons have grown big and little again since he was slain. Thus did I! Thus did I!"

"To whom?" demanded Wabbekishco, the chief, who prided himself on correct speech.

"How should I know" He was white and looked like a soldier."

"Oh senseless one," groaned the old man, "whiskey hath destroyed thee and thou wilt destroy us! Did not the Governor promise that Whistling Duck's slayers should die though it should take years to find them? Even so may we all die through thy drunken boasting. Thou must go to the Governor!"

Farewell Brothers Scugog store and trading post at Ball Point had been found deserted and plundered, with the body of John Sharpe, late of the Queen's Rangers, lying with battered head in a pool of clotted blood on the floor. He had been Farewell's factor, who trapped and traded with the Indians for furs.

With morning's light the Chippewa Muskrats, men, women and children, left their lodges by the marshy lake and journeyed to the great blue freshwater sea of Ontario. At a creek mouth by the mighty clay cliff called Raby Head, below the present Port Oshawa, they launched their canoes and paddled westward - all except Bitterskin, the witch woman, mother of Ogetonicut and Whistling Duck. She was left behind, lest her evil words should reach the Governor's ears and make his wrath burn hotter. On the second morning they landed on the sandy spit known as Gibraltar Point at Trees-in-water, or Place-of-meeting, opposite the Governor's town and slung their kettles. Ogetonicut was surrendered to redcoats who rowed over from old Fort York.

He was arraigned before the Court of King's Bench in the timber-built Government buildings which American invaders burned nine years later when York was captured. They were at the foot of Parliament street, in the old town; now gas works.

The savages' eyes rolled in wonder at the totem above the "bench" or judges' throne, strange beasts carved and painted, a lion and a unicorn rearing towards a gilded crown. They also admired the great woodstove which heated the branding irons which seared T for thief and F for forger in offenders' hands if they were lucky enough to escape with such penalties. The halter was more likely. Four years before this, York had had its first hanging - and the victim had offered a forged note. That was his crime. The gallows stood outside the court, with the stocks and the flogging post; and all punishments were public. They were the same for the white men and their black slaves, and for red men, the Muskrats learned with awe.

Yet the law worked strangely. In this same court at the time the first man was hanged in York, the clerk of the Executive Council, John Small, Esq., was tried for killing John White, Esq., the Attorney-General of the Province, in a duel, fought within pistol shot of the courtroom... Mr. White, who was not the aggressor, died of the pistol wound next day. Mr. Small was declared "Not Guilty" by a jury, and acquitted by the Hon. Justice Allcock, and retained his position as a pillar of York and Upper Canadian Society.

The law worked strangely in Ogetonicut's case. John Sharpe was dead and the Indian boasted he had killed him. But it took all summer to determine where the crime had taken place. Ball Point on Lake Scugog was proved by survey to be within the new-formed District of Newcastle. Ogetonicut languished in York jail without trial because York was in the Home District from which Newcastle had been pared. Presqu'ile had a courthouse, the only one between York and Adolphustown, but no cause to try. Ogetonicut had provided one. A "capital" one chuckled the testy Governor who relished puns and punishments. Here was an opportunity of inaugurating the country seat of the District with a full dress King's Bench trial for murder in the first degree and probably a hanging.

So, on the 7th of October, a mild Sabbath evening, with a light northwest breeze blowing, His Majesty's schooner Speedy set sail from York for that city of the future, that new Newcastle that never was to be, with a company on board so strange that it requires a further chronicle to describe it.

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"All ashore that stay ashore! All aboard that sail!"

"At Governor Hunter's high command H.M. schooner Speedy sails immediately, to-inaugurate the new capital of the new District of Newcastle with a murder trial and possible hanging....

On the Speedy's quarterdeck, in his blue and white uniform, knee britches, cocked hat and large gilt buttons, all six seasons worn, was Lieut. Thomas Paxton, bullied by the Governor into taking the vessel out, although she was unseaworthy, and others had refused to do so. Paxton had a wife and seven children and needed the six shillings a day of a lieutenant commander.

Shackled in the lightless forepeak of the 80-foot ship was he

for whom this stately pageant of justice was being produced, the prisoner O-go-tong-nat, otherwise Ogetonicut, of the Chippewa Musk-rats, accused of the slaying of a white man. Five sailors berthed in the forecastle abaft the bulkheads assured that he would not escape except through the waves that pounded the walls of his wooden cell, making unaccustomed noises at him like the roars and growls of unknown beasts.

Dining on capon in the captain's cabin and served by his own liveried black man, was Mr. Justice Thomas Cochrane, Halifax born, 28 years of age and learned in the law whereof he was a well-deserving pillar. Son of the Honorable Thomas Cochrane, Speaker of the Nova Scotian House of Assembly, and with one sister married to Commodore Sir George Rupert, and one to Reverend Doctor Inglis, third bishop of Nova Scotia, he was as far up in Upper Canadian society as Ogetonicut, drink-crazed Indian, was down.....

With the judge were two law-makers. One was Robert Isaac Dey Grey, member of Stormont and Russell, and Solicitor-General; pew-holder in St. James' Church in York, and slaveholder in the province. A humane master, he. His will not only manumitted his "faithful black woman servant Dorinda and her children" but set aside 1,200 pounds to be invested for their maintenance, and left the "boys" Simon and John each 200 acres of land. Simon served him in his house on the northwest corner of York and Wellington streets, Toronto, which Chief Justice Draper later occupied; and Simon was serving him here in the Speedy. John, the other "boy", lived at the Gray Family home in Cornwall, U.C., until he was 105. He was a veteran of the American Revolution, and of the war of 1812, and could tell all about Governor Hunter, his gruffness and the snuff that was always dis-

colouring his ruffles. He died in 1871, full of years and anecdotes, the last survivor of the black chattels brought into the province when it began.

The other lawmaker was counsel supplied for the prisoner by the Crown, Angus McDonell, treasurer of the Upper Canada Law Society, member for Durham, Simcoe and East York, sometimes confused with his brother Alexander, member for Glengarry and Prescott and sheriff of York.

Cabin passengers possibly too were "Mr. Anderson, a student at the law"; Indian interpreters from the Department, James Ruggles and George Cowan; John Fiske or Fishe, High Bailiff of York, and the rich York merchant, Jacob Herchimer, who brought ginseng at a shilling a pound, green, from farmers whose woodlots it overran, and sold it in China, dried, at its weight in silver. With him was his countryman Johann Stegmann, late lieutenant of the Hessian Regiment of Loosberg, and now one of His Majesty's surveyors. He had conducted the survey which proved the murder to have been committed within the jurisdiction of the new District of Newcastle.

George Cowan, nicknamed Constant, was reputed to have been a drummer boy in Braddock's disaster, and was taken prisoner by the French in the fighting before Fort Duquesne was taken from them in 1758. Thirty-five years later Sheriff McDonell, accompanying Simcoe to Machedash Bay, reported of Cowan: "He is much liked by the Indians and speaks much better French than English." He was the interpreter when the five Chippewa chiefs sold the Crown the site of Penetanguishene for 101 pounds Quebec currency, and used their reindeer totem for signatures.

Since 1776 Cowan had his own trading post at the mouth of the Coldwater River, based not upon Montreal but on Macinac, and was

one who believed that Coldwater "would soon become the most thriving place in Upper Canada and the centre for the provisions and transport trade for the fur countries". With his six "Canadians" (Indian French) he cleared and worked 40 acres around his post. It had fallen into decay by 1816, but only last year we traced the foundations of the magazine and huts and their chimneys and the kerb of Constants well, and found it full of water. The point of Matchedash Bay is still called The Chimneys.

Rev. Robert Dunn's name was not in the Gazette (article describing departure of Speedy) even misspelled, so he did not travel deluxe. He had come from Scotland to Niagara in 1784, and irked Governor Simcoe by rearing a church in Newark with the help of all denominations, while the official Church of England had to wait. He further flouted authority by performing services in contravention of the Marriage Act, which bore heavily upon non-conformists. Prosecuted, he resigned his clerical calling and went into trade, perhaps with the Indians. He may have been one of the witnesses, or may have been travelling to the projected capital for better fortune in pastures new. Perhaps he berthed with blacks, children and common clay.

Lieutenant Paxton, commander of the Speedy, took what accommodation was left by his government guests, snatching his rest in a chair. Such was often the lot of minor commanders in the Provincial Marine. His mate slept in the forecabin with the watch below.

Of the crew of the Speedy the only name known is that of John Cameron of Kingston, possibly the mate. He did not hold rank in the Provincial Marine but he and his brother Allen served therein, according to a petition of their twice-widowed mother for relief. She and her first husband, James McNallege of the 34th Regiment, were both

taken prisoner at Saratoga, and the husband was later killed at Yorktown, Virginia, fighting under Lord Cornwallis. Her second husband, Allen Cameron, was a quartermaster in the 1st battalion of the 60th Regiment at Kingston, Ontario, which was the Speedy's base.

There were also on board, to quote the Gazette, "two children of parents whose indigent circumstances necessitated them to travel by land." Poor babes! And poor parents! With what feelings must they have awaited the Speedy that never came, when footsore and pack-galled they reached the promised land which they hoped to make a home and ammend their lot.

A considerable company trudged the rough-hewn Danforth road and the bush paths along the lake shore for ninety miles in the wake of the Speedy, too "indigent" (to quote the Gazette) or too independent to take passage in the unseaworthy government vessel. William and Abram M. Farewell of Oshawa, trappers and furtraders whose factor's death at Lake Scugog was the basis for the murder trial, expected to join the vessel off their creek-mouth with some Indian witnesses. But finding her already too crowded, when she arrived off Port Oshawa on Monday morning after sailing from York the evening before, they continued the journey to Presqu'ile in their own trading canoe, camping on the shore when necessary.

They reached the projected capital ahead of the Speedy, although they had kept her in sight all day and had been alongside and talked with those on board from time to time. When she was becalmed they could paddle faster than she could move. When they reached Presqu'ile they were surprised not to find her moored in the Cove, but, instead, the whole population anxiously searching for her.

Eleazer Lockwood, settler on the shores of Scugog, had seen

the prisoner going through the motions of killing someone before the band left the lake to go to York. He had hurried after them and notified Col. Givens, the Indian Superintendent. Although an important witness, his name did not appear in the passenger list. It is probable that he was being taken to Presqu'ile for the farewells in their canoe.

Another who took the shore track and reached Presqu'ile ahead of the schooner was Mr. William Weekes, barrister-at-law, rival for Angus McDonnell's seat at the last hotly contested election and destined to fill it with unexpected ease at the next. To the Free and Independent Electors of East York he had declared: "I stand unconnected with any party, unsupported by any influence, and unambitious of any patronage other than the suffrages of men who may be inclined to think with freedom and act with independency." With such a declaration it seems unlikely that Mr. Weekes was the counsel obligingly provided by the Crown for the defendent Indian; the successful Mr. McDonnell was, more probably, voyaging to Presqu'ile for that purpose. If he had been offered passage in the Speedy, Weekes would have declined, for he was fond of solitary journeys on foot or on horseback, living on his saddlebags and rehearsing his speeches to an appreciative audience, himself and his steed. On one of these he was away so long that Peter Ernest, a settler with whom he had disputed, was arraigned for murdering him. Bones had been discovered under Ernest's logpile. On the day of the trial Weekes walked into the courtroom, bowed to the bench, and said: "I appear for the defendant, my Lord". So he was not popular with authority. Perhaps he was suspected of planning something like this for Ogetonicut and left to ride alone.

After his election in 1806, poor Weekes became embroiled with

a Niagara Lawyer of "Right" sentiments, the Hon. William Dickson. In a case tried with political fury before Judge Thorpe at Newark, Mr. Dickson accused his learned friend Weekes of "using seditious expressions". Weekes' wit failed him for once and he challenged his tormenter to the stupid field of honour. They crossed the Niagara River and fought a duel near the ancient French-British-American fort. Weekes died of his wounds that night in the house of Robert See. His constituents of York, Durham and Simcoe thought so much of him that they gave him a fine funeral and elected his friend Judge Thorpe in his place; and Governor Gore thought so much of his slayer that he appointed him a member of the Legislative Council when the time came.

By grim coincidence Angus McDonell, one of the seconds in the duel in which Attorney General John White was killed at York in 1801, was Weekes' opponent in the election of August, 1804, and was drowned in this Speedy disaster two months later, leaving vacant the seat in the House of Assembly which proved fatal to Weekes so soon.

By morning the vessel was floating in a calm off Oshawa thirty miles on her way. Canoes put out from the creek mouth there, with Indian witnesses and with trappers and traders who had employed John Sharpe, late of the Queen's Rangers, the man for whose murder the Indian was going to be tried.

The Speedy was already too full of passengers and their baggage and equipment for the new capital that there was no accommodation for these further passengers even on deck. After a colloquy William and Abram M. Farewell, of Oshawa, the fur trading brothers who had employed Sharpe as their factor and storekeeper at Ball Point on Lake Scugog, cheerfully agreed to paddle on with their witnesses and join the others when the schooner reached Presqu'ile. In the light weather the canoes moved faster than the vessel, and if the lake became rough they could

be beached, or run into a creek mouth and the hardy hunters would make camp, waiting for better weather. So they proceeded, hugging the shore, sometimes ahead of the Speedy, sometimes behind her...

Ogetonicut, in the black forepeak of the schooner, shut off from light and air, had found occupation in his solitude. A bolt in his wooden walls had yielded, and he was scrape, scrape, scraping with it where he found the wood soft, hoping to dig his way out. Into what he could not guess, for he was in total darkness. If his tool made any sound it was like the gnawing of a rat.

As darkness fell, from the Speedy's deck could be seen the candles lighted by Major Keeler's black slaves in the holding he had hewn out high inland above Lead Creek, at the present Colborne. The 60 foot bluff which the French had named Isle of the Hat drew nigh. The schooner was in sight from Presqu'ile, and the community of Simpsons, Sellecks, Gibsons and Rogers had staked everything. The wind was still light.

The fowls in the pens for the court's reflection began to preen themselves and oil their feathers. The cocks crowed repeatedly. Change of weather, shift of wind, forecast the mariners. The breeze lulled again. Snowflakes slowly filtered down. Then the autumn wind bit in hard from the northeast right in the teeth of the Speedy, when she was within four miles of her desired haven.

There was furling and reefing and pulling and hauling, much discomfort for the passengers driven below, much berating and bawling for the four sailors and the mate on deck. The Speedy's 80 ft. length was cluttered with her two guns, the longboat on skids over the main hatch, her anchors and cables, roused out for mooring, the spars and gear of her fore-and-aft rig, the trunks and baggage of the officials, the live-stock pens for their table fare, and furniture for the courthouse. It was hard to reach and work her pumps. She was aleak, her usual condition in a headwind, for she suffered from dry-rot. The water was coming in faster than the pumps could throw it out.

Commander Paxton's first thought was how might he avoid the unmarked Devil's Borseblock in the snow and the dark? It stood like a hidden lion in the Speedy's path, a submarine crag 40 feet across, eight fathoms of water right up to it, only eight inches or so over it. He knew the shore ranges and compass bearings for it perfectly, but how to apply them in the dark?

"Fire the starboard Gun" he ordered. After delays over wet

powder, damp cartridges and sodden linstock matches a flintlock pistol flashed over the powderpan ignited the charge, and the 6-pounder roared. The passengers below thought the vessel was signalling her arrival, and began donning their greatcoats in preparation for landing.

"A few moments yet, your Lordship, a few moments yet," called down Lieutenant Paxton. More truly than he thought.

A light blazed redly. Captain Selleck on the point, in answer to the gun, had set fire to a great pile of brush, logs and chips from the newbuilt courthouse, to guide the vessel in.

Lieutenant Paxton breathed freely. He could now calculate his position from this fix on the Point, so he flogged the ill-named Speedy towards it in wing-weary zigzags, adding the clang of the overworked pumps to the roar of the sails, the sobbing of the scuppers and the hiss of the seas and the mingling snow.

No one heard Ogetonicut's drowning gasps in the lake-filled forepeak. His patient scraping away at the rotted wood splinter by splinter, hour after hour, had been rewarded first by a wetness, then a sudden gush, through the plank, rib and ceiling, all honeycombed with rot, and pierced by his slow toil. With his feet shackled to the floor of the flood prison he drowned in the dark.

After much tacking the Speedy was beyond the Horseblock, Lieutenant Paxton could tell by the compass bearing on the bonfire, now on his quarter. "Stations forward!" he called "Standby for stays!"

She came up into the wind and hung in irons, her snow-filled sails flailing wildly. She was so water-logged she would not steer. So he wore her around before the wind, hauled her up on the other tack as she gathered headway, and bore away for the blaze of the beacon light. She could reach it in ten minutes.

In the manoeuvre the Speedy had drifted to leeward, and she fell further to leeward as she plunged suddenly through the snow with the muzzle of the lee gun level with the water. Even as he estimated the ten-minute interval she smashed squarely on the hammerhead of the unseen Horseblock, and her masts went overside. With a rumble felt rather than heard, that spike of limestone split into fragments and collapsed, carrying down in its ruins the shattered vessel with all on board.