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Schooner Days CVIII (108)
by C.H.J. Snider

Proctor's "Gunboats"

Chatham, Oct.2. - Was there a third British gunboat sunk in the River Thames during the war of 1812? If so, it is thought an old hulk, lying in the river bed near here is the remains of the old fight ship.

So ran a Canadian Press despatch of this week. To answer both questions involved in it, the compiler of "Schooner Days" pilgrimage to Chatham and the rutty banks of many winding Thames, and here is the result of his labors.

Was there a third British gunboat sunk in the Thames? There was, without doubt, unless one cavils at the technical term gunboat.

"Gunboat" has had varying meanings through the century. In general the definition of "a vessel of light draught carrying one or more guns" holds good. In the period of 1812 gunboats included decked sailing vessels armed with cannon, open boats propelled by oars, and carrying cannon on platforms, and galleys combining both features, oars and sails, decks and rowing thwarts, and cannon in fixed or temporary positions.

Whether *Proctor* had any gunboats at all when he retreated up the Thames, or whether the flotilla he scuttled or burned in his retreat was not, rather, transports, moving his military stores, is a point well taken by Mr. Victor Lauriston, 35 Stanley Ave., Chatham, who is well versed in the history of the War of 1812.

Accepting the layman's conception of any armed vessel or one used for military purposes as a "gunboat," it is certain that *Proctor* abandoned four or five vessels in his panic plunge through the western wilderness towards the safety of Burlington Heights. So the answer to the "third British gunboat" question is yes.

We have only to take the report of the invading American commander, Major-General William H. Harrison to the United States Secretary of War, Oct. 9, 1813.

He states that "at the first farm above Chatham they found in flames - (1) - a large vessel, loaded with ordnance and military stores. Two miles further up they found - (2) and (3) - two others in a similar state, and six miles further - (4) and (5) - captured the other two." This corresponds with the assertion of the late Col. J.S. Black, 24th Regt., Chatham historian, that *Proctor* set off for the Thames from Malden "with four gunboats and a small schooner."

Poor old *Proctor* was "asking for it" when Tecumseth called him a fat dog with his tail between his legs, but one's sympathies are also aroused (they would be more so if he hadout was a Major General) when one recollects his position.

He was on the western frontier of civilization, cut off from this base by the destruction of the British fleet, hampered rather than helped by Indian allies, with dwindling supplies and increasing sick. He must have been distracted by the condition of his own wife, who, with stupidity inconceivable, unless one has read Charles O'Mally, he had doomed the impossible hardships of a wilderness campaign. He seems to have been in a blue funk and the skirmish at Moraviantown does not deserve the name of a battle, except for the heroism of the gallant

Tecumseth who there perished. *Proctor* appears to have continued retreat before the fight began. The tragedy of the Battle of the Thames lies not in the petty defeat of Proctor, but in the overthrow and total extinction of the aspirations of the Crouching Panther, noblest red man of them all, for the Indian race. With Tecumseth perished the possibility of an Indian federation preserving even a part of their native continent for the red man from the white.

One of the vessels *Proctor* was using to carry his stores and supplies was a two-masted schooner rigged craft the *Colonel Myers*, after the quartermaster-general of the British forces in Canada at the time. She had been to the siege of Fort Meigs, on the Maumee river in Ohio, and seems to come up to all specifications of the gunboat of the period of 1812. The late Col. Black accepted her as being the "largest vessel loaded with ordnance and military stores" first found in flames, and identified the hull found in 1900 and raised in 1901 at Pikeville, above the C.P.R. bridge, about a mile east of Chatham, as hers.

It had two tons of cannonballs, cannister, flintlocks and bayonets in its hold when it was raised. It was floated to Tecumseth Park, Chatham, and set up there, by the efforts of the Tecumseth Historical Society; but this commendable body had not the resources necessary to preserve it, and souvenir seekers made a wreck of it. A noteworthy feature of the vessel's sternpost was the great iron strap of the rudder gudgeon. The rudder itself was missing.

By 1912 what remained of the hulk was broken up and placed in various forms of permanent memorial. Convocation Hall, Toronto, has a chair made from the timbers and presented by the late John Ross Robertson. The chair is oak, of a beautiful black and brown color, dyed with almost a century's submergence.

The massive stem of the recovered wreck was of walnut. It is possible that she was built at Chatham, where fine black walnut abounded, and may still be found; although it is more likely she was launched from the Royal Dockyard at Amherstburg.

Black walnut, in perfectly straight logs, 16 feet long and two feet across at the small end, used to sell in Chatham at 50 cents a stock. Such a piece would bring \$500 now. Black walnut trees, laden with nuts, still grow along the Thames banks. The writer gathered a pocketful of the fresh green nutmeg scented globes this week in company with Mr. William Angus, editor of the *Chatham News*, within a hundred yards of where the *Colonel Myers* went to her fiery death 120 years before.

According to Mr. Oswald Butler, of the Chatham waterworks, a shipwright named James Baker built five gunboats for the British Government at the flats near Tecumseth Park, Chatham, when the townsite was first laid out by Governor Simcoe in 1793. Two are said to have been launched, and three left on the stocks, to be burned later by settlers who needed the iron fastenings in them much more than they did the timber of which they were composed.

Chatham had been laid out as a dockyard and naval depot, but had nothing but a blockhouse to show when Harrison swept up the Thames. The dockyard settlement was apparently only a temporary one. Possibly it was abandoned after the boats had been finished, for Dr. Mustard, analyst at the Chatham waterworks, asserts that the first house in Chatham was not built until 1828. Louisville, six miles up the river, flourished before Chatham, and built vessels for abroad before Chatham became an active port.

Thus the *Colonel Myers* accounts for one of Proctor's flotilla of five. What of the others?

It is quite probable that the "small schooner" in his little fleet was the *Ellen* or *Eleanor*, a

trading vessel which *Proctor* had taken over for transport purposes for the attack on Fort Meigs earlier in the year, This is proved by the following memorandum by *Proctor* after he reached the safety of Burlington Heights:

CERTIFICATE

“I do certify that the schooner ELLEN, fifty-nine Tons Burthen, the property of Richard. Partinson, Esq., was taken into the Public service as a Transport about the 15th of June last and was burnt at the River Thames by my orders on the third of October together with her rigging, Sails and Store, to prevent her falling into the hands of the Enemy. And that she was valued by him at Five Hundred Pounds Province Currency. Having signed duplicate Receipts

“Burlington Heights, 22d Nov. 1813.

“(Signed) HENRY PROCTOR.

Major General.”

Other notes of the time give *Eleanor of Amherstburg* as the name of the vessel and Richard Pattison or Pattinson as the owner. The accurate Alexander Mackintosh, master of the *Nancy*, consort of this vessel to Fort Meigs, calls her the *Ellen*, so *Proctor* may have been right for once.

President Clarence M. Burton, of the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Society, identified a hulk in the Thames above Pikeville as that of the *Ellen* and purchased it in 1906, but he was not allowed to remove it.

Dr. Mustard states that there are still at least two sunken hulls still in the river above Pikeville, one pointing into the bank, possibly on the Arthur Fisher farm, and the other farther up. On the river bottom. He himself examined the one which pointed into the banks some years ago. Its outline was traceable with a pike pole. The Thames water is not clear, and it is not easy to discern outlines below the surface.

There was another transport named the *Eliza* attached to the Malden base, and, as there is no mention of her being captured in the Battle of Lake Erie, she would have been available for *Proctor*'s retreat. Possibly she was the third vessel burned in the Thames. Whatever “gunboats” *Proctor* had, not one of them was formidable enough from its armament to take part in the Battle of Lake Erie, where every British gun was needed in our little overmatched fleet of six vessels. There is a story that one of his boats was dragged or tracked six weary miles through swamps and shallows and fired only one shot in the battle which followed. After the shot already in her gun had been fired it was found that the necessary ammunition for the piece had been left behind! The story tellers are seldom considerate of *Proctor*'s memory.

Mr. Butler, mentioned before, speaks of a tree having rooted itself in the wreck of one of the abandoned hulks close to the bank and having grown up and covered it.

It seems pretty certain that three gunboats or transports becalmed by the forest boughs as they ascended the river were set on fire by *Proctor* as the shoaling water further impeded their progress, and that they drifted down in flames and burned to the water's edge. One of these, the *Colonel Myers*, has been removed. Harrison may have sent the second remaining pair, which were captured, back to Detroit. He mentions the loss of two cannon, while the spoils were being sent home by way of Lake St. Clair; perhaps these were the same “gunboats,” and the boats were wrecked. He took eight guns in all in the British rout, some of them trophies of Saratoga, in the

Revolutionary War, but he said that other guns were left in the river.

The Thames has been pretty thoroughly prodded and poked by fishers after sunken logs, since timber, once a burden to the settler, became valuable. The sunken “gunboats: are fairly definitely located, but no guns have been found. Perhaps Harrison fished them all up and took them away.

The small, fa gun in front of the Chatham waterworks is not, directly at least, a veteran of the War of 1812. It was “recaptured,” according to an old inscription, by the Kent County militia, after an outlaw army of members of Hunter’s Lodges and Patriot sympathizers had abandoned Fighting Island in the Detroit River, before the ice broke up in the spring of 1838. The gun had been used by them to menace the town of Amherstburg. It has no broad-arrow or other mark of British identification on it. The barrel is reinforced with three curious strips of iron, parallel to the bore. The suggestion has been hazarded that this was an American Revolutionary piece, cast in a Connecticut or Pennsylvanian foundry, which later fell into the hands of Mackenzie sympathizers in 1837.

AND now at least for the implied question No. 2 - Is the old hulk discovered in the river bed in Chatham this week the remains of an old fighting ship?

Regretfully, but most decidedly

NO.

The writer has examined the hulks of the following eighteen -twelvers: The *Nancy*, *Jefferson*, *Tigress*, *Newash*, *Tecumseth*, *Niagara*, *Porcupine*, *St. Lawrence* and several more of doubtful identity but similar fate. They all had this in common: Massive construction, held together by hand-wrought spikes and fastenings, of wood or iron. Two-inch planks and six-inch frames have been the lightest scantling discovered.

This hulk at present in the limelight lies beside the retaining wall of the charming riverside garden of Mr. J.B. Kerr, 363 King street west, Chatham. It has just been uncovered by the lowering of the Thames, which exposes a strip of sand outside the wall. The wreckage, which may have a total length of forty feet, but does not show more than twenty, touches the stones. Not all of it is visible.

What can be examined, however, is a curved strip of planking with a few ribs or frames attached. The planking is pike, blackened on the outside with submersion, but yellowish when shaved down. The plank is about an inch and a half thick, and the ribs or frames are of about the same dimensions, an inch and a half sided, and an inch moulded. They are four to six inches apart. The nails which can be seen are small round wire sales two and three inches in length. The outer side of the planking, which lies nearest the wall, has been sheathed quite extensively with tin. In some places the tin has been nailed on over felt paper, as if intended to stop a leak.

The modern wire nails, tin, tarpaper, light construction, etc., all fit with the probability that the wreckage is that of a small launch or fish boat, or possibly a light river tug, and not more than 40 years old.

Moreover, its location is the most unlikely one for a gunboat or transport abandoned because the river had become too full of shoals for further progress. Vessels drawing 12 feet of water can come up to Chatham now, and in 1813 the river was probably five feet deeper than it is at present. The gunboats known to have been abandoned were found miles further up the

Thames, and it is very probable that they had drifted back down stream a considerable distance before the invaders discovered them. Where the *Colonel Myers* was exhumed, at Pikeville - once a sawmill settlement, now just a name - the water was 12 feet deep even in 1901.

The wreckage right in the heart of Chatham is not at all likely to have anything to do with the War of 1812. It is only fair to state that neither Mrs. Kerr, who discovered it, nor her husband, who examined it, advanced the theory it was one of Proctor's lost fleet. That is an embellishment for which thousand-tongued Dame Rumor must take responsibility.