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Schooner Days MCIII (1103)
By C.H.J. Snider

Happier Bride's Diary – What, No Wine? – Plenty of Salt

Salt is a necessity to the white pioneer. He has to have it for his family, and for his livestock. Without salt he perished from dysentery or starvation. At least 'twas so 150 years ago, before electric refrigeration. The fish he caught and the stock he slaughtered could not be kept without salt. If eaten fresh without salt they nauseated him and caused fluxes.

Each Loyalist immigrant of 1784 was allowed 2 1/2 bushels of salt per annum and no more, doled out by government commissioners. Consequently for 20 years salt was bootlegged.

The first Yankee cargo on Lake Ontario was salt to be smuggled to Canada. The British officer still holding the unsundered fort at Oswego in 1796 would not allow the salt to pass into the lake. It was towed back up the river and carried on sleighs along the Ridge trail, and sneaked into the lake next spring at Sodus, where there was no control fort. Besides, all the forts had been given up. The free-trader ran his vessel aground in the newly established harbor at Presqu'ile in Upper Canada and asked permission to unload her to get her off. When the settlers saw the salt barrels coming out they offered him every assistance. So much so that he sailed away in a few hours with a light ship and a heavy pocketbook.

The place where this fortunate "disaster" occurred is known as Salt Point to this day. It is just inside Presqu'ile.

The prosperity of Oswego where Anne MacDonell's diary in 1805 noted salt went as money would naturally irk a salt monopoly. As high as \$25 a bushel was charged for this necessity of life in Canada.

"We dined at three," continues Mrs. MacDonell's diary after recounting her arrival in Oswego, "a bad dinner, if we had not assisted it from our provision baskets – no wine to be held, fortunate we have a traveling case."

England's Last Stand

"After dinner we crossed the river, not a quarter of a mile wide, in a boat to the opposite side. I was quite delighted with the walk on fine clean grass. It has quite a romantic appearance, the sheep and cattle grazing on the green banks of Fort Ontario.

"We went inside the Garrison. I peeped in all the old huts and walked over the bastions. I was astonished at the immense deal of work once done there, and at the vast sums of money which must have been expended and now become useless and uninhabited.

"Quarters which once the gay officer inhabited, their last use a horse stable, and where the drum and fife used to resound is now heard the grunting of pigs, the only inhabitants at present. Two or three ranges of shattered buildings are to be seen, but a few years will, I

suppose, leave only the entrenchment of what was engineered with so much caution.

“I felt quite reluctant to leave a place that afforded such a fine prospect. The lake, the river – and even the Town did not look ill. But after our curiosity was gratified there was nothing to be done but to return to this side. Only one family residing on that (Fort Ontario) side of the river, six acres being a reserve for the State.

“Returning to McNair’s Tavern we drank tea (it was not good) and at an early hour Mrs. McGill and I retired to our room, which was small, containing two beds, without any other convenience, no table. We had a good deal of noise from the adjoining room, which was full of sailors.”

Earlier Singapore

Great Britain is said to have poured a million pounds into Oswego, in the seventy years’ occupation. And it fell to the French as Singapore fell to Japanese attack. It was another Singapore. It was recovered, held for 40 years longer, and surrendered at length to the new United States.

But before Anne and Mrs. McGill blow out the candle in preparation for another day, be it recorded that in the present bright bustling well ordered city of Oswego the graves of British soldiers of the 18th century are better cared for than the graves of British defenders of York in Toronto. The traveling bride of the High Sheriff of the Home District in Upper Canada was detained for some time in Oswego. Perhaps we may employ the interim to tell more of Oswego’s salt trade – next week?