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Schooner Days DLII (552)
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GOLDEN PHANTOM OF THE LAKES

Where was the fight? – Who got the gold? – First battle on Lake Ontario spread over wide indefinite area with wide indefinite results.

ACCOUNTS of the fighting between the French and the English on Lake Ontario in the Seven Years' War, 1756-1763, are as difficult to understand as accounts of Near and Far East actions today.

Father Hocquart thus piously recorded the very first naval engagement on Lake Ontario, June 26th or 27th, 1756:

“Our little fleet on Lake Ontario, in number about five vessels, having met the English fleet amounting to ten, gave them battle. We have taken the English admiral. Afterwards we put the others to flight, and obliged two to run ashore with all sails set.”

The reverend gentleman doubtless believed what he wrote, but there seems no reason for us to do so also. The English account of the same “battle” boils down to two small English men-of-war, scouting out of Oswego, then a British port, in company with a still smaller craft, and encountering four larger French vessels. They held a council of War, exchanged shots with the enemy, and in the phrase of our own time, withdrew in good order. In other words ran. In the withdrawal the smallest craft disappeared towards the north-east, with two froggies after him.

OFFICIAL DESPATCH

Returning to a more official French source, the “battle” was thus reported by the Marquis de Vaudreuil to the French Minister of Marine:

“Our two barks (French armed vessels used for freighting), returning from Niagara on the 26th of June, perceived across the Bay of Quinte some coming towards them. We gave them chase, all our sails set, but the enemy immediately sheared off. He was pursued so close that he was obliged to abandon his sloop, which was his third vessel. We left this to our two barks; our two corsairs (new armed schooners built for cruising) continued in pursuit of the enemy, who, seeing himself gained on, cut his boat loose and threw a number of things overboard. In vain we fired our chasers after him, he made no response, taken up altogether in pushing himself ahead, and the wind having fallen he gained on our corsairs by means of the quantity of sail he carried. Having chased him into Chouagen (Oswego) we tacked to overhaul the sloop our barks had missed. She struck at once. This prize is about 20 tons, armed with 6 patereros (small cannon, possibly swivels) or muskets, 6 sailors and 8 soldiers.”

Thus the running of two vessels ashore with all sail set and the capture of the admiral of a squadron of ten and dispersal of the rest of a “fleet” simmers down to the capture of one small

vessel with a crew of fourteen men. Still, it was a French victory, and an English defeat. The French followed it up by a smart attack on Oswego, and the destruction of the English fleet there. Old Hocquart was right after all but at the wrong time.

TEN BECOME TWO

The “fleet of ten” in this Lake Ontario, action of June 27th, 1756, actually consisted of two British sloops named the *Ontario* and the *Oswego*, which had had shoes or false keels added to improve their sailing qualities, and mounted four 4-pounders, one 3-pounder and ten little swivel guns. These vessels were only 43 feet long on the keel.

They were accompanied by a small schooner, the vessel erroneously described by Vaudreuil as a sloop. She or her sister captured later at Oswego was taken to Niagara by the French and renamed the *Farquer*, and was recaptured by the British at Niagara in 1759.

English accounts of her armament vary as widely as the French – from “two guns (cannon) and 28 swivels” – which would be one for almost every foot of her length! – to “only six swivels” which may be the patereros mentioned by Vaudreuil.

She is said to have been named the *Lively*. Labroquerie’s well-known drawing of the “Flotte Engloisse” or English Fleet in Lake Ontario, shows two tiny bald-headed schooners with the inscription between them “Les 2 Evive,” “the two Livelies.”

The little schooner which was the first prize made in battle, on Lake Ontario, had, as already mentioned, a twin, which had been chased into Oswego the day before. These little survey vessels or dispatch boats may have each been intended for one gun and fourteen swivels, seven to a side. That would be all their short length would accommodate – and more than their small crews of fourteen men could work. They were no bigger than a lake steamer’s lifeboat.

LONG LOST TREASURE BEARER?

Vague stories of a small war vessel being chased by the enemy into a forgotten harbor or creek mouth, and having there sunk or buried the “pay chest” or whatever treasure she was carrying, decorate both shores of Lake Ontario, Canadian and American, and the “alleged facts” are distributed with international impartiality. It is either a French or American vessel pursued by the British, or a British vessel pursued by Americans or French – very rarely the latter story, because the French lost their war in America and no loyal English-speaking story teller could imagine them ever winning a naval battle, which is where history differs.

The mouth of the Highland Creek, a mile west of Port Union, is one of many localities suggested as the scene of such mythical escape and pursuit. There seems little likelihood that either of the Livelies was chased into the Highland Creek, either as an English dispatch vessel or a French prize. There is much more likelihood of the Farquer-Lively being the foundation for the story of “French gold” – sometimes said to be bullion, sometimes altar ornaments – being sunken at the Outlet, a curious channel which drains Spence Lake into Lake Ontario, on the west face of Prince Edward County. Spence Lake, locally known as East Lake, is a large triangular

pond, three miles long and a mile or more wide, north of Cherry Valley, famed for its Mariners' Services and generosity to British War Victims. The base of this triangle, where the "mouth" ought to be, is a mile-long bar of sand and shingle piled up by Lake Ontario's ceaseless pounding, but through this bar the curious curved Outlet cuts its way in a long diagonal to the lake. The Outlet can be waded, but it is deep and a current flows ceaselessly in and out. Outside the bar is the deep crescent of Athol Bay, between Owen Point and the Sandbanks on the north and Wicked Point on the south. Spence Lake and Athol Bay are to the north of Athol Township; Athol Bay is known locally as Little Sandy, and Owen Point as West. They have been for years. Chart names often fail to stick.

The story here is that a French vessel, pursued by the English, landed at the Outlet and buried her treasure, one keg of gold being lost overboard in the Outlet as they rolled it down the gangplank. Nothing corresponding to this incident has yet been found in records. The fact may be that the little English schooner *Lively*, pursued by the "barks" and "corsairs" of the French fleet, got as far as the Outlet and tried to hide there and was captured later. Re-reading Vaudreuil's dispatch it would seem that she escaped the "barks" and that the "corsairs" caught her later, after they had tacked – the word is significant – near Oswego.

The Outlet is a hundred miles away from Highland Creek and 55 miles northwest of Oswego. It is within chasing distance from where the first freshwater naval battle on the North American continent took place, which was somewhere southeast of Point Peter in Prince Edward County.

The "battle" was all smoke and noise. None of the thirty French guns registered a hit. But they scored a victory, for the French captured a prize. The last Commodore Bradley, the English "admiral" who was not taken, saw off the poor little *Lively* from his flagship, the sloop Oswego, as she was heading for the shore.

DID SHE REACH SHORE? WHERE?

As there are some references to the pursued British tender disappearing to the northeast, the Outlet is not a highly probable scene of her escape or capture, because it would be northwest of the supposed place of encounter. Highland Creek would be much farther west.

It is not easy to fix the exact place where the English and French vessel first met in battle, beautiful "Niagara" in the translation of French manuscripts sometimes means the *Niagara* we know, where the French had a fort, and sometimes it means another place at the east end of Lake Ontario where the French had another fort – a bay then named Niaoures or Niawrerres, which probably sounds like Niagara if an Indian with a hairlip was trying to say it. This has confused many historians. "Perceiving across the Bay of Quinte" suggests looking across the long irregular z-shaped piece of water which forms the real north shore of Lake Ontario between Brighton and Kingston, and makes Prince Edward County a peninsula. This may be what Vaudreuil had in mind, too, but the French chart of the lake in his time (La Broquerie's) called the Bay of Quinte the Bay of Corners – a very good description – and confined the use of the

name Quinte to four places, all west of the bay which we know by the name. La Broquerie's map or chart has "Ille de Quintee" a little east of Port Hope and the present Gull Rock, which may represent the isle intended to be marked. Farther east on the map is another "Illes de Quintee," two islands and dotted shoals, which may correspond to the present Proctor Island or Proctor Point, twenty miles east of Cobourg. A few miles farther east on the same map is "Portage de Quintee," in the position of the present Murray Canal and the old Carrying Place, which gave access to the Bay from the west. Finally Quintee disappears from this map in "Pres Ille de Quintee" which corresponds to the whole peninsula of Prince Edward County. Perhaps "across" is a mistranslation.

GULL POND OR PETTICOAT POINT?

There is another hidey-hole on the south face of Prince Edward County, with a bar which the little *Lively* might have been lively enough to jump. This is Gull Pond, inside of what is officially called Cherwell Point, probably after the ancient brig-of-war *Charwell*, in 1812. Frank or Peter Huff once took the little coaster *F.F. Cole* into Gull Pond single handed in a heavy gale which had hurled his shipmate, Nelson Garrison, overboard, off the Scotch Bonnet, while he was at the wheel. He may have been killed when the mainboom jibed and struck him.

This war's operations uncovered ancient graves some distance inland, north and west of Gull Pond. They were known to have occupied the centre of a farmer's field, and had been marked by shrubbery. The spot may have been a private family cemetery, common in pioneer times, but the last family occupying the farm twenty year ago, the Edmundses, thought them the graves of shipwrecked sailors drowned at Point Peter. The graves are nearer Point Peter than they are to Cherwell Point.

Another hole-in-the-bank the *Lively* may have tried is Petticoat Marsh or the deep water inside Petticoat Point bar, where the bones of the American schooner, *Oswego* of Oswego, have lain, gathering moss for three-quarters of a century. She pounded over the bar in a November gale and sank, drowning all her crew.

Capt. Labroquerie also drew in his map, as below, the ENGLISH FLEET. It may not have been as accurate as his portraiture of his own squadron, in which he was a commander, but neither was his information. This was the second English fleet, in 1757, for the first English fleet had been destroyed at Oswego in 1756, the year of our present story. The picture, like the fleet itself, includes some vessels which had been captured from the French and rearmed.

That the two LIVELIES were really as tiny as the converted lifeboats in which our boy Sea Scouts face Lake Ontario is proved, both by their comparative size in this original drawing and by-the fact that one reef was deemed sufficient to reduce their small sails to storm canvas – a detail which Labroquerie, himself a practical seaman, would make no mistake about. He shows three reefs for example, in the Vaudreuil's mainsail, two in her foresail and one in her jib.

Whether all the vessels shown were in the fleet at any one time is doubtful, and the identification of the two vessels named by Labroquerie "LE JEORGE" and "LE VIGILLANT"

has been questioned. It is certain, however, that the English had only four vessels on the lake at the time of the first battle. One of the two named LIVELY is shown, although both had been captured by the French previously and could not be in the British fleet of 1757, and the sloop ONTARIO, which took part in the first battle of the war, had been captured or destroyed along with her sister ship, the *Oswego*.

Labroquerie's pictures of the LIVELY and the ONTARIO are particularly of value, even if an historical anachronism for they show exactly what the three English vessels which took part in the first battle, June 26th, 1756, were like. The *Oswego*, third ship in the fight, was a duplicate of the *Ontario*. Neither of these small men-of-war was half as long as a 1942 Fairmile, and the third British vessel was not as large as one of those little sightseeing launches of the Harbor Commission for the Island lagoons.

(Caption) THE OUTLET, where a keg of French gold has often been sought but never found. A century-old pioneer log cabin is on its shore.

(Caption) WAR FLEETS OF ONTARIO 185 YEARS AGO

ABOVE, THE FRENCH FLEET ON LAKE ONTARIO, from Capt. Labroquerie's map, 1757. Possibly the very vessels that chased and captured the "LIVELY. The two largest French schooners are LaMarquise de Vaudreuil, named in compliment to the wife of the Governor, and LaHuralt, presumably to be translated Huron. The fourth vessel is the sloop Victor, to which a "t" seems to have been added.