

Toronto Telegram, December 10, 1947
Schooner Days DCCCXXVI (826)
By C. H. J. SNIDER

FIRST OF ALL SAILS INTO NIAGARA, Dec. 7, 1678

The Sieur de La Motte had left La Salle's five-year-old fort at Cataraqui on November 18th, 1678, in a little 10-ton "barque or brigantine," supposedly named Le Frontenac. She had on board a Sulpician missionary, Father Hennepin, and his portable chapel and altar and some artisans and their tools for building a large "barque or brigantine" to be later known in history as the Griffon, above the falls of Niagara, for the exploration of the Upper Lakes, and a post on the river below.

We have been following the *Frontenac's* voyage, the first under sail on the Great Lakes so far as is known, and last week we got her as far as Toronto "to be continued."

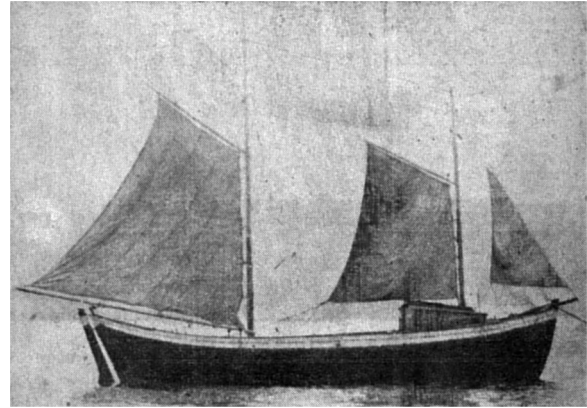
As the thirty-foot Frontenac had more than fourteen men on board she would not have room for much cargo. Indeed, she seems to have gone light on provisions, for at the end of ten days she put into the mouth of the Humber to trade for Indian corn, later mentioned as the food of these pioneers of the sail.

They were almost a week in the Humber mouth, fighting the forming ice, before they got a wind to their liking for the final dash to Niagara.

The straight course from the Humber is southeast by south. They could, perhaps, lay this with the wind at west of southwest. Apparently they feared the north wind would ice them up on the passage and they may have wished to keep close to the shore of Skannadario which Hennepin took to mean the head of the lake, all the way around. At any rate they did not sail until December 5th and could not reach Niagara that day "though it is but Fifteen or Sixteen Leagues distant," as Father Hennepin wrote and imagined, "and therefore cast Anchor within Five Leagues of the Shore, where we had very bad Weather all Night long. On the 6th, being St. Nicholas's Day, we got into the fine River Niagara, into Which never any such Ship as ours entered before . . . The Iroquois Tsonnontouans (Senecas) inhabited the little village situated at the mount of the (Niagara) River . . . were much surprised at our Ship, which they called the great wooden Canou."

WORSE SURPRISE COMING

The Senecas were already suspicious of the French (who tried to exterminate them ten years later), but the simple savages at the mouth of the Niagara River were as kind as those in



Present day French "barques" in Canada collateral descendants of Le Frontenac? Double-ended "barque" in the Bay of Chaleur; a 30-foot pulp log salvager anchored near Campbellton, N.B.

Toronto had been and gave generously to the strangers of their abundance of white fish, which is quality food for today. They made good Seume's lines "We savages are better men than ye." They didn't want a fort built in their territory, and while La Salle seems to have persuaded them to permit a depot of some sort at the mouth of the river, the *Frontenac* went as far up stream as she could, about seven miles, to Queenston, and was finally berthed, on December 15th, at a spot believed to be just below the Lewiston bridge, on the American side.

Thus came to its end the epochal, if not epic, voyage of the *Frontenac*, twenty-five days after it was begun. There were no Hollywood heroics in it, but it marked man's first success in harnessing the horses of the air in our part of the world. Sail had been used for the first time on the Great Lakes. Schooner days had come.

THIS "FRONTENAC"

And what manner of craft first drew its "ten tuns burthen" through the waves of the Ontario and the swirls of Niagara by windpower?

All that is recorded is that she was a "Brigantine of Ten Tuns." She may have been called *Le Frontenac*, after the governor whom the Indians called Onnontio, or Mighty Mountain. Denonville mentioned, ten years afterwards, that four small vessels had been built at Cataraqui in 1678. This was one of them. Another, called the "barque or brigantine" "*Kataraquay*," was used by the Sieur La Forest, La Motte's successor, in 1679. A third, only referred to as "the barque," was wrecked at what they called the Mad Cape with most of the *Griffon*'s intended material on board, in January that year.

Nothing is more elastic than tonnage records. Ten tons carpenter's measurement in 1678 would imply a content of under 1,000 cubic feet, for "tun," and "ton," is a measurement here of space, not weight. The extreme dimensions of the ship would which would produce this exact figure, say 5 x 8 x 25. If we accept 5 feet for the depth of the hold, between the gunwale and the bottom, we might allow 9 feet for the beam or greatest breadth and about 30 feet for the overall length. These are dimensions for a liner's lifeboat and of many French fishing craft on the Gaspé coast now.

A fourth, "*Le Generale*," is mentioned. "Generale" is the word for a drumbeat in French. Perhaps, with "navire" understood, it means "for general purposes" as a work boat. The name is quoted also for one of the last vessels the French built before the Conquest.

SUCCESSORS IN SIZE

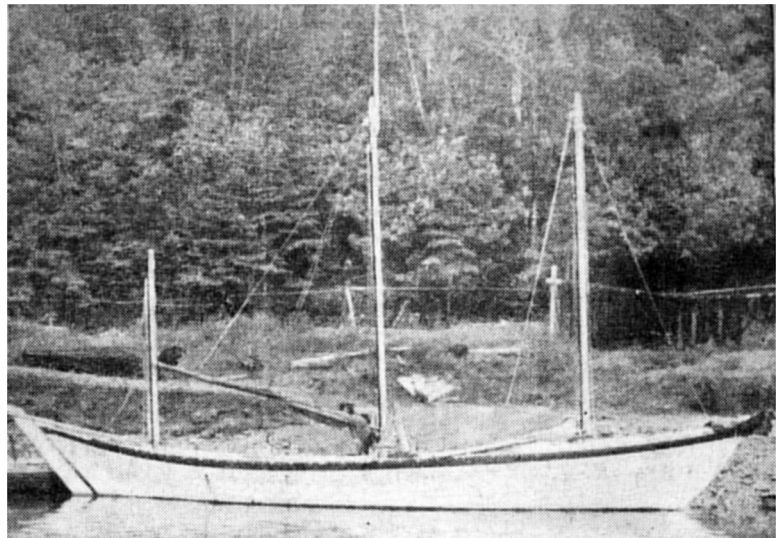
Two hundred years after the *Frontenac* we had a little schooner called the *Merrimac*, later *Zebra*, and another called the *Minnie*, of St. Catharines, of such dimensions, and they registered less than ten tons. They could carry about 15 tons deadweight. The *Zebra* had topmasts and six sails. The *Minnie* had no top hamper. Capt. Al Hare, of Port Credit, who died last month, sailed her as a boy.

At the stern or bow the *Frontenac* might not be castellated like the pictures of the larger *Griffon*, but she would be built up, to provide dry sleeping room and shelter from breaking water.

She may have been completely decked over or she may have had an open hold, between decking at each end. She could not have been very large, for three men on the bank sufficed to tow her up the Niagara River against the swift current as far as Lewiston.

FIRST SCHOONER?

We know she was dependent upon sails. What those sails were like we do not know. "Brigantine" first meant a small vessel rowed or sailed by brigands. Perhaps any sharp sterned vessel, as a barque was then any square sterned one. Both terms meant the kind of hull, not the rig. There is no mention of oars in the existing references to La Motte's "brigantine," but frequent references to the wind and its quarter. So she used sails at all times and possibly sweeps in smooth water. Both the *Minnie* and the *Zebra* could be sculled by one man with an oar over the taffrail.



Beautiful three-master, with curious schooner rig, in Brilliant Cove, near Belle Anse, below Douglastown, Gaspé. She, too, is called a barque.

The rig of the brigantine had not by 1678 crystallized into the two-master, with half the sails square and half fore-and-aft, of the 18th and 19th century. In the 17th century triangular lateen sails were used in the first brigantines in the Mediterranean, and probably square or lug sails in the north of France. The Dutch were already using fore-and-aft sails in their small craft.



"Barques" and a "Butt" (right) at Newport on the Gaspé coast not far from Perce rock.

La Motte may have had them for his "brigantine," but more probably she had two curtain-shaped sails, much like those shown in an early attempt at representing La Salle's *Griffon*, built and rigged in the following year. The *Griffon* is drawn with two lugsails, one small topsail and a conventional jib on a high-stepped bowsprit. The jib can be questioned, but the Dutch had them by this time.

Father Hennepin wrote that the *Griffon* was “a kind of brigantine not unlike a Dutch galliot, with a broad elevated bow and stern, very flat in the bottom, looking much larger than she really was and of sixty tons burden.” The length of the keel for the similar “barque,” in which La Salle planned to sail to the Vermillion Sea, was 42 feet, which may be a guide to the size of the *Griffon*. Down Gaspé way the French today call their sharpsterned little schooners “barques” and the flat-sterned ones “butts,” never schooners nor goelettes. They use the latter name for larger traders with power and only one mast, or none at all. They used to be two or three-masted. One was on Lake Ontario two years ago.

While there is no way of proving it, this *Frontenac* may have been sloop rigged, with one mast, or she may have been the first schooner in America, thirty years ahead of Capt. Andrew Robinson’s reputed original, launched at Gloucester in 1713. What seems certain is that the *Frontenac*’s were the first sails on Lake Ontario or the Great Lakes.

PASSING HAILS

Archibald MacMechan’s *Tales of the Sea*, by Thos. H. Randall. (McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, \$3).

You never miss the water till the well runs dry, and we never knew what a genius Canada lost fourteen years ago in the death of Archibald MacMechan, until Raddall, the Roger Sudden-Pride’s Fancy man, assembled the best of MacMechan marine work from its lurking places in Old Province Tales, Sagas of the Sea, There Go The Ships, and the files of the Halifax Chronicle, Canadian Magazine, MacLean’s, Dalhousie Review, and so on.

Illustrated in line by Donald Mackay and decorously jacketed and end-papered, this new book savors appetizingly of the Maritimes. Another Donald Mackay, the great clipper ship builder a century ago, was a Nova Scotian product.

MacMechan’s affection for Nova Scotia, amounting to a passion, was as amazing as his aptitude for things of the sea and the sail. He was inland born, in Ontario, his roots remained here, but he sang of Nova Scotia as though he were a bluenose Solomon composing new canticles. He endured yacht clubs with fortitude but without pleasure, he had never sailed before the mast – nor abaft it, in a commercial way – and all his racing experience was confined to a few surreptitious trips as a passenger in the *Bluenose* in her trials, unknown to peppery Angus Walters. Yet he could talk with Angus or any other fishing skipper by the hour, and make him ask for more – and when “Casey” Baldwin dismasted that torpedo-hulled R-class sloop *Scrapper* III in the Atlantic, off Cape Breton Island, it was Archibald MacMechan, then known as Grizzlebeard, who was his whole crew, and who helped Casey get the wrecked marconi mast aboard in a high sea and save the little ship from the breakers. And then wrote a cameo about it for some quarterly magazine.

These *Tales of the Sea* are not new – but they read with salty freshness after the passage of twenty years, stories of mutiny, murder, ghosts, piracy, and, best of all, the true heroism of the bluenose men and women who went down to the sea in ships that had sails.

Best in the book is perhaps the tale drawn from the tight lips of Leander Publicover, who told his selected volunteer helper, “if he drowned, my family wasn’t to be blamed. I expected to be drowned myself.” Leander had left his own big schooner in charge of his 18-year-old son and put off in a dory and spent the 20th of December, 1912, picking seven frost-bitten sailors off the waterlogged schooner *Henry B. Tilton*, with the seas breaking over her as high as the mastheads. Three trips had to be made, and the rescued had to be hauled aboard Capt. Publicover’s vessel “same as codfish” because the eggshell dory would smash up if she touched alongside. When he had delivered the last rescued the dory was full to the gunwales. Publicover sent his dorymate aboard in the same way as the sailors, in the bight of a line. Then he sent the dory thwarts, the iron bucket, oars, and the lifebuoy on board, for he wanted to save as much as he could, in case the dory did get smashed with him in it. When she was cleaned out he hauled himself aboard by a lifeline, with the remaining dory thwart and his oars, and the dory painter over his shoulder. They hooked on the tackles, spilled the dory free of water as you would empty a pail, and hoisted her out, without losing a life or a ropeyarn. “The Lunenburg Way,” as MacMechan pithily puts it.