

The Steamer Toronto of 1825

WALTER LEWIS

None of the early Great Lakes steamboats has been as strongly vilified by historians as the first *Toronto* (launched 1825): “peculiar”, “unfortunate”,¹ a “failure”,² “not of much use”, a “freak”.³ Their adjectives, however, pale before the contempt of the *York Observer*, which at the close of her first season described the *Toronto* as the “drivelling plan of a penny wise and a pound foolish”.⁴

The historical assessments are each accompanied by a description of the *Toronto*'s hull based on that of Canon Henry Scadding. “She was constructed without any difference of shape at the bow and stern, and without any ribs. She was a shell of successive layers of rather thin boards placed alternately lengthwise and athwart, with coatings, between of stout brown paper pitched.”⁵ On the strength of this description, H.A. Musham condemned her as “structurally weak, difficult to keep dry and hard to keep on a course by her cut-away profile”.⁶

These same historians have little to say of the *Toronto* after she was put up for auction in Kingston in 1830. The conclusion readily drawn from these accounts is that the *Toronto* was built of a “peculiar” design which contributed to a short, unsuccessful career.

These brief, inadequate accounts leave a number of questions unanswered. How and when did the “unfortunate” career of the *Toronto* end? Was this “peculiar” hull really to blame for her “failure”? And was this “drivelling plan” ever used for other steamers?

Before casually dismissing the *Toronto*, we should take account of a comment made several years later by the editor of the *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*. “The venerable *Toronto* or *Perseverance* (we do not know which) like the Wandering Jew, we presume, is doomed never to die. She has recently undergone another metamorphosis – from the caterpillar into the butterfly.”⁷ The comments were made after major renovations, to a brief flirtation with the name *Perseverance* in 1832-3, and the transfer of the vessel to work towing barges on the Rideau Canal. Somehow, Musham's condemnation does not ring true to this description.

Financial success does not seem to have been found by the *Toronto*. She had been built for a group of York merchants to run between York and Niagara. Launched in the spring of 1825, by the fall of that same season the *Toronto* was put up for sale “for cash only”.⁸ The Baldwin brothers (uncles of the Hon. Robert Baldwin of “Responsible Government” fame) bought out her other shareholders and shifted her down to a route between Prescott and the Bay of Quinte. This move took them out of the path of Capt. Hugh Richardson's new steamer, the



STEAM BOAT TORONTO.

PUBLIC NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN, that this Steam Boat with her Engine, Tackle, and Furniture, as she now lies at the Merchants Wharf in the Town of York, will be sold at Public Auction at the Market Place in the said Town at 12 o'clock at noon on Tuesday the 8th day of November next, to the highest bidder for cash only. And all persons having claims against the said Boat—and who have not already sent them in, are hereby notified to do so to the Subscriber, on or before the 4th day of November next, or they will not be attended to.

By order of a general Meeting of the Stockholders held on board the Boat the 10th October, 1825.

S. WASHBURN,

Secretary.

The Editors of the *Niagara Gleaner*,—*Kingston Herald*,— and *Brockville Recorder*, are requested to insert the above until the day of Sale, and send in their accounts.

STUMP MACHINE.

ad. re auction. “Upper Canada Gazette, 20 Oct. 1825. Construction of the *Canada* for a group of York and Niagara investors led by Capt. Hugh Richardson was already underway when the *Toronto*'s owners decided to cut their losses.”

Canada, which was threatening to take over the York-Niagara crossing.⁹ When the Baldwins disposed of most of their stock two years later, new investors kept the *Toronto* on the Bay of Quinte. One year she was chartered to Archibald McDonell who fought Henry Gildersleeve (the captain and agent of the *Sir James Kempt*) in the newspapers.¹⁰ The battle heated up at Bath the following season when the small cannon used by the *Toronto's* crew to signal departures was fired at the *Sir James Kempt*. One of the *Kempt's* hands was bowled over by the charge.¹¹

By 1832 she was in the hands of James G. Parker, a retired American mariner and Kingston merchant. Parker used the *Toronto* to keep a foothold in the competitive Bay of Quinte trade until his new steamer, the *Kingston*, was launched. Then, after the “metamorphosis” noticed by the Kingston *Chronicle and Gazette*, Parker moved the *Toronto* onto the Rideau Canal where, two years later, she was converted into a barge.¹²

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TO THE PUBLIC.

THE Subscriber having obtained His Majesty's Letters Patent for an improvement in Naval Architecture, as specified, attested, and duly registered, in the Court of Chancery, London, in succession as follows: for Ireland, England, Scotland, the Colonies, and Plantations; each separate and distinct; acquaints the public of Upper Canada that he has appointed Mr J. Ewart his agent, with full power to Build, grant Licences, and receive a premium of Three Shilings Current, per Ton, Register Tonnage, on each Licence so granted, in three months after being launched — Mr. Ewart having had an opportunity of being fully acquainted with the principles and manner of construction of the New System of Ship Building is hereby recommended as being fully competent to its Execution.

Any infringement of the right of the subscriber will be prosecuted as the Law directs.

W. ANNESLEY
York, U C June 20th, 1815. No 25 6w.

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ad. re Annesley, “To the Public”. *Upper Canada Gazette*, 7 July 1825. In a similar advertisement running in the *Montreal Gazette*, Annesley appointed his son, William Annesley jr., his agent.

When the *Toronto's* career is examined as a whole, it becomes evident that her only major failure had been her very first season, when she had, if only occasionally, run between York and Niagara. On May 25th, about a month after her launch, the *Toronto* set off on her first passage across Lake Ontario.¹³ She arrived in Niagara the same day and set off in return on the evening of May 27th. But, according to York's Customs officials, she did not return until June 7.¹⁴ Four days later she entered York again. Almost a month would pass before she successfully crossed a third time (July 6). Four more passages then followed in quick succession, the last times the *Toronto* would enter York that season.

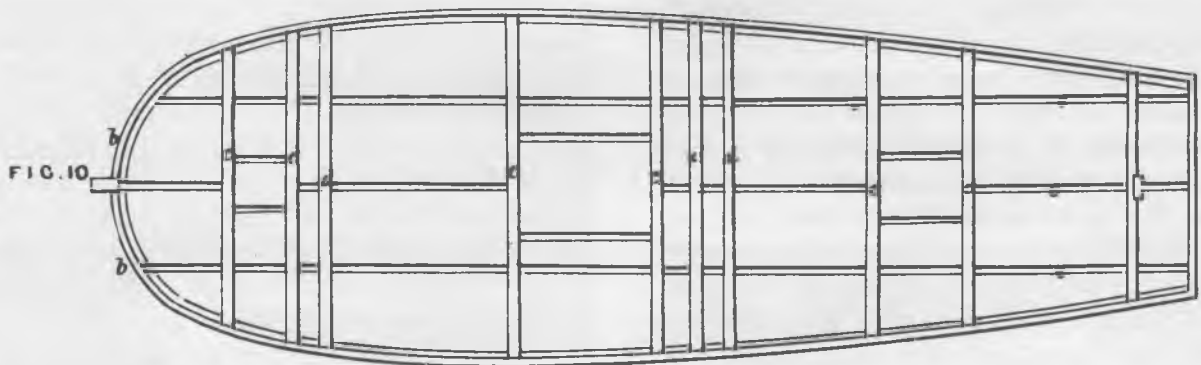
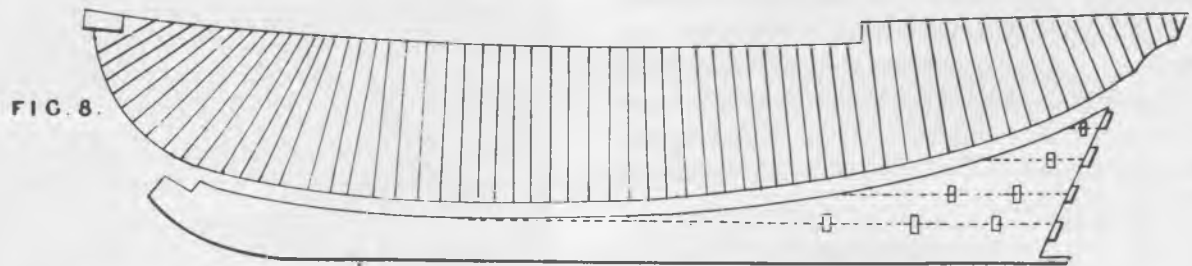
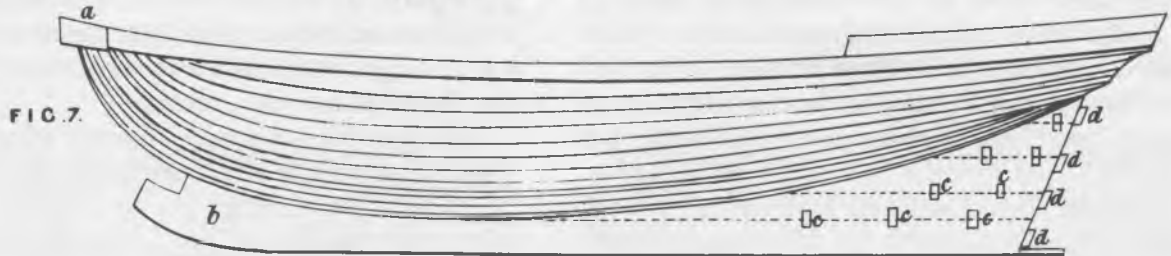
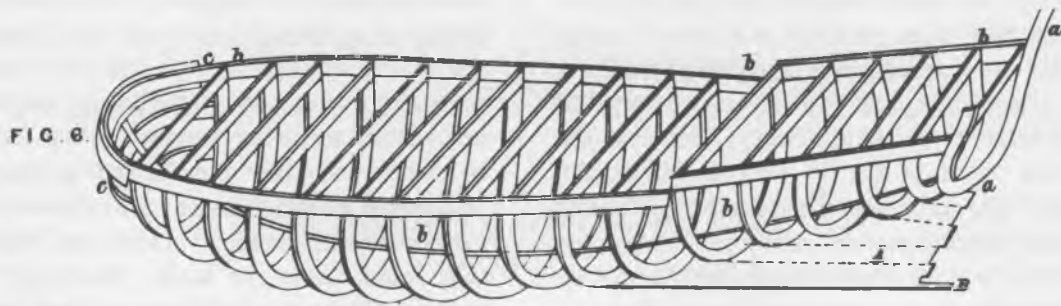
But was the hull the source of these problems? Not according to John Spread Baldwin, one of the exasperated investors. “... She makes a miserable hand of it, and all I

believe for want of an Engineer [. E] very one that has seen an Engine or pretends to be a judge, says, it is good [. T] he Boilers however I believe are very leaky, & there is always something wrong. ... When the Engine dos [sic] go properly, which it seems they cannot continue for more than an hour or two without something going wrong, the vessel [sic] goes at the rate of from 6 7 to 8 miles an hour.” Could a skilled engineer be found in Montreal, Baldwin asked, who could master the baulky machinery?¹⁵ There is nothing in his account, and presumably in the opinion of his brother and fellow investor, Capt. Augustus Baldwin, R.N., to suggest that the *Toronto's* hull leaked too much or that she would not hold a course.

The engine takes an equally prominent role in a contemporary account of her last attempt to cross to York. “... [S]ome of her machinery got out of order – she remained one day and two nights at the Mouth of the [Niagara] River, and although there was a strong wind up the river during the period, she could not get up, till on the 2nd instant, she was towed up by the *Queenston*.”¹⁶ In each of the following two seasons, there would be instances of mechanical breakdowns.¹⁷

Having concluded that the machinery and not the hull was the immediate source of the *Toronto's* problems, we are left wondering about the unusual nature of the design. A little research quickly reveals that a few other steam vessels were built to the same pattern during the years 1824-25. Musham describes the *Chippewa*, a ferry built in 1824 to run across the upper Niagara river as “being shaped like a muskmelon and built of layers of planks and without frames.”¹⁸ The newspaper account of the launch of the *Toronto* credits her design to an “ingenious and scientific artist”, Mr. Annesley [sic].¹⁹ Annesley had already left his name on a small Montreal area steam ferry launched in 1824, and reference to the Montreal press reveals his other credentials.

Annesley's son, William Jr. had opened a small Montreal business selling mirrors and prints, while his father was still in the Irish port of Belfast securing British patents for “Certain Improvements in the Construction of Boats, Ships, and other Vessels.”²⁰ A steamboat using Annesley's patent had been completed on the Humber River in England, and a second was under construction in New York, when Annesley Sr. came to Montreal in the spring of 1824.²¹ William Jr. had invested in a company building a steam ferry between Montreal and the south shore of the St. Lawrence. His father came up from Albany, New York, to build the hull for £480.²² Significantly, the *William Annesley* (as it became known) was also described as being “the exact model of a canoe”; just as Scadding had described as being “the exact model of a canoe”; just as Scadding had described the *Toronto*.²³ Its launch occurred



engraving from patent. "Great Britain, Patent Office, no. 4240, 8 Apr. 1818. Annesley took out a virtually identical patent three years later. (No. 4549, 5 Apr. 1821) Copies of the printed documents are in the University of Toronto, Robarts Library.

just weeks before Capt. Charles McIntosh visited Montreal on behalf of the *Toronto's* investors looking for "Iron, Cordage, Workmen &&&".²⁴ During the fall of 1824, Annesley was also consulted about the construction of a line of shallow draft steamers for the rapids of the St. Lawrence, and developed a plan for an ocean-going steamboat.²⁵ With the exception of the later project (which did not get off the drafting table), all of Annesley's known vessels were small, inexpensive, shallow draft steamers.

Annesley's patents and the contract for the hull of the *William Annesley*, give a clearer idea of how the *Toronto* was probably built. The contract called for "five courses, two fore and aft, of one inch pine each, two transverse of half inch oak – and one outside of one inch oak – with Deck in three courses of one inch pine each, extending to the guards all round. The Guards to extend fore and aft on each side of the said Boat or Vessel to be well supported with Iron braces and of such extent as to form a Deck of twenty six feet in breadth ..."²⁶

In his patent, Annesley indicated that the transverse layer, running from gunwale to gunwale, was not broken by the keel. By eliminating the joints at the keel, he argued, shocks would be distributed throughout the hull rather than straining specific joints. This "unit-body" construction (to use a twentieth century term) worked to the greatest advantage in steam vessels, subjected to the steady pounding of their ponderous, low pressure, walking beam engines. The framing shown in figure 6 of the illustration, consisted of one inch deal boards and was only intended to establish the curve of the hull.²⁷ The lightness of the model provided the buoyancy that was needed for the shallow waters in which Annesley's steam ferries usually ran.

This shallow draft design was of little advantage to the *Toronto* on the open waters of the York-Niagara run. But during her eight seasons on the River St. Lawrence and Bay of Quinte, she was able to slip inshore, to and from tiny bayside docks and up the Napanee river to take on cargoes others could not reach. When the Rideau Canal opened, it was found that she was almost ideally suited to its locks and water levels.

Unusual the *Toronto* may have been, and at times the victim of some misfortune. But the vessel was the product of a particularly interesting experiment in hull design. By World War I, similar consideration was being given to multi-layer, wooden hulled vessels. Certainly, the *Toronto*

would not mark the end of Annesley's career, who in the next few years was occasionally noticed as having built a bridge and small Erie Canal steamers near Albany.²⁸

"The author would like to thank John Mills for his assistance in the preparation of this article."

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