

LAC SAINT-PIERRE DISASTER

Perth's Early Timber Trade

For 12 hours, between about 6:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. over the night of Monday-Tuesday, October 17-18, 1836, a savage gale blowing out of the southeast, swept the length of Lac Saint-Pierre¹ on the St. Lawrence River. The storm tore apart eight timber rafts and drowned 25 of their crewmen. Two of the rafts and at least six of the men lost in the disaster were from Perth.²

*One raft, the property of Messrs. Rogers and Thompson, of Perth, was this morning found scattered upon the beach and all of the crew, 13 in number, have perished. Eight of the crew were found this morning upon the shore at this place [Point Du Lac], in an awful state of mutilation, among whom was the pilot Jeremiah Campbell, one of the oldest and most experienced pilots on the river.*³

Another raft of oak, the property of Messrs. Porter, Gemmell and Cameron, of Perth, consisting of 75 cribs, a complete wreck, but the crew all safe.

When the first Tay Canal, connecting Perth to the Rideau Canal, was completed in 1834, it included five sets of locks, and each lock was equipped with a timber slide. The new canal offered, for the first time, an economically viable means of exporting timber harvested in the townships surrounding Perth and along the Tay watershed to the international market at Quebec City. The head of the canal at Perth included a 50 X 37 meter (160 X 120 foot) turning basin, surrounded by a 12 meter (40 foot) wide wharf and it was soon filled with logs.

In the late 1830s and early 1840s much of the local timber harvest was cut by district farmers, a byproduct of land-clearing efforts. They sold their logs for cash or store credit to merchants capable of getting their product to market. In 1835 Perth's Presbyterian pastor Reverend William Bell (1780-1857) wrote in his diary that,

*This winter an immense quantity of oak timber was prepared in the woods and brought to Perth, to be rafted and sent to Quebec. From 20 to 50 teams of two to 10 oxen each, passed our house twice every day, drawing this timber to the river".*⁴

¹ Named as 'Lake St. Peter' in contemporary press reports of the disaster, Lac Saint-Pierre is a widening of the St. Lawrence River, between Montreal and Trois-Rivieres, lying downstream (northeast) of Montreal and upstream (southwest) of Quebec City.¹ The 'lake' is about 32 kilometres (20 miles) long and 14 kilometres (8.7 miles) wide.

² The *Quebec Gazette* identified the owners of other rafts lost in the storm as James Riddle of Packenham Township and a firm named Thompson & Brother. The *Kingston Chronicle & Gazette* identified other lost raft owners as Ponfard & Co., O'Neal, Herd and Ashworth.

³ *Quebec Mercury*, October 22, 1836.

⁴ *William Bell Diaries*, March 1835.



(Photo courtesy of Hibbing Historical Society)

The timber hauled to the Tay Basin by area farmers was purchased by merchant firms like Rogers & Thompson or Porter, Gemmell & Cameron.⁵ Additional timber cut along the Tay watershed as far west as Bob's Lake, much of it produced at shanties operated by the same merchants or their contractors, was floated down the Tay on the spring freshet into the basin. Some Perth area timber was also hauled, by sleigh, all the way to Brockville where it was assembled into rafts for the voyage down the St. Lawrence River.

With a general store and warehouse located on the south corner Perth's Wilson and Peter Streets, Rogers & Thompson got its start trading in dry goods, mostly in barter exchange for potash. In the earliest years of the settlement, potash was about the only marketable product produced by the first settlers, a by-product of burning the hardwood forest felled as they cleared their land grants. In the 1820s and 1830s large quantities of potash were shipped from Perth, both winter and summer, by ox teams to the Brockville market.⁶ Then the opening of the Rideau Canal in 1832 and the Tay Canal in 1834 created a cost-effective means of shipping timber to market, a much more valuable commodity than potash. In the Tay Canal's inaugural year, Rogers & Thompson was the first local firm to ship cribs of squared timber from Perth.

In the same year, however, the firm of Porter, Gemmell & Cameron also began to shift from the potash trade, and they too sent their first timber cribs down the Tay Canal. Located at #1 Gore Street, and later at #43 & #41 Foster Street, the Porter, Gemmell & Cameron store sold "*dry goods, hardware, groceries and crockery*"⁷ in exchange for "*potash, pork, staves, timber, butter, wheat, corn or oats*".

John Porter (c1795-1858) had emigrated with the Lanark Society Settlers in 1821 and first settled in North Sherbrooke Township. He established himself as a merchant at Perth in 1832 in partnership with Robert Gemmell (1810-1894) and Malcolm Cameron (1808-1876). Robert Gemmell later became Deputy Sheriff of Lanark County and then managed the McLaren Distillery. Before joining with Porter and Gemmell, Malcolm Cameron, the son of a soldier-settler, had operated a general store with partner Henry Glass (1799-1866) and in 1834 became proprietor of the *Bathurst Courier* when its founder, his brother John (1814-1834), died. When Cameron⁸ moved to Port Sarnia in 1837 the partnership of Porter, Gemmell & Cameron was dissolved. Porter would continue to work in the timber trade at Bytown.

⁵ Merchants engaged in the early timber trade also included John Flintoff (1806-1851) and brothers Alexander Montgomery (1796-1868) & Henry Montgomery (1810-1871).

⁶ Wood potash, primarily composed of potassium carbonate, was shipped to the U.K. where it was used for a variety of purposes, including making soap, gunpowder, bleaching textiles, and producing glass.

⁷ *Bathurst Courier*, January 16, 1834.

⁸ Later elected to the Upper Canada Assembly at various times, Cameron held the posts of Inspector of Revenue, Commissioner of Public Works, Minister of Agriculture and Postmaster-General. He was also Queen's Printer.

In the first years of the Perth timber trade, the squared logs marshalled into cribs at the Tay Basin were primarily oak but also included the white and red pine needed to keep the heavier than water oak logs afloat. A large number of oak and pine staves⁹ were also cribbed in the basin before being sent down the canal over the timber slides.



(Photo courtesy Library and Archives Canada)

A crib, bound tightly together with rope and chains, measured about 40 X 25 feet (12 X 7.5 mtrs.) After the cribs completed the nine-kilometer (six-mile) trip from the Basin to Beveridge Bay, they passed on through the Rideau Canal locks and down to the Ottawa River. At Bytown the cribs were laced together, side by side, by banding chains, into much larger rafts, eight to 10 cribs wide and 10 to 20 cribs long, for the voyage down the Ottawa and St. Lawrence Rivers. The big rafts had to be partly disassembled at major rapids, however. The cribs were sent through individually or as 'bands', three to five cribs wide by five or six cribs long, and then reassembled.¹⁰ To provide some manoeuvrability the rafts were fitted with huge oars, 25 feet long. Some timber rafts also hoisted rudimentary sails.

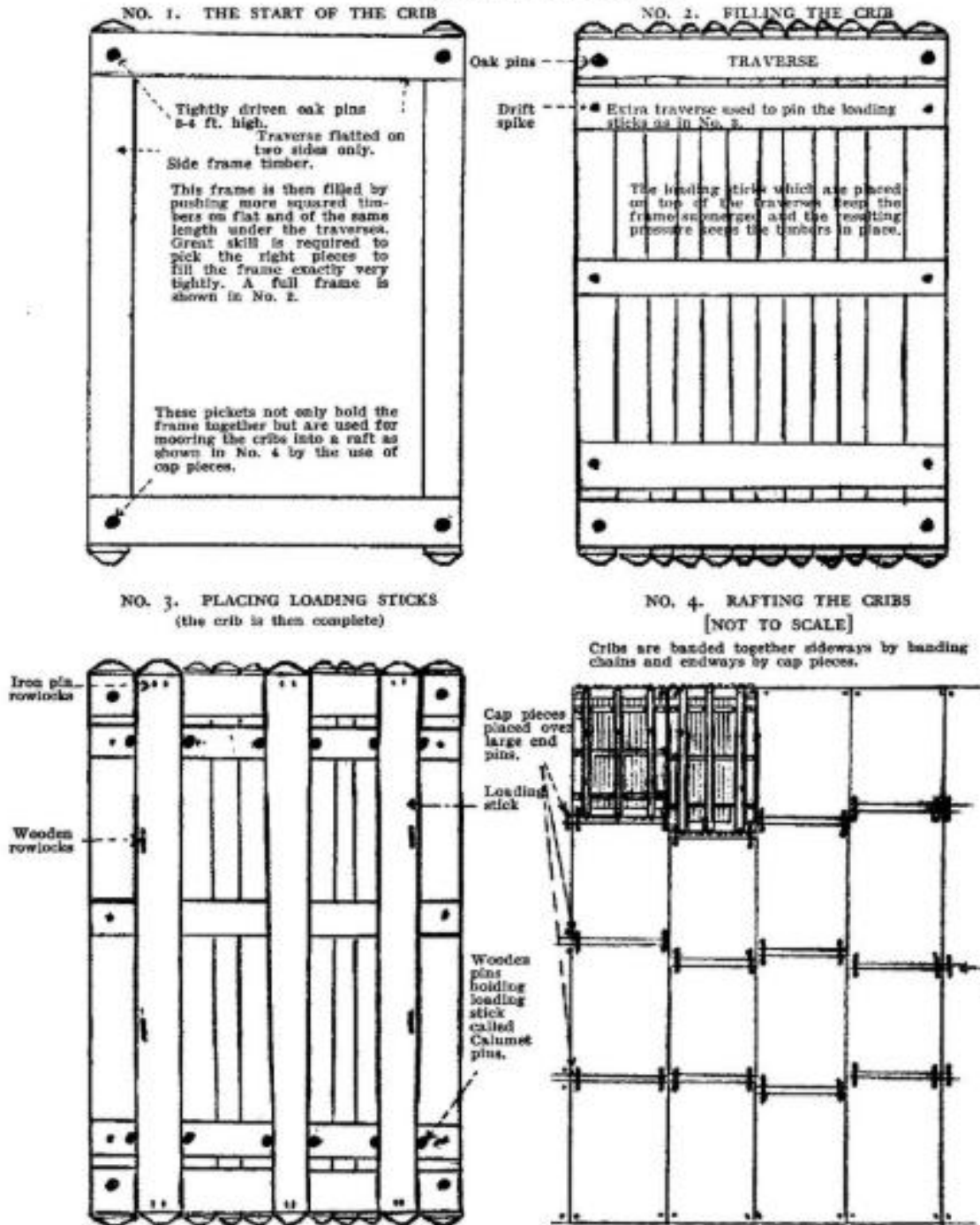
On a crib near the center of the raft a kitchen area was created – an open fireplace, about 12 feet square, raised from the logs on 18 inches of sand for the kettles in which the bread and beans were baked. Over the fireplace cooking pots hung on a pole. The 'cooking crib' was completed with benches and a small, roofed area sheltering supply cupboards.

⁹ Staves were used to construct barrels, a crucial component for shipping goods like liquor, provisions, and other commodities in the 19th century. Staves were sawn lumber 2 ½ to 5 ½ feet long X 4 to 5 inches wide X 1 to 3 inches thick.

¹⁰ There were major rapids on the Ottawa River stretching from the Grenville (Hawkesbury) through Chute-à-Blondeau to the Carillon (collectively the Long Sault Rapids), followed by the Lachine Rapids St. Lawrence River.

SQUARE TIMBER CRIB

SCALE 8 FEET = 1 INCH



Depending upon the size of the raft, it was crewed by 10 to 20 men, known as Raftsmen, or Draveur (in French) or River Pigs. When off-duty the men were accommodated in tents or shanties set up on inboard cribs.

When news of the disaster reached Perth more than a week after the storm. the *Bathurst Courier* identified the drowned men “from about Perth” as,

Patrick Fallinger [Fellinger?], foreman; Bryan Cosgrove, [who] has left a wife and large helpless family, who reside in this place, to bewail his sudden exit into eternity; John Prior; Henry Lewis[?]' William Morrison; and John McGuire.¹¹ The others, five or six in number, were employed when the raft was on its way down, their names, therefore, are unknown to us.¹²

The distance from Lac Saint-Pierre and the condition of the bodies when they were recovered precluded returning any of them to Perth for burial.

... those who were found were caused to be decently buried by the Coroner of Three Rivers, D. Chisholm Esq. The following is an extract of a letter written by him. “Such of them as I found to be Catholics, I caused to be decently buried at Pointe du Lac¹³, and the rest being Protestants I have ordered to be conveyed to the Protestant burying ground here”¹⁴ [Trois-Rivières].¹⁵

- Ron W. Shaw (2025)

¹¹ Further identification of these men has proven impossible.

¹² *Bathurst Courier & Ottawa General Advertiser*, October 28, 1836.

¹³ Probably Cimetière St-Joseph de la Paroisse.

¹⁴ Probably Saint James Anglican Cemetery, Trois-Rivières.

¹⁵ *Bathurst Courier & Ottawa General Advertiser*, November 4, 1836.