Opinicon Shipbuilding

By Frank Phelan

During the heydays of Lake Opinicon Village, a number of vessels were built for use on the Rideau Canal. The ready wood from the sawmills and the need for utility vessels probably prompted this boatbuilding activity. Some of the vessels built were purely utilitarian and perhaps could be described as inelegant, but were purpose-built for hauling ore, cordwood and lumber. On the other hand, some were much more elaborate and self-propelled, even with metal framing (see Meteor below).

22 A barge, the most popular means of transporting goods on the Ottawa River canals from 1834 until after the 1940s. This type of barge was also used on other canals in the province, such as the Chambly Canal and the St-Ours lock. (Public Archives of Canada.)

An example of a purpose-built utilitarian and inelegant barge hauling cordwood

The vessels of the Rideau were designed for protected waters. Flat-bottomed and broad to maximize capacity and stability, they were unsuited for larger waters. Indeed, lumber destined for Oswego, New York, from Tett's Mills (Bedford Mills), was refused at times because Rideau Canal barges "cannot get the lumber through without being more or less damaged from wet in crossing the Lake" (Tett Papers - Transfer Case 2, correspondence 1890-99. Queen's University Archives). Among the limitations of Rideau Canal barges was the need to respect the guarantee of only 5 feet 5 inches (1.7 m) of water over the sills of the locks. Thus, Rideau vessels were of very shallow draft to enable passage through the locks. The lock dimensions also dictated effective length and width of canal vessels.

The locks themselves can only accommodate vessels less than 124 feet long (39.8 m) and less than 31.5 feet (9.6 m) wide. This is the *effective* size of the locks, not the maximum dimensions (134 feet long or 41 m; 33 feet wide or 10 m). The upper breastworks and room to enable gate swings reduce the effective length and the locks taper inward with depth. Barges also need to be able to negotiate some tight quarters in passage of the canal, and very large and wide vessels become difficult to manage. Most barges were equipped with large sweep rudders to aid in negotiating turns and entry to/exit from locks.

Barge “Minnie”

entering a lock at Ottawa

Note the large rudder and tiller

Photo from Library and Archives Canada PA84504

More sophisticated vessels such as steam launches or tugs, self-propelled barges (with their own steam engines), barges with masts and sails in addition to steam power and even steamboats with steel framing were built. Of course, such vessels required finer design and engineering. Without doubt, bigger vessels were also more difficult to build.

It is unclear exactly where vessels were built at Lake Opinicon and just how such construction was managed. At the least, an open, flat area to which sawn lumber can be readily supplied is required. I ponder whether it is possible that building might have taken place on the ice during the off-season? The simplest barges would likely have had a keel laid, then ribs attached, then these would have been planked over (carvel-style – non-overlapping, close-fitting and subsequently caulked). To simplify loading and unloading operations, especially of loose materials, the inside of the hull was also planked. More elaborate vessels would have upper decks and perhaps individual covered holds for cargo which needed protection from water and weather.

While the operations at Lake Opinicon paled compared with those nearby, especially Bedford Mills, evidence has been found for the building of six large vessels, three steamboats and three scows, ranging in length from 62 to 105 feet in length.

The Marine Museum at Kingston maintains many records of local ships, shipbuilding and shipping. Lists such as the Canadian Ship Registry and Ship Registry are comprehensive and are available through the Marine Museum. These are accessible and searchable databases accessed at www.greatlakesmuseum.ca/research-collections/ship-lists. The New Mills List (created by John M. Mills) of some 6,000 steam and motor vessels built between 1809 and 1930 is also available through the Marine Museum. Other sources are: Edward Forbes Bush 1981, Commercial Navigation on the Rideau Canal 1832-1961, Publication 54 (History and

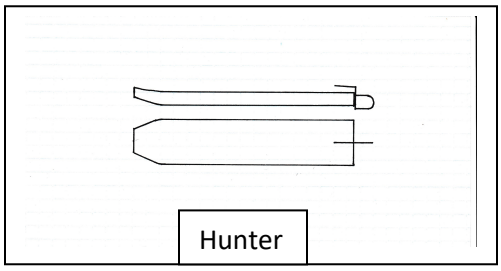
Archaeology), National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, Parks Canada; Ken Mcleod 1998, List of vessels built on the Rideau Canal.

Here is a chronological listing of vessels built at Lake Opinicon:

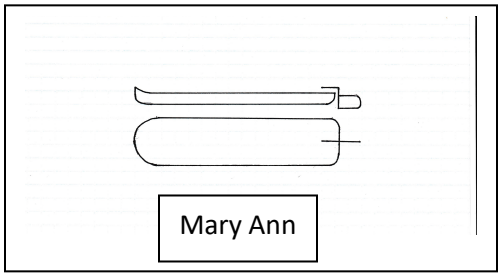
[Dimensions are imperial measurements as is typical of the lists]

Sketches are meant only to be representations of the size, look and character of the vessels.

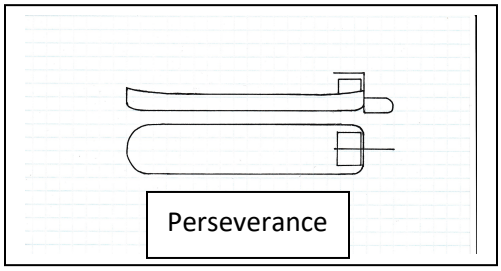
1) **Hunter –** (From McLeod's List: 1860 – Chester Stewart, Lake Opinicon – 82x17x5) – 64 tons - Cdn Ship Registry #720 – 82x16.5x5.2 (from Ship Registry List: #32176 – 1860 – scow – Opinicon Lake – 58 tons) [- not to be confused with the sidewheel steamship Hunter depicted during the early days of the Rideau Canal]. Directly from Forbes Bush: Hunter scow . Port of Registry Kingston, Builder Chester Stewart, Opinicon Lake, South Crosby, 1860 Stern square, Build carvel, Length 82.1, Breadth 16.5 Depth 5.2, Tonnage 64. Owner Chester Stewart. Subsequent Owners George Chaffey, Kingston; William Chaffey, Brockville; John Chaffey, Bedford township.
   Not in New Mills List.



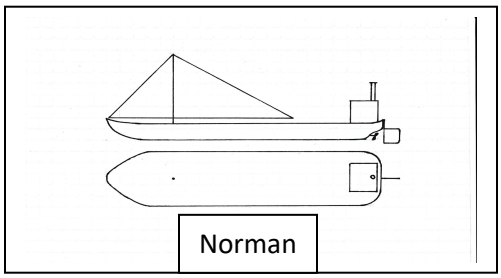
2) **Mary Ann** – (from McLeod's List: 1865 – Opinicon Lake - built by Richard Genge – 76x17x4) (from Ship Registry List: #48515 – 1871 – scow – Opinicon Lake – 40 tons) not in Forbes Bush, not on New Mills List.



3) **Perseverance** – (from McLeod's List: 1868 Opinicon lake - Robert Doudlaw – 88.9x18.5x5.1) (from Ship Registry: #9807 – scow Opinicon Lake – 58 tons). Not in Forbes Bush, not in New Mills List.



4) **Norman** (from McLeod's List: 1872 – Opinicon Lake – Fraser and George – 98x24x7) #80871 on New Mills List – Fraser and George, Lake Opinicon – owner I. Goodearl *et al* – screw– 150 tons – 98x24x7 – steam barge – destroyed by fire at Prinyer's Cove 1883) (from Ship Registry List: #54705 – 1872 - steam barge – Opinicon Lake – 169 tons – built by Wm. Ainsley – 35 hp – also had sails). Forbes Bush: 1 mast, sloop rig, 97.6x23.7x7.1 – 148.91 tons.



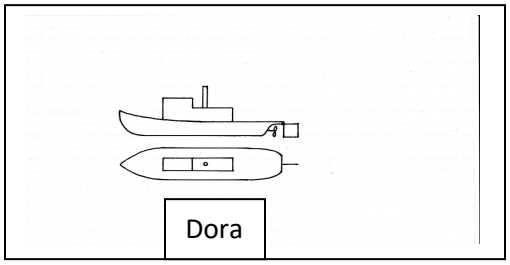
   Directly from Forbes Bush: Norman steamer sc No. 80871 Port of Registry Kingston, Builders Fraser & George, Kingston Built Opinicon Lake, 1872 No. of Decks one, No. of

Masts one, Rigged sloop, Stern round, Build carvel, Framework wood, Length 97.6 Breadth 23.7 Depth 7.1, Length of Engine Room 23.0, Engines horizontal, high pressure, Daniel McEwen of Kingston 1872; cylinder 12 in., stroke 14 in., 35 h.p. Gross Tonnage 148.91, Registered Tonnage 96.74, Owners Isabel Goodearl, 32 shares Robert McLeod, Kingston, 14 shares Jane Shanks, Portsmouth, 13 shares John Annet, Gananoque, 5 shares, 208 Subsequent Owners. Mortgage 17 September 1872 by Robert McLeod; David Wright Allison 7 February 1881; Deseronto Navigation Co., 10 March 1881; Hazelot Hicks, North Marysburgh township, Prince Edward County, 13 October 1882; Disposition vessel total loss by fire 30 November 1883 at Macdonald's Wharf, Prince Edward County, registry closed 29 December 1883.

Similar to Norman – schooner/barge in Foster's Lock (Norman was also self-propelled by steam engine) Archives Canada PA-008818

5) Dora – 1889 per Forbes Bush – built Alexander Miller at Opemicon [*sic*]– steamer - 61.6x13x5.5 – 44.15 tons

Directly from Forbes Bush: Dora steamer sc No. 96710 Port of Registry Ottawa, Builder Alexander Miller, Ottawa; at Opemicon [*sic*] 1889 Length 61.6 Breadth 13 Depth 5.5 Length, Engine Room 6.7, Engines high-pressure, J. & O. Weir, Montreal; cylinders 10 in.; stroke 12 in. Registered Tonnage 44.15, Owner Alexander Lumsden, Ottawa, forwarder Subsequent Owners Department Public Works, 18 April 1904 Disposition registry closed 20 February 1939. Not in McLeod's List. Not In New Mills List. Not in Ship Registry.

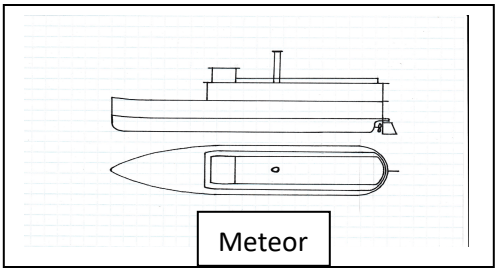


Dora

Similar to Dora – Tug Agnes P

https:images.ontario.ca/lakesandislands/228823

6) **Meteor** – 1890 per Neil Patterson – 105' double-decker steamboat - - built by Alexander Miller. Forbes Bush: #96709 – registered Ottawa – Alexander Miller 1889 – Opemicdn [*sic*] – 105x23.8x6.6 – 100 hp – 115.68 tons – owner Alexander Lumsden, Ottawa



Directly from Forbes Bush: Meteor steamer sc No. 96709 Port of Registry Ottawa, Builder Alexander Miller, Opemicdn [*sic*] (Opinicon), 1889 No. of Decks two, Stern round, Build carvel, Head sharp, Framework steel, Length 105 Breadth 23.8 Depth 6.6 Length, Engine Room 11. Engines compound, Carrier & Taine of Levis, 1887; cylinders 12 in. and 26 in.; stroke 12 in., 100 h.p. Registered Tonnage 115.68, Owner Alexander Lumsden, Ottawa, forwarder Disposition dismantled, registry closed 20 August 1897. Not in McLeod's List. Not in New Mills List. Not in Ship Registry.

Interestingly, there is a steamship with much the same dimensions (length 104.6 feet, Breadth 23.8 feet, 111.5 gross tonnage, 100 hp engine, steel framework) and description also named the Meteor which ferried passengers and freight on Lake Temiskaming (northeast of Sudbury) starting in 1888. Still, we can get an impression of the style of steamship embodied by that Meteor:

The Meteor on Lake Temiskaming from an old postcard

Further to the coincidence of naming and size, the owner of both Meteors was Alexander Lumsden, Lumsden Steamboat Line (Ottawa). The Meteor built at Lake Opinicon appears to have gone immediately to Ottawa. Its fate after that is unknown. The Meteor which plied the waters of Lake Temiskaming was initially christened Minerve out of Montreal before being relocated to Ottawa and rechristened Meteor. (https://www.communitystories.ca/v1/pm_2.php?id=story_line&lg=English&fl=08ex=351&sl=2677&pf=1).

In the Mills List, Minerve was constructed at Ville Marie, Quebec in 1887, about the time that the Meteor was built at Lake Opinicon (1889), according to Forbes Bush. Interesting set of coincidences!? One supposes that the same design at least might have been used for both vessels.

Given the size and complexity of some of the vessels, there must have been many employed in the shipbuilding trade at Lake Opinicon. Chester Stewart (builder of the Hunter) had a team of 21 working during 1861 (South Crosby Census per Warren, S. 1997. Hub of the Rideau: A history of South Crosby Township. Haynes Printing Company, Cobourg, ON).

I must admit I still have difficulty picturing the shipbuilding as it took place at Lake Opinicon. There seems to have been several sites (where?) and there must have been considerable infrastructure besides the timber mills to house the workforce, tools and means to launch the vessels once built. What about wharves? Many mysteries to explore yet!