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Not Your Ordinary Sleigh Ride: Two Early-Nineteenth-Century Winter Travelers on Lake Champlain

*"Travelling on Lake Champlain, is,
at all times, really dangerous; and I
would not advise any one to attempt it."*

By JENNIE VERSTEEG

Poor Hugh Gray. He was heading out from Montreal in the winter of 1808, crossing the icy St. Lawrence on the 9-mile route upstream to La Prairie. As the end point of the stage route and later the rail route to Montreal, La Prairie was in the nineteenth century "the grand thoroughfare of trade between Montreal and St. John's [Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu]" and thus an important link between Vermont and Lower Canada.¹ No sooner had Gray left the city when his driver became lost following the wrong sleigh tracks on the snow-covered river. Perhaps this somewhat frightening experience was good preparation for the Englishman's subsequent experience with travel on frozen Lake Champlain, which he narrated in portions of his *Letters from Canada*, reproduced here.²

We are fortunate to have Gray's narrative, for although scores of early-nineteenth-century British and American travel accounts give us glimpses of the transportation, local customs, and landscape, very few mention winter travel. As Gray himself observed, "travelling over an uniform surface of ice in very cold weather" is different, and not just because the countryside is hidden by snow. "Curiosity freezes under such circumstances, and the only prospect which arouses attention is the inn, or village, which is to afford the comforts of food and fire." Yet Gray also noted that "with all the inconveniences attending it," winter travel was not uncommon in the Lake Champlain corridor: "the Americans are constantly coming into Canada, particularly to Montreal."³

In this article I briefly examine the wintertime Lake Champlain ex-

periences of two early-nineteenth-century English travelers: Gray, who traveled here in 1808, and Lieutenant Francis Hall, who recorded his account in 1818. Of course neither of these gentlemen was on a mere tourist's ramble, but—winter or summer—both observed their surroundings, often in great detail, with an eye to communicating with a British readership. First let us consider Hall's south-to-north trip and then, at greater length, Gray's north-to-south path.

Francis Hall journeyed across Lake Champlain en route from New York City to Lower Canada in March 1816. Hall's narrative, published as *Travels in Canada and the U.S.*, tells us nothing about his exact mission, but we know that he was a lieutenant in the Fourteenth Light Dragoons and was passing through Vermont on his way to Quebec City, where he lived for two years. The length of his stay, no doubt, accounts for the size of his party: "three persons, four servants, and one waggon load of baggage."⁴

Hall had barely arrived in the New World, and after a January–February North Atlantic crossing from Liverpool that had taken forty-four days, the prospect of winter travel through New York State and Vermont may not have seemed very daunting to him. On March 9 Hall's party had left New York City for Albany on a steam packet (with a capacity of 200 to 300 passengers), and he had already had a chance to mingle with Americans, which allayed some of his apprehensions. "Truly, I thought, these republicans are not so very barbarous."⁵

From Albany the group traveled by wagon, leaving the main north road at Granville to go to Whitehall. Hall knew he had entered a different world when the countryside became "more wild and wintry as we proceeded. The snow which had hitherto been partial, now began to impede the progress of our waggon, which had been moving at the rate of three and a half miles per hour. We were frequently obliged to alight, and walk down steep hills, thickly encrusted with ice and snow." After getting to Whitehall and switching to sleighs on a "bright and mild afternoon," the party enjoyed "the pleasing change from our snail-paced waggon to the smooth rapidity of a sleigh, gliding at the rate of nine miles an hour."⁶

Hall's group found "good accommodation" overnight in Shoreham at the tavern he identified as that of "a Mr. Larenburg." Although there may have been such a tavern, it is more likely that Hall stayed at the tavern of John C. Larabee mentioned in John Wriston's *Vermont Inns and Taverns, Pre-Revolution to 1925*. If so, he probably had quite a bit of company. The tavern was conveniently located on the lake and in the early 1800s was a popular winter stopping place where news and information were exchanged. Wriston, quoting from Joseph Goodhue's *History of the Town of Shoreham*, indicates that "seventy teams a night are spoken of as stopping

at the Larabee House . . . by the Lake," presumably not all for an overnight stay.⁷

The Hall party set off before breakfast under less appealing conditions than those of the previous afternoon:

The lake now began to widen, and the shores to sink in the same proportion; the keen blasts of the north, sweeping over its frozen expanse, pierced us with needles of ice; the thermometer was 22° below zero; buffalo hides, bear skins, caps, shawls and handkerchiefs were vainly employed against a degree of cold so much beyond our habits. Our guide, alone of the party, his chin and eye-lashes gemmed and powdered with the drifting snow, boldly set his face and horses in the teeth of the storm.⁸

Cold though he was, Hall revealed no anxiety about the trip, experiencing pleasure where others might have thought of danger.

Sometimes a crack in the ice would compel us to wait, while [the guide] went forward to explore it with his axe, (without which, the American sleigh-drivers seldom travel,) when, having ascertained its breadth, and the foothold on either side, he would drive his horses at speed, and clear the fissure, with its snow ridge, at a flying leap; a sensation we found agreeable enough, but not so agreeable as a good inn and dinner at Burlington.⁹

After his overnight at the unspecified inn in Burlington, Hall crossed over to Plattsburgh just as summer travelers did, "curious to view the theatre of our misfortunes." After lengthy contemplation and analysis of the Battle of Plattsburgh, Hall continued up the lake to Canada, where "nothing could be more Siberian than the aspect of the Canadian frontier."¹⁰ Hall's 211-mile sleigh ride down the lake from Whitehall may have been cold, but it was essentially a rather uneventful journey.

Hugh Gray's tale of winter travel stands in contrast to Hall's. Published as part of a collection of letters written during his 1806–1808 stay in Canada, it also hints at the tension along the border between Vermont and British North America as the United States and Great Britain drifted toward war in 1812.

We know almost nothing about Gray except that he died in 1833 and had previously toured extensively on the European continent, making trips to less-developed countries such as Spain and Portugal, which he at times compared to North America. Gray did not identify himself as a merchant or a government agent and seems to have been part of the class of gentlemen travelers of apparently limitless leisure, funds, and curiosity. Yet his attentions were more focused than those of many contemporary travelers, and his stay in North America was at least in part related to his concern for the British national interest—specifically, for supplies of naval stores for the British West Indies. Gray assumed that

the flow of American goods through the Lake Champlain corridor would soon cease, and he wondered how to replace U.S. commodities, especially timber. "Any country . . . which could give us the articles we have been in the habit of receiving from [the Americans], becomes doubly interesting," he explained in his preface.¹¹

In 1806 the first timber raft had come down the Ottawa River to the St. Lawrence and on to Quebec City, and by the time Gray was traveling, Canadian timber had already begun to replace Vermont supplies. To ensure future naval stores, Gray argued that it was important for Britain to retain its dominance in the region, even though such sway would "retard [Canadian] progress in population, in arts, and in commerce. Their individual interests ought to yield to those of the mother country, the head of the empire."¹²

It may be that Gray published his personal observations to make his voice heard in the emerging debate about Britain's ongoing interests in North America. It is also possible that he emphasized his patriotism and national interest simply as a marketing ploy, to set his story apart from the many other travel accounts published in his day. Gray undertook his journeys very early in the century, when travelers still felt a need to link accounts of their tourist rambles to some serious educational or other purpose; the idea of travel for pure pleasure and interest was just developing. Most of Gray's accounts are, in fact, much like those of scores of slightly later pleasure travelers of the nineteenth century who observed the sublime and beautiful in nature and commented on local attractions and customs.

Yet Gray at times also carefully noted commercial activity and border conditions. For example, in September 1807 he pointed out that Chambly on the Richelieu River was the "only channel acknowledged in law for the commerce of the States with Lower Canada. Hence, at a place called St. John's, on the river, near the lake [Champlain], we have established a custom-house, which takes cognizance of whatever passes to and from the United States." Elsewhere, though, he was realistic enough to write that with the encroaching hostilities, "it is not to be supposed that strict attention will be paid to the law making St. John's the only legal channel."¹³

With only one clear port of entry and exit to study, Gray was able to enumerate precisely the quantities of various Canadian exports to the United States and to report an 1806 Canadian trade deficit at Saint-Jean of exactly 108,960 pounds sterling, 3 shillings, and 6 pence. Gray noted "this balance the Americans carry out of Canada in cash" but did not see it as a problem, for the "old [mercantilist] notion that it was ruin to a country to allow its specie to be taken from it, is now very generally exploded."¹⁴

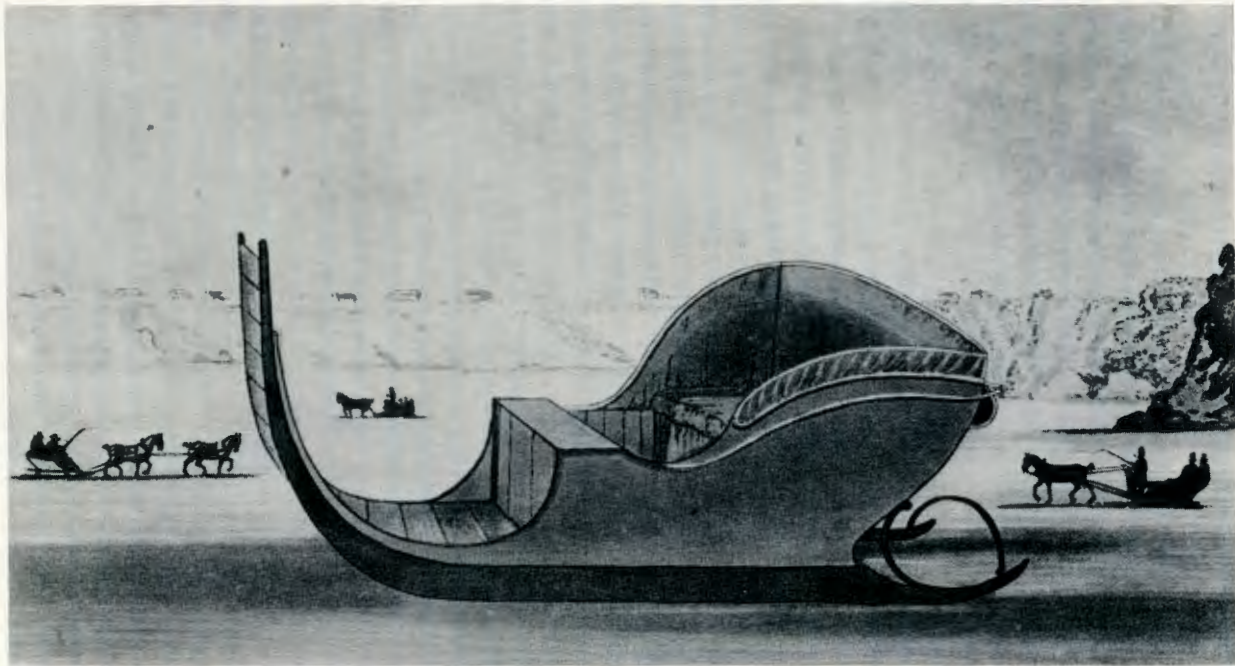
Gray's experience of winter travel on Lake Champlain was quite different from that of Francis Hall. For one thing, he traveled lightly and apparently alone with a driver in a *cariole*. In British North America the *cariole* was a sort of one-horse chaise on sled runners, the counterpart of the summertime calèche, referred to by English-speaking travelers as a calash or calesh. We know that Gray was no fan of Canadian vehicles, and he may have had the same mixed feelings about the *cariole* as he did about the calèche: "A person who had been accustomed to travel only in England, would say, that a Canadian calesh, with its two wheels and single horse, was not fit for a Christian to be put into. . . . But I have seen worse."¹⁵

Another English traveler in British North America of the same period, John Lambert, left us a clear description of a *cariole*: "The carioles nearly resemble the body of a one-horse-chaise, placed upon two runners, like the irons of a pair of skates. They are painted, varnished, and lined like the better sort of calashes. The driver generally stands up in front, though there is a seat. . . . Between him and the horse, there is a high pannel, which reaches up to his breast, and prevents the splashes from being thrown into the cariole."¹⁶

Gray's transition from travel in Lower Canada to travel on Lake Champlain had involved switching from a one- to a two-horse *cariole*; Gray and Lambert were just two of many travelers to comment on the contrast—in both summer and winter—between the American custom of using two horses and the Canadian usage of a single horse. Lambert's is again more complete than other narratives, noting some Canadian exceptions to the one-horse norm: "the dashing youths in the army, the government service, or . . . the merchants," who "are fond of displaying their scientific management of the whip in the tandem style."¹⁷

Hall also described winter vehicles but was rather vague, commenting on "the common country sleigh" as a "clumsy, box-shaped machine." He may have been referring to the rural habitants' use of the so-called berlin, which Lambert wrote was "better adapted for long journeys, as the sides are higher, and keep the traveller warmer."¹⁸ One assumes, however, that an English gentleman would not think of setting foot in a berlin. Lambert also described warmer, covered *carioles* but indicated that they were used only for events such as fancy evening balls, "for the pleasure of carioling consists principally in seeing and being seen, and therefore the open one, though it exposes the person to the severest weather, is always preferred."¹⁹

Lambert further remarked that the body of the *cariole* "is sometimes placed on high runners of iron, though in general the low wooden runners are preferred, as they are not so liable to be upset as the others."²⁰ This



"The Canadian Cariole." Illustration by John Lambert. Courtesy Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

latter feature is fortunate in light of the style of travel Gray described in a letter, part of which is reprinted below. It is unfortunate that we cannot follow Gray all the way up the lake, for though the end of his letter promises further information, Gray's published accounts do not return to the theme of travel in the Lake Champlain region.

HUGH GRAY, EXCERPT FROM *LETTERS FROM CANADA*

Quebec, 1808

After leaving Laprairie, we very soon got into a primeval forest, through which a road has been cut as far as the American boundary line; and it is continued onwards to Lake Champlain. This is the principal communication in this district, between Canada, and the United States. For many miles the country is very level, and completely covered with large timber, principally pines. I saw no cross roads, so that it is a kind of pass that might be defended with very few men.

The vicinity of Montreal to the United States, encourages the soldiers occasionally to desert, by the road we passed; to prevent which, a few invalids are stationed in the wood; they live in log-houses, not the most comfortably in the world. There is another road by way of St. John's, but the deserters avoid it on account of the garrison or fort. . . . We found near the Lake a kind of public-house, where we stopped during the night.

Next morning we could not proceed, because, during the whole night it had blown very fresh, accompanied with a heavy fall of snow, which continued till near mid-day; and as every track on the Lake was covered, we could not venture to go upon it, our conductor not being well acquainted with the different bearings of the land marks.

The Lake, though 120 miles long, is not broad, seldom above 10 to 15 miles; and there are a great many islands and headlands, which direct the course of the pilot in summer, and the cariole or sleigh driver in winter.

So soon as the weather moderated, we set out on the Lake; and took a guide for some time, till we should fall in with someone going our way, or discover a track in the snow to direct us.

Travelling on Lake Champlain, is, at all times, really dangerous; and I would not advise any one to attempt it, if it can be avoided; which may generally be done by lengthening the route. Instead of going on the Lake to Burlington, or Skeensboro, you may go by way of St. John's, Windmill-point, and Sandbar, to Burlington, and from thence to Skeensboro.

It is very common, for sleigh, horses, and men, to fall through the ice, where the water is some hundred feet deep; and you have no warning of your danger till the horses drop in, pulling the sleigh after them; luckily the weak places are of no great extent; you extricate yourself from the

sleigh as quickly as possible, and you find the ice generally strong enough to support you, though it would not bear the weight of the horses. You instantly lend your aid in pulling out the horses, and in endeavouring to save them, which is done in a manner perfectly unique, and which will require the greatest stretch of your faith in my veracity, to believe—*the horses are strangled, to save their lives.*

When the horses fall through the ice (there are almost always two in an American sleigh), the struggles and exertions they make, serve only to injure and sink them; for, that they should get out of themselves, is, from the nature of the thing, perfectly impossible. When horses go on the Lake, they always have, round their necks, a rope with a running noose. I observed that our horses had each of them such a rope; and on inquiry, found out for what purpose it was intended. The moment the ice breaks, and the horses sink into the water, the driver, and those in the sleigh, get out, and catching hold of the ropes, pull them with all their force, which, in a very few seconds, strangles the horses and no sooner does this happen, than they rise in the water, float on one side, are drawn out on strong ice, the noose of the rope is loosened, and respiration recommences; in a few minutes the horses are on their feet, as much alive as ever. This operation has been known to be performed two, or three times a day, on the same horses; for, when the spring advances, the weak places in the Lake, become very numerous; and the people, whose business leads them often on it, frequently meet with accidents. They tell you that horses which are often on the lake; *get so accustomed to being hanged, that they think nothing at all of it.*

Pray, tell me, do you not think that this is one of the stories that travellers imagine they may tell with impunity, having a license?— Seriously, you are wrong.— Though this manner of saving horses, and getting them out of the water, appears extraordinary, yet, I assure you, the thing is very common, and known to every one who has been accustomed to travel on the lakes and rivers of this country, during winter. The attempt however does not always succeed. It sometimes happens, that both sleigh and horses go to the bottom; and the men too, if they cannot extricate themselves in time. There was an instance of it on Lake Champlain, a few days before I crossed it. . . .

There is another source of danger to the traveller on the lakes, which it is difficult to account for: viz. large cracks or openings, which run from one side of the lake to the other; some of them, six feet broad at least. I had not proceeded many miles on the lake before I met with a crack; but instead of an opening, I found that at this place the ice had shelved up to the height of several feet; and I learned that this was an indication of there being an opening further on. At the distance of eight or ten miles

from this place, I was surprised to observe the driver put his horses to their full speed: I could see no cause for it. In a few minutes, however, I saw the crack or opening, about five feet broad: we were at it in a moment; it was impossible to check the horses, or to stop and consider of the practicability of passing, or of the consequences; the driver, without consulting any one, had made up his mind on the subject, — the horses took the leap, and cleared the opening, carrying the sleigh and its contents with them. The concussion on the opposite side was so great, however, that the runners of the sleigh were broken, and there was a great chance of our being thrown, by the violence of the concussion, out of the sleigh, into the gulf we had crossed: this had very nearly taken place; but I was fortunate enough to regain my seat. By the help of some cords, we repaired our damage, and proceeded on our journey. We met with several other cracks, but as they were not in general above a foot or two in breadth, we passed them, without fear or accident. When the ice is cleared of snow, which was frequently the case, I could see that it was about a foot in thickness; yet it made a crackling noise as we went along, and seemed to give to the weight of the sleigh and horses, as we advanced, which produced sensations not very pleasant.

There are a great many islands in Lake Champlain, which are generally inhabited; you find inns on them, too, where you can get provisions, and beds if necessary. I shall embrace another opportunity of making some observations to you about this Lake and the surrounding country; but for the present, shall, in my next letter, communicate to you some further particulars relative to the Canadian winter.

NOTES

¹ Gideon M. Davison, *The Traveller's Guide Through the Middle and Northern States, and the Provinces of Canada*, 7th ed. (Saratoga Springs and New York, N.Y.: G. M. Davison and S. S. & W. Wood, 1837), 334. The Montreal—La Prairie route was covered by ferry in the summer and by sleigh in the winter. Travelers to Vermont and New York took a stage for the 17-mile trip from La Prairie to Saint-Jean on the Richelieu River; in the summer they then embarked on sailing vessels and later steamers to go down Lake Champlain. Though a different route to Montreal by way of Longueuil was considered more scenic and resulted in a shorter river crossing, Longueuil was not served by regular stages. In 1836 the first Canadian railroad, the Champlain and St. Lawrence, was completed, linking La Prairie to Saint-Jean and continuing La Prairie's importance.

"Upper Canada" and "Lower Canada" are the official designations for the two parts of Canada, per the 1791 Constitutional Act. Hence references to "the Canadas."

² Hugh Gray, *Letters from Canada, written during a residence there in the years 1806, 1807, and 1808, shewing the present state of Canada, its productions, trade, commercial importance and political relations, illustrative of the laws, the manners of the people and the peculiarities of the country and climate, exhibiting also the commercial importance of Nova-Scotia, New Brunswick & Cape Breton and their increasing ability, in conjunction with Canada, to furnish the necessary supplies of lumber and provisions to our West-Indian islands* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1809).

³ *Ibid.*, 51–52, 272.

⁴ Francis Hall, *Travels in Canada and the U.S. 1816–17* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ Ibid., 45, 47.

⁷ John C. Wriston Jr., *Vermont Inns and Taverns, Pre-Revolution to 1925: An Illustrated and Annotated Checklist* (Rutland, Vt.: Academy Books, 1991), 499.

⁸ Hall, *Travels*, 49.

⁹ Ibid., 49-50.

¹⁰ Ibid., 50, 60.

¹¹ Gray, *Letters*, 1.

¹² Ibid., 76.

¹³ Ibid., 135, 179. Like most others in the first half of the century, Gray referred to the Richelieu River as the Sorel (or Sorelle).

¹⁴ Gray reported that Americans preferred payment in the form of Spanish dollars, which were then used in the China trade. Alternatives were French, American, and British gold and silver coins, all of which circulated in Lower Canada. Ibid., 182.

¹⁵ Ibid., 125.

¹⁶ John Lambert, *Travels Through Lower Canada and the United States of America*, vol. 1 (London: Richard Phillips, 1810), 174.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hall, *Travels*, 67-68.

¹⁹ Lambert, *Travels*, 174-175.

²⁰ Ibid., 174.