

VERMONT

*The
Proceedings of the
Vermont Historical Society*

HISTORY



WINTER 1992

VOL. 60, No. 1



The Wreck of the *General Butler* and the Mystery of Lake Champlain's Sailing Canal Boats

The General Butler was a type of vessel that many historians believed had not existed in the United States.

By ARTHUR COHN AND MARSHALL TRUE

Toward noon on Saturday, December 9, 1876, heavy winter gales drove the *General Butler* toward the north end of the Burlington breakwater. The *Butler* carried a load of marble from Isle La Motte for delivery to the Burlington Marble Works; also on board were Captain William Montgomery, one deck hand, Montgomery's teenage daughter and a schoolgirl friend, and Elisha R. Goodsell, a quarry operator from Isle La Motte. The girls planned some Christmas shopping in Burlington; Goodsell traveled to get medical treatment for an eye injury he had suffered while hammering a piece of steel. The buffeting of the storm was too much for the steering mechanism of the aging *Butler* and just off the breakwater, according to press accounts, "the vessel began to drift at the mercy of the winds and waves."¹

The plight of Captain Montgomery and the *General Butler* suggests some of the commercial realities of boating on Lake Champlain in the late nineteenth century. Economic necessity drove commercial sailors to dare winter's worst to carry one last cargo. As long as the lake remained reasonably ice free, some intrepid captains risked cold water, freezing temperatures, and frostbite to augment their financial resources against the enforced winter break. In this voyage of early December, Montgomery

and his crew — as the *Butler's* passenger list suggests — expected a routine delivery, although they certainly understood the risks of the season. Sailors in 1876 had none of the benefits of radar, weather forecasting, or radio communications; instead they relied on their experience in scanning the sky to predict the weather. Montgomery had miscalculated.

As the *Butler* drifted southward, the deck hand threw over a storm anchor in a vain attempt to keep the vessel from crashing into the breakwater's stone-filled wooden cribs. Meanwhile, Captain Montgomery attempted to rig a spare tiller bar onto the ship's steering gear to give him some control of the crippled vessel. With the tiller bar chained in place, Montgomery ordered the anchor line severed with an ax, and he attempted to run around the southern end of the breakwater. He did not make it. A short distance beyond the southern lighthouse, the *Butler* smashed into the breakwater.²

The *Butler* survived the pounding of the gale long enough for passengers, crew, and captain to leap to the frozen haven of the breakwater. Captain Montgomery was the last to leave the ship. Immediately after he jumped at the crest of a large wave, the *Butler* sank in forty feet of water, its stone cargo propelling it downward. Although they had escaped riding the *Butler* and more than thirty tons of Isle La Motte marble to the lake's bottom, passengers and crew found themselves on the open breakwater whipped by fierce winds and driving snow and soaked by heavy waves. Chilled and exhausted, the refugees from the *Butler* might have died had it not been for the intervention of James Wakefield and his son, Jack. Although dozens of lake men had flocked to the wharves in response to the *Butler's* plight, only the Wakefields acted. They seized a small government lighthouse boat and rowed out to the breakwater. Captain Montgomery lifted his daughter and her young friend into James Wakefield's arms, and as scores of people watched from shore, the groggy Goodsell, the deck hand, and finally Captain Montgomery clambered into the bobbing rescue craft. Wakefield and his son rowed them safely to shore.³

Bystanders took the chilled survivors to J. Sullivan's house on Battery Street where Dr. H. H. Langdon examined them. Shortly all were pronounced out of danger. The Burlington *Free Press* commented on December 12: "It was Miss Montgomery's first trip in her father's boat, but she showed a goodly degree of Yankee grit, for the first question she asked on returning to consciousness was that she might be allowed to make the return trip when the schooner would be raised."⁴ Although the masts, shrouds, rigging, and other appurtenances were recovered, the hulk of the *General Butler* never was. The remains of the schooner rest in forty feet of water off Burlington's breakwater today.



Burlington Marble Works. This was the General Butler's destination when she ran into the southern end of the breakwater (visible in this view) and sank. From F. W. Burgett's Illustrated Atlas of the State of Vermont, 1876.

In May 1981, a little more than a century later, two diving students discovered the wreck of the *General Butler* in Burlington harbor.⁵ This discovery posed a historical puzzle. At first glance the *Butler's* length (eighty-eight feet) and width (fourteen and one-half feet) marked it as one of the numerous standard canal boats that operated on the inland waterways of the eastern United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But several of the *Butler's* features, including dead-eyes for mast supports, a mast tabernacle, and a centerboard, suggested that the vessel had been rigged for sail. Canal boats did not sail or did they? Modern-day nautical experts agreed that canal boats were towed on lakes, rivers, and canals and had no independent means of propulsion. Yet the dead-eyes and other sailing features raised basic questions about what type of vessel the *General Butler* had been.⁶ This article reports the authors' discoveries about the history of sailing canal boats on Lake Champlain.

Maritime law required all commercial sailing vessels to register with the local collector of customs. The *Butler's* first owners filed registration papers while the ship was under construction at the shipyard in Essex, New York, and each time the *Butler* changed hands, the new owners added documents of ownership to a file that was ultimately sent to the National Archives.⁷ These registration papers, similar to the title documents now used to register an automobile, identify the *Butler* as either an "L&C Boat" or as a "Lake & Canal Boat"; moreover, her surrender papers, filed for all vessels lost on the lake, describe her as a "Schooner

rigged Lake & Canal Boat.” These descriptions suggest that the *Butler* represented a hybrid vessel that functioned both as a sailboat, driven by the wind on the open lake and as a canal boat, towed along the lake and through the canal. Steamboats, we knew, frequently towed canal boats up and down the lake but standard lake histories said nothing about sailing boats that also ran on the canal. If the *General Butler* did both, and the physical evidence as well as its registration papers suggest that it had, it represented a type of vessel about which historians of the lake had written very little.⁸ As we researched the *Butler*, we began to uncover a largely forgotten aspect of the commercial history of Lake Champlain shipping.

From the close of the American Revolution, sailboats and a small number of early steamboats carried goods and passengers up and down the 125 miles from Whitehall, New York, to St. John, Quebec, on the Richelieu River. The construction of the Champlain Canal after the War of 1812 led both boat builders and merchants to imagine the opportunities provided by the opening of Lake Champlain commerce to the dynamic markets of the Hudson valley and the port of New York. Canal construction began in 1817 and as soon as navigable sections of the canal opened, standard canal boats began carrying cargo. When the completed canal connected Lake Champlain to the Hudson River in 1823, most area entrepreneurs continued to ship goods on the lake’s traditional sloops and schooners and transfer cargoes to and from canal boats at Whitehall.

The opportunity of a dramatic expansion of lake commerce was evident; Vermont’s governor, Cornelius Van Ness, hailed the opening of the canal as a “new era” and promised “the immense value of such a communication . . . will soon be extensively seen and felt.”⁹ But some shippers and shipwrights recognized that the canal posed logistical problems for traditionally rigged lake vessels. Sailboats arriving at Whitehall laden with cargo would have to be unloaded, then the cargo would be placed on a canal boat to be transferred once again to another sailing vessel on the Hudson River. These cumbersome problems of transshipping would cost time and money. Some enterprising merchants and inventive boat builders pooled their talents to produce a new type of lake craft—the sailing canal boat. This vessel could load cargoes at distant lake ports and sail up to Whitehall where it would undergo a transformation. Its crew quickly unstepped its masts and either removed and stored them in a sail locker or simply laid them on deck. After the crew raised the centerboard, a standard canal boat emerged and horses or mules towed it through the canal to the river. Once on the Hudson, the crew could either restep the masts or join a conventional tow to proceed to ports along the river including New York City.

Tracking these Lake Champlain sailing canal boats in our quest to docu-

ment the *General Butler* required historical detective work. Some design features of the Champlain boats likely had European origins. Sailing barges had operated on rivers and canals there for centuries. The English sailing barge on the Thames River, with a flat bottom on its barge-shaped hull and equipment that enabled the masts to be lowered onto the hatch covers to accommodate numerous river bridges, may have been the immediate ancestor of the Champlain sailing canal boats. The lake vessel, while not an exact copy of the Thames barge, shared a number of design similarities.



The sailing canal boat P. E. Havens was the same class as the General Butler, and also built at Essex, New York. Courtesy of Arthur Cohn.

Each possessed a barge-like hull with a flat bottom, for maximum cargo-carrying capacity, and both vessels could drop their masts when the need arose. Since the Champlain boat dropped and raised its mast only at the ends of the canal, builders of this craft employed a much simplified mechanism for this function. Additionally, because their maximum beam was determined by the narrow locks of the new canal, the Champlain boats adopted a centerboard design, while Thames barges traditionally used leeboards for lateral stability.¹⁰ The centerboard design was probably well-known in the Champlain Valley. Its inventor, John Schank, had been the British naval officer who supervised the shipyard at St. John, Quebec, where the British forces had constructed a fleet in anticipation of the British invasion of the Champlain valley in 1776.¹¹

Canal boats also operated on Lake Sebago and the Cumberland and Oxford (C & O) Canal in Maine.¹² There, a large lake and a newly opened canal produced the same problems of transshipment that boat builders on Lake Champlain faced. Although the C & O canal boats were slightly smaller than their Champlain counterparts—reflecting the scaled-down size of that canal and locks—they were otherwise much alike. The similarities of these vessels pose the question, which came first? Did the American sailing canal boat originate on Lake Sebago or on Lake Champlain? The earliest C & O boats date from 1830, the year that the canal was opened. Since the Sebago boats appeared simultaneously with the opening of the C & O Canal, we hypothesized that might also have happened on Lake Champlain. To check, we first turned to Thomas Canfield's "Discovery, Navigation and Navigators of Lake Champlain," published in volume I of Abby Hemenway's *Historical Gazetteer* in 1867.¹³ Canfield, a Burlington merchant and shipper, knew commercial boating on Lake Champlain intimately and his work is cited by many historians as basic for understanding the early history of commerce on the lake. We found that Canfield's work is the first link in a chain of misunderstanding about the development of canal boats on Lake Champlain.

On canal boats, Canfield wrote:

Messrs. Follett & Bradley of Burlington in 1841 established the "Merchant's Line." This line was composed of the first class canal boats. Constructed like a sloop, with frames sufficiently strong to stand the seas upon the lake, rigged with a mast and sail, which could be taken out in an hour at Whitehall and the boat proceed at once through the canal, and upon arrival at Troy be towed direct to New York by steam tow boats on the Hudson, thus property put on board at one port went through to its destination without handling From 1825 to 1845 navigation by sail upon the lake may be said to have been in the ascendant and to have reached its meridian, and from the first day of June, 1841—the day the *Richard M. Johnson* [under the command of] Capt. Orson S. Spear, of the "Merchant Lake Boat Line," left Burlington wharf for New York—may be dated the commencement of its decline.¹⁴

Canfield's emphasis on the year 1841 led some maritime writers to conclude that sailing canal boats made their first appearance on Lake Champlain in that year. For example, P. André Sevigny, in his *Trade and Navigation on the Chambly Canal*, pointed out that while sailing vessels proliferated on the lake after the opening of the Champlain Canal, "Their cargo had to be transferred to the towing barges used on the canal, since their sails prevented them from traveling on the canal." Sevigny concluded: "This situation lasted until 1841, when a Burlington merchant named Timothy Follett and an associate named Bradley launched the

Merchant Line shipping company. Their barges had sails too, but the sails and masts were detachable. When these barges reached Whitehall their rigging was stored there and they were then towed by mule to Albany or New York.”¹⁵ Even as careful a historian as Ralph Nading Hill was apparently misled by Canfield’s emphasis on events of the 1840s; Hill concluded, “A further change took place in 1845 with the advent of sloop rigged canal boats.”¹⁶

If Lake Champlain sailing canal boats did not appear until 1841 or 1845, then clearly the C & O vessels of Lake Sebago preceded them. This would argue that the Champlain boats were somewhat larger and later versions of their Maine cousins. Our study of the *Gleaner*, the first vessel to pass through the Champlain Canal in 1823, however, provides incontrovertible evidence that the Lake Champlain sailing canal boats were the original American craft of this design.

The voyage of the *Gleaner* in September 1823 attracted widespread public attention. The *Gleaner* hailed from the northern Lake Champlain port of St. Albans, Vermont, and her historic maiden voyage through the recently completed canal evoked celebrations all along the Hudson River route to New York City. At Troy “the city turned out to greet the arrival of the large and beautiful lake boat, *Gleaner* from St. Albans . . . [as it] passed through the sloop lock just above us which completes the connection to the Northern Canal with the river Hudson.”¹⁷ The press chronicled these celebrations and gave an eager public news about the ship as well. An article in the *Mercantile Advertiser* of New York City described the *Gleaner* in detail. “She is 35 tons custom house measurement, carries a cargo of 60 tons — is 57 feet keel, 60 feet on deck and 13-1/2 feet wide — has a handsome cabin, with 10 good berths for passengers . . . with a full cargo she will draw 3-1/2 feet — being six inches less than the depth of water in the canal.” The same article stated: “The vessel was built as an experiment and is found to answer all the uses intended. She sails as fast and bears the changes of weather in the lake and river as well as ordinary sloops and is constructed properly for passing through the canal.”¹⁸ The *Gleaner* was a Lake Champlain sailing canal boat.

Sailing canal boats made their debut, as their Sebago counterparts would seven years later, simultaneously with the opening of the canal, which stimulated a shipbuilding boom up and down the lake. Shipyards built traditional lake sailboats and standard canal boats in significant numbers and for a time shippers continued to transfer cargo from sailing vessels to canal boats at Whitehall. Nonetheless, sailing canal boats, in the years after 1823, were built in St. Albans, Swanton, Burlington, and Vergennes on the Vermont side of the lake and at Chazy and Plattsburgh on the New York side. Was Thomas Canfield wrong? Not really. He was

a substantial investor in the Follett and Bradley line and pride of possession may have led him to exaggerate the importance of the 1841 class of sailing canal boats. The real problem was that Canfield called the *Gleaner* and her sister ships “long boats” and reserved the term “first class canal boat” for vessels built in 1841 and after. What Canfield called “long boats,” however, were early versions of sailing canal boats.¹⁹

Our research suggests that there were three distinct classes of canal boats, which we identify by date, the 1823 class, the 1841 class, and the 1862 class. The earliest canal boats, those built from 1823 to 1841, were designed both to sail efficiently on the open lake and to ride smoothly under tow through the new canal connection. Wholesalers and shippers were no longer limited to the market offered by the northern water route to Canada. For the first time merchants shipped along an all-water route to southern markets without difficult portages or costly transshipment. The editor of Burlington’s *Northern Sentinel* pointed to the importance of this route: “. . . merchandise can now be transported . . . to and from St. Albans, in from 10 to 14 days, at an expense of about ten dollars per ton. Hitherto the time required for carrying merchandise . . . has been about 25 to 30 days, at an expense of 25 to 30 dollars per ton.”²⁰ Merchants in the lake towns on the northern shores of the lake now had an opportunity to buy and sell in the dynamic market towns along the Hudson River. Although some looked to sailing vessels and standard canal boats, a few more enterprising entrepreneurs had a different idea about how to take advantage of the new waterway. The first sailing canal boats, like the *Gleaner*, were built and owned by local merchants from the lake’s northern reaches. Nehemiah Kingman, for example, one of the owners of the *Gleaner*, was a hatter by trade. Kingman seized the opportunity offered by the opening of the canal and established a dry goods and grocery business at St. Albans Bay. For northern merchants, like Kingman, shipping via the new canal boats afforded them a distinct economic advantage. The new canal boats were able to ship goods from lake ports directly to the Hudson and return to their home ports with products from all over the world.²¹

Merchants at the southern end of the lake had less need to invest in sailing canal boats. Instead they built the simpler standard canal boats to move their merchandise. The commercial ports at Whitehall, Orwell, Shoreham, Ticonderoga, Bridport, Chimney Point, and Crown Point fronted on the river-like Lake Champlain narrows. Merchants in these towns employed one of the steamboats regularly passing their docks for a tow to the canal or back to their home port. The geography of their region made adding a sailing capacity to the barge-like boats an unnecessary expense. Businessmen in this area enjoyed increased commerce

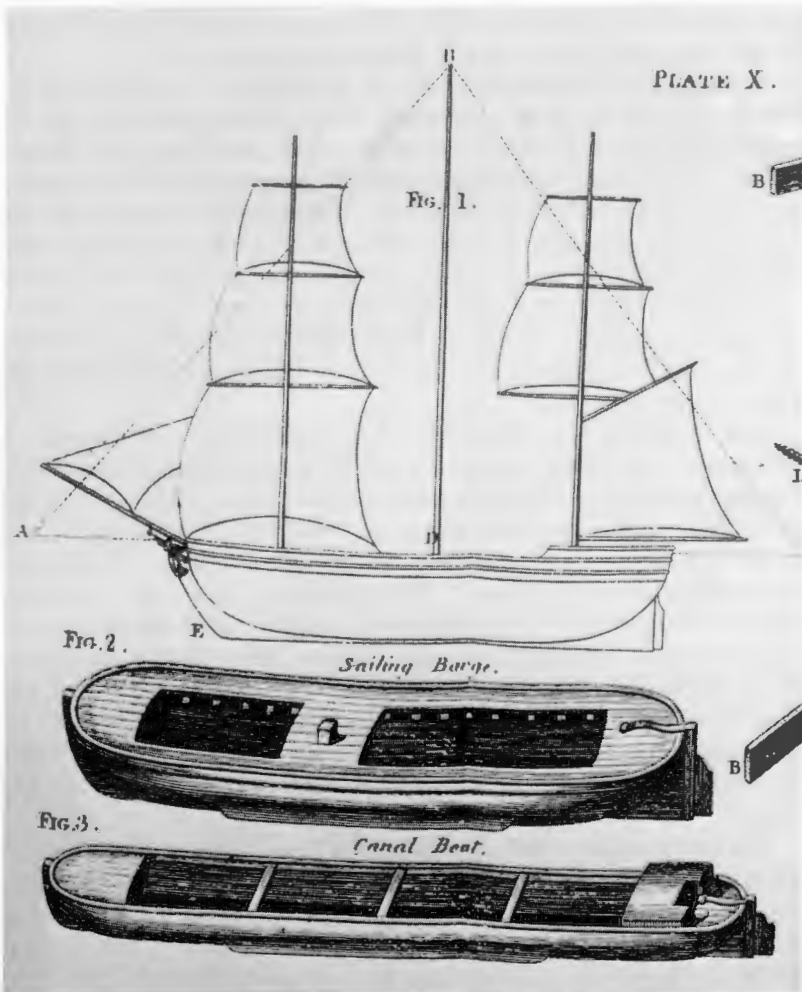
and built numerous stone and brick warehouses along the water's edge in the years after the opening of the Champlain Canal.²²

The canal also changed the nature of commerce on Lake Champlain significantly. Bulky goods, too costly when transshipped, like timber, marble, and farm produce, chiefly butter, cheese, and wool, now flowed southward through Whitehall while manufactured goods, chiefly textiles, leather goods, and furniture, along with previously unavailable foodstuffs from oysters to peaches, were shipped north. Total shipping on the lake jumped from forty or so vessels to more than two hundred.²³ Shipyards on both sides of the lake responded to this increased trade by turning out sloops, schooners, and canal boats. Most of the sailing canal boats produced in this shipbuilding boom came, not surprisingly, from the scattered northern lake towns.

A key feature of the earliest 1823 class vessels was the randomness of their design. The first sailing canal boats followed no apparent standards of construction. Rigged both as sloops and as schooners, these boats took on the appearance and features given them by their respective local builders. They had, however, some common characteristics. They all had masts that could easily be lowered or removed at Whitehall to allow them to pass through the canal. They were equipped with centerboards or shallow keels in order to function effectively while on the lake under sail. They also had shallow drafts because the canal they had to travel was only four feet deep. The size of the canal locks and canal regulations designed to protect the canal from damage also limited the overall dimensions of these canal boats to "78-62 / 100 feet long, 14-46 / 100 feet wide."²⁴

The men who designed and built these early sailing canal boats remain, for the most part, anonymous. One interesting exception is British naval architect William Annesley. Annesley was a pioneer in new techniques of boat construction and an advocate of experimental methods of naval architecture. He wrote *A New System of Naval Architecture*, published in London in 1822. In this treatise, Annesley argued that ships should be constructed "with planks or boards . . . which are laid in courses at right angles alternately, longitudinal, vertical, or oblique, and where the curve requires it upon molds." This technique "exclude[d] frame timbers, beams, knees, breast hooks and stem."²⁵

In 1823, Annesley came to the Champlain Valley to proselytize his new methods. He achieved some success and sold at least seven patents for sailing canal boats with laminated hulls. Matthew Sax operated a busy store and commercial wharf at Chazy, New York. Sax commissioned the first building and launch of an Annesley-designed sailing canal boat. This first sailing canal boat was called the *William Annesley* and as the



This drawing taken from A New System of Naval Architecture by William Annesley. Boats of this type appeared on Lake Champlain after the opening of the Champlain Canal in 1823. Courtesy of Arthur Cohn.

Plattsburgh Republican reported in the summer of 1823, "We learn that a vessel has just been built by Judge Sax, at Chazy on Lake Champlain upon this improved plan, which gives entire satisfaction. The above boat has just passed through the lake to Whitehall with 4,000 pieces of boards and planks and fully answers the expectations of all concerned. This boat has just navigated the lake for about 120 miles and it is believed that boats

which go through Lake Champlain will navigate the river from Albany to New York with perfect safety.”²⁶ Later that summer Sax ordered a second Annesley-designed craft, which he named the *Governor Clinton*. Sax operated both vessels on the lake for at least the next thirteen years.²⁷ During the spring of 1823, Annesley was forced by ice on the lake to spend several days at Vergennes. There he met Captain Jezehial Sherman, one of the lake’s most experienced mariners. Sherman, a boat builder as well as a steamboat captain, later constructed an Annesley-type sailing canal boat that he christened the *Ethan Allen*. In addition to Captain Sherman, “Judge Platt and Mr. Hull each built two boats all of nearly similar dimensions at Plattsburgh.”²⁸

From Lake Champlain, Annesley went to Lake George where a steamboat, *The Mountaineer*, was built according to his principles. Annesley also visited the St. Lawrence region where several other laminated hull vessels were constructed. Later Annesley settled in Albany where he worked until 1848 as a ship designer. Annesley strongly argued the advantages of strength, capacity, and economy of his construction techniques but he recognized that the traditional boat building community would resist his new ideas.²⁹

Such resistance may also partly account for the fact that the 1823 sailing canal boats never numbered more than a handful. Sailing ships were what most shipwrights and merchants knew and what they continued to build. Increasing prosperity in the commercial ports on the lake led to the development of a new class of sailing canal boats. As Canfield pointed out the first of this class was the *Richard M. Johnson*, launched on June 1, 1841.³⁰ The firm of Follett and Bradley, which ordered the *Johnson*, operated what was likely the largest wholesale business in the Champlain Valley. This firm and other commercial enterprises had made Burlington the premier example of a successful lake port. Increased traffic on the lake led to federally funded improvements for the port of Burlington. A lighthouse was erected on Juniper Island in 1826 and construction of an improved breakwater to protect the new wharves built along the waterfront began just over a decade later.³¹ Burlington was the most important commercial center in the Champlain Valley. As large-scale wholesalers, Follett and Bradley keenly understood the advantages achieved when “property put on board at one port went through to its destination without handling.” Also as prosperous merchants, Follett and Bradley had enough capital to commit themselves to building a fleet of boats. This commitment produced the 1841 class of sailing canal boats.³²

Centralized management and standardized design, in fact, characterized this class of sailing canal boats. They were rigged as sloops and their overall dimensions were determined, of course, by the size of the canal locks.

A contract for a brand new sailing canal boat built “of full size for the locks . . . and to be of the best quality and the work and fastenings to be fully equal to any boat ever built on Lake Champlain” cost Follett and Bradley fifteen hundred dollars. Ten years later, the price for a new boat of the same class by the same builder had risen to \$1,675.³³ These sturdy vessels proved economically successful and soon larger shippers “produced fleets which numbered as many as 40 vessels.” One 1841 class vessel has been studied in detail; it was sloop-rigged, seventy-nine feet long and thirteen and one-half feet in beam, with a single centerboard and was steered by a tiller; this ship was fully laden with marble blocks when it sank off Isle La Motte.³⁴ As these 1841 sailing canal boats became more popular on the lake, they replaced the traditional sailing vessels on the lake’s shipbuilding ways; by the time of the Civil War shipbuilders had largely abandoned construction of traditional sloops and schooners for commercial use on Lake Champlain.

The dramatic and immediate successes of the Champlain and Erie canals led to plans for the enlargement of their carrying capacity. In 1860, the New York state legislature authorized an expansion of the Champlain Canal; by 1862 the entire sixty-four-mile length had been both widened and deepened. The locks were enlarged as well, and the canal could now accept longer and wider vessels with a deeper draft.³⁵ Ship owners and builders responded by building vessels with a larger cargo capacity.

The 1862 class of sailing canal boats was more than an expanded version of the 1841 class. They were deeper draft vessels, which ran eighty-eight feet in length with beams of fourteen and one-half feet. Many builders also added a second mast; a schooner-rigged vessel required fewer men to operate it and a smaller crew enabled the owner to pay lower wages. Lake shippers took cost-cutting measures because this class of canal boats had to compete with the railroad for the commercial traffic of the region.

Shipbuilders at Hoskins and Ross, an established shipyard in Essex, New York, launched one of the first new sailing canal boats. It was christened the *General Butler*, after a prominent Union officer under whose command some Vermont Civil War troops served.³⁶ The *Butler* entered a changing commercial world where fortunes would be shaped by the new forces of locomotive and rail; nonetheless three different owners worked it on the lake for fourteen years. Preliminary research on the owners of the *Butler* reveals something of the rich social and economic history centered on the lake men of the Champlain Valley. For example, Edwin Langdon and Jabez Rockwell of Alburg, Vermont, had ordered the construction of the *Butler*. While Langdon, a local merchant, was apparently just an investor, Rockwell hailed from a family that had produced over a dozen men who followed the call of the inland sea, including Captain

Ell B. Rockwell who worked on ships on the lake until he was ninety-eight years old. Ell B. also reportedly had a financial interest in the *Butler*.³⁷ The *Butler's* second owner, Julius Rugar of Plattsburgh, whose brother was also a lake man, owned a number of vessels during his long career on the lake. Rugar “dropped dead” in November, 1903, after delivering two boatloads of potatoes to New York City from Plattsburgh.³⁸



William Montgomery near the stern of the J. P. Howard, built in Champlain, New York, in 1882. Courtesy of Arthur Cohn.

The *Butler's* final owner and its captain on that fatal day in 1876 was William Montgomery. An Irishman, who came to Isle La Motte via Canada, Montgomery had seen ships passing his home shore and had looked for work in the lake's maritime trades. As his wreck on the breakwater attested, Montgomery had a reputation as a “rough and ready old fellow” who would venture out of port when others chose not to travel. This rashness led to a number of close calls and misadventures during Montgomery's long working life.³⁹ Both Montgomery's sons, William and John, followed their father into the lake trade. The oldest son, William, worked on the lake until his death from typhoid fever in 1897. William kept a diary for the year 1895, which records his work on the schooner *J. P. Howard*, hauling hay in the spring, stones in the summer for the expansion of the Burlington breakwater, and barrels of apples in the fall.⁴⁰ Lake vessels from Isle La Motte and elsewhere continued to do useful commercial work long after the bulk of the region's trade was carried by rail. John Montgomery began his life on the lake as a cabin

boy for his father and his older brother and worked his way up to become one of the lake's last celebrated steamboat captains. During the destructive floods of 1927, when the railroad bridges and lines washed out, Captain John Montgomery on the *Chateaugay* carried much needed food and other supplies into the region.⁴¹ John Montgomery finally outlived lake commerce and in retirement served as town clerk and state representative for his hometown. The elder William Montgomery survived the wreck of the *Butler* in 1876 and lived to the ripe old age of ninety-two. He died in 1922 a witness to the steady decline in the commerce on the lake where he worked for fifty years.

Sailing canal boats appeared as pragmatic shippers and shipbuilders responded to the dynamic new opportunities afforded by the opening of the Champlain Canal in 1823. The canal sparked increased demand for traditional watercraft and concomitantly inspired an adaptation of that watercraft technology to create the nation's first sailing canal boats. The canal boats played an integral part in Lake Champlain's mid-century economic boom; much of the goods of that new commerce were shipped north and south in their holds and on their decks.

Yet these boats, including the *General Butler*, became victims of increased competition from the railroads. Rail lines reached Burlington in 1850 and through lines were completed along the New York shore in 1875. The Essex shipyard finished its last sailing canal boat in 1878, and shortly thereafter the shipyard itself was converted to a horseshoe nail factory. By century's end, the boats that made up the lake's once extensive commercial fleet remained only rare curiosities. A federal government report prepared just after the turn of the century recalled the heyday of commercial activity on the lake and observed: "All this has now practically disappeared. The visitor to the lake today will see at rare intervals a solitary line of canal boats . . . oftener he will see nothing but a large expanse of water backed by blue mountains and intercepted here and there by groups of islands."⁴²

Although canal boats no longer ply their trade on the lake, they are not all gone. Since 1981 divers and nautical archeologists have located a number of Lake Champlain's wooden commercial ships on the lake's bottom. The lake's cold water has preserved these vessels as wooden time capsules of the commercial history of the lake. Today the *General Butler* remains in Burlington harbor just west of the breakwater it struck over 115 years ago. The *Butler* now is an experimental Underwater Historic Preserve under the sponsorship of the Vermont Division of Historic Preservation. The *Butler* is regularly visited by divers who can still see its remarkably intact hull and marble cargo. Bright yellow mooring buoys placed at its bow and stern make the *Butler* easy to find; divers can follow

a chain to the bottom, which connects to a yellow travel line that guides them along the lake bottom to the vessel. On the deck are the *Butler's* anchor windlass, mast tabernacles, hatches, and dead-eyes. At the stern divers can peer into the rear cabin where meals were served and bunks provided a moment's rest. The woodstove is still there, although the wreck's impact toppled it onto its side. Fish congregate in schools on the stern deck and around the tiller bar that Captain Montgomery hastily lashed with chain in his vain attempt to save his ship. The wrecked *General Butler* now serves as an indispensable artifact for recovering the rich history of commercial shipping on Lake Champlain. We believe Captain Montgomery would approve.

NOTES

¹ *Daily Free Press and Times* (Burlington), Morning edition, 11 December 1876. The storm was apparently severe. The *Free Press* reporter noted: "Winter wasn't satisfied with merely leaving his card this time, but came himself and took possession of the whole earth." The same article continued: "Experienced sailors declare they have seldom seen the weather so rough, and certain it is that persons who were out on the lake wish never to do so again."

² *Daily Free Press and Times*, Morning Edition, 11 December 1876. The *Free Press* reporter noted: "A little way beyond the southern lighthouse she struck and all hands made haste to land on the breakwater. So tremendous was the force of water that with each wave the schooner would be actually sent higher than the breakwater; and alternately sinking, each plunge in the trough of the sea would seem to be the last. To land on the breakwater the members of the party were obliged to jump from the schooner when it was on the crest of the wave; and the undertaking required a leap of some eighteen feet on to a mass of large rough stones covered with ice. All, however, made the perilous essay with little or no injury, save Mr. Goodsell, who struck on his head and was knocked senseless, and was afterward found to be quite severely cut and bruised."

³ Wakefield was an adopted Vermonter and his experience had prepared him well for the rescue that December. He had left England at age thirteen and worked as a sailor on many of the world's oceans. He had experienced revolutions, pirate raids, mutinies, storms, and shipwrecks. He had served on Lord Horatio Nelson's flagship, *Victory*, and after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, Wakefield continued in the merchant service for several years. After visiting a brother living at Whitehall, New York, he decided to move to the shores of Lake Champlain. Wakefield sailed back to England to get his wife and they embarked on the return trip to North America on the *Queen of the West*. Off the Newfoundland coast, this ship was overtaken by a hurricane; fierce winds and frenzied seas scattered the vessel's rigging about the deck and tore out her masts. The sodden rigging and torn masts threatened to capsize the ship; Wakefield took an ax, crept across the deck, cut away the rigging and saved the ship, passengers, and crew. In 1857 he settled in Burlington and prospered as a sailmaker, rigger, and ship chandler. *Boston Sunday Globe*, 12 December 1909. This *Globe* article is based on an interview with Wakefield. In closing the interview, the captain said, "I guess that's about all, my boy," dismissing the last twenty years of his life with less than half that many words. Begged by his sons to continue the old sailor refused: "Ye'll be getting me in trouble." Pulling his fur cap over his ears, noting that nasty weather was brewing and that it was near suppertime, "the ancient mariner" walked off into the darkness. Also see Arthur Stone, *The Vermont of Today*, 3 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1929), 336-37.

⁴ *Daily Free Press and Times*, Morning edition, 12 December 1876.

⁵ Scott McDonald and Dean Russell discovered the *General Butler* in May of 1981 while exploring the vicinity of the breakwater.

⁶ After the *Butler* was located, Art Cohn called a number of canal historians for help in identifying the craft. All agreed—as far as they knew—sailing canal boats had not existed in the United States. Apparently the class of canal boats exemplified by the *Butler* had been lost to public knowledge.

⁷ Enrollment Papers, *General Butler*, National Archives, Washington D.C., Record Group #41. These records were located by historian Morris Glenn who kindly shared them with us.

⁸ See, for example, Ralph Nading Hill, *Lake Champlain: Key to Liberty* (Taftsville, Vt.: Countryman Press, 1976).

.....

⁹ Cornelius Van Ness, "Inaugural Address," 15 October 1824, *Records of the Council of Safety and the Governor and Council of the State of Vermont*, 7 (Montpelier, 1873-1880), 443.

¹⁰ On English canal boats, see Dennis F. Davis, *The Thames Sailing Barge, Her Gear and Rigging* (Newton Abbot, England and Camden, Maine: International Marine Publishing Co., 1970) and Edgar J. March, *Spritsail Barges of Thames and Medway* (London: Percival Marshall, 1948).

¹¹ John Sharnock, *A History of Marine Architecture* (London: R. Faulder, 1802). Shank overcame a significant lead in shipbuilding that the American rebels had in 1776 by the ingenious strategy of disassembling existing vessels at Chambly and having them transhipped overland to St. John, Quebec.

¹² Joel W. Eastman, *Cumberland and Oxford Canal History* (York, Pa.: The American Canal and Transportation Center, 1983).

¹³ Abby Hemenway, ed., *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* (Burlington, 1867), I: 656-707.

¹⁴ Hemenway, *Gazetteer*, I: 683-84.

¹⁵ P. André Sevigny, *Trade and Navigation on the Chambly Canal: A Historical Overview* (Parks Canada, 1983), 44.

¹⁶ Ralph Nading Hill, *Lake Champlain*, 209.

¹⁷ *Northern Sentinel* (Burlington), 12 September 1823. This paper is located at Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

¹⁸ *Mercantile Advertiser* (New York), 6 September 1823. Microfilm, New York State Library, Albany, N. Y.

¹⁹ Hemenway, *Gazetteer*, I: 684.

²⁰ *Northern Sentinel*, 12 September 1823.

²¹ Henry K. Adams, *A Centennial History of St. Albans, Vermont* (St. Albans: Wallace Printing Co., 1889), 78-86.

²² MS copy of the Register of Canal Boats as it appears from the book of registry of those boats in the comptroller's office on 1 January, 1833, New York State Library Archive, Albany, New York. This useful list gives the name of each boat, the port where it was owned, the names of its owners, and the date of each vessel's certificate of registry.

²³ Many sources describe the increased volume and changing nature of this trade; see, for example, Howard Russell, *A Long Deep Furrow, Three Centuries of Farming in New England* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1976) and John E. O'Hara, "Erie's Junior Partner" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1951).

²⁴ Henry W. Hill, *A Historical Overview of Waterways and Canal Construction in New York State* (Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society, 1908), 144.

²⁵ William Annesley, *A New System of Naval Architecture* (London: W. Nicol, 1822). This was a radical departure from traditional heavy timber watercraft construction, and, although Annesley's ideas were not widely adopted in the nineteenth century, his principles of design anticipated the laminated hull method of construction widely used in building fine wooden boats today.

²⁶ *Plattsburgh Republican* (New York), 28 June 1823. Special Collections, Feinberg Library, State University of New York, Plattsburgh, N. Y.

²⁷ "Ledger Book E," 146-171, Matthew Sax Family Papers. Collection privately held by a Sax family descendant.

²⁸ John L. Sullivan, *A Commentary on the New System of Naval Architecture of William Annesley*, (Troy, N. Y.: William S. Parker, 1823), Appendix, I.

²⁹ Sullivan, *Naval Architecture*, Appendix, 4. Also see *Child's Albany Directory and City Register*, 1831-1848, in which Annesley is listed as a "patent ship builder."

³⁰ Richard Mentor Johnson, a former senator from Kentucky, had been vice president of the United States under Martin Van Buren (1837-1841). He was best known as one of several men who claimed to have killed Indian leader Tecumseh; he apparently had no Vermont connections. His vice-presidential campaign produced one of the most rapid slogans in American history: "Rumpsey Dumpsey / Colonel Johnson killed Tecumseh." For biographical details, see *Dictionary of American Biography*, s. v. "Johnson, Richard M."

³¹ Zadock Thompson, *History of Vermont* (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1842), 216-17.

³² Hemenway, *Gazetteer*, I: 684.

³³ See contracts signed by shipbuilder Orson Spear in the 1840s and 1850s. Spear Family Papers, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

³⁴ Hemenway, *Gazetteer*, I: 684. Also see Arthur B. Cohn, ed., *A Report on the Nautical Archaeology of Lake Champlain* (Burlington: Champlain Maritime Society, 1984), 31-40, and Montgomery Fisher, ed., *A Report on the Nautical Archaeology of Lake Champlain* (Burlington: Champlain Maritime Society, 1985), 27-35.

³⁵ Henry W. Hill, *Waterways*, 156.

³⁶ Butler was a Massachusetts lawyer and a politically appointed general. Ironically Butler later became embroiled in a serious squabble with Vermonters when he alleged cowardice in the behavior of Vermont's 7th infantry at the Battle of Baton Rouge in August of 1862. See George G. Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War* (Burlington: Free Press Association, 1888), 2, 6-45.

.....

³⁷“Unique Family of Sailors,” *Swanton Courier*, 23 March 1911, and see Ell Barney Rockwell, “Stenographic record of reminiscences of Steamboat Career on Lake Champlain,” Special Collections, Bailey / Howe Library, University of Vermont.

³⁸*Plattsburgh Daily Press* (New York), 4 December 1903. Benjamin Feinberg Library, State University New York Plattsburgh.

³⁹Conversation with Julian Rockwell, eighty-seven years old, on 7 October 1981, and author Arthur Cohn.

⁴⁰Diary of William Montgomery of Isle La Motte, 1895. Private family collection. William married Lena Carew in 1894 and their only daughter, Cora, was born in 1895. Her father’s diary records that he spent several days “at home” on the occasion of her birth. Also see Allen L. Stratton, *History of the Town of Isle La Motte* (Barre, Vt: Northlight Studio Press, 1984).

⁴¹“Recalling Boating Days on the Lake,” *Burlington Free Press*, 26 October 1936, and Ogden Ross, *Steamboats of Lake Champlain* (Burlington: Champlain Transportation Co., 1930), 154-55.

⁴²Marshall O. Leighton, *Preliminary Report on the Pollution of Lake Champlain* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1905), 11-12.