

Cobourg historians have experienced difficulty in finding authentic information about local happenings in the 1820s. There was no local newspaper at that time to give a running account of the events of that decade. What history we have has come from several sources, but it is rather meagre.

The 1820s witnessed the arrival of a number of schooners and a few steam boats on Lake Ontario, replacing Durham boats and the former bateaux. The poor roads in Upper Canada made land travel difficult.

Most newcomers travelled by water. Many immigrants using boats for transportation along the north shore of Lake Ontario bypassed Cobourg and moved on to York and Western Ontario for settlement. Cobourg had no harbor and only a few boats would call and only in relatively calm weather. Except for Irish immigrants, destined for Peterborough settlement in 1824 and 1825, few newcomers came to Cobourg and the local area. This affected the local economy. Most citizens and settlers realized Cobourg must have harbor facilities.

Cobourg had one advantage. Living in the village and environs was a fair-sized group of citizens with excellent foresight. They were aggressive promoters and entrepreneurs. They went all out on projects for the good of the community. Nothing seemed to daunt or dismay them. At times there was internal discussion and at other times, a few would not participate, but by and large, they forged ahead on various undertakings. Through their efforts, Cobourg was pulling itself up by its own bootstraps. Slowly the population and trade increased.

Dora Emily Watbee, in writing a thesis at the University of Toronto for her M.A. degree in 1949, chose the subject "Cobourg — 1784-1867." In excellent story form, her writings thoroughly cover the subject in a flowing language. About the Cobourg harbor's beginnings she tells us:

"Early in 1825, John Covert petitioned the government for aid to build a pier or breakwater, "at the village of Cobourgh." The petition received a favorable report when it was presented by Z. Burnham, but before any legislative decision was made, the citizens of Cobourg decided to take action. On October 27, 1827, in Conger's Tavern, a meeting of "all those townsmen and settlers interested" met to consider how to get a harbor. The meeting was a momentous one, not only because it began the long and tangled story of the harbor, but also because it was the first of innumerable such meetings at which the town's citizens took the initiative in local projects — evidence of the energy which sparked Cobourg and all such little communities with the power to push Canada forward.

"At that birthday meeting, October 27, 1827, J.G. Bethune was chosen as chairman of the harbor committee, which included a baker's dozen of the local merchants and farmers. The committee was authorized to open a subscription book, and, as soon as the subscriptions were completed, to negotiate for a loan of 3,500 pounds, and to apply to the Legislature for the rights to levy harbor duties and to obtain estimates and plans for the harbor. Optimistically 3,500 pounds was set as the sum which would be needed to construct a "safe and commodious harbor," to take care of the principal and interest, the committee believed that it could count on 200 pounds a year for ten years from the sale of shares small enough, say one pound, so that they would appeal to the local investors.

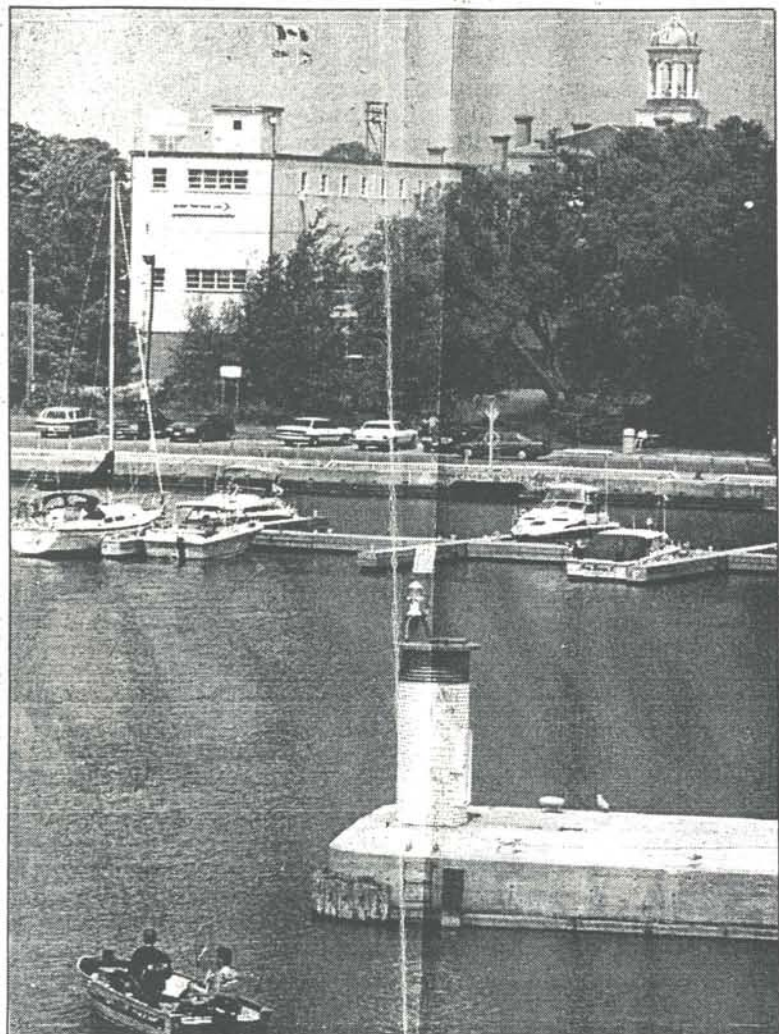
"The first harbour committee included: J.G. Bethune, Walter Boswell, Geo. S. Boulton, Dougald Campbell, John Covert, Wm. Falkner, John Gilchrist, John McCarty, Archibald McDonald, Ebenezer Perry, Henry Ruttan, John Spencer, and Benjamin Throop.

"The first developments were propitious. Not 200 pounds but 336pounds, 8(shillings) and 6(pence) was subscribed immediately that the stock book was opened, and as they had hoped, by the small investors of the district. Of the 161 original subscribers who gave more than one pound, only 13 were

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Climo's beloved harbor.

Photo by Ted Amsden.

from the first harbor committee, the largest amount being the 12 pounds 10, 6 of J.G. Bethune. Mr. Harris, the government surveyor who had been appointed by the committee to survey the coastline and to draw up the plans and estimates for a harbor suitable for vessels drawing eight feet, six inches, found three advantages in the course of his investigation: There was an abundance of stone for filling piers within a mile of Cobourg; the safety of transport and the reduction of freight would compensate for the tolls; and since Newcastle had previously had an annual assessment which regularly exceeded the expenditure, it could afford to pledge 50 pounds a year for ten years in aid of Cobourg's harbor.

"By January 28, 1828, the committee was ready to present its findings to the Legislature with its petition and a letter in which he (Mr. Harris) reviewed the need of harbors on the north shore in view of the rapid increase of trade, the possible tolls, and the enthusiastic response to the subscription. He also — premonitory insight? — recommended that the act make subscribers' property liable for their pledges. The government co-operated. On the grounds that the harbor would facilitate the shipment of produce raised in the surrounding country and the impost of merchandise, and that it would increase the safety of navigation, Mr. Burnham recommended the appointment of a commission to further the plans.

"There were difficulties encountered, too, in the first year. Mr. Harris had raised the original estimate of 3,500 pounds to 7,500 pounds, for he believed that the smallest installation feasible was a dock 80 by 40 yards, and a pier 235 yards into a depth of 12 feet of water. Mr. Burnham, comparing Mr. Harris's

Harbor's early days

A-Cobourg Harbour
(1857-1862)

estimate with similar projects in the province believed that it was high, but admitted that usually the cost of public works was greater than the original estimates and recommended that the 7,500-pound estimate be accepted. But that was as far as the government was willing to go. It would not underwrite the loan, on the excuse that the provincial funds "may be required for other purposes" and that a joint stock company would best accomplish the undertaking. The first, fine enthusiasm of the subscribers, too had cooled; only 30 pounds was added to the first 336 in six months. Mr. Harris's report had awakened some of the investors to the realization that dividends were a long way into the future, and that first estimates had a habit of being excessively optimistic.

"In spite of those setbacks, the harbor moved forward. The idea of a joint stock company, suggested by the legislative commission, was gaining favor with the harbor committee. During 1828, the plans for the formation of a harbor company progressed to the point that the committee was ready to ask for an act of incorporation by the end of the year. The investigation pursuant to that request brought out a new weakness in the scheme. An expenditure of 7,500 pounds would make a harbor useful only to Cobourg and the adjacent country, but would not build a harbor of refuge for vessels up and down the lake. Several captains who had had years of experience in schooners were interrogated; all agreed that in a storm, they would make for Presqu'isle. They did admit, however, that a harbor at Cobourg would be of great advantage to them when discharging cargoes for Cobourg and for the rear, since frequently in the spring and autumn they had not been able to come in to the existing wharf.

"Accepting the fact that the harbor was to be begun on the minor scale, the legislature passed the act which created Cobourg's first joint stock company, the Cobourg Harbour Company, on March 20, 1829. The first directors were practically the same as the original committee named in 1827; the few changes only made it more completely Cobourg personnel. The Act, true to type gave the directors their duties, set the tolls, election dates, voting powers of the stockholders, and limited stock to 7,500 pounds. The restricting clause was number 18 which set the time limits: 'that the harbour be commenced within one year and completed within seven.'"

In the year 1827, Cobourg consisted of: 40 houses, two churches, two inns, four stores, several distilleries, extensive grist mills and a population of about 350. From the report of surveyor John Small: "The trade of Cobourg is increasing rapidly, more through the spirit and enterprise of its merchants than its natural advantages. The formation of a harbor is now proposed."

The following is a list of trade items passing through the port:

Exports: 5,000 bbls of flour, 500 bbls of pork, 150 bbls of potash, 200 bbls of sundries, such as beef, lard, butter, whiskey, etc.

Imports: 200 tons of merchandise, 600 bbls of salt, 200 bbls of bulk foreign goods.

Sandford A. Fleming, writing in his historical notes on the plan of Cobourg that he produced in 1847, tells us: "Improvements in the town went on slowly, until the harbor was commenced in 1828. The following year, the harbor company was incorporated. This work cost upwards, 10,000 pounds, and several improvements are still in contemplation."

Those enterprising merchants of earlier days, did not wait for the government approval in 1828, but went ahead, placed their first cribs for the piers in what is now lower Division Street, opposite the camping grounds. This cribwork was uncovered a short while ago, when excavations were made for sewer installations.

— Percy L. Climo