

# History of Cobourg Harbour



ONTARIO  
BICENTENNIAL

COBOURG CANADA WEEK '84  
SOUVENIR EDITION

# The Cobourg and District Historical Society

P.O. Box 911, Cobourg, Ontario  
K9A 4W4

## Ceremony for the Unveiling of the Plaque to Mark the Site of the Original Cobourg Harbour

Canada Day, July 1, 1984  
2:30 p. m.

Opening Remarks	Mr. Peter Delanty, Chairman Cobourg Harbour Plaque Committee
Appreciation	Mr. Louis Peters, Past President Cobourg and District Historical Society
Unveiling	Mr. Mac Lees, Mayor of Cobourg and Mr. Percy Climo, Member Cobourg Harbour Plaque Committee
Crying of the Inscription	Mr. Ralph Wilding Tottenham Town Crier
Bicentennial Committee Comments	Mr. Don Kirkup, Chairman Cobourg Bicentennial Committee
Presentation of Bicentennial Committee Grant	Mr. Mac Lees, Mayor of Cobourg
Response	Mrs. Barbara Garrick, President Cobourg and District Historical Society



## COBOURG HARBOUR

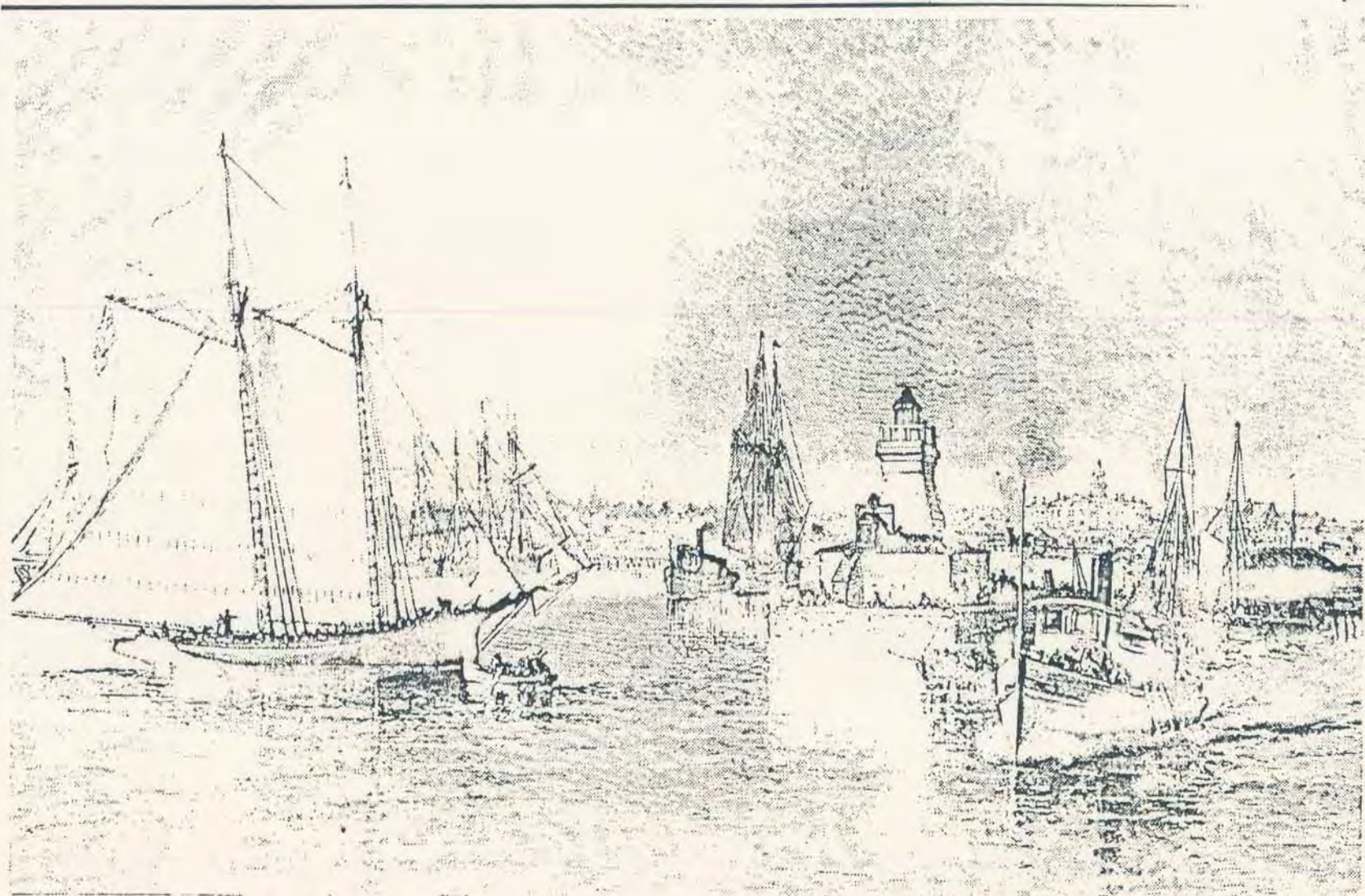
On this site in 1829 the first pier was built by a local private enterprise known as the Cobourg Harbour Company. In the year 1841 alone, 597 vessels of over 50 tons each and many smaller vessels docked here. Due to increased activity, protective piers were added in 1843 and in the 1870s. Tolls were charged for harbour usage and goods transported included lumber, grain, and later, iron ore. In the 1840s and 1850s Irish emigrants landed here to embark on a new life. 1859 saw the dream of an international port die with the failure of the Cobourg-Peterborough Railroad.

The 1876 America's Cup challenger "Countess of Dufferin" and the steamship "Cobourg" called this port home. Between 1907 and 1950 the large freight/passenger-car ferries "Ontario 1" and "2" sailed between Cobourg and Rochester. Today, with the assistance of the Federal Government, Cobourg has become an important small craft harbour.

Erected--Cobourg and District Historical Society--1984







This sketch from the Public Archives of Canada depicts Cobourg harbour in the late 1870s. Note the steam tugs towing sailing vessels out past the

lighthouse; also Victoria Hall in the background to the right. The spire of St. Andrew's Church (burned 1937) is left of the centre sailing vessel.



## Cobourg Harbour: A Gateway to Central Ontario

Cobourg's harbour area, with its sandy beach, shady trees, and outlets for freshwater streams, attracted travellers of early times and continues to attract visitors today.

Even before settlements were begun parties travelling in open boats camped by the creek mouths to catch and enjoy the fresh fish. From "Walter Butler's Journal" we read the account of a military leader travelling from Niagara to Kingston along the northern shore of Lake Ontario. His account of March 11, 1779 offers this description of one of the earliest official visits to the Cobourg harbour area:

Set off at Daylight, rowed till twelve, the swell increasing with the wind ahead at East put into a Creek called by the Indians "Pamitiescotiyank" (the fat fire) the distance from our Encampment 15 Miles, at this Creek and two others nearly of the same name, the Indians in the Fishing Season resides, all those three Creeks head near A Lake of about 30 Miles long, distant from this 50 Miles, where the Messessaugoes have two Villages and where<sup>1</sup> the Canadians in Winter send Traders ...

Idelle Rogers, an eminent historian, believes this to be a description of Cobourg's harbour area with its three creeks. The lake of 30 miles length is Rice Lake and the Indian villages mentioned are those that were found on its shores. One may suggest that by 1779 the British were investigating Cobourg's shore with an eye for locations for settlement.

Edwin C. Guillet, an acknowledged Ontario historian, cites the belief of the Herriman family, early Cobourg settlers, that their ancestors camped on the beach in 1797.



Newcastle District settlers used this shore for overnight accommodation. On August 12, 1825, white tents were scattered along the beach as 2,000 Irish emigrants landed in Cobourg on their way to the Peter Robinson settlement at Peterborough.

At this time larger boats were forced to anchor offshore because of the shallow waters. This lack of a deep water access necessitated the use of a Jollyboat. For the development of commerce to continue, a harbour facility was needed. In 1828 a local group petitioned the Provincial Legislature for permission to incorporate themselves into a joint-stock Company. In March of the following year, the authorization for the construction of the harbour was received.

With the new harbour facilities, ships from Genesee, New York were received, limestone from Presque Isle was delivered, and emigrants disembarked from ships such as the "Niagara". By 1832 a toll was being collected from the commerce crossing the Cobourg wharf.

The improved port facility brought problems and tragedy as well as benefits and hope. By 1832 hospital sheds had to be built at the foot of Darcy Street to quarantine and treat the many immigrants who suffered from Cholera Morbus. The Great Migration had begun and Cobourg Harbour was an integral part of it.

Cobourg's shore was also a scene of drama and mystery. Percy Climo, a local historian, offers this colourful account of the October 23, 1832 drowning of the infamous James Dempsey from the steamboat "William the Fourth". Dempsey and another man were standing near the open gangway and, in the heavy seas, were washed overboard as the ship left the harbour. The ironic aspect of this story lies in the fact that in Ireland Dempsey had been a violent man and, "we are told, had headed a notorious gang of White Feet in Queen's County"<sup>2</sup>. One of the men Dempsey had attacked in Ireland was a distiller and brewer, Mr. Calcutt.



Only weeks before Dempsey's death, on August 1, 1832, Mr. Calcutt had come to Cobourg to reestablish his family and business in a new and peaceful land. Dempsey died within yards of Calcutt's door. Following the inquest of Dempsey's death the editor of the Cobourg Star offered this comment:

Ireland of course was no longer a place of safety for him [Dempsey] and it became his turn to fly. When by a singular Providence, his steps were directed to the very place selected as the home of him [Calcutt] whom he had formerly injured, within sight of whose door he was doomed to perish--and upon whose land his miserable and ghastly carcass, horribly mutilated by the avenging waters, was afterwards made literally to bite the dust! -- his face being completely buried in the sand! -- "Doubtless there is a God who judgeth!"

It is unfortunate but true that many who came to Ontario brought not only their ambitions and dreams for a better future, but also the hatreds and biases from a bitter past. That two men, such enemies as Dempsey and Calcutt, should both come to Cobourg seems an interesting coincidence. Perhaps Dempsey was still pursuing Calcutt; it is likely that we shall never know.

Cobourg's waterfront continued to be a place of interest and excitement. On May 29, 1833 the steamboat "Cobourg" was launched. Described as spacious and elegant, she was propelled by two 50 horsepower engines and burned cordwood for fuel. Her regular course was to be between Cobourg and Oswego, New York.

By 1841 the harbour was a bustling site receiving immigrants and manufactured goods and exporting flour, corn, lumber, pork, wheat and wood. In the year 1841, 597 vessels over 50 tons and many smaller vessels called at the port.

Local promoters had visions of the Cobourg Harbour as a great international port as it became the southern terminus of the Cobourg-Peterborough Railway, bringing iron ore from the Marmora mines. Built at the harbour was an



unloading system which allowed hopper cars on a high trestle to unload their contents directly into the waiting ships. Much planning and effort had produced this sophisticated operation. When the Rice Lake Railroad bridge collapsed in 1860 the hopes of the local businessmen crumbled. As well, the Harbour Company was encumbered with problems of sand deposits blocking the harbour channel. The Langevin Pier was constructed in 1874-5 to prevent the deposit of the sand by the sweeping winds.

Excitement and hopeful anticipation came to Cobourg again on May 10, 1876 when the beautiful racing schooner "Countess of Dufferin", built in Cobourg and bound for the America's Cup race off New York, slipped into Lake Ontario.

From 1907 to 1950 activity at the harbour accelerated as the 1,000 passenger car ferries "Ontario 1" and "2" carried people and railroad cars between Rochester, New York and Cobourg. The waterfront reverberated with the voices of excited tourists and the clanging of the noisy freight cars being shunted down the spur line to the pier and into the cavernous hold of the ferry.

Victoria Day, 1944 was a memorable day in the history of the Cobourg harbour. On that occasion Captain Dan Rooney, a retired lake captain, brought "the ship that bore his town's name safely into the Cobourg Harbour..."<sup>4</sup> Crowds lined the pier and beaches to welcome the Corvette "Cobourg", its captain Gordon Johnson, and its crew, who were on their way to the service of their country against Germany's U-boats. The Kiltie Band paraded in their honour: Judge J. C. M. German and Mayor Burnet spoke; and gifts were presented by the Cobourg Women's Committee, which included Lenah Fisher and Madeline Rooney. One of the most interesting gifts presented was a piano that had to be fitted among the "maze of pipes and beams that criss-cross[ed] the ship"<sup>5</sup>.



In his manuscript "Corvette Cobourg, The Role Of A Canadian Warship In The World's Longest Sea Battle", Tom Blakely records this exciting event. A public inspection of the "Cobourg" was held and a "Corvette Dinner" followed at St. Peter's Parish Hall. The next morning the Corvette "Cobourg" slipped out into Lake Ontario and headed eastward to face the grim realities of submarine warfare.

Today on the sandy beach tourists laze and in the evenings band music floats from the bandshell in Victoria Park. Where the expectant Irish emigrants awaited transportation to the townships north of Rice Lake, spectators now watch ball games and campers sit by their mobile homes. In the 1980s the Coast Guard Cutter is located here to answer distress calls for this region of Lake Ontario. Thanks to the foresight of enterprising locals and the support of government agencies, the marina services are being expanded. Although commerce has shifted to other ports, Cobourg harbour remains important as an international centre for sail and power driven pleasure craft.

Barbara J. Garrick  
June, 1984

References:

1. Canadian Historical Review, Vol. 1, 1920. "Walter Butler's Journal of An Expedition Along the North Shore of Lake Ontario 1779", pp. 389-390.
2. Percy Climo. I Cover the Waterfront The Cobourg Harbour. 1983.
3. Ibid..
4. Tom Blakely. Corvette Cobourg, The Role of A Canadian Warship In The World's Longest Sea Battle. 1979.
5. Ibid..

See also:

Don Dawson and Peter Greathead, "Cobourg's Harbour Days in Cobourg and District Historical Society Historical Review, 1980-1982". pp. 59-67.