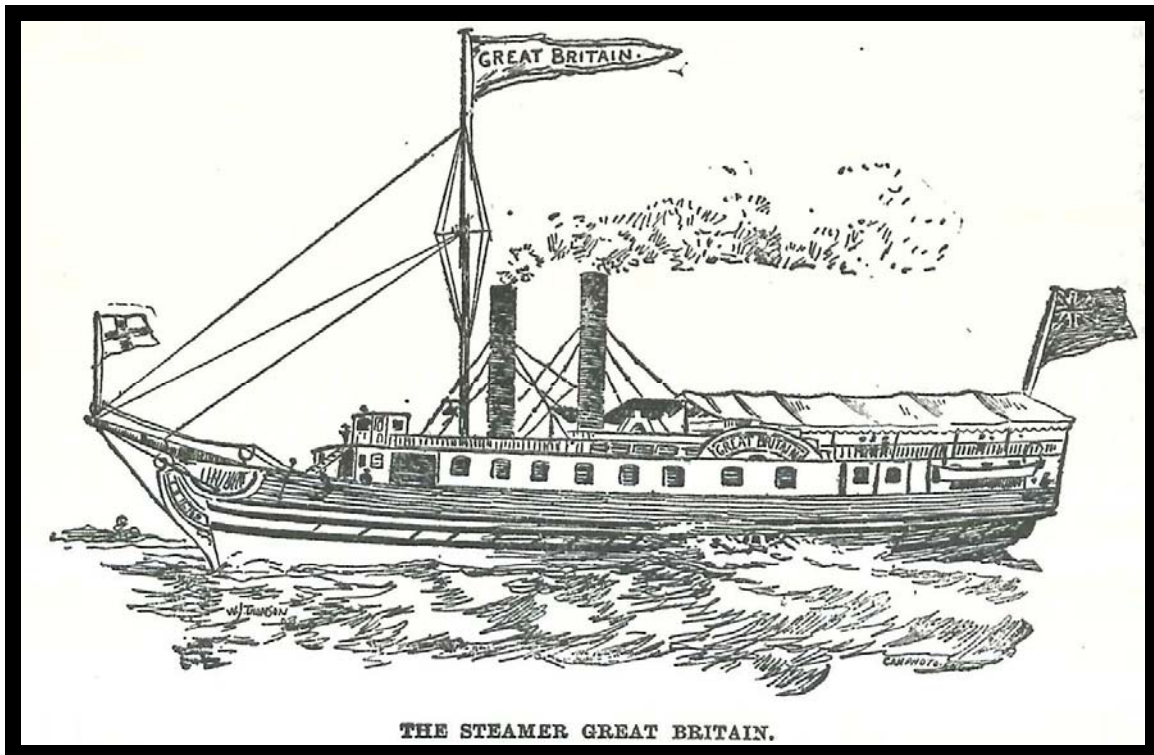


Cholera



The largest steamer on Lake Ontario brought joy and sorrow to York in 1832

On June 30, 1832 James Worts recorded a recipe for medicine widely reputed to combat cholera. It was a stirringly Canadian concoction. Maple sugar, lard, and charcoal ... washed down by spruce beer should the patient survive. Of course, it was totally useless, although the spruce beer might have re-hydrated victims, which would actually have helped them had anyone known how to treat the deadly disease. Doctors were divided on the source of infection: intemperance, bad night air, lack of cleanliness were all proposed. But none were aware of its true causes or cures: essentially, death by dehydration resulting from vomiting and diarrhea, transmission by touching contaminated items, treatment by re-hydration.

Worts noted this medicine about ten days after cholera hit the little town of York (population 4000 to 5000). Townspeople had been watching in helpless fascination as the dread disease worked its way along travel routes with a bumper crop of immigrants: from Quebec City ... to Montreal ... Upper Canada, and along the north shore of Lake Ontario.

On June 21st, the new steamer *Great Britain* dropped anchor in the harbour, bringing with her the pandemic that would devastate the town. (This is the same ship that had brought great joy to James Worts earlier in the spring when she had delivered the much-anticipated main shaft for the windmill on April 20th.)

When Dr. King boarded the *Great Britain*, he discovered that one passenger had been attacked by cholera and landed at Kingston; another had been off-loaded at Cobourg; and two children had died on board of diarrhea (not definitely proved to be cholera, but undoubtedly linked). He also diagnosed two new cases of cholera, who were sent directly to York Hospital.

Fortunately for Worts and his neighbours, ships landed at the western end of the Bay and victims were, for the most part, treated in that vicinity. The Toronto Garrison at Fort York remained untainted, probably because of its relative isolation from the town. But James Worts and his eldest son, James Gooderham Worts, must have remained in a state of high anxiety while awaiting the arrival of their families, who had crossed the Atlantic during the height of the scourge.

Finally, on July 25th, William Gooderham arrived at the head of a party of 54, which included not only Gooderham and Worts family members and their servants, but also eleven orphans. No details have surfaced about the orphans, but it seems likely that their parents or guardians had died during the hideous trans-Atlantic passage and Gooderham had stepped in. The Gooderham and Worts families undoubtedly had not traveled steerage, perhaps sparing them. But the children and their families may have been among the many impoverished immigrants crammed into infection-prone conditions for months at sea.

By the time Toronto's first pandemic had abated in September, it had nearly decimated the town: between 250 and 400 people died and many more suffered serious illness. It had also underlined the governmental weaknesses facing the town: lack of legal authority to enforce regulations made by the newly appointed Board of Health and lack of adequate funding. The 1832 experience was part of the justification for creating the "city" of Toronto in 1834 ... just in time for the next bout of cholera.



The *Great Britain* (left) steams toward York in the time of the cholera pandemic

The drawing of the *Great Britain* is reproduced from John Ross Robertson, *Landmarks of Toronto*, vol. 2 (1896), p. 856.

The contemporary painting of what is probably the *Great Britain* comes from an 1830s print of the Windmill owned by Gooderham & Worts.

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, sg@thedistillerydistrict.com