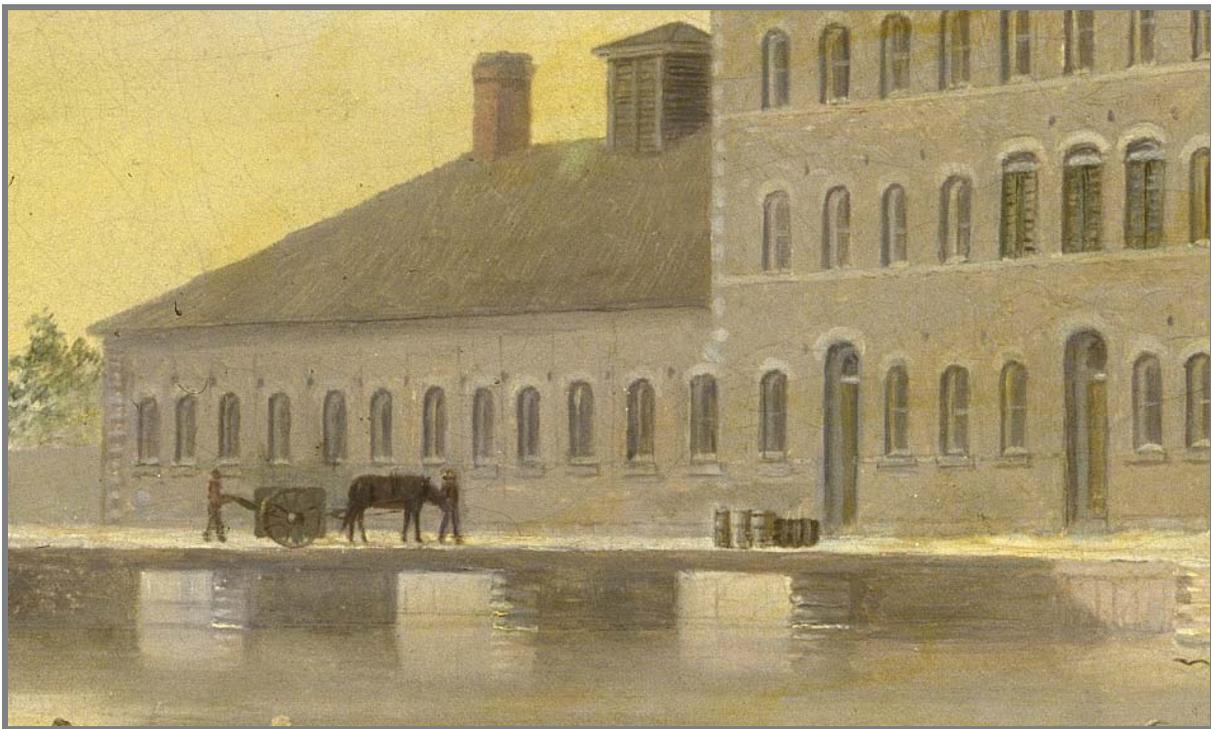


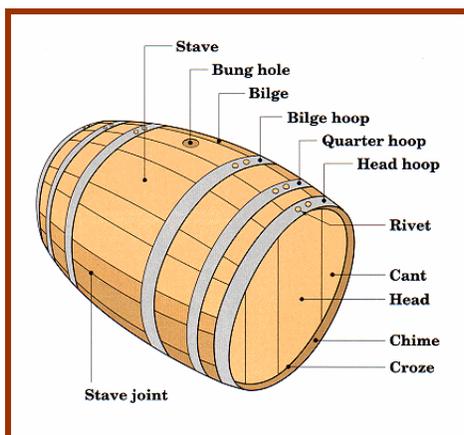
Barrels & the Cooper's Craft



Gooderham & Worts Barrels and Casks, May 1870

DHD

Coopers built and repaired barrels and other wooden containers designed to hold dry goods (like flour) and liquids like (wine and whisky). They were highly skilled craftspeople, able to perform many tasks – from selecting wood (sometimes actual trees) through every stage of a complicated process. For centuries, coopers' hand-produced barrels were the main way to store and transport goods of all sorts. Even today, their much-automated barrels are essential to producing fine wines and whiskies, because the wood itself imparts flavours to the raw alcohol and allows in just the right amount of oxygen to make the final liquid ... perfect.

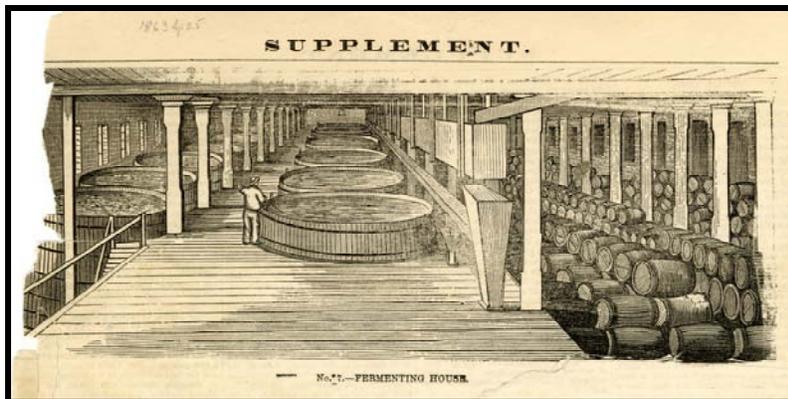


The common barrel appears, at first glance, to be a fairly simple object. But take a closer look. As this diagram indicates, it's a very complex creature. Among other intricacies, it bulges, enabling it to be turned-on-a-dime, rather than just rolled forward. Imagine the skill required in the pre-power-tool days, when each stave had to be hand-tapered to form the bulge, planed on the outside, slightly cupped on the inside, and precisely beveled along the edge to ensure a tight joint. Then the staves had to be fitted

together, tightly hooped, and topped with another complicated bit of woodworking. Finally, in the case of alcohol production, the barrels had to be fired to provide just-the-right charred interior to allow the liquid (whether wine or whisky) to absorb the wonders of the wood (French or American oak, depending on taste and tradition).

In 1832, Gooderham & Worts needed only “slack cooperage” barrels to hold their flour. In all probability, they purchased barrels from independent coopers. In the 1840s, after the distillery had started up and “tight cooperage” barrels were required, G&W purchased barrels from two identified coopers – flour barrels from Robert Hogg on Yonge Street at Hogg’s Hollow, and both flour and whisky barrels from John W. Beven at King and Princess streets.

By 1850, G&W barrels were all made a short distance from the mill and distillery, by ten “constantly” employed coopers, who comprised about a third of the full-time workforce of 31, and made between £ 50 and £ 120 per year. At least two of these coopers – Alfred Brown and Peter Dash – lived on Palace (later Front) Street in houses owned by William Gooderham.



G&W entered a new age in distilling, and barrel-making, when the great Stone Distillery opened in 1860 and the company was capable of producing 2 million gallons (or 40,000 50-gallon barrels) of whisky. **40,000 barrels.** Initially, cooperage was

accomplished somewhere in the new building. This 1863 wood-cut from *Canadian Illustrated News* shows the style of barrels, as well as the great fermenting vats (or tuns) that were also probably built by coopers.

In 1863-4, the first separate, on-site cooperage was built at the south end of the new Maltings: a cooper’s shop, 78 x 26 feet, in what was later known as Building 28. Thereafter, the work of the coopers seems to have been split between the west side of Trinity Street, where repairs and barrel-washing continued, and a large, new cooperage located at Cherry and Palace (later Front) streets in 1871.

The off-site location may have been related to a devastating fire that gutted the Stone Distillery in October 1869. Perhaps firing – or toasting – barrels over an open fire was a process better done at some distance from potentially explosive distilling, whereas washing and repairing barrels could be done safely in nearby Buildings 28 and 32, and in a barrel wash-house and open yard just west of the Maltings where William Gooderham’s homestead stood until 1885.

In any event, an 1872 article in *The Mail* provides a rare glimpse into cooperage at Gooderham & Worts:

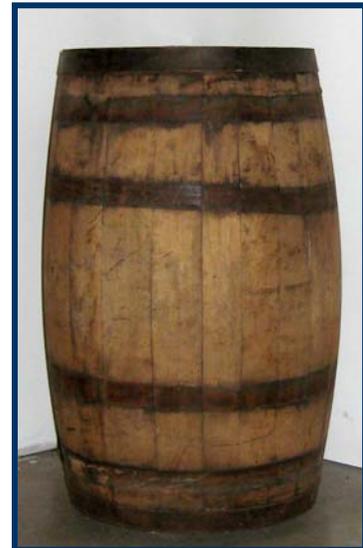
We should mention also the cooper shops, where some forty men are employed, a few of whom have worked there twenty years and over – and the yards adjoining, where are piled staves to the value of \$30,000, large quantities of them having been brought all the way from Central Ohio, where it seems “oak ridges” and stave timber do considerably abound. The coopers make good wages, some of them from \$18 to \$24 per week, which they do by working twelve or fourteen hours daily, at their own option, of course, being paid altogether by the piece.

Long hours. Piece work. Company loyalty. Family tradition. Such was the life of coopers at G&W in the late nineteenth century.

In 1906, G&W cooperage activity was moved from Cherry Street to Trinity Street north of Mill. Around 1916, the old Cherry Street site was absorbed into a railway yard. As distilling gradually wound down, the cooperage function became less significant until it disappeared altogether around 1969.



**Stamp of Approval: Barrel Head Stencil
(Artifact 58-1-17)**



Old Barrel

Diagram of wine barrel reproduced from www.kramerwine.com.

Other sources include: E. B. Shuttleworth's *The Windmill and its Times* (1924); *The British Colonist*, April 16, 1850; *Canadian Illustrated News*, April 23, 1863; *The Mail*, April 23, 1872.

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

