

Windmill Construction Workers



Two workers pause outside the 1832 windmill

G&W

176 years ago, James Worts was supervising the building of his new windmill on the edge of Toronto Bay. As the days grew shorter, the tower grew taller until it was completed on November 26, 1831.

All too often, construction and other workers remain anonymous. We have no idea who they were, what they did, how much they were paid, or anything of their personal habits. Fortunately for us, many of Worts' records survived ... until the early twentieth century when E. B. Shuttleworth published *The Windmill and Its Times*. Thereafter, they disappeared, so our only direct knowledge of the windmill comes from Shuttleworth's rare book and one or two contemporary images.

The earliest page, written in longhand, tells us that November 7, 1831 was a "fine frosty morning" and that the bricklayers were at work by eight. During that day, George Monro earned five shillings making windows, while fellow worker, George Calvert, took home six shillings and three pence, for making "moveable curb." John Scott and "Boy" earned eight shillings for unspecified work; while simple labourers (with no last names) – Robert, William, Jarvis, Harry, and Sam - earned a shilling.

Sampson and Irish spent their day “barrowing” bricks around the site, while Ed Copping and his beast of burden carted 1,000 feet of board and 20 loads of sand. (Later in the year, Copping also sold Worts a horse, harness, card and sleigh for \$100.) A man named Prentice was paid £1.0.0 for a 32-rung ladder and £2.3.9 for 1,000 feet of board. An unidentified supplier was paid £1.8.4 for 34 lbs. of rope used to hoist bricks. (Obviously, both British pounds and North American dollars were used in 1830s York.) Altogether, November 7th seems to have been an average day on the job site, with a staff of about a dozen men (and one boy) employed in a variety of tasks.

These and other workers sawed, nailed, carted, and otherwise laboured away through the fall of 1831 to raise the tower. Sometimes, their efforts were interrupted. Shuttleworth notes – with wry (perhaps rye) amusement – that some men fell prey to a “not uncommon failing,” drinking on the job:

One of the [unnamed] mechanics was undoubtedly a good workman and on this account much esteemed, but, like many others, had a not uncommon failing. The degrees of intoxication are amusingly put down by his employer who probably noted them from the standpoint of wages. Thus the man might be “partly drunk,” “drunk half a day,” “sleepy drunk,” “dead drunk,” or “drunk as David’s sow.”

Despite the interruptions of weather, materials, and personal failings, Worts could report on November 26, 1831:

Finished the Tower and laid on under curb [*for the rotating cap and sails that would be added later*] and covered it over with boards

as protection against a threatened snow storm that duly arrived.

Winter was coming and construction thoughts naturally turned to completing the interior of the windmill. By the time the tower was complete, 105,000 bricks had been purchased from Messrs. Snider & Ward; 216 bushels of lime and 100 loads of sand had been combined for mortar; and a variety of other materials – such as fir purchased from T. Silverthorne’s farm 14 miles north of little York – had been laid in for the project. It was an impressive endeavour. Both James Worts and his workers deserve due recognition.



Two fishers – possibly mill workers – catch dinner near the windmill G&W

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

For more information about the history of the Distillery District, please go to our new website, www.distilleryheritage.com. This heritage website is a work-in-progress, dedicated to bringing to life the history and heritage of the Distillery District from the 1830s onward. We plan to include a broad range of materials, such as artwork, photographs, historical maps, and rare documents, including Shuttleworth's 1924 book.