

Whisky Galore!



Mill and Distillery (centre) based on 1849 drawing

TPL: JRR 341

“Distillery Commencing, 3rd Nov. 1837.” With these simple words, William Gooderham announced the beginning of a new era. The successful miller was launching a venture that would become the largest distillery in the British Empire and, for a time, the largest distillery in the world.

Gooderham, however, devoted himself to “business” not frivolous commentary, so we have no written explanations for why he expanded or exactly how the new distillery was arranged. Once again, E. B. Shuttleworth, who scrutinized early business records before they vanished, has provided the major clues.

The “why” is relatively easy to imagine. Combining distilling with milling was “common enough in Upper Canada,” as Shuttleworth put it. The milling process generated not only good, saleable flour, but also unsaleable waste products, such as “middlings.” Fortunately, by distilling, such waste products could be transformed into eminently saleable alcohol. Gooderham might also have been inspired by several of his own customers, such as William Arthur who had been carting large amounts of middlings off to his distillery across the Don River, north of Gerrard Street, and John Maitland who did the same for his City Distillery on the wharf at the foot of Church Street.

Factors other than converting an accumulating loss (middlings) into a growing profit (whisky) perhaps entered the calculations. On the production side, local producers like Gooderham had a distinct advantage over foreign distillers who had to pay high import duties. While competition among home manufacturers was “remarkably keen,” rewards could be high.

On the consumption side, Upper Canadians – including early Torontonians – proved to be a thirsty bunch, with beer and whisky being the overwhelming favourites. Public drinking places abounded. According to some calculations, there was a tavern or inn for every 214 Torontonians (including men, women and children). According to others, the ratio was even lower. A quick search of the 1837 *City Directory*, for example, yields over 70 inns, taverns and hotels in the narrowly defined City of Toronto. With a population of about 9,600, Toronto boasted one drinking place for every 138 people. Even this search undoubtedly leaves out other, less formal or legal, grog shops not mentioned in the directory. Add to the public drinking places, the private purchases of whisky from storekeepers, and the opportunities were more than tempting.

Clearly, Gooderham must have been planning the distillery for months. While firebrand William Lyon Mackenzie was tearing around the countryside giving speeches, raising a farmers’ army, and fomenting rebellion at various watering holes – including Doel’s Brewery at Bay & Adelaide and Montgomery’s Tavern near Yonge & Eglinton – William Gooderham was fermenting his own whisky rebellion at the distillery.

To the south and west of the windmill, timber-frame distillery buildings were constructed (probably by carpenter George Robinson); stocked with essential equipment, such as a wooden [pot still](#), and great wooden mash and fermentation vats; and supplied with yeast (probably from local brewers), middlings carted over from his own mill, and malt from both his own mill and other local suppliers. Since the mill was already powered by a steam engine, steam was available for distilling.

According to Shuttleworth, the distillery was practicing its amber magic by October 31, 1837:

Mill deliveries for Oct. 30th and 31st, of 18 bushels of middlings on each day to “the Distillery” afford the first surviving mention that such a place was in existence at all, but it is very sure that, on Hallowe’en night – a very appropriate occasion for the liberation of spirit – several tubs of mash must have been bubbling merrily in the fermenting room. The still was actually in operation, and some spirit was produced, as slop, or “wash,” as it is called, was said to be ready for disposal.

Apparently drawing on the expertise of other distillers, like Alexander Maitland who received a complimentary gallon of new whisky on November 1st, Gooderham began experimenting. (Brewers and distillers have long displayed a

surprisingly collaborative approach to practicing their craft.) And, on November 7th, Gooderham sold his first whisky: 128 gallons were purchased by general-storekeeper Joseph Lee, who operated the East York Store on King East near Frederick Street. The very next day, Lee returned to purchase another 156 ½ gallons. Obviously, Gooderham's raw whisky was a success, as Lee returned again and again for refills.

Before long, Gooderham's customers included shopkeepers, like Joseph Lee and King-Street competitor, Joseph Cawthra; druggists, like bookseller, stationer and druggist, James Lesslie (alcohol was regarded as "medicine" by many); and inn keepers, like W. C. Cook on King East near the Don Bridge, and William Heather, who established "Windmill Inn" on Windmill Street (now Trinity) near Eastern Avenue.

Gooderham soon adopted refinements, such as adding a touch of rye to the mix of grains, and filtering "ordinary whisky" through charcoal to create a "best whisky" that sold for 6 pence more per gallon. The business was a roaring success and destined to roar ever louder.



Cane's 1842 Map has this unique view of G & W's new distillery CTA

The top illustration is a detail from an 1896 painting by Sir Edmund Wyly Grier, probably done for John Ross Robertson who included a drawing of the same view in volume 2 of his *Landmarks of Toronto* (1896). Both were based on a drawing of the waterfront in 1849 by F H Granger. None, however, provides specific information about the distillery. The Grier detail shows William Gooderham's large redbrick house (left), which was built over a decade after the distillery was created in 1837, and the 1846 wharf (right) from which alcohol was shipped out to Montreal and other distant locations before the arrival of the railway.

The lower illustration is a tiny detail from the view of Toronto along the bottom of Cane's 1842 map. This would have been drawn about 5 years after the distillery was started, pre-dates an expansion to the business that included a wharf in 1846, and is unlike later depictions.

For additional information on the social history of alcohol and drinking in Ontario, see Margaret McBurney and Mary Byers, *Tavern in the Town: Early Inns and Taverns of Ontario* (1987); and Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (2003).

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

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit www.distilleryheritage.com.