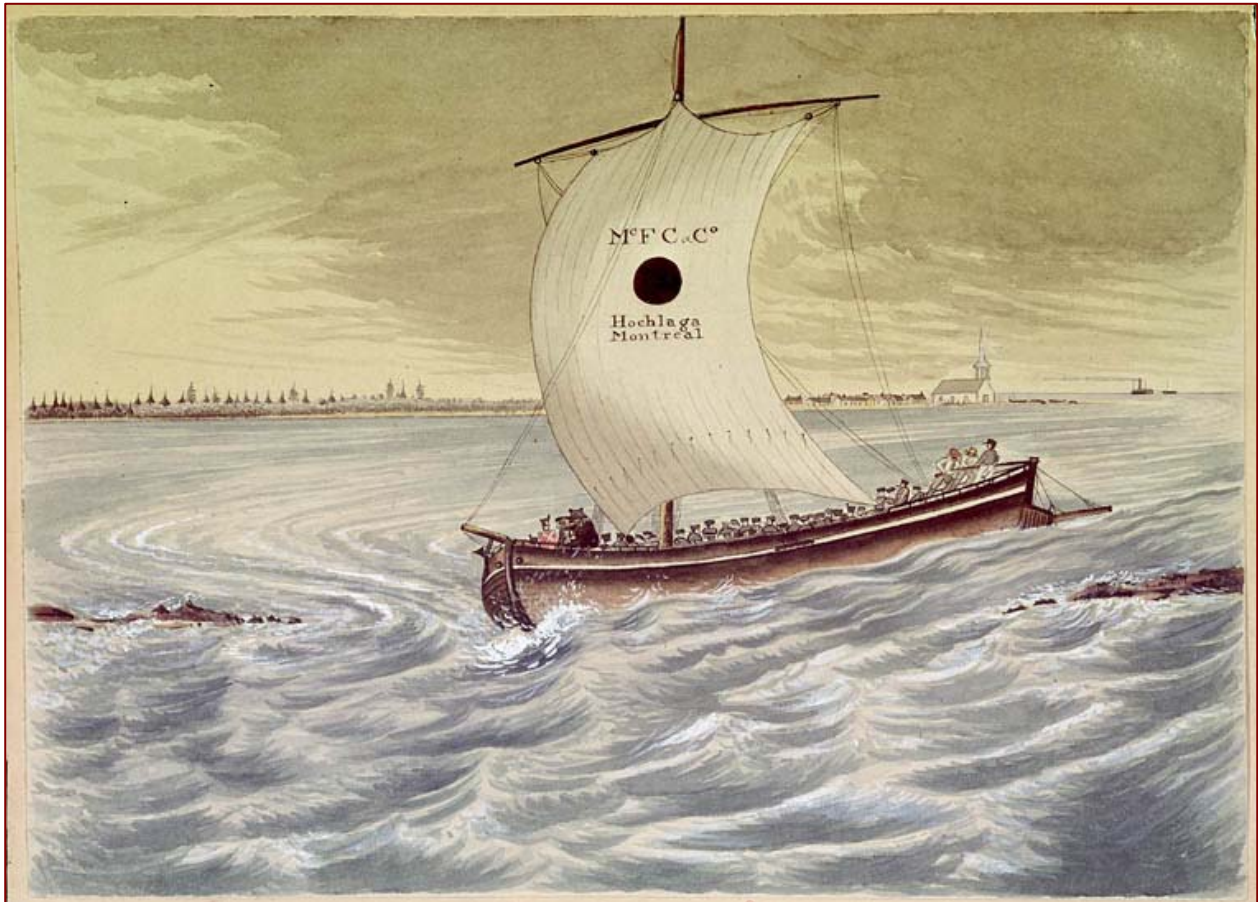


## Distillery Children: James G. Worts, teenager



**A bateau shooting the Lachine Rapids toward Montreal in 1843, H.F. Ainslie LAC**

Childhood was short for many youngsters in the nineteenth century. Take the case of James G. Worts, who ended up as one of Toronto's wealthiest and best-connected businessmen. His early life was a good deal less pampered than that of young Alice and his other children who grew up in the distillery district of the 1860s and '70s.

James G. was born in 1818 and grew up in Norfolk and Suffolk, England where his father, James Worts, operated several windmills. We know nothing of his early childhood, but assume he attended the local school and perhaps helped his father at work, absorbing the life of a miller. As depression descended on England, James and his brother-in-law William Gooderham decided to try their luck in North America. James Worts would go ahead to find a suitable location and start the business. Gooderham would attend to matters in England and follow later with the rest of the family.

While leaving his wife and five younger children in England, James decided to take his bright, eldest son, 13-year-old James Gooderham, with him. On May 31, 1831, the great adventure began. At the thriving port of Great Yarmouth, father and son boarded the brig *Sylvan* and set sail for North America. After 45 days at sea, they landed at Canada's oldest city, Quebec, and proceeded on to Montreal.



**Quebec Harbour in 1830, Cockburn LAC**



**Montreal in 1829, Cockburn LAC**

According to the earliest available source, a brief 1880 biography of James Gooderham Worts, the teenager was left in Montreal to attend school and fend for himself while his father continued on. No details about his life in Montreal have emerged, but he probably explored streets such as the ones depicted two years earlier by James Pattison Cockburn, studied diligently (as was in his character) and generally prepared himself for whatever the future might bring.

In October, the call came. James received a letter from his father, informing him that a site for the windmill had been selected in little York, Upper Canada, and instructing him to hire a flat-bottomed boat known as a “bateau” to bring all their personal effects, as well as the machinery necessary to build the mill. A major task and greater responsibility for a boy just entering his teens. “These instructions were carefully attended to,” according to the *Canadian Biographical Dictionary* of 1880, “while yet but a little more than thirteen years of age, James left Montreal for Upper Canada, in a bateau of about ten tons burden, accompanied by six Indians.”

In 1831, the trip from Montreal to Toronto (York) took over two weeks by water: up the St. Lawrence River and along the north shore of Lake Ontario. The bateau was a shallow-draft, flat-bottomed, double-ended cargo boat propelled by sail, oar, or pole, depending on conditions. It was, of course, Worts’ six native companions who made the journey possible.

Who were they? We don’t know their names, but their skills were legendary. According to Dr. Carl Benn, they were probably Mohawks from Kahnawake near Montreal, who were celebrated for their boating and piloting skills. They knew the boats, they knew the waters, and they were especially skilled in guiding craft through the treacherous Lachine Rapids.

In this case, Worts’ native companions also provided most of the power, poling the heavily laden craft along the shore of the St. Lawrence River. Occasionally, they

were assisted. A small steamer towed them across Lakes St. Louis and St. Francis. And teams of horses and oxen provided extra strength in the face of especially strong rapids like the Long Sault. But most of the way was covered by poling the bateau.



**Natives poling canoes up the rapids of the St Lawrence, ca. 1839, PJ Bainbrigg LAC**

The trip was undoubtedly arduous, both for a youth who had never before ventured into the wilderness, and for the hard-working natives. But it was also filled with natural beauty, perhaps especially appreciated by the young Norfolk immigrant as the party poled upstream through powerful rapids, wended its way through the Thousand Islands, and slept under the astonishingly bright stars. Of course, in October, it could also have been cold and perhaps foul-weathered.

Since JG left no account of his journey, we look to an earlier, keenly observant traveller to capture the flavour of passage by bateau between Lower and Upper Canada: Mrs. Elizabeth Simcoe, the intrepid wife of Upper Canada's first Lieutenant-Governor. For example, travelling upstream between Montreal and Niagara, the diarist described her first encounter with "rapids" on June 23, 1792:

We soon arrived at the Cascades, the commencement of the Rapids above La Chine. The term Rapid is meant to describe shallow water, strong Currents & a rocky bottom which causes the whole surface of the Water to appear foaming & white like breakers at Sea. The Batteaux Men keep as close in shore as possible, & by dint of exertion & labor they tow & pole the Boat up against the Current.

On other occasions she described the rapids as both awe-inspiring and terrifying, and the weather as changeable in the extreme. For example, on September 17, 1795:

...A mile before we came to the Long Sault there was a violent Storm of thunder lightning & rain, & as we were about to descend the Rapid another violent storm arose which was a grand accompaniment to a terrific scene. ... At 4 a thunderstorm occasioned us to stop at the bout du Lac St. Francois where Mr. McGill was [in favour of] staying the night, but I thought it too early, & sailing across the Lake a good way from shore a violent gale of wind arose when we were in a line with Pt. Mouille. It thundered rained & became perfectly dark, the boat tossed violently, the Children crying & [nurse] Collins sighing. The wind blew so strong off shore that I feared being driven out into the Lake & lost or driven to the United States Shore.... The weather then clearing up & growing calm I consented to proceed provided they kept close to the shore....

Fourteen days after leaving Montreal, Worts and his companions reached Prescott, Ontario. Strategically located at the point where great river met great lake, Prescott developed a successful forwarding trade. There, all the goods were transferred from slow bateau to the speedy new Lake steamer *Alciope*. The native navigators likely returned to Montreal with another group, and Worts enjoyed his first Great Lake passage. “Only” two days later, the teenager reached York where his father awaited his arrival, the almost complete windmill tower awaited its first iron machinery, and JG would one day make his mark as a successful capitalist and family man.

The cast-iron mill machinery was probably manufactured at Sorel, Quebec.

Sources are sketchy and differ about JG’s early life. See [Worts, J. G.](#) from *The Canadian Biographical Dictionary and Portrait Gallery of Eminent and Self-Made Men, Ontario Volume, 1880*; [Worts, James G.](#), from *Dictionary of Canadian Biography online*; and E. B. Shuttleworth, *The Windmill and Its Times*, passim.

In the absence of paintings or photographs of the young James Gooderham Worts, this article is illustrated by places he encountered during his journey from England to Upper Canada in 1831. All are held by the Library and Archives of Canada:

- Boats Descending the Lachine Rapids*, May 24, 1843, by Henry Francis Ainslie, LAC C-000506 (NB Ainslie’s bateau was transporting members of the 83<sup>rd</sup> regiment and their mascot, a bear, *downriver* toward Montreal; but the boat was similar to the bateau used by Worts in 1831);
- Harbour at Quebec with the Joseph of Gaspee, looking toward the Citadel*, ca. 1830, by James Pattison Cockburn, LAC C-040046;
- St. James Street, Montreal*, 1829, by James Pattison Cockburn, LAC C-012701;
- Indians Poling up the Rapids of the St. Lawrence*, ca 1839, by Philip John Bainbrigg, LAC - 024163 (NB Bainbrigg’s natives were obviously disproportionately large and their boats were small canoes rather than bateaux, but the technique, the people, and the river were all similar to what Worts’ encountered.)

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, [sg@thedistillerydistrict.com](mailto:sg@thedistillerydistrict.com).

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