

## “Frightful Explosion”



**Eight months before the Frightful Explosion, two anonymous stokers appeared in *Canadian Illustrated News (Hamilton)* TPL**

On Christmas Eve 1863, stoker John Kingston was blown to kingdom come when Boiler No. 2 exploded before dawn at the Gooderham & Worts distillery. The Christmas Day edition of *The Globe* reported the “frightful explosion” on its front page amid the seasonal ads, festive poetry and international news:

About 25 minutes to 6 o’clock yesterday morning [December 24<sup>th</sup>], one of the boilers for the distillery of Messrs. Gooderham and Worts burst with a loud report, destroying the building and hurrying one unfortunate man, without a moment’s warning, into eternity.

Kingston had arrived for work after dark the previous evening, probably having walked from his residence on King East near Power Street. The weather was frosty, the nearby Bay was frozen into “one beautiful sheet of smooth ice,” the moon was nearly full and the distillery was almost deserted. Kingston had bumped into co-worker Daniel Murray, who later reported to the Coroner that his friend had been his usual “sober” and “steady” self. An ordinary night shift dedicated to keeping the boilers stoked and the steam up.

Around 5:30 a.m., G&W engineer Elisha Simpkins arrived for work. When he checked the boilers in the three-year-old Boiler House behind the Stone Distillery, “everything seemed to be working right.” He checked the taps and

gauges; there was adequate water in the tanks; but, he noted later, the steam pressure had been low – 60 when it should have been nearer 100. Kingston continued stoking and Simpkins headed over to the Engine Room next door. He prepared to start the great Bartley & Gilbert engine and returned to the Boiler House to confirm that the fires were up. When he left, Kingston was stoking Boiler 2. That was the last time anyone saw the fireman alive.

Shortly after Simpkins had returned to the Engine Room, he heard a great boom, was thrown violently forward and immediately surrounded by steam and fragments of the wreck. When he had pulled himself together and staggered outside, he saw that the Boiler House was a heap of ruins and on fire. He called out John Kingston's name. No reply. "I believe Kingston is killed," he remarked to worker John Wood who had rushed to the scene.

And what a scene it was. Fires were still burning in the pre-dawn dark. Large chunks of boilers had been thrown 50 yards away. Stones weighing 50 to 100 pounds had been hurled high in the air and fallen to ground some 300 to 400 yards away. One very large stone had fallen on the roof of a nearby stable, "going through it as if it were a piece of paper."

Fortunately, at the moment of the explosion there had only been two people in the vicinity – Kingston and Simpkins. Otherwise, the death toll would have been much higher. Soon, however, assistance arrived, no doubt attracted by the immense crack-of-doom that had rocked downtown Toronto. The fires were put out and a search mounted for the body of Kingston. Before long, the horrifying discovery was made:

In a short time the body was discovered lying amidst the debris, but so mangled, spattered and disfigured, as to be scarcely recognizable. The legs and arms were broken, the body mangled, while it was burned and scalded by the fire and water in a most frightful manner.

The shattered remains of the stoker were carried to a nearby house (perhaps William Gooderham's villa on Mill Street), while someone was sent to convey the tragic news to family members. The incident had happened shortly before Kingston's shift was due to end and their father, husband and brother would have been expected to walk in the door. As it happened, the Grim Reaper knocked on their door instead and they were escorted to see the dead body of their loved one:

We have seen painful sights in our time [as a reporter], but when the wife and sister of that poor man took their first look at his mangled and disfigured remains, their wild shrieks of horror and grief, and their looks of agony and despair, were enough to make strong men weep.

Coroner Scott, who was immediately informed of the fatal event, summoned a jury. They met that very afternoon. Obviously, Kingston had been killed by the boiler explosion. But why had the boiler exploded and was anyone at fault? Those were the main questions addressed that day. Witnesses were called.

Engineer Simpkins testified that he was responsible for the engines and boilers at the plant. He described the day's events in some detail. Then he reported that in July, he had detected that one of the boilers – No. 2 as it became clear – was faulty. In fact, it was so weak in places that a hammer could be driven right through it. He duly reported the problem to his superiors – David Roberts, Sr. and the proprietors, William Gooderham and James G. Worts. Because the defective boiler was one of the new boilers purchased from Montreal, a local boiler-maker, Mr. Currie, was summoned to examine and fix the machine. This he did, although the details given were not impressive to an outside observer.

James Currie, for his part, confirmed that he had repaired the boiler the previous summer. "I knew the boiler that burst this morning, and remember doing some slight repairs to the bottom of it in July or August last," Curry testified. "With the exception of some leaks, it was in good order, and apparently sound."

"Apparently sound" ? Not reassuring stuff.

David Roberts, Sr. – engineer and designer of the Stone Distillery, the Boiler House, and some machinery – praised engineer Simpkins as thoroughly competent. He acknowledged that Currie had done "some slight repairs" to Boiler 2 the previous summer, and offered his opinion about the explosion:

I have examined the wreck of the boiler, and regard the accident as a pure explosion, arising from the sudden action of steam. It might have occurred from a deficiency of water or the ignition of gases in the boiler. I consider the iron in the boiler good. The gauges are sometimes deceptive.

Again, not an airtight explanation or comforting assurance that no such explosion would happen again.

Finally, James G. Worts "stated to the jury that no pains or money were spared to make the building and all the machinery as complete as possible." Moreover, he pointed out, "as they themselves were continually around the building, it was of course to their own interests and safety that they should have every means taken to guard against an accident."

Indeed. Undoubtedly great care had been taken in building and equipping the distillery. Personal safety required that. Business operation and potential liability for the worker's death also required that the jury find that the cause of the explosion was accidental, not negligence on the part of the boiler-makers, the supervisors, or the distillery proprietors. And so it found.

George Brown's *Globe* was unimpressed – indeed, outraged – by the quick verdict of "accidental death." In a long article published on December 28<sup>th</sup>, *The Globe* reviewed the testimony, pointed out weak arguments and conflicting evidence, and made a case for calling a full Coroner's Inquest.

The boiler explosion which, on Thursday, took place at the distillery of Messrs. Gooderham & Worts, we regard as altogether of too great importance to be passed over so lightly as was done by the coroner's inquest. In the enquiry, many material points were left untouched which demand, in the interest of public safety, a minute examination. The use of steam is so common, that some are too apt to forget the enormous power, and through long freedom from accident, to become careless of those precautions necessary against the latent danger which exists wherever a boiler is found....

We are not prepared to affirm that the verdict of the coroner's jury is an absurd one, but we do affirm that it is *not* warranted by the evidence.

And there things stood. Had a full inquiry been held, rebuilding the Boiler House would have been delayed and the distillery would have remained shut for some time. It appears that no such inquiry was held. The Boiler House was probably quickly rebuilt along the same lines as its predecessor. The distillery got back to work. And the widow Ann Kingston faced Christmas – and future life - without a husband and provider.



**Santa as (somewhat) grim reaper**  
*Canadian Illustrated News (Hamilton) 1862*

Many thanks to Jim White who told me about an explosion that occurred in the Boiler House and killed a worker sometime in the 1860s. This follow-up article to last week's history of the Boiler House is a result of that conversation.

Thanks also to Ralph Bouwmeester for providing times of sunrise (7:49 am) and moonset (7:13 am) on December 24, 1863.

The 1862 Santa cuts a distinctly different figure from super-jolly, modern Santas. The Victorian toy-giver appears a tad grim, even scary, especially in the context of this article. The original image has been cropped and given a grey background, but is otherwise unchanged.

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

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit [www.distilleryheritage.com](http://www.distilleryheritage.com)

To unsubscribe from this newsletter, contact [sg@thedistillerydistrict.com](mailto:sg@thedistillerydistrict.com)