WHEN CANVAS WAS KING

CAPTAIN JOHN WILLIAMS: MASTER MARINER

By Robert B. Townsend

Embodying the research and writings of C.H.J. Snider.

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Captain John Williams: Master Mariner

The men who sailed the Great Lakes in schooner days contributed much to the development and character of Canada as a Nation. This is a story of life on the Great Lakes from 1859 to the 1920s, centred on the life and times of Captain John Williams. It provides an insight into the way people lived, the way lake schooners operated and the way commerce developed in the Great Lakes basin. It is in an interesting, at times exciting, story.

Captain Williams was a smart man with a vessel, whether it be steam or sail. A distinguished Canadian who could serve as a role model for generations to come. He was a man who had qualities of leadership; humility; wide awakeness; courage; skill; experience; and the ability to take a chance at the right time. Those qualities, with a little good luck, were needed to navigate the Great Lakes in schooner days, with the little wooden grain bins they called schooners, with nothing but the winds of heaven for motive power and with no such aids as radio or satellites for weather guidance.

The biography of Captain Williams - factual but fascinatingly interesting - is meant to provide the reader with a sense of the tremendous maritime heritage of Central Canada in a format that is interesting to both sailors and landlubbers alike. It is excitingly different.

Foreword

What follows is the life story of one very significant Great Lakes schoonerman, Captain John Williams, as told by him to C.H.J. Snider, Canada's greatest marine historian, and is retold here in a factual story format.

The telling of Captain Williams story is a feeble effort to express appreciation for one whose career, "from the deck of the humblest wood-scow to the wheelhouse of the proudest lake freighter had been a consistent building of character that made one proud of being a fellow sailor and a fellow Canadian with John Williams."

John Williams was born in Toronto on the 22nd day of March 1857, not far from where he was living when he eventually died.

His father was Joseph Williams. Welsh by ancestry, a Londoner who had come to this country after being to sea. With the vision of the people of, 'How Green Was My Valley' he saw, in the lakeshore wilderness west of Scarborough Bluffs one hundred and fifty years ago, the possibilities of a park, and the delight of Kew Gardens of the old land. When he could he bought land there, hewed a home out of the tangle, and called it Kew Beach. As part of the Williams estate, he had what turned out to be some of the best real estate in Toronto.

Joseph Williams had owned a little schooner called the *Empire*, only thirty-five feet long but that is another story, as Joseph Williams sold her before John Williams was born.

John Williams' sea going career began in 1866, at age nine, when he was the cook on board the *Rover,* with his brother Tom, age 12, as crew; brother Joe, aged 15 as mate; their father Joseph Williams Sr. as Captain. It ended sixty-one years later in 1927, being past the 70-fathom mark on life's longline, and he had to

C.H.J. Snider, without doubt Canada's greatest marine historian

retire by the government's regulations. He had been a Captain for half a century, in eight schooners and ten steamers and had been everywhere on fresh water a freighter could float, from the head of Lake Superior to the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

I wish to give full credit to the genius and extensive research of C.H.J. Snider, without doubt Canada's greatest marine historian, to whom we owe a great debt for recording and preserving so much of the extensive marine history of the Great Lakes that would otherwise have been lost forever. Mr. Snider's 16 books and his,"Schooner Days" column in the now defunct Toronto Evening Telegram, of which he became Editor and later, as a Trustee of the John Ross Robertson Estate, a publisher of that great newspaper.

Captain John Williams inspired C.H.J. Snider from the time he first heard him heaving the three-masted schooner *Straubenzee* around the waterworks dock in Toronto, with aid of her jibs, in 1892. In the years 1940 and 1941, while Captain Williams was "running homeward with so fair a wind on so clear a course" Snider wrote many articles in his Schooner Days Columns in the Toronto Evening Telegram about the life and adventures of Captain John Williams, who then was settling so graciously into "that unhoped serene which men call age."

Mr. Snider has made possible by his preparation, what is hopefully an interesting, entertaining and informative biography of one of Canada's greatest sailors.

Master Mariner

There was never a smarter man in a sailing vessel than Captain John Williams and C.H.J. Snider knew every schooner he had, the *Rover, Brothers, Belle, P.E. Young, W.T. Greenwood, W.Y. Emery, Speedwell, Straubenzee*. Not one of them was fast or handy, except perhaps the *Belle*, built in the bush at Duffin's Creek, and the *Highland Beauty*, hitherto unmentioned, because his brother Tom sailed her. John may have been in her occasionally. Most of his commands were as awkward as all get-out. Other men had nothing but trouble with them. Some were notoriously clumsy. But with Johnny Williams on the roof of the house they would do everything but talk. They seemed to eat out of his hand.

It was the same when he went into steam in 1904. He was master in turn of the *Algonquin, Iroquois, Matthew, Osler and Hagarty* up to 1914. Everyone made a good profit for the owners while he was in her, and underwriters slept easy when they knew he had been signed on for the season.

Yet John Williams had never been heard to boast of what he could do with a vessel, in steam or sail. He had often said: "My brother Joe was the handiest man I have ever seen in a vessel; he could...." Never a vaunting word of his own prowess. The grace of humility sits like a halo on the storm-battered head of this Great Lake Captain.

He was married in 1885. He had promised his wife, who was very dear to him, to retire as soon "as possible," for the perils of his trade weighed heavily on her. So in 1915 he had "swallowed the anchor" and moored ashore for seven years.

They were long years for him. His wife saw that. With the self-sacrifice of all sweet

women she told him she would be happy if he were happy again afloat. So in 1922, he stepped to the bridge of the *Canadian Engineer* as Master again in steam. In 1923, he commanded the *Canadian Trader*, in 1924 the *Canadian Adventurer.* These were all new steamers of the Canadian Mercantile Marine. In 1926 he commanded the steamer *Largo* and in 1927 he took the *Largo* to Quebec. He also brought up the *J.B. Foote* twice to Port Colborne from Montreal and once to Port Dalhousie.

He was past 70 and retirement was due, whether he wanted it or not. So retire he did, and Mrs. Williams had seven years of happiness unalloyed with anxiety for her venturesome husband.

Mrs. Williams died on the 5th of May 1934.

Captain Williams's last voyage was made in an open boat to Rochester and back with the Sea Scouts from the Beach's area of Toronto in 1936.

He had not got to where he did without numberless close calls, narrow escapes, special Providence, though he never lost a ship or a man. His whole life had been one long adventure, gay, (in the true context of that word, as it was used until recent years) gallant, often perilous, never tragic, not even the amputation of his leg that reduced him to "jury rig" in 1938, in his eighty-second year.

John Williams never had a harsh word for the men he sailed with and against, in the long years of hard competition, low wages, fierce jealousies, and all the ills to which lake faring flesh is heir. "Poor fellow - maybe he crooked the elbow a bit too much" is perhaps the hardest he had to say of anyone. Usually it was. "Well he had rather hard luck. I was in Charlotte with the so-and-so when he was there with Such-and-Such, and we flipped a coin to see which would load first at the trestle. I won, got away that day, and had a fine run up the lake. If I'd lost I'd have been a day later and maybe wound up on the beach the way he did."... and so on.

His crews in schooner days were just the usual proportions of saints and sinners, fifty-fifty of the latter, but he had something good to say of the toughest, drunkenest hellion who cheated the gallows by drowning.

"He was a terrible man to swear," it may be "but he did know how to jibe a mainsail without tearing the whiskers out of her," or some such qualification.

He had many partners. Of the most aggravating, a man who lost four vessels of his own, and who was always in trouble, he says: "I told him when we made our deal: "There will only be one master aboard our vessel and that will be me. The master gets $60 a month in these times and the mate $40. You and I will each draw $50. The only fault I ever had to find with him was he worked too hard."

At the same time being no mere honeysuckle, John had always a shrewd appraisal of ability and of disabilities. For him to be silent when asked for an opinion of a man or a vessel was enough to make the wise put on extra insurance - if, indeed the subject was insurable.

Starts Life At Nine

The life story of Captain John Williams as a Master Mariner of the Great Lakes began when he was just nine years of age. It was a time when the Fenians were going to invade Canada and fight the Battle of Ridgeway within a hundred miles of his home. Neither little Johnny nor anyone else in Canada was aware of that on this, the 24th day of May 1866.

The twenty-fourth of May was the Queens Birthday, a holiday. And this was the day; he was allowed to leave his shoes and stockings off. And his father, late Colour-Sergeant in the old 100th Regiment, England's garrison for Fort York, had promised him he could be one of the crew of the *Brig Rover*.

His father, Joseph Williams, had purchased a sailing ketch called the *Brig Rover* and little Johnny Williams was, on this day, the twenty-fourth of May, 1866, starting an exciting expedition to take delivery of their new acquisition at Port Credit, Ontario, some ten miles east of Toronto.

The Williams family lived in a wilderness of standing and fallen timber, far on the outskirts of the new city of Toronto, Queen City of the West, with its forty thousand inhabitants. Their "twenty-one acres more or less" were on the foreshore of Lake Ontario between Scarborough heights and the delta of the Don River. Much of the wilderness was marsh. Much of it was sand. There was good ground for market gardens in the clearings. The trees throve or dwindled with the alternating levels of the Lake waters. They were poplars and softwoods, with some evergreens.

From the roof of the their log built home, situated four miles and bit east of the St. Lawrence Market, the growing city was barely visible. You might see the three hundred-foot spire of St. James Cathedral and the tops of the waterfront elevators, dark red pagodas of the grain trade, as tiny marks under the soft blue smudge of wood smoke from the city's chimneys.

Joseph Williams, Sr., had been a sailor before he became a soldier and settler, and fitting out a newly bought hooker was no novelty to him, though it was a great one to his boys. He was prepared for the items that had to be transported, including a skiff to be used as the vessel's boat.

All four of the family had started from their home at daylight. Father and Brother Tommy, aged eleven, drove in an old light wagon with supplies and equipment. They travelled along the long sandy track of Queen Street from their home in Kew Beach, through the City to what was then called the Dugway, and down to Sunnyside at the west end of the City, where their old friend Queen Street reappeared as the Lake Shore Road. And so on out past the Humber River to near Two Tree Point off what was called Dutchman's Bay at Mimico. Here, young Jack and his big brother Joe, aged fifteen were waiting for them with a skiff being taken to Port Credit as the

boat, or safety vessel, for the *Brig Rover*. The oldest and youngest brother had rowed the skiff all the way from Kew Beach to the foot of Scott Street, and helped load the light wagon with sails and gear. Then they rowed along Toronto's waterfront and through the old Queen's Wharf Channel, and across Humber Bay. Did they have blisters?

At Two Tree Point a turnabout was made. The rowers drove Old Sam and wagon on towards the Credit, and the riders took the boat along the shore for the remaining six miles or so.

The Credit mouth, now called Port Credit, was a lovely haven then, as remote from Toronto as if it had been on the other side of the Lake. A log blockhouse had guarded it from the time it had been an Indian post, and there was an Indian village of Mississauga up the river. The blockhouse stood on the high bank on the East Side where the Lake Shore Road crossed the water on two low wooden bridges with a marshy island for a stepping stone between. A real brigantine had been built there many years before. Called the *British Queen,* it was painted black and red and was remembered because she had a royal on her foremast.

There were storehouses for grain and goods down the East Side of the harbour, and piles of wood on the pier where the steamer called daily with the mail, passengers and freight. This pier ran east and west on the Lakefront. The lighthouse had yet to be built, but a tall pole held up a coal oil lantern.

On the west side great willows waved their silver green arms, and on the front a road christened Lake Street - lost in its namesake this century - had two or three houses on it and ended in Goose Point, also long lost. What was called Goose Point enclosed an inner bight or pond which yellow-webbed argosies of white and grey geese navigated. There were almost as many hotels as homes in the little port and five taverns specialised in goose dinners. So did the big frame Sailors' and Fishermen's Boarding House under the west bank - and so did some of the schooners, little and big, which loaded in the harbour.

Everything was green in the Credit, this twenty-fourth of May, as the boys came in; all green and gold. The 1866 model frogs were singing amid the fresh-churned butter of the newly minted marsh marigolds. The big cottonwood landmark on the East Side of the harbour was ablaze with new tassels. The fresh leaves of the hardwoods in the remains of the primeval forest had hidden the funeral plumes of the pines, lilacs and snowballs were splashes of white and mauve above the picket fences of the gardens and the lordly rhubarb reared his yellow-white spire over elephant ears glossy on crimson stalks. Dust trailed the light wagon to its moorings. Roosters crowed and hens clucked to their chicks, and dogs barked, and the Canada bird called "CAN-ada! CAN-ada! CAN-ada!" though Confederation was still a year and a month and a week to come. Spring was spring in country villages in 1866.

The most ambitious thing about the *Brig Rover* was her name, which was painted in bold, black letters across her white stern. She was on the general lines of a

shoebox, with the lower angles rounded off at either end to let her stumble over the water instead of pushing half the lake ahead of her and dragging the rest behind. Her bottom had been built upside down, on the high bank of the river near the Lake Shore Road. It was planked like a sidewalk. After it was caulked and payed, it was turned over, and the sides, ends and deck added. This wooden box was then pushed forward on to long skidways and launched into the creek. *"BRIG ROVER"* was painted on her stern because her earlier owner wanted to outdo old Tom Sponton, the salt-water man who had re-rigged a sandscow with a square topsail and registered her as the *BARQUE SWALLOW*.*

Barques and brigs were square rigged on two masts. The *Swallow* was not a barque and the *Rover* was not a brig. Their only approach to square rig was the one square topsail each had. The *Rover's* was very sketchy indeed, being merely a square of canvas laced to two poles and set flying from the deck.

It was Moses Niblock who built the *Rover*, in 1860 on the river bank east side, below the old hotel in Port Credit, on the Lake Shore Road, where the now old post office stands. The government blockhouse and inn for travellers were erected there in the 18th century, by Governor Simcoe's direction.

Robert Lynn, Grandfather of Rev. Garnet Lynn, kept the old hotel at one time, but gave up the business for conscience sake, and small blame to him. It was for him that Moses Niblock built the *Rover* at a total cost of $300. Robert Lynn sold her to Tom Smidley of Port Credit and Johnny Grantfield of Toronto. It was Grantfield who had evolved the pikepole topsail. He was the 'local inventor" of Port Credit; one of his later devices was a contrivance for scooping up coal spilled at wharf edges. Much coal was lost thus in the old horse-and-bucket system of unloading. Smidley was a dapper militiaman, and distinguished himself soon after this with the Tenth Royal Grenadiers in the Fenian Raid. Yet soldiering and inventing had not made the *Rover* larger or more prosperous.

She was a good carrier. She could pack 20 cords of wood or four toise* (216 cu.ft.) of stone, and the equivalent of either in gravel, sand, staves, shingles, lumber, barrels of flour or bags of potatoes. That was more than many finer lined craft of her dimensions could attempt, and all that was expected of her.

But, as they used to say, "She couldn't sail sour apples against a headwind."

But a fair wind always comes if you wait long enough. Johnny Miller and Abe Block of Port Credit, in their lifelong partnership, were in the *Rover* in their youth. They could not afford a chain cable, but they had one good big long all-purpose line. They never took the *Rover* "off sounding." If the wind came ahead they let go the anchor and rode like a gull at the end of the long line. If it "came on bad" they would heave up and run for the nearest shelter.

"Never knew it to fail," said Captain Miller, "if the wind was ahead when we turned in at night we'd have a fair slant by morning, or vice versa. Sailors have to sleep when they can, any way. The *Rover* gave us plenty of sleep."

The topsail was given up when the *Rover* toddled off to Kingston to try her luck on what was called the Rideau route, inland sailing between Kingston and Ottawa. For this she needed no topmasts, but had to have tabernackled masts that could be lowered to let her under the fixed bridges.

There was a good trade in lumber and cordwood on the Rideau for a while. When it petered out the *Rover* came back to the west end of the Lake, and got back her long topmasts and gafftopsails. But not the square one, though she still had *BRIG ROVER* on her stern.

And she had passed into the hands of Joseph Williams, Sr., for the sum of $75. This was, of course, paid in the then new money that had succeeded the old Halifax currency.

But to young John, with the imagination of a nine-year-old boy, she was a *Queen Elizabeth*. She had a little square house at the stern for a cabin, with two windows and one door. You went down three steps and were on a square floor with a stove in front of you and a standing table. On either side this floor extended under the deck to the *Rovers* flat sides, making four shallow bunks. Behind - beg pardon, abaft - the floor ran to the rudderpost and provided room for lockers. Forward of the cabin bulkhead the hold ran clear to the bow, without other obstruction than the centreboard box in the middle and the shores that supported the deckbeams in the wake of the hatches.

She had two big square open hatches and two masts, each with its topmast and gaff and boom. Her complete suit of sails would be seven pieces. She was fifty feet long and could carry perhaps forty tons of dead weight, or a little more than one railway flatcar.

"My, father," said Johnny, as he strutted her littered deck, ignoring alike splinters in his bare feet and the water he could see in her hold, "she's a big one! She's certainly a big one!"

He felt big too, striding the deck of a lake leviathan whereof he was crew. But he discovered that nautical duties were of wide range. "Get yourself a bite to eat from the basket, you and Joe," said his father briskly, "then Joe'll help Tom and me finish fitting her out, and you'll start back with the horse. Johnny had not expected promotion to captaincy of a light wagon on the first day of his lake faring, but he had already had the voyage half way or more to Port Credit in the rowboat, and anyway, orders were orders. So with the May sun past the zenith but still high and warm on his back, he made sail back for Kew Beach, the old horse plock-plock-plocking along the drying road.

The sun was getting low when he reached Sunnyside on the way home, and he saw a stranger waiting for a lift. Having been warned of the perils of the road he spurred up old Sam with his long gad, but the Dugway Hill, which wandered down through South Parkdale, was too steep and sandy to be taken at a gallop, and the stranger boarded this tender of the *Rover* without opposition. He was a harmless chap enough, and sat on the tailboard saying never a word.

Johnny drove on and on, and somewhere his passenger disappeared. It was getting dark at night now, and the child had been up since dark of the morning, and had a very full day. He must have nodded, for the next thing he knew it was pitch black and his mother was getting him down off the seat, and old Sam was snorting at their own gate, for he wanted his supper and stall.

A toise* ***is three feet high by six feet wide by twelve feet long, That is 216 cubic feet. A mason's toise was somewhat smaller, 192 cubic feet.*

A cord of wood ***is a pile 4' x 4' x 8'***

Port Credit Harbour