

“A Revolution in Travelling”: The Steamboat Letters of the Torrance family, 1831-1848

Rob Fisher

La correspondance de la famille Torrance dans la collection des papiers de Robert M. Powell et de sa famille à Bibliothèque et Archives Canada doit être reconnue pour sa discussion sur les bateaux à vapeur du fleuve Saint-Laurent et des Grands Lacs dans les années 1830 et 1840. Cette cachette de lettres récemment découverte jette une nouvelle lumière sur les débuts de la navigation sous vapeur sur le Saint-Laurent, indiquant le grand intérêt et la participation de cette famille dans les aspects technologiques et commerciaux de ce développement révolutionnaire. L'auteur a transcrit les parties les plus significatives de la correspondance et a placé ces extraits en contexte en se rapportant à un éventail de sources déjà publiées.

The Torrance family correspondence in the Robert M. Powell and family papers at Library and Archives Canada ranges widely over many subjects of 19th century historical interest, but perhaps is most notable for its discussion of steamboats on the St. Lawrence River and Great Lakes. The recently discovered cache of letters sheds new light on the early days of steam on the St. Lawrence River, revealing the family's keen interest and involvement in this revolutionary development.¹

John Torrance (1786-1870) emigrated from Scotland to Montreal, Canada, where he established a retail and wholesale business in 1814. John Torrance & Company traded in groceries, spirits, and other goods, importing tea direct from India and China. He expanded into shipping to complement this import business, forming the Montreal Tow Boat Company in the 1820s (later known as the Montreal and Quebec Steamboat Company) with the steam tug *Hercules* as one of its first vessels.² After competing with the Molson family's St. Lawrence Steamboat Company for a brief period, the two firms

¹ Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Robert M. Powell and family fonds, R12455, volume 2, Torrance family correspondence, files 12 to 15. The archival fonds holds three files of family correspondence covering 1831 to 1854 (files 12 to 14), and a fourth file for a later period (file 15), dating from 1868 to 1884. The author would like to thank Walter Lewis and Larry McNally, and the anonymous reviewers, whose careful reading and thoughtful comments have corrected many errors and done much to improve this article. Any errors that remain are, of course, the responsibility of the author.

² Frederick H. Armstrong, "John Torrance," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*[DCB], 1861-1870, Volume IX (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), and "David Torrance," *DCB, 1871-1880*, Volume X (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), available online at <http://www.biographi.ca>.



Illustration 1: Portrait of John Torrance Sr., 1863. McCord Museum I-9409-1.

negotiated agreements on schedules and fares so that they maintained a virtual monopoly on the lower St. Lawrence for many years, crowding out and sometimes buying off the competition. Gerald Tulchinsky observed that, by the mid-1840s, not only were the Torrances and Molsons “collaborating to fix freight and mail carrying rates at high levels but they had in fact begun to merge their operations.”³

John and Elizabeth Torrance had fifteen children. Some of their sons went into the family business, which also included their nephew David Torrance, who had married their eldest daughter, Jane Torrance.⁴ Their daughter Elliot Torrance (1828-1850) married Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt in 1848, and after her death, her younger sister Amy Gordon Torrance (1834-1911) had married Galt in turn.⁵ Torrance provided a good education for his sons, sending them overseas

to England to finish their studies. Though most of them engaged in commerce, Frederick William Torrance (1823-1887) studied law and was a professor of Roman Law at McGill University and later a judge of the Quebec Superior Court. In one of his letters, he offers a spirited defence of an education in the classics to a skeptical, business-minded brother.⁶ With the exception of Sir A. T. Galt, Torrance and his family are virtually forgotten today. Though they did not lend their name to any surviving businesses or educational institutions, they played a leading role in the commercial success of 19th century Montreal.⁷

Twenty-five Torrance family letters survive from 1831 to 1854 in the Robert M. Powell and family papers. Powell was a descendant of John and Elizabeth Torrance through their son John Andrew Torrance, commonly known as Andrew, who was the

³ Gerald Tulchinsky, *The River Barons: Montreal Businessmen and the Growth of Industry and Transportation, 1837-1853* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 52-53; and Alfred Dubuc and Robert Tremblay, “John Molson,” *DCB, 1851-1860*, Volume VIII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

⁴ Armstrong, “David Torrance.”

⁵ Robert M. Torrence, *Torrance and Allied Families* (Philadelphia: Wickersham Press, 1938), 166-169; and Jean-Pierre Kesteman, “Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt,” *DCB, 1891-1900*, Volume XII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

⁶ F. W. Torrance, Edinburgh, to J. A. Torrance, Montreal, 17 October 1841, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13.

⁷ Armstrong, “John Torrance.”

chief recipient of the letters. The correspondence is primarily from John and Elizabeth Torrance to their sons James (1817-1910) and Andrew (1818-1896), and from their sons Daniel (1815-1884) and Frederick William to Andrew.⁸

Many of the Torrances are represented in the correspondence but it is the letters from Daniel Torrance that are particularly rich in nautical detail. Daniel was obsessed, it is fair to say, by steamboats and wrote long, detailed letters discussing business opportunities or weighing the merits of various boats. As his father wrote to Andrew in 1848, and probably with some understatement, about a recent visit, “Daniel was in good spirits but talked chiefly about steam boats.”⁹ Three of Daniel’s letters to Andrew further reveal this enthusiasm through their almost exclusive discussion of steam navigation and trade. Daniel settled in New York City in the early 1840s, probably as an agent for the family firm, where his interest in steamboats and shipping brought him into the ambit of Cornelius Vanderbilt — the legendary “Commodore” of the Vanderbilt Line. Daniel married Vanderbilt’s daughter Sophia in 1846 and quickly became a trusted lieutenant in the Vanderbilt empire, tackling the toughest assignments for the Commodore and amassing his own fortune in the process.¹⁰

Although Daniel expressed the most interest in steam and shipping, details of the family business are revealed in many of the other letters. Elizabeth Torrance, for example, in one of the earliest letters, dated 8 June 1831, wrote to her son James, then studying in Devonport, England, that, “Papa desires me to say he is quite pleased with the engineers who came out to put up the engines in the VOYAGEUR: they work like brave fellows. It is expected the VOYAGEUR will commence making regular trips to Laprairie about the first of July. She is a very fine boat, & it is thought she will equal any in speed on the River St. Lawrence.”¹¹ The engineers who came out to put in the engines were from Fawcett, Preston, & Co. of Liverpool. *Voyageur* was built in Montreal by Shea & Merritt, launched 14 May 1831,



Illustration 2: Portrait of Andrew Torrance, b. 1818, ca. 1860s. Library and Archives Canada, e010771744.

⁸ LAC, R12455, volume 2, Torrance family correspondence, files 12 to 14.

⁹ John Torrance, Montreal, to Andrew Torrance, 17 February 1848, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 14.

¹⁰ T. J. Stiles, *The First Tycoon: The Epic Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 264, 438, and 526.

¹¹ Elizabeth Torrance, Montreal, to James Torrance, Devonport, 8 June 1831, LAC, R12455,

and 142 feet in length.¹² Later in November that year, Elizabeth Torrance informed James and his brother Andrew, also studying in England that “Another Steam Boat called the St. George was launched on Saturday, she belongs to the Tow Boat Company, and is a fine vessel, the season for vessels of every description is fast drawing to a close, it is snowing fast and blowing hard. I had almost forgot to say it was Miss Lunn christened the St. George.”¹³

Their father, John Torrance, picked up the story of the *St. George* in an August 1832 letter: “We have got another Boat called the St. George in operation. She is considered the fastest Boat on the St. Lawrence and we have another receiving her Engines called the Canada. She has two 80's and is expected to surpass everything before her, her Model is allowed to be the finest yet.”¹⁴ E. D. Merritt built the *St. George* at Montreal for the Montreal and Quebec Towboat Company with engines by John Dod Ward's local Eagle Foundry. She was 159 feet in length and launched 19 November 1831. Shea & Merritt built the *Canada* in Montreal also for the towboat company but with engines imported from Fawcett, Preston, & Co. in England. She was 177 feet in length and launched 12 June 1832.¹⁵ Frank Mackey, in *Steamboat Connections*, his authoritative study of steam on the Upper St. Lawrence, only makes brief reference to the *Canada*, simply referring to her as another Torrance boat.¹⁶ James Croil, however, recalled in 1898 that the *Canada* “was accounted the largest and fastest steamer then afloat in the New World.”¹⁷

volume 2, file 12. Alexis de Tocqueville was an early passenger in the *Voyageur*, leaving Montreal on 2 September 1831 in her for La Prairie, travelling by carriage to St. Jean, then boarding the steamboat *Phoenix* for travel on Lake Champlain, en route to Albany, New York. *Voyageur* was also associated in June 1832 with the outbreak of cholera in Montreal, bringing the disease from Quebec City with European immigrants, as recounted by Dr. Henry Bronson, in Stephen G. Hubbard, ed., “Biographical Sketch of the Life and Writings of the Late Prof. Henry Bronson, M.D.,” *Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society* (New Haven 1900).

- 12 John M. Mills, *The New Mills' List: Inland and Coastal Steam and Motor vessels Operating in Canada from 1817 to 1930* (Marine Museum of the Great Lakes at Kingston), Ship No. 57100, online at <http://www.marmuseum.ca/collectionscatalogue.html>; and George H. Wilson, "The Application of Steam to St. Lawrence Valley Navigation, 1809-1840" (McGill University, M.A. Thesis, 1961), 268.
- 13 Elizabeth Torrance, Montreal, to Masters Torrance (Andrew & James), Devonport, 13 November 1831, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 12.
- 14 John Torrance, Montreal, to James and Andrew Torrance, Devonport, 16 August 1832, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 12.
- 15 *The New Mills' List*, Nos. 48780 and 07810; and Wilson, "The Application of Steam to St. Lawrence Valley Navigation, ", 268-269. Wilson states that *Canada* was co-owned with the Molsons. The *New Mills' List* records *Canada* as having two 96-inch stroke engines.
- 16 Frank Mackey, *Steamboat Connections: Montreal to Upper Canada, 1816-1843* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 300.
- 17 James Croil, *Steam Navigation and Its Relation to the Commerce of Canada and the United States* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1898), 313. Croil states that *Canada* was launched in 1837 and was 240 feet in length. *The New Mills' List* (cited above) and the Ship Information



Illustration 3: Long Sault Rapids of the St. Lawrence River, showing steamer and raft in the rapids, 1849. Watercolour. Artist: H. S. Library and Archives Canada, c040334k.

There is a gap in the correspondence but in 1840 we are rewarded with three very detailed letters from Daniel Torrance to Andrew Torrance regarding the family's shipping interests. Daniel's first letter, dated 21 June 1840, which will be reproduced in full below for its historical interest, describes a trial of the steamboat *Ontario*, owned by John Hamilton.¹⁸ Mackey's *Steamboat Connections* provides much of the context for Daniel's discussion of her performance and prospects. Significantly bigger, at 206 feet, than any other boat on the Canadian side, and fast, approaching speeds of close to 20 miles per hour, *Ontario* "heralded a new era" on the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes. She was designed to run the rapids between Prescott and Montreal, thereby circumventing the longer Rideau Canal route or the laborious overland forwarding between Prescott and Montreal. She soon suffered mechanical breakdowns, however, and became entangled in legal disputes. Hamilton, not convinced of her ability to run the Long Sault rapids consistently, decided to sell her. At the same time, the Post Office contract for mail delivery on the Montreal-Quebec route was coming up for tender in August. With a

Database do not agree with this. Ship registers show that *Canada* was registered 30 September 1833 with a length of 177 feet. *Canada* was re-registered in 1841, and broken up in 1852. See the Ship Information Database, registration numbers 9003362, 9035462, 9035663, <http://www.pro.rcip-chin.gc.ca/bd-dl/nav-ship-eng.jsp>. See also LAC, Department of Transport fonds, RG42, Volume 1386, Microfilm reel C-2465, p. 6.

¹⁸ Daniel Torrance, Kingston, to John Andrew Torrance, Montreal, 21 June 1840, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13.

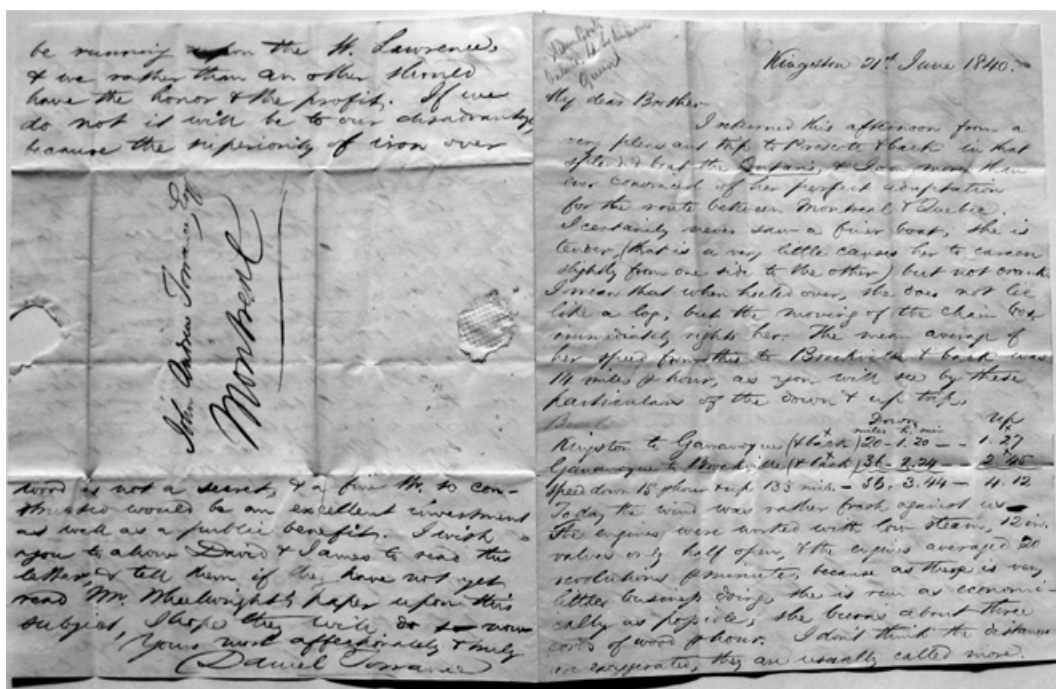


Illustration 4: Manuscript letter, Daniel Torrance, Kingston, to John Andrew Torrance, Montreal, 21 June 1840, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13.

lucrative six-year contract at stake, the Torrances, and others interested in bidding for the mail run, were taking a long hard look at the *Ontario* — the most eligible steamboat on the market in the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario.¹⁹

Manuscript letter: Daniel Torrance, Kingston, to John Andrew Torrance, Montreal, 21 June 1840.²⁰

Kingston, 21 June 1840

My dear Brother,

I returned this afternoon from a very pleasant trip to Prescott & back in that splendid boat the *Ontario* & I am more than ever convinced of her perfect adaptation for the route between Montreal & Quebec. I certainly never saw a finer boat, she is tender (that is a very little causes her to careen slightly from one side to the other) but not

¹⁹ Mackey, *Steamboat Connections*, 162-165; Croil, *Steam Navigation*, 326; and Walter Lewis, "Until Further Notice: The Royal Mail Line and the Passenger Steamboat Trade on Lake Ontario and the Upper St. Lawrence River, 1838-1875" (Queen's University, M.A. Thesis, 1983), chapter 1; online at <http://www.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/documents/UFN/default.asp?ID=s005>. See the legal case, *Hamilton v. The Niagara Harbour and Dock Co.*, *Upper Canada Reports*, *Queen's Bench* (Old Series), Volume 6, 381-405.

²⁰ Daniel Torrance, Kingston, to John Andrew Torrance, Montreal, 21 June 1840, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13. The original punctuation and spelling have been preserved in this transcription and in all quotations from the original letters.

crank. I mean that when heeled over, she does not lie like a log, but the moving of the chain box immediately rights her. The mean average of her speed from this to Brockville & back was 14 miles p. hour, as you will see by these particulars of the down & up trip,

Kingston to Gananoque (& back) 20 miles down 1 h 20 min, up 1 h 27 min

Gananoque to Brockville (& back) 36 miles down 2 h 24 min, up 2 h 45 min

Speed down 15 per hour & up 13 $\frac{1}{3}$ miles

Today the wind was rather fresh against us. The engines were worked with low steam, 12 in. valves only half open & the engines averaged 20 revolutions p. minute, because as there is very little business doing, she is run as economically as possible; she burns about three cords of wood p. hour. I don't think the distances are exaggerated, they are usually called more. If it were thought necessary to stiffen her, it could be done as was done on the *Burlington*²¹, a square log sawed diagonally lengthways & the halves secured one on each side, this would make her quite stiff & neither disfigure nor diminish her speed. Mr. Hamilton²² deserves the greatest credit for having built such a boat; she is unsurpassed perhaps unequalled (considering how speed & strength are combined) anywhere, & is a credit to this country. Every one is delighted with her & all make the natural remark, "What an admirable boat this would be to run between Mont'l and Quebec". I have no hesitation in saying we could not build a more suitable boat of wood for that business, & if we should obtain the mail contract, ought by all means endeavour to buy her; not a difficult matter because Mr. Hamilton cannot make her pay on any route above Montreal. The cabin below extends clear fore and aft. I question very much whether we could build a boat as suitable for less money than she cost, & supposing she cost £1,000 more at the most, surely the having her ready at our hands is worth all that. I think Mr. Molson's boat will cost all of £12,000 by the time she will make her first trip. I feel

²¹ Torrance undoubtedly referred to the *Burlington* on the Lake Champlain-Richelieu River run of the Montreal-New York route, and not the *Burlington* on Lake Ontario. The *Burlington* was built at Shelburne, Vermont, in 1837 for the Champlain Transportation Company at a cost of \$15,000; she was 190 feet long, 405 tons, and made 14 miles per hour with engines built at the Eagle Foundry in Montreal. See Samuel Ward Stanton, *American Steam Vessels* (New York: Smith and Stanton, 1895), 60-61. Charles Dickens praised the *Burlington* in his *American Notes for General Circulation* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1842): "There is one American boat — the vessel which carried us on Lake Champlain from St. Johns [St. Jean, Quebec] to Whitehall — which I praise very highly, but no more than it deserves, when I say that it is superior even to that on which we went from Queenston to Toronto or to that on which we travelled from the latter place to Kingston, or I have no doubt I may add, to any other place in the world."

²² John Hamilton (1802-1882) of Queenston purchased the *Frontenac* and built, in partnership with his brother Robert Hamilton Jr., the new steamer *Queenston* in 1825. John Hamilton built the *Great Britain* at Prescott in 1831 and soon dominated the steamboat business on Lake Ontario. He was appointed to the Legislative Council of Upper Canada in 1831 and to the Senate of Canada in 1867. See Peter Baskerville, "John Hamilton," *DCB, 1881-1890*, Volume XI (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), and Walter Lewis and Rick Neilson, *The River Palace* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008), 20-62.

convinced that the Ontario, could make the trip from Mont'l to Quebec in ten hours & back in 13 running time. Should Mr. Molson's boat the "Queen"²³ go as fast the two would produce a revolution in travelling on the St. Lawrence.

My dear Andrew I have given you these particulars as I know you feel interested in Steaming, & I wish to prove to you that I have not forgotten you, although you seem to have forgotten me, & I should like you to write a few lines & give me your opinion of the matter. If it be desired that we build a boat for ourselves, I shall try that it be of iron, as I have no doubt, but than an iron boat with horizontal or diagonal engines could be built to run 16 miles p. hour as easily as Mr. Hamilton's does 14 – from the much lighter dft. of water & the improvements we might make in the engine. I am sure if Mr. H's boat were worked with about 25 in. steam & it cut off at one fifth (instead of one half as it is now) that the same consumption of fuel would drive her 1 mile p. hour faster; & this because the vacuum would be so much better; in the performance of an engine this is all important, & if it is proved that the higher & more expansively the steam can be worked, it is done the more advantageously. It may be depended upon that an iron boat will ere long be running upon the St. Lawrence, & we rather than another should have the honor & the profit. If we do not it will be to our disadvantage, because the superiority of iron over wood is not a secret, & a fine Str. so constructed would be an excellent investment as well as a public benefit. I wish you to allow David & James²⁴ to read this letter, & tell them if they have not yet read Mr. Wheelwright's paper²⁵ upon this subject, I hope they will do so now.

Yours most affectionately & truly,

Daniel Torrance

Ultimately the Torrances did not obtain the mail contract, nor did they purchase

²³ The *Queen* was built at Sorel by David Vaughan for the Molsons' St. Lawrence Steamboat Company. She was launched 17 June 1840 and 209 feet in length. She sank, by coincidence, in collision with the *Lord Sydenham* (the former *Ontario* on 23 May 1843). See *The New Mills' List*, No. 045160.

²⁴ His cousin David Torrance and brother James Torrance

²⁵ This probably refers to a brief, five-page paper titled, "Form and Construction of Iron Steamers," printed in 1838, which is extremely rare today. It is impossible to know if the other Torrances would have had access to it in 1840 but Daniel pre-supposes so. The author apparently was William Wheelwright (1798-1873), an American, who founded the Pacific Steam Navigation Company in 1838, and proposed building iron-hulled ships for its service from England to the west coast of South America. Charles F. T. Young referred to this paper in his book, *The Fouling and Corrosion of Iron Ships: Their Causes and Means of Prevention* (London: London Drawing Association, 1867), 31: "In 1838, a Mr. Wheelwright, of Regent Street, London, brought forward the 'longitudinal' system of construction, which has since been brought to such perfection by Mr. Scott Russell in the 'Great Eastern', ... Mr. Wheelwright published a small pamphlet on this plan in 1838, which was accompanied by plans and sections, and it may be seen in the library of the Institution of Civil Engineers." This discussion of iron construction was followed up in an 1843 letter which provides additional context for the brief mention here.

the *Ontario*. That honour went to William and George Tate of Montreal, who examined and purchased the steamboat in August for £10,500 from Hamilton. The Tates won the mail contract in September, and renamed her the *Lord Sydenham* after the new governor general, perhaps in gratitude for winning the contract.²⁶

Daniel wrote to Andrew again one week later while en route to Oswego to lease several barges for their carrying trade. This letter, quoted extensively below, underscores the politics of business on the upper St. Lawrence and Ottawa and Rideau routes in the 1830s and 1840s. Frank Mackey and Pierre Camu have described the intricacies of the battle that erupted in the forwarding trade between Kingston and Montreal after the opening of the Rideau Canal pitted the longer but safer Ottawa-Rideau route against the more difficult but shorter St. Lawrence route, with its rapids, and mixed land and water transport. John Macpherson and Samuel Crane emerged from the competition in 1837 with a near monopoly on both routes, thanks in part to their control of the private lock at Vaudreuil on the Ottawa River.²⁷ The moving of barges figures prominently in this letter, of which, as Mackey shows, with trade booming in 1840, there was a shortage on the Kingston-Montreal route. Macpherson and Crane owned the most barges, and the most steamers for towing them.²⁸

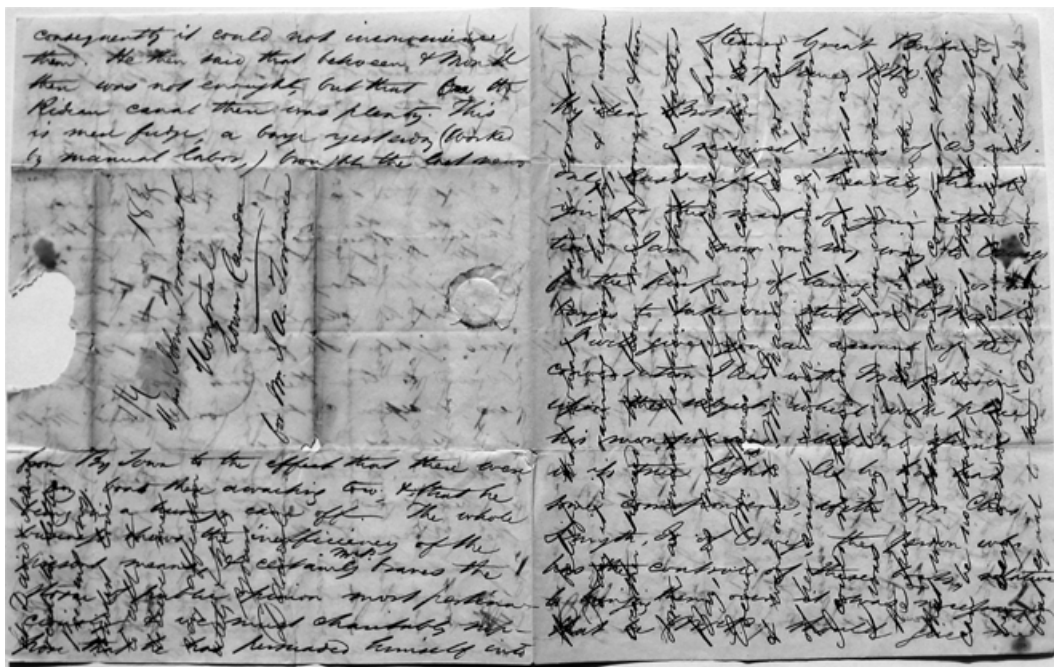


Illustration 5: Manuscript letter, Daniel Torrance, en route Steamer *Great Britain*, to J. A. Torrance, Montreal, 27 June 1840, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13.

²⁶ Mackey, *Steamboat Connections*, 163-165.

²⁷ Mackey, *Steamboat Connections*, 141-147; Pierre Camu, *Le Saint-Laurent et les Grands Lacs au Temps de la Voile, 1608-1850* (LaSalle, QC : Éditions Hurtubise, 1996), 184, 260, and 265; and Croil, *Steam Navigation*, 318-320.

²⁸ Mackey, *Steamboat Connections*, 177-178.

Macpherson's questionable business practices figure prominently in Daniel's letter, in which he also again casts covetous eyes at the Ontario and presses the advantages of iron ships. This letter is more of a challenge to read and transcribe for its overlapping, cross-hatch writing style, used often in the 19th century to save writing paper.

Manuscript letter: Daniel Torrance, Steamer Great Britain en route to Oswego, to J. A. Torrance, Montreal, 27 June 1840.²⁹

Steamer Great Britain, 27 June 1840

My dear Brother

I received yours of 23 inst. only last night, & heartily thank you for this mark of your attention. I am now on my way to Oswego for the purpose of leasing ½ dozen or more barges to take our stuff on to Mont'l. I will give you an account of the conversation I had with Macpherson³⁰ upon the subject, which will place his monopolisian, illiberal spirit in its true light. As he has had some correspondence with Mr. Chas Smyth Jr. of Oswego,³¹ the person who has control of these boats, relative to bring them over it was necessary that he (McP.) should give me a letter to Smyth to the effect that so far as he was concerned, I should be at liberty to engage them. This I obtained with some difficulty, McP. at first wishing to have entire control of the boats, and I told him that our property being in the hands of different forwarders, it was only fair that each one should forward his portion of it. This he could not deny. He then wished me to bind myself to pay £20 or more for the towage of each boat from Mont'l to Kingston & when I would not do this, gave me to

²⁹ Daniel Torrance, Steamer *Great Britain*, to J. A. Torrance, Montreal, 27 June 1840, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13.

³⁰ John Macpherson was a Scottish immigrant who established a firm in the early 1820s forwarding passengers and freight between Montreal and Upper Canada. He was a brother-in-law of John Hamilton, the Lake Ontario ship owner. Macpherson and Samuel Crane, an American, were in partnership sometime from the mid-1820s which, after the departure of Allan McMillan in January 1831, became known as Macpherson & Crane. By the end of the decade they were the leading forwarding business between Kingston and Montreal. Macpherson & Crane took over the Ottawa and Rideau Forwarding Co. in 1837, whose private lock at Vaudreuil on the Ottawa River gave them control of trade on the newly completed route to Lake Ontario via the Rideau Canal. "By 1839 Macpherson and Crane owned 10 steamboats, 26 large barges, and 24 batteaux, and had 4 extensive ranges of warehouses in Montreal, Kingston, Prescott, and Bytown (Ottawa). The company was valued at £50,000." See Ken Cruikshank, "Sir David Lewis Macpherson," *DCB*, vol.XII, and the *Kingston Chronicle*, 12 February 1831. James Croil recalled that "at the height of the forwarding business on the Ottawa, Macpherson & Crane owned a fleet of thirteen steamers and a large number of bateaux and barges, which were towed up the Ottawa and through the Rideau Canal to Kingston ... The flotilla would make the round trip returning via the St. Lawrence, in twelve or fourteen days." See Croil, *Steam Navigation*, 319.

³¹ Charles Smyth Jr. operated a carrying business on the Oswego and Erie canals. The *American Railroad Journal*, Volume 6 (New York 1837), states that Smyth transported 4,004 tons of cargo through the Port of Oswego for Lake Ontario and the upper lakes in 1836. The 1860 census of Oswego, New York lists him as a ship chandler, age 51, with real estate valued at \$23,000.

understand that they would not do it for less.

By my letter to J. T. & Co.³² of this date, you will observe the arrangement I made with Dickenson & Co.³³ & which will likely prove exceedingly advantageous. I mentioned to them the result of the conversation I had with McP. & Dickenson, very properly said that even were he a loser by it the property must be got forward, & he was willing to take the six boats. McP. made the same demand upon Hooker & Henderson³⁴ who have 4 of these for S. Y. & C.³⁵ & Mr. H. replied that for the towage he might charge what he liked but that he should only collect [tear in paper from wax seal] was right. The fact is McP. [tear in paper] bound to tow the boats for the forwarders, & upon certain conditions: McP. said he was surprised that I would ask him to tow barges, when I believed there was not steam enough upon the Rideau & Ottawa route for the present number of boats employed, I answered that I had never told him so, & that according to himself, there was more than sufficient in operation, & consequently it could not inconvenience them. He then said that between [word omitted—possibly Bytown] & Mont’l there was not enough, but that on the Rideau Canal there was plenty. This is mere fudge, a barge yesterday (worked by manual labor), brought the last news from Bytown to the effect that there were a doz. boats there awaiting tow & that he being in a hurry, came off. The whole business shews the inefficiency of the present means, & certainly McP. braves the storm of public opinion most pertinaciously, & we must charitably suppose that he has persuaded himself into the belief that what he says is correct.

Today it is raining very heavily..

I have only advocated the purchase of the Ontario on the case that we obtain the

³² John Torrance & Company.

³³ William Dickinson, who in partnership with Edward Hackett, engaged in the forwarding trade between Kingston and Montreal after leaving Canada Inland Forwarding in 1837 when it was taken over by Ottawa and Rideau Forwarding Company. Dickinson established his base of operations at Hatters Bay near Kingston. The firm went bankrupt in late 1841. See Mackey, *Steamboat Connections*, 149, 178.

³⁴ Alfred Hooker and James Henderson had established a partnership in 1825 and quickly became a leading concern in the carrying trade on the upper St. Lawrence River, Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. They owned wharves and warehouses at Montreal, Prescott, and Kingston, and a fleet of barges and steamers. “Mr. H.” in Torrance’s letter is presumably Alfred Hooker, the partner based in Kingston. Luther Holton later became a partner in this firm. See H. C. Klassen, “Luther Hamilton Holton,” *DCB*, vol. X; and Mackey, *Steamboat Connections*, 114-131, and 178.

³⁵ Stephens, Young and Company was founded in 1840 by Harrison Stephens (1801-1881) and John Young (1811-1878) and dealt in staples. Young had clerked for many years in John Torrance & Co. and managed its Quebec office with David Torrance from 1835 to 1840. Harrison Stephens was a Vermonter who had been importing American goods to Montreal since 1832. In addition to other staples, the firm “dealt in vast quantities of flour and pork, having on hand up to 50,000 barrels of each at a time. After conducting an extremely successful trade, Stephens dissolved his partnership with Young in 1846 and not long afterwards retired from the import business.” See Gerald Tulchinsky and Brian Young, “John Young,” *DCB*, vol. X, and Gerald Tulchinsky, “Harrison Stephens,” *DCB*, vol. XI.

mail contract & there can be no doubt but that then it would be very desirable. I cannot believe that a boat equal to the Ontario can be built for 25 pct. less & I, being as good a judge of the matter as any one, maintain that she is well adapted for the St. Lawrence route. I shall write to father from Oswego & request that he make the necessary enquiry about the expense of building an iron boat & the best means of placing it upon the St. Lawrence. I am of opinion that an iron Str. may be built to run a mile an hour faster than any boat that has yet seen, say 17 miles. We are now so involved in Steam that it would be difficult to free our selves at the present profitably; & well managed it must prove profitable. Generally our boats are too expensive, & I find every where that economical boats make most money. By return trip of this boat, I expect to bring over 6 or more boats from Oswego. As McP. & C.³⁶ will have about 3500 B[arre]ls for us all American. I shall bring over two or three for them. In the arrangement for these boats the forwarders are the only responsible parties, & I in consequence of getting the boats have the right of loading them entirely. It will be well for David to see Mr. Hall about the matter, & ask if under the circumstances they may not carry the stuff direct to Mont'l. I should have awaited a reply from J. T. & Co. to this scheme ... Let David & James read this

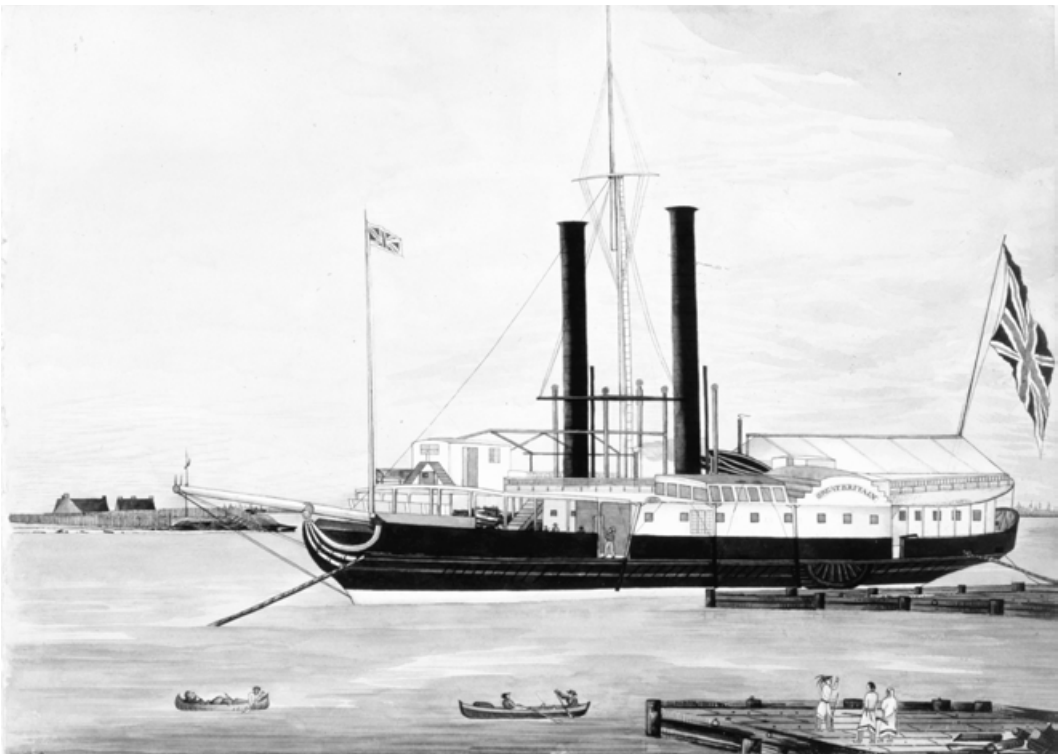


Illustration 6: Steamer Great Britain on Lake Ontario, June 1839. "... the largest vessel on Lake Ontario, as she lay at the Wharf, June 1839." Watercolour by Henry Francis Ainslie. Library and Archives Canada, c000522k.

³⁶ Macpherson & Crane.

*letter. Present my kindest love to all & believe me, very affectionately & truly yours,
Daniel*

Subsequent letters did not carry the same level of nautical detail and will be quoted more briefly. Christmas 1840 found Daniel travelling in Alabama on company business, apparently in regard to the cotton trade. He wrote to his brother Andrew describing his travels, marvelling at the rapid growth of the towns of Montgomery and Columbus, but most fascinated by steamboat operations on the Alabama River. Despite drawing only four feet, the boat he travelled in had grounded a dozen times on the short stretch between Montgomery and Selma, Alabama. The boat had taken on 160 bales of cotton and expected to ship 900 bales before reaching Mobile at the river mouth on the Gulf of Mexico. Daniel remarked on the differences in the trade:

At some places, the bales are trundled down an almost perpendicular bank, 100 ft. high upon the deck of the boat, which is made fast to the nearest tree; wharves as yet are unknown, in fact the exigencies of trade do not require them. The Steamers on these Western waters are all of the same class, propelled by horizontal high pressure engines & chiefly adapted for freight. The entire hold is appropriated for this purpose, the first deck to the engine & boilers & c., & the upper one to the accommodation of passengers. They have a very singular, unsightly appearance, nothing is in their favor excepting their superior adaptation to these rivers, from the fact that low pressure engines continually get out of order from the muddiness of the waters injuring the sucking & valves.³⁷

The high pressure steam engine invented by Oliver Evans provided a better horsepower to weight ratio than low pressure engines, but was prone to violent explosions. Their lower weight, however, made them better adapted to rivers where only shallow-draft steamboats could operate, like the Mississippi and its tributaries. Daniel would have been more familiar with the low pressure engines that predominated in the deep waters of the St. Lawrence River, Great Lakes, and Hudson River.³⁸

His father weighed in with some remarks in 1843 about iron construction and new steamers, which showed the influence of Daniel's thinking concerning the advantages of iron hulls. John Torrance wrote from Liverpool to Andrew in Montreal: "I believe iron steamers are more durable than wood but there is nothing so fast as the Montreal and the clippers on the Hudson, Laird has just turned out a new steamer of iron for the Indies. She is a fast boat faster than any thing here, she is round stern & the same in the bow about 160 feet long drawing about 2 feet with a small supply of coal in Iron is cheap enough now, workmanship would be the great cost."³⁹ The Torrances engaged in the lively discussion in shipping circles about the suitability of iron hulls for commercial purposes. As yet only naval or government revenue applications had justified the higher

³⁷ Daniel Torrance, Steamer *Factor* at Selma on the Alabama River, to J. A. Torrance, Montreal, 26 December 1840, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13.

³⁸ Walter Lewis, "The First Generation of Marine Engines in Central Canadian Steamers, 1809-1837", *The Northern Mariner* VII, no. 2 (April 1997), 4-5.

³⁹ John Torrance, Liverpool, to J. A. Torrance, Montreal, 19 September 1843, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13.



Illustration 7: Steamer Pilot in the Rideau Canal, 3 August 1844. "Small high pressure steamer with its accompanying barge, and having in tow three canoes with Indians-When five of these canoes go in company they are entitled to have the canal lock opened for them." Watercolour by Major George Seton. Library and Archives Canada, c001072k.

cost of iron construction in North America. But before long, William Parkyn would build the first iron steamers on the lower St. Lawrence at Montreal, seizing the "honour," and presumably the "profit," that Daniel had craved for his family. Parkyn imported pre-cut iron plates from Scotland for assembly at his shipyard.⁴⁰ John Hamilton would follow suit, launching the iron-hulled *Passport* at Kingston in November 1846 while James Sutherland launched the *Magnet* at Niagara-on-the-Lake in July 1847. Both

also used iron plates made, and in *Passport*'s case, partially-assembled, in Scotland.⁴¹

The correspondence resumes in spring 1846 with two letters from Daniel to his brother Andrew — the first sent from New York and the second from Montreal. Daniel never strays far from steam navigation, discussing new developments on the Hudson River, his unhappiness with the timid approach of the Torrance firm to its partners and rivals on the St. Lawrence River, the opening of the river to navigation for the season, and his efforts to outfit the *Montreal* with new engines:

I observe the Queen, first boat for Quebec, left Montreal on her first trip 16 inst. I have had made a pair of blower engines & fans here for the Montreal, from which I expect an increase of steam to warrant the expenditure therefore viz.: about £400 – all fitted up – they cost here £250. She will be ready about 1 prox. The new engines are 12½ diam. 15 in. stroke blowers 4 ft. 6 in. diam. – nearly three times the power of the old ones.⁴²

⁴⁰ Larry McNally, "Montreal Engine Foundries and Their Contribution to Central Canadian Technical Development, 1820-1870" (Carleton University, M.A. Thesis, 1991), 31; and Mackey, *Steamboat Connections*, 341.

⁴¹ Walter Lewis, "Steamboat Promotion and Changing Technology: the Careers of James Sutherland and the Magnet," *Ontario History* LXXVII, no. 3 (September 1985), 207-30; and Lewis & Neilson, *The River Palace*, 20-28. Walter Lewis and Rick Neilson provide much of the context for the adoption of iron in ship construction in the 1840s and 1850s in these works.

⁴² Daniel Torrance, New York, to John A. Torrance, Toronto, 20 April 1846, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13. My thanks to Larry McNally for his insight to the possible purpose of these modifications.

His modifications may have been an innovation to get more air to the fireboxes. Walter Lewis has observed that continuous innovation and improvement was the norm at this time—almost no two engines were alike, each incorporated lessons learned from the trial and error of previous models to improve reliability or coax more power from them.⁴³ Pierre Camu, in his history of shipping on the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River, remarked that the *Montreal* was co-owned by the Torrance and Molson firms, which reflected the increasing integration of their operations.⁴⁴

Perhaps most significantly, in both letters Daniel voiced his displeasure with the Torrances' agreement with the Molsons and other shipping concerns for regulating competition and rates on the St. Lawrence. From New York, Daniel wrote:

When I was in Mont[rea]l in Feb[ruar]y there was some talk of compromise among the Committee upon the ground that as the combination ends with this year, the most should be made of it. In a general view that is correct, but I hope it will not be acted upon because independently of our opponents, the more stock is depreciated this year, the better will it be for those who continue on the river afterwards – this is 'entre nous' – to any one who can manage steamboat business as it should be carried on, a grand opportunity will be presented at the end of this year.⁴⁵

In his following letter, dated 1 June 1846 from Montreal, apparently after face-to-face discussions with the principals concerned, he exploded:

I am disgusted with this arrangement for our companies. I mean the Mont. Tow Bo. Co.⁴⁶ and Molson's, it is a most short sighted policy ... but what can be expected from a committee but a temporizing policy, from David I expected better things, as for Molson⁴⁷ he was always undecided and ready for compromise. I shall have nothing more to do with Committee Management in Steamboat matters, my views are so entirely opposed to them in general that I shall in future steamboat on my own account or not at all.⁴⁸

From this point on, Daniel more and more devoted his energies to the Vanderbilt

⁴³ Lewis, "The First Generation of Marine Engines in Central Canadian Steamers," 6-7.

⁴⁴ Camu, *Le Saint-Laurent et les Grands Lacs au Temps de la Voie*, 189. James Croil referred to the *Montreal* as "a large and fine steamer" which "was lost in a snow-storm near Batiscan, in November 1853, and was replaced by the *Lord Sydenham*, afterwards lengthened to 250 feet, and renamed the *Montreal*," in *History of Steam Navigation*, 313-314. According to *The New Mills' List*, No. 38050, the *Montreal* was built in Montreal by T. Boyd for combined ownership of the Torrance and Molson firms. She was launched 21 November 1841 and 248 feet in length.

⁴⁵ Daniel Torrance, New York, to John A. Torrance, Toronto, 20 April 1846, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13.

⁴⁶ Montreal Tow Boat Company (the Torrance-owned firm).

⁴⁷ Torrance probably refers to John Molson Jr. (1787-1860), who was the member of the Molson family most extensively involved in the shipping side of their business at this time. See Alfred Dubuc and Robert Tremblay, "John Molson," *DCB*, vol. VIII.

⁴⁸ Daniel Torrance, Montreal, to Andrew Torrance, 1 June 1846, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13.

enterprises in New York. His cousin David Torrance began to take a larger role in John Torrance & Company, gradually assuming control of the firm after the elder Torrance's retirement in 1853 and renaming it David Torrance & Company. Frederick Armstrong, author of the biographies of the Torrances in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, has speculated that David's increasing control over his uncle's firm is what ultimately motivated Daniel and Andrew's brother James to open a rival firm.⁴⁹

The two letters from 1846, the first dated 20 April 1846, just five weeks after his marriage to Sophia Vanderbilt, also reveal Daniel's growing involvement with Cornelius Vanderbilt:

*Lest you do not know, I may say that Mr. C. Vanderbilt has proved himself a master spirit in steam, having been probably more successful as a steamboat proprietor than any man in this or any other country. Of course I have not been unobservant of his management in a business for which I have always had such a "penchant."*⁵⁰

Daniel was keen to learn at the hands of the master, his new father-in-law, and emerging developments in steam on the Hudson River offered him much food for thought after his formative experiences on the St. Lawrence. The two rivers shared many similarities, from deep channels to heavy traffic, and were leading centres of low-pressure steam engine development and innovation. His interests and involvement, however, would increasingly rest with the New York scene. Though for the moment he struck a posture of nonchalance: "There is nothing remarkable in steam here excepting the trial of Mr. Stevens' new boat, it runs on one of the Philadelphian works and is said to be quite successful. The hull is of iron nearly the size of the Mont[real]'s."⁵¹ In spite of his own avowed enthusiasm for iron construction, Daniel had to admit that Vanderbilt himself had as yet little faith in iron steamers and he went on to describe some of the drawbacks of iron construction as revealed by recent American experience: "To make them as strong as wood they must be nearly as heavy – both Stevens and Ericson's are too weak it appears to us, the latter's boilers are a complete failure and they are now making new ones for the latter the 'Iron Witch' the size of the Oregon's."⁵² The *Oregon* was a fast boat built in 1845 by Vanderbilt rival "Liveoak"

⁴⁹ Armstrong, "John Torrance," and "David Torrance."

⁵⁰ Daniel Torrance, New York, to John A. Torrance, Toronto, 20 April 1846, LAC, volume 2, file 13.

⁵¹ Daniel Torrance, New York, to John A. Torrance, Toronto, 20 April 1846, LAC, R12455, volume 2, file 13. Robert Livingston Stevens (1787-1856) and his father John Stevens (1749-1838) of Hoboken, New Jersey were among the earliest pioneers in steam navigation, building the *Phoenix* in 1807. Because of Robert Fulton's monopoly on the Hudson River, the Stevens family pioneered coastal and canal steam services between New York and Philadelphia, encouraging the establishment of engineering facilities in the latter city. George R. Taylor observed: "Engines, transmission, gearing, and boilers became more dependable and efficient through the efforts of a host of inventors and practical builders, probably the most notable of whom was the marine engineer and naval architect, Robert L. Stevens, son of John Stevens." *The Economic History of the United States*, vol. IV (New York: Rhinehart, 1951), 60; also William H. Thiesen, *Industrializing American Shipbuilding* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 84.

⁵² Daniel Torrance, New York, to J. Andrew Torrance, Toronto, 20 April 1846, file 13. John

George Law for the Stonington, Connecticut route. Daniel reported in April that the *Oregon* was “much injured by running on the rocks (she is not yet off).”⁵³ Though not reported in the letters, she had recovered from this mishap sufficiently by June 1846 (shortly after the second letter) to race the pride of Vanderbilt’s fleet, the *Traveller*. Daniel undoubtedly watched the race with keen interest, perhaps even aboard ship, as undoubtedly Vanderbilt was: “The two steamboats ran a dead heat, covering a 20-mile course in 57 minutes.” A re-match the following year between the *Oregon* and the *Cornelius Vanderbilt* resulted in a victory for George Law, after a helm error cost the *Vanderbilt* precious time.⁵⁴

Subsequent letters also refer to issues of steam navigation and shipping, but none in such detail as the letters in 1840 and 1846. Daniel wrote to Andrew in January 1848 with the latest news from New York City: “There is a great deal of steamboat building going on, five large ocean steamers, two nearly complete of over 2000 tons each, and one just laid down which will be nearly 3000. Mr. Vanderbilt is finishing a steamer for the New Haven route...,” but unfortunately no other letters from Daniel survive in the Torrance correspondence and we lose this very enthusiastic and informative voice on steamboat development.⁵⁵ These later letters show Daniel’s growing engagement in the New York shipping community and foreshadow his future involvement with the Vanderbilts.

Daniel Torrance prospered in New York, becoming a trusted lieutenant in the Vanderbilt empire. When the Commodore challenged the Collins and Cunard lines on the transatlantic route in 1855, he entrusted the management of his European steamship line to Torrance. By all accounts, Daniel distinguished himself. When Vanderbilt assumed control of the New York Central Railroad in 1867 and installed himself as president, he made Daniel its vice-president and left day-to-day operations to him.⁵⁶ Daniel stepped down from this position and retired to private life in 1870, upon which the *New York Times* reflected that he

Ericsson (1803-1889) was a Swedish-born American mechanical engineer and shipbuilder. He was a pioneer in the development of the screw-propeller and lead in the design and construction of the USS *Princeton*, a warship considered the fastest steamer afloat after besting *Great Western* in a contest in October 1843. *Princeton* had “two vibrating lever engines...built by Merrick & Towne, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and designed by John Ericsson,” which might be the source of Torrance’s reference to the “Philadelphian works”. Ericsson’s steamer *Iron Witch* was launched in 1846 at New York and is considered one of the first iron-built passenger vessels. Ericsson later designed the USS *Monitor*, famed Civil War Ironclad. “Princeton,” *Dictionary of American Fighting Ships*, <http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/p12/princeton-i.htm>, quoted; Thiesen, *Industrializing*, 125-7; W.S. Lindsay, *History of Merchant Shipping and Ancient Commerce*, vol. IV (London 1876), 194n.

53 Daniel Torrance, New York, to J. Andrew Torrance, Toronto, 20 April 1846, file 13; and Wheaton J. Lane, *Commodore Vanderbilt: An Epic of the Steam Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 75.

54 Lane, *Commodore Vanderbilt*, 75-76; Fred Erving Dayton, *Steamboat Days* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1925), chapter IV; Edward J. Renehan, *Commodore: The Life of Cornelius Vanderbilt* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 150-151; and Stiles, *The First Tycoon*, 156-158. Stiles only refers to the race in 1847.

55 Daniel Torrance, New York, to Andrew Torrance, Liverpool, 15 January 1848, file 14.

56 Stiles, *The First Tycoon*, 264, 453; and Renehan, *Commodore*, 222, 261.

had “won unqualified praise for the thoroughness and efficiency of his management. Fearless and independent in his actions, at all times, he administered the affairs of his office in a manner that brought credit upon himself, and profit to the corporation.”⁵⁷

Daniel came out of retirement in 1871 to assume the presidency of the Ohio & Mississippi Railroad “as a personal project.” He had become very wealthy in his own right through his work for Vanderbilt; so much so, that when Vanderbilt died in 1877, Sophia Torrance received the smallest share of his estate of his eight daughters, whose inheritances were based on perceived financial need.⁵⁸ Daniel died 19 November 1884 in New York of pneumonia. His obituary merely remarked that he had come to that city as an importer of teas and that since his retirement had “spent considerable time in Europe. His life was a quiet one, and he connected himself with scarcely any clubs, societies or business organizations.” Given his extensive involvement in the Torrance shipping firm before arriving in New York, and his many undertakings for the Vanderbilt firm, it is surprising to read of him simply as an “importer of teas,” but it perhaps can be attributed to having lived so long abroad and neglecting his social relationships in New York.⁵⁹

Daniel Torrance’s passion for steamboats and penchant for writing long, descriptive letters adds colour to our picture of a critical development in 19th century nautical history. While the Torrance family correspondence that has survived as a whole in the Robert M. Powell and family papers is too sporadic to provide us with a comprehensive portrait of their shipping and business interests, it does offer fascinating glimpses of early steamboating on the St. Lawrence River and Great Lakes, and its connection to North American developments.

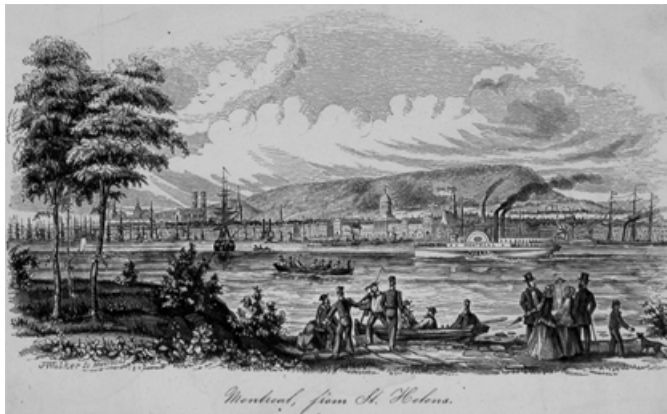


Illustration 8: Montreal, from St. Helen's Island, with Steamer Montreal. Wood engraving by John Henry Walker, ca. 1847. McCord Museum, 930.50.8.588

⁵⁷ “Change in the New-York Central Railroad - Resignation of Mr. Torrance,” *New York Times*, 28 February 1870.

⁵⁸ Stiles, *The First Tycoon*, 526; and Renehan, *Commodore*, 291. Sophia Torrance’s share of the will was \$250,000. The vast bulk of the \$100 million estate went to his son William Vanderbilt, leading his daughters to contest it in court.

⁵⁹ “Death of Daniel Torrance,” *Baltimore Sun*, 22 November 1884.