

# REMEMBERING THE STONEHOOKERS



# Introduction

In the age before concrete, a constant supply of building stone was essential. Beginning in the 1840s and lasting until just after the First World War, the Lake Ontario waterfront between the Credit River and Burlington Bay was busy with sailors engaged in mining the shallow waters for shale. The shale was loaded onto small sail-driven schooners known as stonehookers.

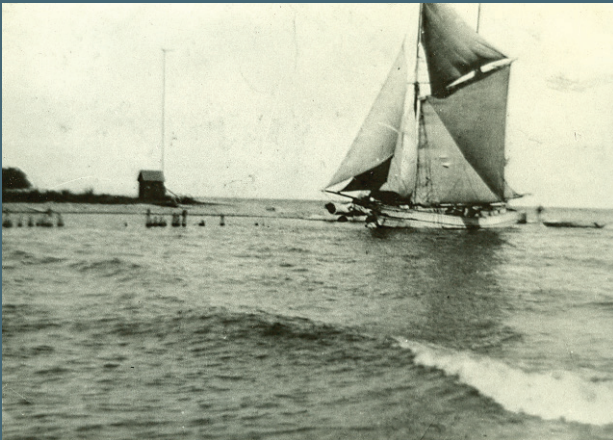
The stonehooker was a small vessel, usually between twenty to one hundred tons in burden. Schooner-rigged with shallow draft, the typical stonehooker could sail fast in light winds. Port Credit became a centre of the industry. Many stonehooking vessels were built at the shipyards here, and many more called the port home, including the *Ann Brown*, *Ariadne*, *Arthur Hannah*, *Brig Rover*, *Catherine Hays*, *Coral*, *Defiance*, *George Dow*, *Hunter*, *Lithophone*, *Lone Star*, *Mabelle*, *Madeline*, *Mary Ann*, *Mary E. Ferguson*, *Maude S.*, *Olympia*, *Raleigh*, *Rapid City*, and *Reindeer*, amongst others.



# Dundas Shale

In order to harvest Dundas shale (stone) from under the waters of Lake Ontario, a stonehooker would anchor close to the shore, usually in anywhere from six to twelve feet of water. Sailors pried slabs of shale from the lake bottom using long rakes (“hooks”). The shale would be lifted from the lakebed and loaded into a small scow. The scows were equipped with hoists and A-frames to assist in the lifting of the shale, but it was backbreaking work. The loaded scow would then be poled to the waiting schooner where the shale would be loaded onto the deck.

Stonehookers such as the *Lillian* and the *Newsboy* could carry thirty tons of shale. The stone was piled into rectangles three feet high, six feet wide, and twelve feet long and weighed 10 tons and was called a toise (pronounced “tyce”). A toise would bring the stonehooking crew between \$3.00 and \$5.00. Three trips a week and two toise per trip were considered a good output for an average two-man crew. Much of the shale was taken to Toronto where it was off-loaded at Queen’s Wharf at the foot of Bathurst Street. Builders in early Toronto and other cities were often dependent upon the flat stone wrestled from the lake for building purposes, most often used in foundations, pavement and sidewalks.



Front cover: Stonehooker *Lillian*, Port Credit, c1914 source: Heritage Mississauga

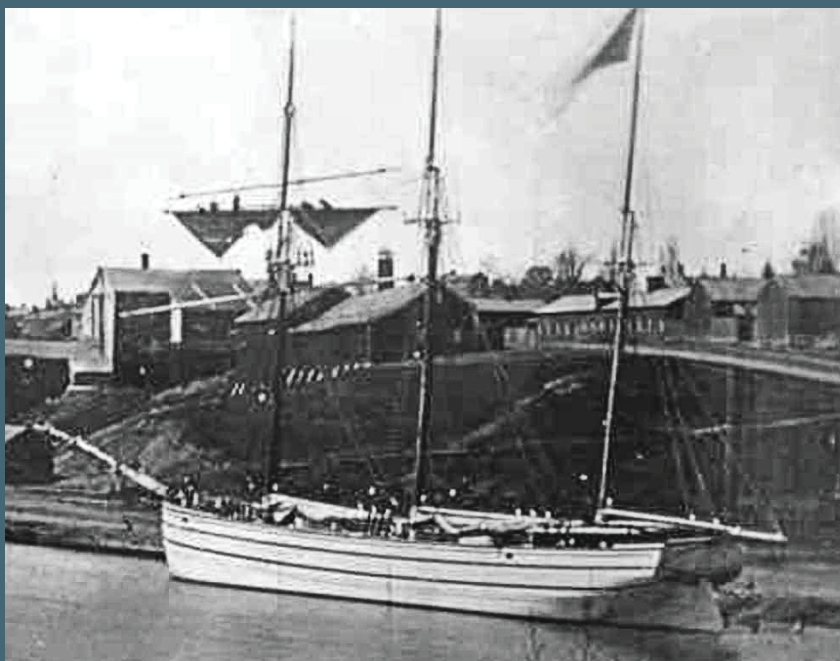
Left: Port Credit Harbour Scene, Stonehookers *George Dow* and *Lillian* in Harbour, 1908 source: “Harold Hare Collection, Mississauga South Historical Society”

Above: Stonehooker *Newsboy* under full sail, Port Credit Harbour, 1908 source: Mississauga South Historical Society

# A Dangerous Trade

Many vessels that sailed out of Port Credit were lost on Lake Ontario, along with the sailors who sailed them. Ships wrecked in the lake included the *Augusta*, *Barque Swallow*, *Brothers*, *Coronet*, *Jessie Drummond*, *Maggie Hunter*, *Morning Star*, *P.E. Young*, *Pinta* and *Sampson*, amongst others.

Many early residents of Port Credit were stonehookers and fishermen by trade, and the dangers of the lake were a part of daily life. There are many stories of sailors who never returned home, and their final resting place is somewhere under the deep, cold waters of Lake Ontario. Some of the sailors who sailed out of Port Credit with the schooners and fish boats to never return home were Robert Crosby, Byron Dorland, William Dorland, Howard Gilliam, John Gilliam, Billy Hutchinson, Joseph Howell, Alex Mason, John Newman, Frank Nixon, Joseph Quinn, William Quinn, William Sargent and Richard Walker. There were likely many more, leaving widows, children, and grieving families behind. Brave sailors also risked their lives to help in countless rescues on the lake.







## A Family Affair

Many families who called Port Credit home over generations were tied to the rhythm of a sailor's life, including the Blakeley, Block, Blower, Cavan, Dorland, Hare, Harrison, Joyce, Lynd, Miller, Naish, Newman, Peer, Thompson, Ure and Wilcox families, among many others. Several generations within a family were often tied to life as a stonehooker or a fisherman.

Above: Unknown sailors at Port Credit Harbour, c1910. source: Heritage Mississauga  
Bottom left: *Augusta* at Welland Canal, source: Maritime History of the Great Lakes

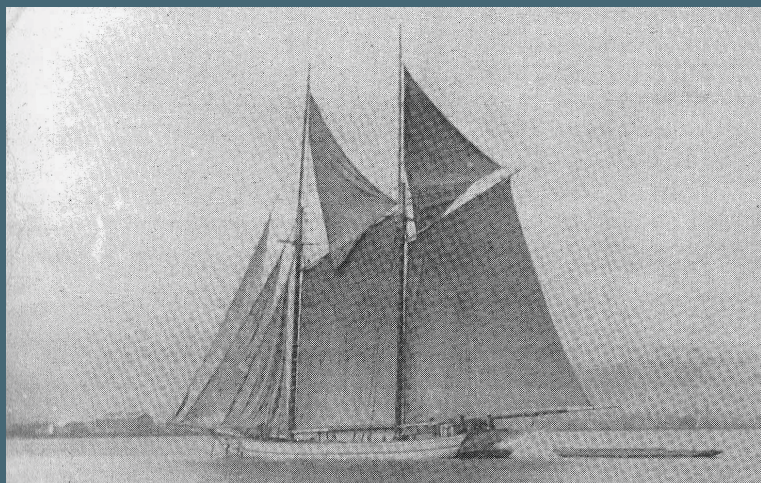
# The Blowers

One of the well-known stoonhooking families in Port Credit was the Blower family. The stoonhooker *Catherine Hays* was owned by Thomas Blower. Known affectionately as *The Kate*, the *Catherine Hays* was built in 1833. Thomas Blower passed away suddenly in 1867, and left his widow, Emily (née Gerling, c1829-1896), with eight young children under the age of 16. Emily had little choice but to try to provide for her children. She moved the family onto the 41-foot-long *Catherine Hays*. Emily began hauling cordwood to Toronto, and the eldest boys helped with loading and unloading of the cargo. For this, they collected \$5 per load. Following her late husband's trade, Emily also turned to stoonhooking:

*"Not long ago Captain Al Hare of Port Credit, in his eighties, told of seeing Emily Blower wading waist deep in lake water, her black skirt ballooning up around her with the air it held, while she helped the little boys load the box-like scow in which they had to ferry the stone out to the empty Catherine Hays, anchored as close into shore as they dared to bring her. Every stone had to be lifted from the bottom to the scow, from the scow to the deck, from the deck to the hold. Then they had to be carried to the City and be got up on deck again and out on the dock before they would be paid \$5 a toice."*

The elder boys, Mark, Thomas, George and Abe Blower, continued stoonhooking until 1915. The old *Catherine Hays* was rebuilt in 1869 and renamed the *James Abbs*, until she was retired in 1884. Other Blower schooners included the *Madeline*, *Elizabeth Ann*, *Lillian* and the *Reindeer*.

From *Schooner Days* by C.H.J. Snider (1932): "While the 'hookers were here, the Blower boys sailed 'em."





## The End

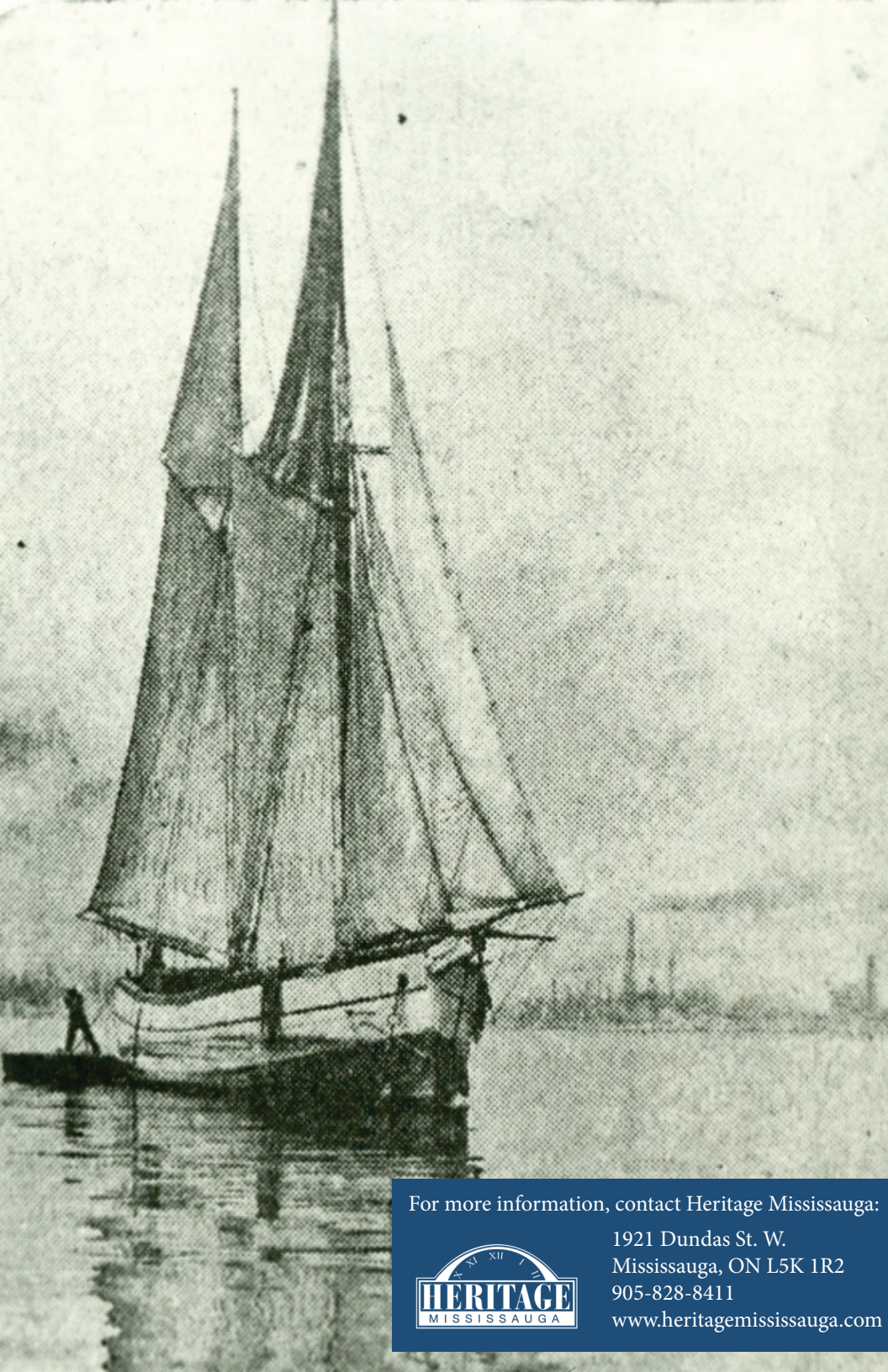
The introduction of concrete started the decline of the stonehooker trade, combined with improvement of roads and transportation networks. The *Schooner Days* article series in the *Toronto Telegram* by C.H.J. Snider, along with several articles and book excerpts by the late Port Credit historian Lorne Joyce, recall the heyday of the stonehooking trade. The last of the active stonehookers was sold in 1929.

Left: *Madeline*, source: Mississauga South Historical Society

Above: Stonehooker *Margaret Ann* and scow harvesting shale, Port Credit, c1900  
source: Heritage Mississauga

Back cover: *Minnie Blakely*, source: Heritage Mississauga





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