

HISTORIC ROOTS

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General Butler, the man.

GENERAL BUTLER: THE MAN AND THE BOAT

By ARTHUR B. COHN

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One summer day in 1980 some divers came across the wreck of an old boat. It was in about 40 feet of water at the bottom of Lake Champlain, right outside the breakwater that protects Burlington harbor. Its cargo was still inside. The divers could no longer read its name, but they knew this boat was the *General Butler*. In fact they had been looking for it.

The boat was named after Benjamin Butler, a Massachusetts lawyer and businessman. He was also a general during the Civil War. General Butler fought some important battles at the start of the war and at first was thought to be a hero. It was during that time that Jabez Rockwell named his new boat after him.

General Butler, the boat, was built in 1862 in Essex, New York, a town on Lake Champlain with a busy shipyard. *General Butler* was a sailing canal boat. It could sail on the lake and still fit into the locks on the canals that led from Lake Champlain to the Hudson River. It carried freight, as trains and trucks do today.

Photograph from the author's collection.



General Butler, the boat, looked exactly like the F.P. Havens, shown here.

The lake was still a busy waterway, but the railroads would soon put the lakemen out of business. Jabez Rockwell did not know that when he built his new boat. Both the boat and the man were to have interesting lives.

General Butler, the man, was in charge of troops from New England early in the Civil War. After the Battle of Baton Rouge, in Louisiana, General Butler said that Vermont soldiers had behaved poorly under fire, that they were cowards. This made Vermonters very angry. State lawmakers demanded an investigation. They found no proof that what he said was true, and from then on Vermonters hated Butler. So did the people of New Orleans when

he was their governor. They called him “Silver Spoons” Butler because, they said, he stole the silver spoons from every house where he had dinner. They hated him so much that they painted his face on the bottoms of their chamber pots!

Back on Lake Champlain, for fourteen years *General Butler*, the boat, carried marble, wood, coal, potatoes, apples, and hay from as far away as Canada to as far away as New York City. By 1876 its owner was William Montgomery, a lakeman from Isle La Motte, Vermont.

On December 9, 1876, very late in the year for travel on the lake, the *General Butler* set sail for Burlington with a load of marble blocks. On it were the captain, his teenage daughter and her friend, one crewman, and an injured man who was going to the hospital. Montgomery was a daring sailor who often left harbor when others would not, but he would not have taken chances with his daughter. The fact that the two girls were along on this trip makes us think he thought the lake would be smooth and the trip easy. He was wrong.

On the way through the lake the weather changed. As the *General Butler* came close to Burlington there were huge waves. Snow and ice coated the decks. It was hard to see or steer. Captain Montgomery decided to try to take the boat behind the Burlington breakwater. He knew the water would be a little calmer there.

He started in from the north, but the boat's steering wheel broke. He could not steer. The people on the boat were in great danger.

But Montgomery knew what he was doing. He stopped the boat by throwing an anchor over the side. Then he tied a spare tiller to the rudder post with a chain, cut the anchor line with an axe, and tried again to get past the breakwater.

It was still daylight and, in spite of the storm, many people came to the lake's shore in Burlington to watch and see what would happen. For a while it looked as if the boat would make it to safety, but the waves were too strong and the breakwater too close. Each wave lifted the boat up and dropped it so that it hit against the breakwater. Montgomery could not steer in such strong waves. He knew the boat could not last long. The passengers would have to leave it. So each time the boat rose high on the waves one of the passengers jumped over the side onto the icy stones of the breakwater. Elijah Goodsell, the man who was going to the hospital, hit his head when he landed and passed out. Montgomery was the last to leave the boat, and just in time. As he landed on the breakwater, the *General Butler* dropped back into the water and sank.

It still was not clear that those on the breakwater, who were soaked by each new wave, would come out alive. They would not have if

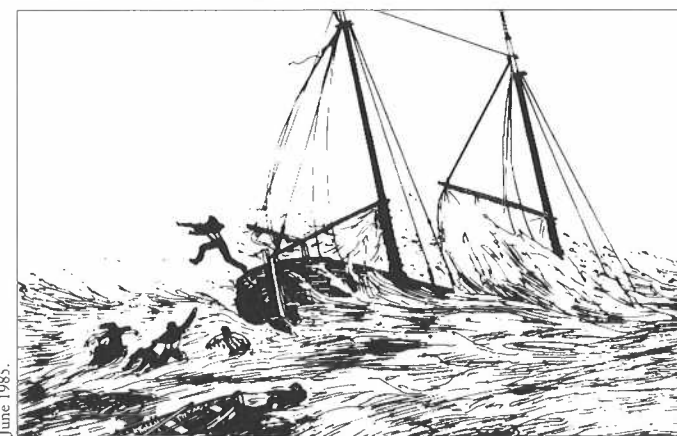
James Wakefield and his son had not risked their own lives to save them.

Wakefield was born in England and had spent most of his life at sea. Not long before, he had decided to stay ashore and live in Burlington. He knew that the five people on the breakwater would soon freeze to death or drown unless someone helped them. So he took a 14-foot rowboat and with his son Jack rowed out through the storm and brought them all safely to shore.

No one died or was even badly hurt, and everyone soon warmed up again. The captain's daughter said she wanted to sail back to Isle La Motte on the *General Butler* when it was taken out of the water.

The passengers were very lucky. Newspapers called the storm one of the worst in the

Passengers jumping off the General Butler onto the breakwater, as drawn by an artist years later.



Drawing by Kevin Crisman. From *A Report on the Nautical Archaeology of Lake Champlain*, Champlain Maritime Society, June 1985.

century. It caused great damage to property in the area, not just to the *General Butler*.

What happened to General Butler, the man? He retired from the army and served in Congress for many years. He also ran for governor of Massachusetts. He ran six times and was elected once. He was not re-elected. He was not elected president either, although he ran for that office too.

General Butler, the boat, was never raised. It is still at the bottom of Lake Champlain. Its masts were pulled out because they were a danger to other ships, but the boat and its cargo are still where they have been for more than one hundred years. Now divers can visit the *General Butler* to learn about life on the lake in that time. It and four other wrecked boats are part of Vermont's Underwater Historic Preserve, a kind of museum at the bottom of the lake. People who go there can see the ship, the huge blocks of marble that are still inside, and the spare rudder, still tied with a chain.

Rooting Around

Pieces of the past are all around us, waiting to be discovered. They all have stories. Are there any cellar holes or ruined houses near you? What can you find out about them? If you have ever found an arrowhead or a broken piece of pottery or even an old coin, didn't you wonder what its story was?