

Nelson Walker: Silversmith, Shipbuilder and Surveyor

By Laurence Joyce

A fiddle pattern fork (Fig. 1), purchased in 2008 at Bermondsey antique market in London, was the starting point for this article. It was made in Montreal during the second quarter of the 19th century by Nelson Walker, and like much Canadian silver of that period it bears pseudo-English marks (Fig 2). Several pieces of silver bearing Nelson Walker's marks can be found in Canadian collections: the Sigmund Samuel Gallery of Canada, part of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, has examples of a nutmeg grater, a fish slice and a handsome loving cup, all dated between 1825 and 1840. Pictures of

these items can be found quite easily by a quick search on the internet ("nelson walker" +silver +Canada).

What was puzzling, though, was that neither the Canadian websites, nor several Canadian individuals who were consulted, appeared to know what had happened to Nelson Walker after 1855, when he is supposed to have left Canada for good (according to John Langdon's books on Canadian Silver). Nelson Walker is not as rare a name as one might think, especially after Admiral Horatio Nelson's spectacular naval successes in the 1790s, so the appearance of a Nelson Walker in the UK census for 1861 in Plum-



Fig. 1:Fiddle pattern fork above
Fig. 2:Nelson Walker marks

stead, Kent, aged 62, profession listed as ‘Surveyor and Draftsman’, could not at first be taken to be the same person, even though his place of birth is given as Montreal, Canada. The London Post Office directories for this period list Nelson Walker as working for the Civilian Department of the Royal Engineers at Woolwich.

Further research revealed a Nelson Walker working as a ‘surveyor/draftsman’ for the Civilian Department of the Royal Engineers in Canada in the 1840s and 50s. There was also a Nelson Walker designing propellers for early steamboats on the Canadian waterways in the early 1840s. It looks, on the face of it, an unlikely career path for someone who had started out as a silversmith, but then Nelson Walker appears to have been a versatile, ambitious and resourceful character.

According to *Steamboat Connections: Montreal to Upper Canada 1816-1843* by Frank Mackey¹, a book that describes the early history of steam-powered navigation in Canada, Nelson Walker was born in Montreal on 21 March 1799, the son of an English hairdresser who had arrived in Canada a few years earlier. By the end of 1824 he was married and working as a silversmith in Montreal. A receipt

from 1835, with an ornate billhead engraved by Walker himself, shows that he had premises at 126 St Paul’s Street (Fig 3)². However, by 1839, he is described in deeds as a former silversmith and trader or merchant, ‘now Gentleman’, a strong indication that he was no longer ‘in Trade’.

The political events of the time may well have had a bearing on Nelson Walker’s step up in society, or at least in his own estimation. Since 1791, the British colony of the Province of Quebec had been divided into two parts – Upper and Lower Canada. In February 1834 the Parti Patriote of Lower Canada, led by Louis-Joseph Papineau, submitted the 92 Resolutions, a series of demands for political reforms in the British-governed colony. The Patriote move-

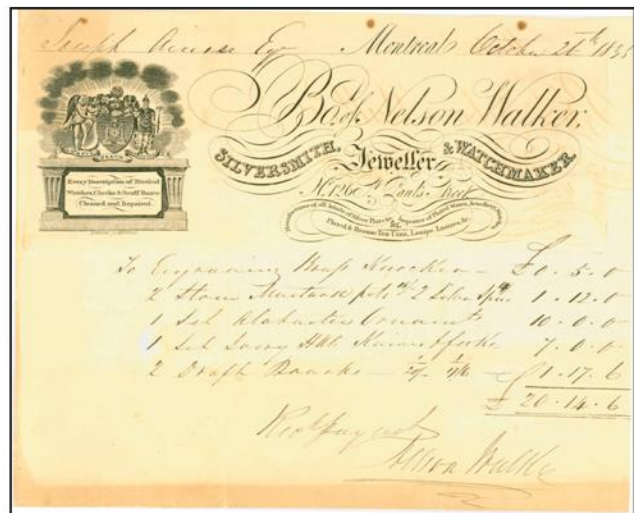


Fig. 3 Receipt 1835

ment was supported by a majority of the population, but not by all. Nelson Walker's name appears on a list of citizens loyal to the British crown who attended an anti-Patriote meeting at Tattersall's on St James Street, Montreal, in that year³. Four years later, in 1837, an armed rebellion in Lower Canada was defeated by the British armed forces under their commander-in-chief, Sir John Colborne.

The following year a similar rebellion was quashed in Upper Canada, and in November Nelson Walker was named by Colborne as Paymaster to the Montreal Volunteer Rifle Corps, a unit that fought on the loyalist side during the rebellion in Lower Canada⁴.

The Montreal archives also contain Nelson Walker's request earlier the same year to become 'secrétaire de la Commission chargée d'enquêter sur les perts encourues par les fidèles sujets de Sa Majesté lors de la Rébellion de 1837' [secretary of the Commission to investigate the losses incurred by the loyal subjects of Her Majesty during the Rebellion of 1837]. This request is accompanied by two letters of recommendation, dated 4-10 May 1838⁵.

As early as 1833, Nelson Walker was showing an interest in steamboats, and he became the president of the company that owned the *Patriote Canadien*, a vessel that at first operated as a ferry between Montreal and La Prairie. In 1836, a document bearing his signature (Fig 4) attests that he sold 43 shares in the *Patriote Canadien* at 10 shillings each,⁶ and from an article that appeared in the *Montreal Gazette* for 20 March 1841 under the title 'The Ericson Propeller', it is clear that his interest in steamboats had developed further:

'It gives us pleasure to learn, that the Ericson propeller is so much approved of, that it is to be applied to 4 large barges intended to ply on the Lachine, Ottawa, and Rideau Canals, now building for Messrs. Sanderson and Murray, and that the necessary engines will be ready shortly after the opening of

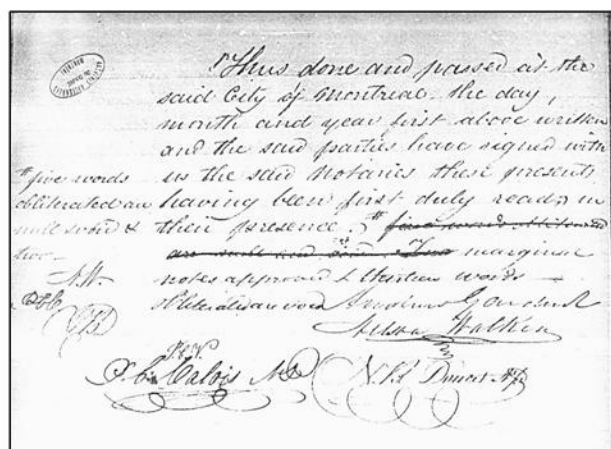


Fig. 4, Sale of steamboat stock by Walker

navigation, 3 of them being built at New York and 1 in this city. We have seen a very ingenious model of the engine and propeller, in the course of being built in this city, which was constructed by Mr. Nelson Walker, previous to his viewing any application of it's [sic] powers to vessels on this Continent, and which was intended to be affixed to one of Messrs. Murray & Sanderson's boats, before any communication had been made with Mr. Ericson on the subject. Nothing can exceed the simplicity of this model, and as it's [sic] efficacy has been tested, Mr. Walker is entitled to much praise for his ingenious contrivance founded on a mere theoretic sketch of Ericson's invention.'

And in the *Western Herald* (Sandwich UC) for 25 November 1841 (reprinted from the *Montreal Gazette*):

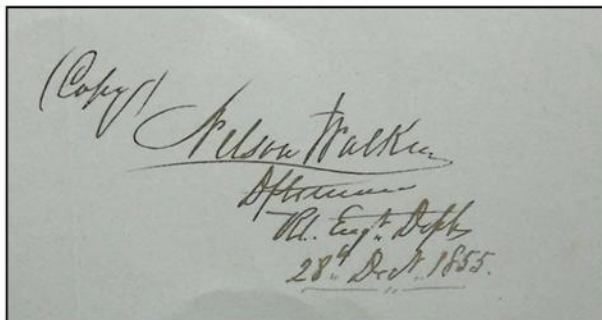
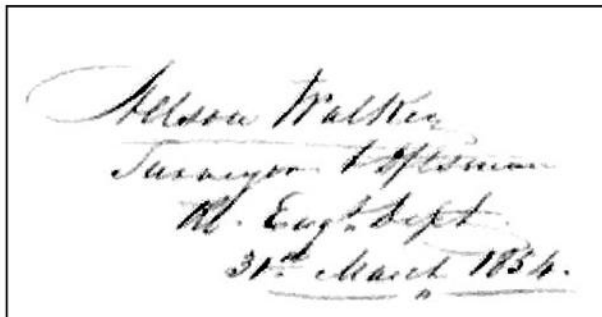
'We are glad to learn that the new vessel, belonging to Messrs. Murray and Sanderson, constructed by Mr. Nelson Walker, of this city, upon the propeller system, arrived in port on Wednesday, with two barges in tow fully laden, from

Kingston. Owing to the difficulties of the navigation, such a feat has hitherto been deemed an impossibility, no one imagining that any steamer could tow barges from Coteau du Lac to the Cascades. This has, however, been accomplished, and in spite of a strong headwind which prevailed at the time. The name of the new steamer is the '*BARON TORONTO*'.

The steamer left Kingston on Sunday morning, incurring the severities of the snow storm of Monday, and arrived on Wednesday at Lachine. This shows the practicability of towing from Montreal to Kingston, via the Rideau Canal, and downwards, via the St. Lawrence. The forwarders who accomplished the trip deserve credit for their enterprise.'

In 1841 and 1842, 'Nelson Walker, gentleman' was granted patents for designs for ships' propellers. At some point in the next five years, Nelson Walker's career took another quite surprising turn. By 1847 he is found working as a surveyor and draughtsman for the Civilian Department of the Royal Engineers. In Canada's national collection of books, documents and

records⁷ there are 29 maps, plans and charts that carry his signature, some drawn by him and some simply verified by him. The earliest of these is a map of the Township of Nepean (now part of Ottawa) dated 1847, and the latest is a plan of the boundaries of the Military Reserve at Fort Erie, Canada West, signed and dated 31 March 1854 (Fig 5). Various directories of the period, including Scobie and Balfour's *Canadian Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge* for 1848 and for 1852-53, list him at Bytown (modern-day Ottawa) working in the Civil Branch of the Royal Engineers.



Above Fig.5: Signature dated 1854
 Fig. 6: Signature dated 1855

The 1852 census for Canada (delayed from 1851) lists Nelson Walker, 'surveyor/draftsman' at Bytown, living with his wife Mary Ann, born in England, and two daughters, Sarah Louise and Georg[ina] Augusta, both born in Canada⁸. The following year, in 1853, his wife Mary Ann dies, according to the records of non-Catholic burials in the Montreal region, 1767-1899, at the Banque et Archives nationales du Québec.⁹

At some time after 1854 (1855, according to John Langdon and others), Nelson Walker crossed the Atlantic for England. He is still working for the Civilian Department of the Royal Engineers, but now he is based at Woolwich in Kent. The National Archives at Kew hold several maps and plans drawn, copied or verified by Nelson Walker between 1855 and 1861, mostly of the Royal Arsenal site. Figure 6 shows a photograph of Nelson Walker's signature that appears on one of these maps. The 1861 census for the United Kingdom shows Nelson Walker living at No 4 Crescent Road, Plumstead (Fig 7), with his daughter Georgina, or Georgina as she appears on the census record. He is also listed in the Post Office directories at the Civilian Department of the Royal Engineers

Office, and last appears in the edition for 1863, suggesting that he was still working in the previous year¹⁰.

Nelson Walker was now well over 60 years old and perhaps he had come to the end of his working life. For one reason or another, possibly retirement, he moved away from Woolwich, and on 19 February 1864 *The London Gazette* carried the following notice:

Nelson Walker, late of No. 1, Buckland-street, Plymouth, in the county of Devon, and formerly of Woolwich, in the county



Fig. 7: Crescent Road, Plumstead

of Kent, retired Civil Officer of the Royal Engineers, having been adjudged bankrupt by a Registrar of the Court of Bankruptcy for the Exeter District, attending at the Devon County Gaol or Prison on the 15th day of January 1864, and the adjudication being directed to be prosecuted in the County Court of Devonshire, holden at East Stonehouse, is hereby required to surrender himself to Parmenas Pearce, Esq., Registrar of the said last-mentioned Court, at the first meeting of creditors to be held before the said Registrar, on the 2nd day of March next, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon precisely, at the said Court, St. George's Hall, East Stonehouse.'

A similar notice appears on 4 March 1864:

'... for the said bankrupt to pass his Last Examination, and make application for his Discharge ...'

The Order of Discharge was granted on 23 March 1864. And on 20 November 1866:

'Nelson Walker ... retired Civil Officer of the Royal Engineers, adjudicated bankrupt on the 15th day of January 1864. A Dividend

Meeting will be held on the 5th day of December next at eleven o'clock in the forenoon precisely.'

Nelson Walker had been dead for almost a year. He had died on 9 December 1865 at 36 Park Street, Plymouth, in the parish of Charles the Martyr. The Cause of Death listed on his death certificate is 'debility and exhaustion', and the name of the person notifying the death is given as Susan Lancaster of the same address.

These discoverable facts about Nelson Walker afford only a glimpse of the man's life and leave many questions unanswered: what happened to his daughters; what was he doing in London in 1823, apart from getting married (see endnote 9 below); were there any other trips across the ocean?¹¹ But what does seem probable, given his busy career, as an inventor, designer, merchant, draughtsman and surveyor, is that he left the silversmithing, jewellery and watchmaking business behind him at some point in the late 1830s or early 1840s.

Endnotes:

1. Frank Mackey, *Steamboat Connections: Montreal to Upper Canada 1816-1843*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.
2. Picture courtesy of the Société Historique de Montréal. A photographic copy of this receipt was provided by the librarian of

the Society, Lise Lavigne, who kindly retrieved the document from the Archives department of Montreal City Hall. Mr Warren Baker also provided me with a slightly earlier (1833) copy of the billhead alone, and informed me that Nelson Walker had been using this billhead as early as 1823.

3. *Montreal Gazette*, 1 April 1834, p2.
4. *Steamboat Connections*, p326 note 22.
5. At the time of writing I had not yet viewed these documents. The information comes from their online descriptions [<http://pistard.banq.qc.ca>].
6. Document courtesy of the Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec. Perhaps Nelson Walker made a loss on these shares, because they were offered originally at 30 shillings a share. Bigelow, De Witt, and Fabre were also associated with other Montreal and La Prairie men in the ownership of the *Patriote Canadien*, a steamer of 196 tons burden build in 1832 by Sheay and Merritt and equipped with a 60-horsepower engine made by Bennet and Henderson. This was an effort to bring out the capitalist in the habitants around La Prairie and it worked: 'Shares were offered at 30 shillings so that the country people could afford them, which did indeed lead almost all of them to buy one or several shares and therefore gave them a more direct interest in encouraging the venture and seeing it succeed.' The steamer ran at first as a ferry between Montreal and La Prairie, and from 1834 she challenged the Molson-Torrance boats in the Quebec trade before being bought off by those interests and mothballed. *Steamboat Connections*, pp70-71. The preface to this book also has this to say: 'Without a closer look, one might never know that . . . the Mr Walker behind some of the earliest pro-

pellier books in Canada was not Montreal machinist James Nelson Walker but Montreal jeweller Nelson Walker.' *Steamboat Connections*, pages xiii –xiv.

7. Library and Archives Canada, www.collectionscanada.gc.ca
8. His daughters Georgina Augusta and Sarah Louise (or Louisa) were both baptised in the Church of England in Montreal in 1831. Possibly they were twins. However, the ages given in the 1852 Canadian census of 19 for Sarah Louise and 16 for Georgina Augusta suggest that perhaps Georgina had died and that the name was inherited by a later child. In the 1861 UK census, where she is found living with her father in Plumstead, Kent, her name is given as Georgina, and her age as 27. A Georgina Walker with the same unusual spelling is also found in the 1871 UK census as a boarder in the St George's Hanover Square district of London. Her birthplace is given as Canada and her occupation as milliner. However, her age here is given as 25, though this may be a transcription error. There were also two sons: Edmund Farrar, who was born in 1825 and died in the cholera epidemic of 1832; and Frederick Kenneth, who was barely a year old at the time of his death in 1835.
9. The IGI online index shows a marriage at St Olave's, Southwark, Surrey, England, on 13 February 1823 between Nelson Walker and Mary Ann Carter.
10. Nelson Walker is witness to the will of a colleague, proved in April 1861.

The Will of James Richard Edkins. *In the Name of God Amen.*

I James Richard Edkins Clerk in the

Royal Engineers' Department at present residing at No.7 North Bank Saint John's Wood in the County of Middlesex being of sound and disposing mind memory and understanding do make and publish this my last will and testament in manner following and give devise and bequeath all and singular my freehold property which I hold in the County of the City of Dublin by fee farm grant or by leases of lives renewable for ever under Lord Meath to my wife Ellen Elizabeth Edkins for her life and at her death to be divided in equal portions between such of my children as shall survive her.

I give and bequeath all other property money or effects of any kind whatsoever which I may be possessed of to the said Ellen Elizabeth Edkins for her sole use and benefit and further I nominate and appoint the said Ellen Elizabeth Edkins and William Knox of 87 Saviour Street Dublin Gentleman to be Executrix and Executor of this my will in witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal this 10th day of February 1858. *James R Edkins*

Signed sealed published and declared by the testator as and for his last will and testament and by us witnesses at his request in his presence and in the presence of each other. *G A Medler, Nelson Walker*

I Nelson Walker of the Royal Engineer Office Woolwich in the County of Kent a Draughtsman in the Royal Engineer Department make oath that I am one of the subscribing witnesses to the last will and testament of the said James Richard Edkins formerly of No. 7 North

Bank Saint John's Wood in the County of Middlesex but late of Saint Soliers in the Island of Jersey (etc, etc).

11. An 1828 list of passengers to and from the Port of Quebec mentions 'In the *Charles Tennyson*, for London, Mrs. Nelson Walker and family, of Montreal'

Laurence Joyce is an avid silver collector and researcher living in London. This article was first published in November 2009 in *The Finial*, the journal of The Silver Spoon Club of Great Britain, and appears here by kind permission.