

“Uncertain as to future fate” 1837 Upper Canadian rebels incarcerated in “John Montgomery’s Room” in Toronto’s jail in 1838

Chris Raible

Volume 113, Number 2, Fall 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081113ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081113ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Raible, C. (2021). “Uncertain as to future fate”: 1837 Upper Canadian rebels incarcerated in “John Montgomery’s Room” in Toronto’s jail in 1838. *Ontario History*, 113(2), 195–221. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081113ar>

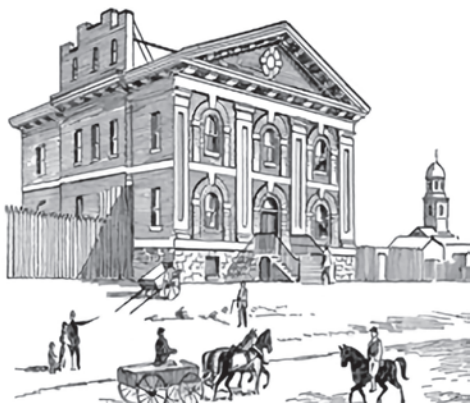
Article abstract

Through first-hand accounts, most notably that of prisoner John Goldsworthy Parker, this article examines the lives of the men who were imprisoned following their failed rebellion in 1837 in Upper Canada. As a close camaraderie developed, they began to think of themselves as the men in “John Montgomery’s Room” (named after the owner of the tavern where the rebels had rallied in the Rebellion). Included are descriptions of their daily lives, how they interacted, their meals, devotions, sicknesses, and entertainments, how they coped with the execution of some of their fellow prisoners, and, most closely, the carving of many unique commemorative boxes many of which remain today as artifacts of the failed rebellion.

“Uncertain as to future fate”

1837 Upper Canadian rebels incarcerated in “John Montgomery’s Room” in Toronto’s jail in 1838*

by Chris Raible



Left: 1836 etching by John Howard copied by C.W. Jeffreys.

Above: 1838 box lid illustration by M.P. Empey copied as woodcut.

Prologue: Rebellion

The story of the Upper Canada Rebellion is an oft-told tale—of hope and enthusiasm, of error and ignorance, of courage and disaster.¹ With the intent of taking over Toronto in a *coup d'état*, hundreds of men marched down Yonge Street and rallied at Mont-

gomery's Tavern a few miles north of the city. Alas, after three days of indecisive skirmishing, they were totally routed by government troops on the fateful Friday, 7 December 1837.

In the wake of the disaster, the rebel forces fled to the woods—leaders Wil-

**Note:* The author would like to express his gratitude to Darryl Withrow, who also provided the images of prisoner boxes (unless otherwise noted), John C. Carter, Linda Corupe, Robert Harvey, the anonymous reviewers and, especially, *Ontario History* editor Tory Tronrud for their counsel, research, and assistance in the process of writing this paper.

¹ *The Story of the Upper Canada Rebellion* is, of course, the title of the two-volume work by John Charles Dent (Toronto: C. Blackett Robinson, 1885). Perhaps the most readable chronicle of that ill-fated debacle, it is also less than fully reliable. More valuable, although not without errors, is Edwin C. Guillet, *The Lives and Times of the Patriots* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968 – originally published Toronto: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1938). The most valuable single resource for the story is, of course, the volume of documents by Colin Read and Ronald J. Stagg: *The Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada: A Collection of Documents* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1988). A comprehensive bibliography of works on the Rebellion is, of course, beyond the scope of this study, but for more works see note 117 near the conclusion of this paper.

Abstract

Through first-hand accounts, most notably that of prisoner John Goldsworthy Parker, this article examines the lives of the men who were imprisoned following their failed rebellion in 1837 in Upper Canada. As a close camaraderie developed, they began to think of themselves as the men in “John Montgomery’s Room” (named after the owner of the tavern where the rebels had rallied in the Rebellion). Included are descriptions of their daily lives, how they interacted, their meals, devotions, sicknesses, and entertainments, how they coped with the execution of some of their fellow prisoners, and, most closely, the carving of many unique commemorative boxes many of which remain today as artifacts of the failed rebellion.

Résumé: *À travers des témoignages de première main, notamment celui du prisonnier John Goldsworthy Parker, cet article examine la vie des hommes emprisonnés à la suite de leur rébellion ratée de 1837 dans le Haut-Canada. Alors qu’une étroite camaraderie s’est développée, ils ont commencé à se considérer comme les hommes de la “chambre de John Montgomery” (du nom du propriétaire de la taverne où les rebelles s’étaient rassemblés lors de la Rébellion). On y trouve des descriptions de leur vie quotidienne, de leurs interactions, de leurs repas, de leurs dévotions, de leurs maladies et de leurs divertissements, de la façon dont ils ont fait face à l’exécution de certains de leurs camarades prisonniers et, surtout, la sculpture de nombreuses boîtes commémoratives uniques dont beaucoup restent aujourd’hui des artefacts de la rébellion ratée.*

liam Lyon Mackenzie, John Gibson, Jesse Lloyd, Silas Fletcher, and many others reached safety across the United States border. The others found temporary security in their own homes or those of friends and relatives. Hundreds, hearing that an official Proclamation offered amnesty, gave themselves up; hundreds more were rounded up. All these men crowded into the Home District jail in central Toronto.² The hostilities had ceased, but the government pondered what to do.³ By the end of December, many men had been released, but many more were simply held, without trial and with little hope.

January 1838

On Monday, 2 January 1838, in a room on the upper floor of the Home District Jail on King Street in central Toronto, prisoner John Goldsworthy Parker opened a small notebook and began to write.

Parker was in a large room (about 25 feet by 25 feet), its doorway iron-barred.⁴ The only light came through iron-grated windows, each loosely covered with exterior boards to prevent communication with the outside world. Parker—American-born, married with several children, resident of Kingston and Hamilton for nearly a decade, middle-aged (born 1894), urban rather than rural, success-

² Many prisoners were temporarily lodged in the Parliament building a few blocks to the west and the Court House next door.

³ For another year there would be invasions from south of the border, but in Toronto the rebellion was over.

⁴ As described by Charles Durand, *Reminiscences of Charles Durand* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, 1897) 322 & 334 (dictated and published sixty years later, 1897) and by John Doel, “Rebellion Recollections of John Doel,” unpublished manuscript, MS 1816, Archives of Ontario.

ful merchant, highly literate, deeply religious—had not borne arms in the Rebellion. Nor had he participated in the early December insurrection at Montgomery's Tavern.

Parker was not alone. Sharing the room were perhaps thirty other prisoners. In an adjoining room, similarly fitted but half as large (25 feet by 12 feet), another two dozen men were confined. All were charged with treason and imprisoned for allegedly taking part in armed insurrection.⁵

These men were not the only Rebellion prisoners in the building. Below, on the main floor, hundreds more were crowded into several cells. The scene was described a few months later by a Methodist minister:

"... I visit the gaol⁶ daily, generally preaching twice each visit to the prisoners in the different rooms, where a few of the more respectable & wealthy are confined, & the cells, where the much greater number are kept. Many of those in the latter are in a truly pitiful situation. There are two... halls of cells, in each of which from 45 to 50 are confined with very little room or air or any other comfort. Sickly & dirty, some crazy... some gloomy & despairing. ...[Y]ou may then

well think what my feelings are when among them & seeing & hearing their misery & groans, many of whom are not yet tried, nor can they tell when they will be."⁷

Confinement conditions for Parker and his upper-room inmates were indeed "different." As "a few of the more respectable & wealthy," these men were far less crowded and allowed far more freedom. Why this special treatment? Probably because they had friends, had connections, and had a little money.



Parker's account book

Arrested in early December and held a few days in Hamilton, by January, Parker had been jailed in Toronto for about three weeks. Ready money, he had quickly learned, could lessen the discomfort of confinement. Purchases of goods and services supplemented the minimal services and the limited diet provided by jailor John Kidd and his staff. Close confinement demanded, understandably, that personal purchases be shared. Parker was not the only man with some funds, but he, a successful merchant, had become the *de facto* treasurer for the men in this

⁵ Men arrested for "High Treason" were confined separately from persons jailed for more ordinary crimes.

⁶ Spellings, "jail" and "gaol," were both commonly used.

⁷ May 4th, 1838, William Ryerson, Toronto, to Revd. Egerton Ryerson, Kingston, in, C. B. Sissons *Egerton Ryerson: His Life and Letters*, vol. 1 (Toronto, Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1937), 460-61.

room.

Parker began the year 1838 by making entries in his account book. This little notebook, albeit damaged, often illegible, and missing some pages, survived. It is now part of the mass of thousands of documents known as the “Upper Canada Sundries.”⁸ Its pages offer insight into the day-to-day life of thirty men confined for months in a single room.

In the course of the next four months—from January to early June 1838—Parker listed expenses and income as “debits” and “credits.” Thus, according to his first entry, on Tuesday, 2 January, he purchased, for a shilling, salt.⁹ On the same day—and on every day for the next two weeks—he paid 1 shilling, 3 pence for milk. Milk sales then ceased, save a single purchase more on 30 January.¹⁰ On the 9th he bought 5 shillings’ worth of sugar. The source of most of these purchases was revealed on 15 January with a payment to the Lesslie Brothers¹¹ store for sugar (5s) and butter (5s).

A daily food ration was provided the prisoners. The room was equipped with an iron wood-stove.¹² Parker’s record

suggests that initially the men did limited cooking, but, later in the month, began to do more. They purchased mustard (4½ pence) and pepper (6 pence) on the 22nd, potatoes (7shillings, 10½ pence), sugar (5 shillings) and flour (3 pence) on the 25th, and pepper (5 pence) and milk again (2 shillings, 6 pence) on the 30th.

The prisoners’ life together was undoubtedly made more comfortable by their purchases of soap (6 pence) on 2 and 22 January, and of candles (6 pence) on the 6th and the 10th; on the 22nd the jailor, Mr. Kidd, supplied two more candles for 3 pence. Wood was purchased twice, for 7½ pence each time.¹³

Money could not only buy goods; it could buy services. On 16 January, 7½ pence was paid to a woodchopper; later in the month, fellow prisoner W.E. Edmondstone paid for another chopping.¹⁴ Three times during the month, “Tub men” were paid half a crown (2/6) and on another day, a “scavenger” earned the same amount. Presumably these payments were for the emptying, perhaps daily, of a slops bucket. What latrine was available to them is not clear. For

⁸ Upper Canada Sundries (hereinafter UCS) 113880 to 113920. Now held by the Library and Archives of Canada, microfilm images are available on line. Perhaps because many of the pages are unbound, the numbered UCS images of Parker’s pages are not in chronological order and a few pages of other Parker notes are intermingled.

⁹ January expenses were recorded on two pages, unnumbered, between UCS 113893 and UCS 113895.

¹⁰ There is no hint as to why he stopped daily purchases of milk.

¹¹ James Lesslie was an active, even passionate, political reformer, but he had no sympathy for armed Rebellion. Nonetheless, he, too, was arrested, but soon released – no case could be made against him. See J. M. S. Careless, “James Lesslie,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 11 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1982).

¹² Durand, *Reminiscences* ... 322; and Doel, “Rebellion

¹³ These are the only recorded purchases of wood for the whole five-month period.

¹⁴ These two, and a third in early February, are the only wood-chopping payments.

periods daily, prisoners were allowed to be outside in the prison's high-fenced yard—presumably there was a latrine in the yard.

On that same upper floor of the jail, opposite the two Rebellion prisoner rooms, was a third room. In it, rebel prisoner Charles Durand would recall sixty years later, “unruly or disorderly women were confined... It was necessary to have them, when permitted by the gaoler, to scrub our rooms and sweep every week, and they were paid for it.”¹⁵ Parker's notes recorded three January payments to a “washwoman” or a “girl,” each for 1 shilling 3 pence.

Twice in January—once for 1 shilling 3 pence and once for 2 shillings 6 pence—Parker bought notepaper.¹⁶ Early in the month, he wrote off an unpaid debt by “R.H. Smith.”¹⁷ For some unstated purpose, on the 22nd, a “soldier” was given 7½ pence.¹⁸ At the end of the month:—“Balance in Treasury, 7½^d.”

Although some of these expenditures were undoubtedly for his personal needs, Parker did not bear all the costs. A page in his account book records that on January 23rd he collected from 23 prisoners, £1.8.9 and in the course of the following week, 5 more men contributed 7

pence more (and a penny was found).¹⁹ Parker thus apparently personally subsidized the January costs for something less than a pound.²⁰

Parker's fellow prisoners

Who were these men sharing this room with Parker? Official documents do not record which room or cell each of the several hundred jailed Rebellion prisoners occupied. Indeed, as men were arrested, released, kept for a time in strict custody, later allowed more freedom, taken ill and hospitalized, returned (if recovered) to jail, or simply moved about for other reasons, the number of occupants of any particular room or cell fluctuated. However, the population of this upper-floor room (and of the smaller room next door) remained fairly stable. Thus, though men came and went, some twenty-seven prisoners, all named on pages of Parker's records, remained together for several months.²¹ Alphabetically, they were John Brammer, Joseph Brammer, Charles Doan, Jesse Doan, Charles Durand, William G. Edmundson, Luther Elton, Michael P. Empey, George Fletcher, Aaron Friel, Adam Graham, John Graham, William Hill, Eli Irwin, Jared (or Gerard) Irwin,

¹⁵ Durand, *Reminiscences...* 334. There is no hint of their providing any other services.

¹⁶ Current newspapers were forbidden.

¹⁷ There is no known rebellion prisoner by that name.

¹⁸ “A guard of Twenty-five soldiers were constantly on guard in the gaol,” Durand, 329.

¹⁹ UCS 112894.

²⁰ What personal purchases other prisoners may have made is unknown. John Graham, for example, was sent \$2 by his sister Jane. There is no known record of how he spent it. See Letter No. 5, in Albert Schrauwers, “Letters to the Children in Prison,” *York Pioneer*, 82 (1987).

²¹ UCS 113882 and UCS 113889-91.

Reuben Lundy, John McCormack, John Montgomery, Thomas David Morrison, Timothy Munro, John G. Parker, Reuben A. Parker, William Reid, Willson Reid, Leonard Watson, Hugh D. Willson, and John D. Willson.²²

More than half of these men were born in Canada—nearly all in Upper Canada. Of the rest, eight were born in the United States, three in England, and one in Ireland. Only one of them was under 20, most were over 30, several over 40 and one²³ was 54. Nearly all were married and had children.

Although the Rebellion is sometimes referred to as “The Farmer’s Revolt,”²⁴ fewer than half the rebels in this room were farmers—and most of these were “yeomen” who owned their farms. By occupation, the others were: four merchants, two physicians, two schoolteachers, two tanners, one carpenter, wheelwright, one innkeeper, one attorney, one shoemaker, one tailor. These men were all reasonably well educated and generally successful.

Eleven of these prisoners were mem-

bers of the “Children of Peace” —a group led by David Willson, which in 1812 had broken away from the Quaker Yonge Street Meeting and formed a new religious community. Over the course of the next quarter century, the sect had grown in size, built a religious temple and other buildings, and formed a village they called “Hope” (later changed to Sharon).²⁵

Indeed, prisoners Hugh David Willson and John David Willson were David Willson’s sons.²⁶ Three other pairs of brothers—John and Joseph Brammer, Charles and Jesse Doan, and William and Willson Reid—were all also active members of the religious sect.²⁷ To complete this noting of familial connections, Eli and Jared Irwin were brothers, John G. and Reuben A. Parker were brothers and business partners, and William Graham Edmundson was Adam Graham’s nephew.

There were other linkages between the men. George Fletcher, John Graham and Reuben Lundy were also Children of Peace. Charles Durand and Reuben

²² Aaron Friel and Ruben Parker were not arrested until February; Timothy Munro not until March. Seven other men – Jonathan Doan, William Graham, Dr. H. J Hunter, W. Ketchum, Michael McFarlane, Alex Reid and Robert Smith – were also briefly imprisoned in the room.

²³ Leonard Watson.

²⁴ See Rick Salutin, and Theatre Passe Muraille. *1837, William Lyon Mackenzie and the Canadian Revolution* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1976) includes his oft-produced play, “1837: The Farmer’s Revolt.”

²⁵ For the story of the founding of the Children of Peace, see Robynne Rogers Healey, *From Quaker to Upper Canadian: Faith and Community Among Yonge Street Friends, 1801-1850*. (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006); W. John McIntyre, *Children of Peace* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994); and Albert Schrauwers, *Awaiting the Millennium: the Children of Peace and the Village of Hope* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

²⁶ Willson himself, though an active reformer and friend of William Lyon Mackenzie, was personally against the attempted armed insurrection, despite his sons’ involvement.

²⁷ Adam Graham and John Graham were apparently not related to each other.



Sharon Temple. Sharon Temple Museum Archives. 994.9.32.

Parker were brothers-in-law (having married sisters). Durand and the Parkers had together been active political reformers in Hamilton. Similarly, John Montgomery and Thomas David Morrison were Toronto reformers. Morrison and John McCormack, both physicians, undoubtedly had known each other professionally.

All of these prisoners, except the three from Hamilton,²⁸ lived in the Home District: two in Toronto, eleven in Hope or East Gwillimbury, five in Newmarket, and six from other communities in the District. Thus, prior to the Rebellion, they each had known at least some of their cellmates. In their new crowded quarters, they all came to know each other very well indeed.

“John Montgomery’s Room”

As a close camaraderie developed, they began to think of themselves as

the men in “John Montgomery’s Room.” Montgomery was, of course, the owner of the tavern where the rebels had rallied in Rebellion. Although not quite the oldest,²⁹ but undoubtedly the most respected, John Montgomery became a sort of *paterfamilias*. Parker, as their treasurer with steady contact with the world beyond the prison fences, served, as he recorded (perhaps in jest) on the cover of his notebook, as “chief magistrate.”

Indeed, this assumed “judicial” role is reflected in Parker’s early months’ accountings: prisoners are listed by name and “fined” a penny, a penny halfpenny, or even, in cases involving John McCormack, three pence or seven pence halfpenny.³⁰ It was like a game—or perhaps it was simply an affirmation of shared membership in a community. As the period of their confinement wore on, these collections continued less regularly.³¹

The prisoners’ shared life together soon evolved into a routine. Many years later, one remembered:

A time to get up and roll up the beds—a time for Meals—all are in bed by nine o’clock—we had family Devotion Every day—and Religious Services on the Sabbath—we had a good deal of singing... espe-

²⁸ Durand and the two Parkers were from Hamilton, but officially recorded as from the Home District, undoubtedly because they were each quickly transferred to Toronto’s jail.

²⁹ Montgomery was probably born in 1788 – Leonard Watson was born in 1783.

³⁰ UCS 103906 and again 103911

³¹ UCS 103915 and 103921

cially in the evenings.³²

Music soon became central to their lives together. The Doan and the Willson brothers, as well as Joseph Brammer (all members of the Children of Peace Band) sang and played instruments.³³ John Parker (a Hamilton Sunday School leader) led hymn singing—he would later buy a flute and a music book.³⁴ John Durand and John McCormack (both great singers) taught them all Scottish and Irish melodies.³⁵

Not that there were no tensions between prisoners. Durand recalled one incident:

The Irish doctor [McCormack] was very strong on his feelings on the Roman Catholic question... [and] Montgomery was... equally strong in his Protestant views. The [other] prisoners were a good-natured, intelligent set of men, not generally religious, but open-hearted and pleasant.... A discussion... arose one night...on the morality of the Roman Catholic priests in convents and in the confessional.... Montgomery held that their wickedness was a fact, the Doctor as strongly held to the negative. Contradiction followed assertion, when suddenly the contestants were heard to assault each other in the dark.... [Sleeping prisoners] lying thickly on the floor,...were aroused... candles were lighted...the combatants were found in the most laughable positions; John with his shirt torn, but ready to continue the contest, and the Doctor bare as the day of his birth.

Friends intervened, explanations were made and tempers cooled, amid peals of laughter... Although the balance of the night was spent in quietness, the incident was not soon forgotten.³⁶

If these residual enmities ever re-erupted—or if there were other expressions of hostility between the prisoners—Durand must have forgotten. Indeed, the mellowed memory of Durand, after a sixty-year fruitful career as a prominent Toronto attorney, painted a picture of prison life as almost idyllic:

Whence came now our daily bread? Our wives, always faithful in trouble, and friends, did not forget their dear ones in gaol. They were busy outside in their peaceful, comfortable homes in the country, making up all kinds of good things. Every few days, and generally at stated times, sleighs and wagons, according to the state of the weather, came in with cooked meats, vast quantities of poultry, fowls, ducks, geese and turkeys, with all kinds of pies, vegetables, apples, preserves, and whatever they thought their husbands and sons had liked at their once happy homes.

He continued his paean in praise of feminine cleverness:

Women are always kind to the imprisoned, and as home is their sphere, where the kindest affections reign supreme, they never need urging in this respect, are far more inventive and thoughtful than men.... [T]he pies and pudding, and stuffed poultry

³² Doel, “Rebellion ...” As a young boy, Doel was imprisoned in December for only a week or so, but his 1896 memory of the prisoners’ daily routine is probably accurate.

³³ Ethel Willson, Trewhella, “The War of 1812-14 and the Rebellion of 1837,” in “The Story of Sharon” *Canadian Quaker History Journal*, 77 (2012).

³⁴ UCS 113903, UCS 113884

³⁵ Durand, *Reminiscences...*, 327.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 324-25.

were not only used as eatables, but were the precious and kindly purveyors of news from home, love-letters, political news, written greetings of dearest wives, sisters and brothers. Laughable it often was to see how the little missives were concealed in the fowls, the cakes and the pies.³⁷

February

The jolly mood of this Durand reminiscence is markedly at odds with other accounts. Methodist minister John Doel recalled that when he visited, “poor John Montgomery would sit for hours sying [sic] and brooding over his troubles.”³⁸ Worse, perhaps, were the fears and grief felt by many prisoners’ families that winter. Children of Peace founder David Willson, with two sons and two sons-in-law imprisoned, was moved to send them a lengthy prayerful poem. It began:

*Dear children of our love and care,
Our evening thoughts, our morning prayer,
In your deep grief we freely join,
It is the change and turn of time.*

And continued:

*We see your offspring circling round
No fathers smiles on them abound.
Tears flowing from their mothers eyes
Are mingled with their mournful cries
All's done for them that can be done
The wife the mother child and son...*

After many sad lines, the poem concluded:

May God have pity, truth arise

*To still the tear that floods your eyes
May saints and angels hear us groan
And bring to our peaceful home
Spare not your minds to flee abroad
But still think on your home and God
May heaven and God think on your prayer
And grant you mercy where you are
No wealth, no land, no store so dear
As you that floods the flowing tear
Each one is like the dove alone
Till we shall die or see you home³⁹*

Parker’s recorded February purchases were similar to those in January: sugar, potatoes, flour, pepper and tea, along with soap and candles. Floor washing and “tub” emptying⁴⁰ were paid for—plus some “cloride[sic] of lime,” presumably as a disinfectant. There were also payments—2 shillings each time—to John Kidd for “storage,” but no noting of what was being stored. (Perhaps it was a way of rewarding the jailor for his continued compassionate service.) The month ended showing total expenses of 1 pound 5 shillings, 7½ pence.⁴¹ Recorded income: from 21 prisoners, 1 pound, 6 shillings, and 3 pence.⁴² Plus “fines” from six men totaling 1 shilling and 4 pence.

By this time, a few more men had joined this prisoner family: Aaron Friel, in early February and Timothy Munro in mid-March. In late February Reuben Parker arrived, arrested for allegedly “mediating some plan for the rescue of his brother.”⁴³

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁸ Quoted by Guillet, *Lives...*, 115. The original source of the quote has not been found.

³⁹ The full poem is in Schrauwers, “Letters...”

⁴⁰ The term is not defined – probably slops from washing & cooking.

⁴¹ UCS 113906, UCS 113909.

⁴² 21 @ 1/3 = £1/6/3 – UCS 113906.

⁴³ Edward A. Theller, *Canada in 1837-38, Vol. 1* (Philadelphia: Henry F. Anners, 1841), 167.

(There was little evidence; Reuben was released in late April without being charged.)

March

Parker's accounts for March reflect changes taking place among the prisoners. The usual purchases of tea, &c. were accompanied by "drawing pencil and lead" for 7 shillings and 5 pence on March 2nd; and "Paper, tea, &c" on the 9th for 11 shillings and 10 pence. Most startling, however, was a purchase on the 19th: "3 knives—4/6."⁴⁴ Why would prisoners suddenly need knives? Prisoner purchases from the Lesslies can hardly have been secret. How could prison authorities possibly sanction such a purchase and allow inmates to have knives?

To understand these purchases requires a bit of background. Among the founding members of David Willson's Children of Peace, were John and Ebenezer Doan. As master carpenters and joiners (like their father, Jonathan Doan), both men were centrally involved in erecting the community's buildings—and especially in crafting the altar of the central temple building—the "Sharon Temple," as it is now known—completed in 1831.



Box YP015 by Jesse Doan— Parks Canada/Marni Wilson/50.2.15

⁴⁵ Constructed entirely of wood, it is an elegant example of master craftsmanship.⁴⁶ Although neither of John Doan's sons, Charles and Jesse Doan, was a carpenter by trade, they both learned fine wood-crafting skills and were undoubtedly among those who helped erect and adorn the Temple and its furnishings.

One day in early March, Jesse Doan took a scrap of maple firewood and began to carve it, shaping it into a box—a small box—2 ½" long, 1 ¼" wide, and barely ¾" high. Neatly crafted, with a sliding dovetail joint lid, it was a lovely creation.

The box would perhaps have been long forgotten, even lost,⁴⁷ had not Jesse Doan proceeded to write in ink on its smooth surface.⁴⁸ On the lid, in an elegant script, he penned "E.D.," and around the outside, "Jesse Doan—To his

⁴⁴ UCS 113905.

⁴⁵ For the story of the elder Doans as skilled craftsmen, see John McIntyre and William C. Reeve, *Canadian Quaker Master Builders & Cabinetmakers* (Kingston: Kingston Press, 2018).

⁴⁶ Now the Sharon Temple National Historic Site and Museum. See McIntyre. *Children ...*, 167-68.

⁴⁷ This box is here designated "YP015." Every box referred to in this article has a "YP" accession number in an Inventory of 1837 Rebellion Prisoners' Boxes, first published in the *York Pioneer*, 2005, and since enlarged as more boxes were discovered.

⁴⁸ He possibly had John Parker do the inscribing.

-- Mother at -- Hope.”⁴⁹ To confirm the creation as his, on the bottom of the box he wrote, “Made by Him in Toronto Jail, March 12th 1838.”⁵⁰

Its craftsmanship testifies to the skill of its creator. Despite its small size, there is no hint that the box was to be hidden or kept secret. Moreover, despite the musings of some authors a century or more later, crafting such a box with a pocket-knife or piece of broken glass would not have been possible.⁵¹ Sharp, precision instruments were needed to create it. (See the Appendix for a more extended explanation of prisoner box-making.)

As already noted, visits to prisoners by family and friends were allowed—they came bringing not only news and sympathy, but also letters, food, clean laundry, and personal items.⁵² The Doans had a reputation as woodcrafters.⁵³ It is entirely possible that a family member or friend supplied, perhaps on request,

wood-crafting tools. Jesse Doan’s box was but the earliest known little box to have been crafted in Toronto’s jail—others soon followed.

Later that same month, Jesse’s elder brother, Charles, crafted another box, 3½” long, 2½” wide, 1⅜” high.⁵⁴ A *memento mori* to his deceased infant son, Charles inscribed the box’s sliding lid:



Box lid YP009 by Charles Doan

*Memento of David Willson Doan
who died Aug 28, 1837, aged 16 mos. 10 days.*

⁴⁹ “E.D” was his mother, Elizabeth Doan; “Hope” was the name of his home village.

⁵⁰ The box still exists, having been preserved by the Doan family for several generations, and in 1938 given to Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, whose estate left it to the people of Canada. It is now in the collection at Laurier House in Ottawa.

⁵¹ E.g. Dorothy Duncan, “Prisoner’s Boxes,” *Canadian Antique Collector*, April 1971. See especially, Darryl Withrow, “With glass or with chisel? The Boxes and the tools and skills needed to create them,” in Chris Raible, et al, *From Hands Now Striving to Be Free* (Toronto: York Pioneer and Historical Society, 2009).

⁵² Some Doan and Graham correspondence is found in the David Willson papers in the archives of the Sharon Temple. Unfortunately, very little personal correspondence of rebel prisoners has survived. See Schrauwers, “Letters...”

⁵³ See note 46 above.

⁵⁴ Charles had contemplated making a box for some weeks. On January 19th, Mary Doan had written her husband about their soon-to-be-born child, that “its name will be David W D” and that “I think he will get a box.” He was born 12 days later. Mary’s letter closed, “I still remain unhappy,” but added as a post script, “a little present from prison is very acceptable.” See Schrauwers, “Letters...,” Letter 1, Mary Doan to Charles Doan.

⁵⁵ The poem may have been composed for Charles Doan by John Parker. For more on this box as reflection of the faith of the Children of Peace, see McIntyre, *Children...*, 169-70.



And he inscribed on its bottom:

*Charles Doan arrested Dec. 10th committed
to prison Toronto where I now remain Mar.
31 1838.*

The inscriptions on the two sides, in the voice of the deceased child, reveal both the father's sadness and his profound faith.⁵⁵

*Dear parents, it's a mournful day:
In tears your eyes are seen:
Haste not to put your grief away,
May it you blessings bring.
My innocence dear father, learn
And press it on thy mind;
From worldly cares and anger turn
That thou may mercy find.*

*In this dear mother Lay my toys,
The props that closed my eyes;
These little gifts were [?]e my joys,
Now in my grave I lie;
My tombstone standing by my grave
My tombstone standing by my grave
My friends may on it see
And read the sorrows of my days;
Prepare and come to me.*

⁵⁶ UCS 113905 & 113910.

⁵⁷ Nearly 900 men were imprisoned that winter for allegedly taking part in an armed insurrection. Although many had by March been released, several hundred were still held in the Toronto jail. See Toronto Branch, Ontario Genealogical Society, editors. "Persons Arrested for Insurrection or Treason," [1837 December 07 to 1838 November 01] based on Appendix I of Charles Lindsey, *The Life and Times of William Lyon Mackenzie* (Toronto, P.R. Randal, 1862, reprinted Toronto: Coles Publishing Co., 1971).

A few weeks before the imprisoned father completed his box, a second son was born to Mary (Willson) Doan and Charles Doan; he was christened, David Willson Doan thus perpetuating the name. The box's lid featured a sketch of a house in a wooded setting, and signed with initials: WGE in one corner, JGP in the other. Schoolteacher William Graham Edmundson was the artist while John G. Parker, who was something of a poet, probably helped with the inscriptions. The crafting of this box was thus the cooperative enterprise of at least three different men—it may have involved others as well.

Parker's accounts show that box-making prompted more purchases. On 19 March, he spent 3 shillings for varnish and a shilling on a bottle of ink. Two days later he bought "paper, knife, &c." for 11 shillings, eight pence; on the 26th "knives, etc." (the cost is illegible); and on the 30th another knife, for 1 shilling and sixpence. He also spent 3/6 for two quires of paper.⁵⁶

April

After being held in limbo for three months, there was a restlessness among the prisoners. The government, at last, started to deal with its large imprisoned population.⁵⁷ Officials began the process of sorting the prisoners—those

deemed most responsible for inciting the armed insurrection, those who took up arms and actively joined the Rebellion, and those who had been caught up in the affair but were now of little threat to society. Special legislation passed by the Upper Canada parliament empower the Lieutenant Governor to release men, if they pleaded guilty, promised good behaviour for three years, and provided financial securities. Hundreds of prisoners (with legal guidance) petitioned for “Her Majesty’s most gracious pardon” by swearing they had been “seduced” from their allegiance during the “recent treasonable insurrections” by “artifices used by desperate and unprincipled persons.”⁵⁸ A special commission chaired by former Attorney General Robert Jameson⁵⁹ had begun reviewing the cases of all men indicted and jailed. Despite their pleas, however, a number of rebels were brought to trial.

The first trials—politically and historically the most significant trials—were for Samuel Lount and Peter Matthews. Matthews had been arrested in December, but not until late January was Lount captured trying to reach the safety of New York.⁶⁰ Both men were jailed in



Illustration in Mackenzie's Caroline Almanac for 1840

Toronto—in the most secure cells (in the lowest level) of the building. Late in March they were each tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged. News of the trial spread a deep gloom throughout the jail. (Charles Doan’s sad box was dated March 31st.)

A scaffold for the public execution was erected in the yard between the jail and the courthouse. On 12 April Lount and Matthews were publicly hanged. A huge crowd of sympathizers assembled as public witnesses. Imprisoned comrades watched the grim spectacle through the jail’s barred windows.

The execution had a profound effect upon the men in Montgomery’s Room. Their common grief, their common fears—and their common faith—found a

⁵⁸ Jesse Doan petition, March 17th, USC 108575-7. Similar language was used in petitions filed by many prisoners that Spring of 1838.

⁵⁹ For a detailed discussion of these issues see Rainer Baehre, “Trying the Rebels: Emergency Legislation and the Colonial Executive’s Overall Legal Strategy in the Upper Canadian Rebellion,” and Paul Romney and Barry Wright, “The Toronto Treason Trials, March-May 1838,” – both in F. Murray Greenwood and Barry Wright, *Canadian State Trials Volume II: Rebellion and Invasion in the Canadas, 1837-1839* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, 2002).

⁶⁰ There are, of course, many published versions of the stories of Lount and Matthews. See especially the biographical entries for each of them by Ronald J. Stagg: *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. VII* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).



Box YP098 by J Doan, MP Empey & JG Parker



Augustus Charles Pugin, "Père La Chaise", Paris and Its Environs Displayed, 1829.

collective expression. The wood-crafting skills of Jesse Doan shaped an elegant little box—6" long, 2 ¼" wide 2 ⅝" high, with an over-hanging lid,⁶¹ four short glued-on legs, as if it were a miniature blanket box. Michael Peter Empey provided the box's most striking feature: a scene of grand tombs and monuments in one of the world's most famous cemeteries—*Père Lachaise*—in Paris. Empey's drawing is an almost exact copy of an image by a French artist, Charles Pugin, first published in an 1829 volume of scenes of Paris.⁶² Prisoner John G. Parker,⁶³ inscribed the edges of the box's lid to identify not only maker, cemetery and artist, but also that it was made in Toronto's jail on: "*April xvi mdc-ccxxxviii*"—four days after the hanging).

An inscription on the box identifies its intended recipient: "*to William Graham East Gwillimbury.*" The senior Wil-

liam Graham was born in Ireland and there married to Hester Reid. The couple (after a period in New York) settled in East Gwillimbury with their eight children. Although not themselves members of the Children of Peace, many of their children joined the sect. William Graham had died just over a year before.⁶⁴ The box was a gift to his son, the junior William Graham. He was married to Elizabeth Doan, sister of the two Doan brothers. In December, he had briefly been a cellmate before being released without a trial.⁶⁵

On the bottom of the box, Parker inscribed the names of twenty-four "*prisoners in John Montgomerys room*" (all had been previously referred to in his account book).

Missing from this April list⁶⁶ of roommates are four names: Reuben A.

⁶¹ Like all the known boxes: a sliding dovetail joint lid.

⁶² Augustus Charles Pugin, *Paris and Its Environs Displayed in a Series of Picturesque Views* (London, Robert Jennings, 1829). How Empey had access to Pugin's work remains a mystery. See: Chris Raible, "A Picturesque View on an 1837 Rebellion Prisoner's Box," *York Pioneer*, (2015).

⁶³ The writing is very similar to other boxes known to have been inscribed by Parker.

⁶⁴ He died on February 4, 1837.

⁶⁵ Toronto Branch, OGS "Persons..."

⁶⁶ Its inscription: *April xvi mdcxxxviii*.

Parker, John's brother, was released on 16 April, the day the box was inscribed. Thomas D. Morrison and Charles Durand, may have been reticent about their names being inscribed with those of their fellow prisoners, even though it was a memorial box. Morrison would be formally tried on 24 April—he would plead his total innocence of participation in the Rebellion; indeed he firmly denied approving of the Rebellion in any way. Successful in his plea and released, he immediately fled the country.⁶⁷ Durand did not go on trial until May. Unlike

Morrison, Durand was convicted and sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land.⁶⁸ There is no clear reason for the omission of John Graham's name.⁶⁹

Making more boxes

The box-making of Jesse and Charles Doan inspired their fellow prison-



YP098 by J Doan, MP
Empey & JG Parker

ers. Parker's accounts for the month record purchases of several more knives,⁷⁰ also three bottles of varnish (1/3 a bottle) and at least ten sheets of sandpaper (1/ a sheet). The execution of Lount and Matthews prompted a flurry of box making. By the end of April, sixteen of the prisoner cellmates had made (or made for them) a total of thirty-seven boxes.⁷¹

The inscriptions on each of these boxes explicitly name the prisoner or prisoners involved in making it.⁷² Each also bears the date, the location where it was made, and the name of the person for whom it was to be given: a wife, a child, a parent, a friend. Inscriptions reveal much about their makers' lives and feelings. Most of these boxes were memorials to their martyred rebellion leaders, Samuel Lount and Peter Matthews.

Several makers, prompted no doubt

⁶⁷ The next day, April 25th, he left the country. See Victor Loring "Thomas David Morrison," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 9 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 1985.

⁶⁸ On 20 May, Durand's name was inscribed on a box (YP135). His sentence, however, was reduced and he was banished from the country in August. See, John Weaver, "Charles Durand," *Dictionary of Hamilton Biography*, Vol. 1 (Hamilton: Dictionary of Hamilton Biography, 1981).

⁶⁹ Perhaps the omission was a clerical error. One other prisoner, Michael McFarlane, was also named on this box – he was imprisoned for only a month, from April 14 to May 17 – no box made by or for him has been discovered.

⁷⁰ Some of his entries are simply "knives," not recording how many.

⁷¹ There was also a box made by several "state prisoners."

⁷² A prisoner's name on a box did not necessarily mean that he personally crafted the box. It may have been crafted for him.

by grim memories of viewing the hangings through the jail's barred windows, added a quatrain written by a prisoner poet—almost certainly John Parker:

*I'm clinging to the massy grate
To catch a glimpse of heaven's pure light
Uncertain as to certain fate
But trust in God to set all right*⁷³

Many of the inscribed messages are expressions of their makers' profound religious faith:

*Tho chains, darks[sic] cells & bolts surround /
My trust [in] God is ever found*⁷⁴

*Early in the day / Listen to the Lord / Jesus
thou obey / Search his holy word.*⁷⁵

*Now in your youthful days, / Choose the way
of truth;*

*To God the saviour go / While in the
bloom of youth.*⁷⁶

*Long nights of darkness reign below / With
scarce a twinkling ray;*

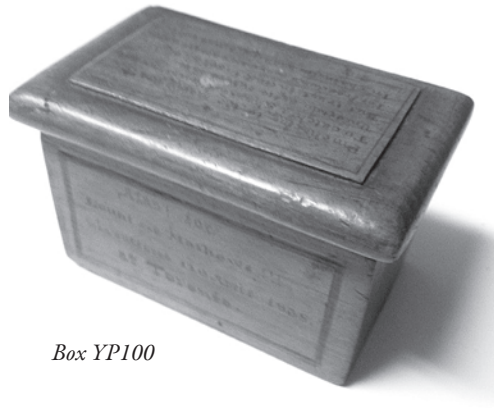
*But the bright world to which we go, / Is
everlasting day.*⁷⁷

Some inscribed phrases, however, were less pious and much more sentimental:

*I long from these dark cells to be free
Which hinders my joy & communion
with thee*

*Though now my tyrants like billows do foam
Surely all will be peace when I'm with thee at
home.*⁷⁸

And some with more militant phrases, like these two:



Box YP100

*If tyrants continue to keep us apart,
Still united we'll be in mind and heart
INDUSTRY AND GOOD NAME*⁷⁹



Box YP022

*For freedoms sons can't always dwell
In chains, in bondage, bolts & cell
Equal Rights Public Safety*⁸⁰

⁷³ On boxes made by Timothy Munro (YP063), William Reid (YP041), John Parker (YP022) and a box made by several prisoners (YP067).

⁷⁴ John Montgomery - Box YP125.

⁷⁵ Timothy Munro - Box YP065

⁷⁶ Jesse Doan - Box YP105,

⁷⁷ Adam Graham - Box YP083 - Isaac Watts hymn.

⁷⁸ Eli Irwin - Box YP046 - the author of the poem is unknown.

⁷⁹ Reuben A. Parker - Box YP100.

⁸⁰ John G. Parker - Box YP022.

A Gift in Gratitude

On one box crafted in late April, the camaraderie of incarceration—and of grief—found expression. Its crafting was a collective effort. Under Jesse Doan's watchful eye perhaps, some men carved with knives, others sanded the box's surfaces, Empey drew an image identified "Toronto Jail" on its lid, others inscribed words, others brushed on varnish over its finished surface to protect its drawing and inscriptions.⁸¹ One side bore the quatrain beginning, "*Of we cling to the massy grate.*" Beautifully crafted and strikingly similar to the box, already described, made by prisoners in John Montgomery's Room,⁸² this box bears no makers' names, simply a collective identification. Indeed, its most striking feature is the inscription on its front panel:

*To the Venerable and rev'd
Dr. J. Strachan
From the state prisoners*

Not one of these "state prisoners" was an Anglican,⁸³ yet they crafted a box for Toronto's Archdeacon, soon-to-be-Bishop! Not one of these prisoners favoured the clergy reserves, yet they crafted a box for that law's most ardent defender! Not one



of these prisoners admired the "Family Compact," yet they crafted a box to be presented to the Compact's most prominent member! These "state prisoners,"⁸⁴ charged with High Treason for voluntarily joining an armed insurrection and now awaiting punishment—public hanging, transportation to Van Diemen's Land, imprisonment in the Kingston penitentiary, or banishment from their lands and livelihood—were giving a box to the *venerable and revered Doctor John Strachan!*⁸⁵

(A search of Strachan's papers and other records found neither mention of the box, nor confirmation of his personally having visited imprisoned rebels, but very likely he did. Strachan was a pastor

⁸¹ There is alas, no record of the cooperative making of this box.

⁸² YP098 with its image of *Pere La Chaise* is longer and has shorter legs.

⁸³ Empey may once have identified himself as Anglican, but later census records recorded him as Presbyterian. See Nancy Saunders Maitland, "Michael Peter Empey: The Myth and the Man," *Waterloo Historical Society*, Volume 103 (2015).

⁸⁴ The men listed as "Prisoners in John Montgomery's Room" on box YP098.

⁸⁵ This box has an interesting history. For a more detailed study, see Chris Raible, "Uncertain as to future fate": Archdeacon John Strachan visits Rebellion prisoners in Toronto's jail," *York Pioneer*, vol. 114 (2019).

as well as a priest. The jail was in his parish, close to his church. It is, of course, possible that this collective prisoner expression of respect and gratitude for Strachan was a purely political act, that the prisoners hoped their gift might prompt him to use his undoubted personal influence to mitigate their punishment. If so, nothing in the official records suggests that he did. Nor do any later reminiscences of rebel prisoners suggest that by making a gift to Strachan they hoped to gain their early release.)⁸⁶

During that winter of their discontent and incarceration, the prisoners were also visited by other Toronto clergy.⁸⁷ Charles Durand, writing sixty years after the fact, recalled that “various ministers of the gospel used to visit us by turns.”⁸⁸ Methodist Rev. James Richardson (whose church was on Adelaide Street, just north of the jail), and Congregationalist Rev. John Roaf (whose church was also nearby), in appreciation for their ministering, were each presented little boxes inscribed as gifts to their wives (right).

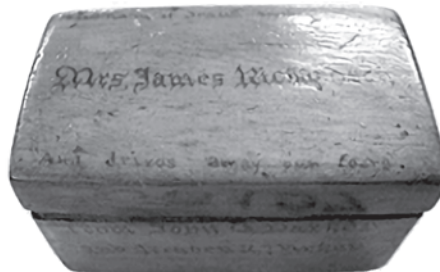
Some of these pastoral calls offered more than spiritual guidance. At least one clerical visitor, the Rev. John Roaf, brought financial assistance. In April, according to Parker’s accounting, Roaf gave him cash—4 pounds, 10 shillings and

10 pence—and again in May, another 2 pounds, 10 shillings.⁸⁹ (Parker’s record also noted a gift from another visitor: 10 dollars from an unidentified “Mr. P.”)⁹⁰ These contributions confirm that these prisoners were anything but isolated from supporters in the world outside the prison walls.

John Graham’s name is clearly inscribed as the maker of three more boxes made in this April-May period. Each is



Above: box YP127 by the Parker brothers
Below: box YP134 by Reid and J.G. Parker



inscribed as a gift to his sister Hester, at home in Hope. In early May, Elizabeth wrote to her brother-in-law⁹¹ reporting

⁸⁶ The only known reference to this box is “An Incident of 1837-38,” *Toronto Evening Telegram*, February 10, 1912. The article is the source of the image of the box.

⁸⁷ Visits by Methodist ministers – John Doel and William Ryerson were noted above.

⁸⁸ Durand, *Reminiscences ...*, 325.

⁸⁹ UCS 113902 and 113904.

⁹⁰ UCS 113899, possibly James Hervey Price, a prominent Toronto reformer.

⁹¹ Elizabeth was married to John’s brother William, Jane to his brother Jeremiah.

family news and chiding him for neglecting to acknowledge an earlier gift of \$2 “from your sister [in-law]... she would be pleased if you would send her a box.” Elizabeth continued, “We have all received a box from you but her and Richard’s wife. If you make any more, your Mother wishes you to send each of them one.”⁹²

A striking example of box-making skills was a box crafted in April by Jesse Doan. Made of walnut, a bit larger than other boxes—8” long—all six of its surfaces were embellished with shaped maple or birch inlays—circles, ovals, hearts, diamonds, stars. The messages inscribed in these inlays offer evidence of the breadth of Doan’s knowledge and of the depth of his militancy:⁹³

*To claim their shrine in Freedom's home
Her armed ?? soon shall come*
(source not found)

Where Liberty dwells there is my country
(from a letter by Benjamin Franklin)

A day an hour of liberty is worth a whole eternity of bondage
(line from a play by John Addison)

Who would be free themselves must strike the blow.
(from a poem by Lord Byron)

*Tyrants their fetters forge in vain
To crush thy spirit Liberty!
Like brittle glass shall burst the chain
From hands now striving to be free.*
(poem possibly by John G. Parker)

*Charity Hope Joy Peace Love Faith Justice
and Equality*
(inspirational words and phrases)



YP013 by Jesse Doan

Dieu et La Liberte (attributed to Voltaire)

*Hail to that land whatever land it be
Which struggling hard is panting to be free*
(attributed to Oliver Goldsmith)

The Spread of Box Making

During this period, at least nine other boxes were inscribed with the names of men imprisoned elsewhere in the jail.⁹⁴

⁹² Letter No. 5 in Schrauwers, “Letters...”

⁹³ Doan was, perhaps, showing off his knowledge and his skills. A box he made in June (YP014) featured phrases in both French and Latin and a stanza of a Robert Burns poem.

⁹⁴ William Alves, John Anderson, Perciphen Hawke, George Lamb, Joseph Matthews, Joseph Shep-

How or where each of these boxes was actually made is uncertain. It is likely that they were in fact crafted and inscribed by men in Montgomery's Room. Men in that room had the skills, the tools, the experience—and, apparently, the permission of the jailor—to make boxes. In that room, in the course of a few weeks, box making had apparently developed into a made-to-order enterprise.

Years later, Durand recalled:

[T]he prisoners used to make all kinds of memento boxes of cedar and Canadian maple wood -- boxes for snuff, for needles, money or rings. On the boxes all kinds of mottoes [sic] would be written in indelible ink, and the names of their dearest outside friends, wives, sisters, mothers and sweet-hearts were remembered. The boxes were really very beautiful, with carefully fitted sliding lids. ...Hundreds were sent out to friends and are now, no doubt, existing among the families of York and the city of Toronto, and many are, perhaps, scattered in the United States... I have some now in my house.⁹⁵

Making a box required various skills—crafting the grooves for its sliding lid, shaping its full form, inscribing its names and messages, illustrating or decorating it, varnishing or protecting it. Box making was a not a private pursuit. In a tightly crowded room, it became a collective activity. Nor was box making a secret activity—indeed, jailor Kidd, may

have encouraged it. Box making prisoners engaged in creative activity were, perhaps, less likely to complain—or to try to escape.

Indeed, apart from the earlier (unsubstantiated) accusations that Reuben Parker was attempting to free his brother, there is little evidence that these prisoners ever seriously planned an escape. Quite the contrary. “General” Edward Theller, an Irish American had been captured back in January while leading a failed invasion of Upper Canada from Detroit. Eventually transferred to Toronto, he was imprisoned in the room adjacent to the boxmakers’ room. Theller, Charles Durand recalled,

made a proposition... to rise upon a certain day... overpower the guards, take their arms and escape. This could have been done had it been finally determined on, but John G. Parker and I opposed it... [T]he event would have been of frightful consequences, [but] never happened.⁹⁶

Theller, in his published account of the perils of his activities and imprisonment, made only brief reference to his period in the Toronto jail—and made no mention of prisoner box-making. From Toronto he was transferred to the citadel in Quebec, from which, a few months later, he successfully escaped.⁹⁷

During the winter, several Ameri-

ard, Michael Shepard, Leonard Watson and Henry Weaver. There is no reference to any of them in Parker's accounts, no hint of their having been transferred to the room.

⁹⁵ Durand, *Reminiscences...*, 326. Box YP135 is the only known Durand box. Boxes are now in many places in Ontario, two other provinces, and five states. One found its way to Australia, two more to the United Kingdom – all three are now back in Ontario.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁹⁷ See vol. 2, chapters 8 & 9 of E. A. Theller, *Canada in 1837-38, Showing by Historical Facts, the*

cans among the Rebellion prisoners, Theller one of them, had complained of their treatment to the U.S. President. In response, a State Department official, Aaron Vail, was sent to investigate. In late April he visited the Toronto jail, talked to a number of prisoners and left town soon thereafter. He reported to Washington that there was little for the American government to be concerned about. Montgomery's room occupant Aaron Friel, the only prisoner named in Vail's report, was indeed released shortly thereafter.⁹⁸

May

Focused as they might be on such creative activity, these men were, however, anything but free from suffering the ordeals of extended close confinement. Not surprisingly, Parker's accounts record some purchases probably made for medicinal purposes: In March:

tamarind, lozenges, ointment, acid and even rhubarb. In April: Rochelle salts (twice), ointment (2 boxes, 1 bottle) and sulphur. In May: walnut oil (twice), Peruvian Bark, acid (twice), and more Rochelle salts. And in early June: Epsom salts and seidlitz powders. The specific reason for these purchases, and for whom, Parker did not record.⁹⁹ Nor is it clear whether the snuff he bought on 3 April and again on 5 May was for his own sniffing or was shared with his cellmates.¹⁰⁰

In May, dozens of rebel prisoners, having confessed their guilt and provided financial sureties, were released. Among them were more than half of the Montgomery's Room cellmates.¹⁰¹ Parker's accounts for April record purchases of four carpet bags, but their intended purpose is not clear.¹⁰² They may or may not have been acquired for Parker's personal use.

In the next few months, as many pris-

Causes of the Late Attempted Revolution, and of its Failure (Philadelphia: Henry F. Anners, 1841). See also, Colin Read, "Edward Alexander Theller, the 'Supreme Vagabond' – 'Courageous, honest, and true'?" *Ontario History*, 84, 1 (March, 1992).

⁹⁸ Vail, after visiting 35 of them, expressed confidence that the Americans "arrested on mere suspicion, or upon charges unsusceptible to direct proof" would soon be released and that the others, men "whose imprudent conduct betrayed them, in violation of the laws of the United States, into acts of open hostility against the people of Canada ... [would] be dealt with in the mildest manner consistent with the demands of justice and the nature of their offence, without any feeling of vindictiveness or resentment, and in a spirit of lenity and forgiveness." A. Vail to Secretary of State Forsyth, 5 May 1838, *Documents Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Vol. 23*, Doc. 39. Lieutenant Governor Arthur reported that Vail's visit was a "strange mission" but he had, "of course given Mr. Vail a courteous reception." Arthur to Colborne, 25 April 1838, in Charles R. Sanderson, *The Arthur Papers, Vol 1 1822-1838* (Toronto: Toronto Public Libraries and University of Toronto Press, 1957), 89. For a very different version of the U.S. officials visit, see Theller, *Canada...* vol.2, 9-11.

⁹⁹ UCS 113884, 113886, 113888, 113897, 113899, 113901, 113903, 113905, 113912, 113914, 113917, and 113920.

¹⁰⁰ UCS 113898 and 113904.

¹⁰¹ Released during May: John and Joseph Brammer, George Fletcher, Aaron Friel, John Graham, William Hill, Eli and Gerard Irwin, Reuben Lundy, Timothy Munro, William Reid, and John D. Willson

¹⁰² UCS 113901 and 113902.

oners were released or transferred elsewhere, Toronto's jail became less crowded. By mid-May, more than half the original Montgomery's Room prisoners had been released. Only eleven of the twenty-seven Montgomery's Room men were still imprisoned there. Undoubtedly other prisoners were transferred to the room from the less comfortable cells on the floors below, but Parker's account book made little or no record of these newcomers.¹⁰³ Very possibly some of them also became box makers, but there is no known way to identify them.

With so many of his cellmates being released while he remained incarcerated, Jesse Doan found expression of his feelings with box making. That month he crafted four more boxes; one was for his daughter Sally Ann:



Box YP045 by Jesse Doan

*Though daughter dear my fate is hard
Yet freedoms sons have great reward
And I shall clame [sic] a share
When freedoms sons shall strike the blow
And lay those proud usurpers Low,
That keeps us in despair. [sic].*

Meanwhile, Parker made another four boxes while Charles Durand and John McCormick each made (or had made for them) boxes.¹⁰⁴

Box making continued. In the next weeks, scores of boxes were crafted—but in which rooms or cells cannot be determined. Many more prisoners became involved in the collective, cooperative activity. As box making spread, most of these “new” boxes were similar to the earlier boxes—one, by or for Henry Weaver,¹⁰⁵ was inscribed with Parker's initials “J.G.P.” and featured his poetry:

*Freedom's sons were caused to dwell,
With chain and bolts in dreary cell
And Witness'd from the Massy grate,
Poor Lount and Matthews meet their fate;
These hours of sorrow yet will end,
And Jesus be the pris'ners' friend.*

Sixty years later, Charles Durand still retained poignant memories of frequent visits to the jail by his wife and their infant daughter Helen:

¹⁰³ One Parker entry, for 30 May, (UCS 113921) shows a 5-shilling payment by John Anderson, a prisoner who, with Parker, would soon be transferred to Fort Henry. By late May, Anderson may have become a cellmate – or, perhaps, he was paying for a box (YP037), made in April or May and inscribed with his name. If so, it is the only known record of box-making involving a financial contribution.

¹⁰⁴ Neither man had previously had a box inscribed with his name. Indeed, Durand's description of prisoner box making, noted earlier, was written entirely in the third person, with no suggestion that Durand himself was one of those engaged in the activity. Two other prisoners remaining Montgomery's Room prisoners, Luther Elton and Hugh D. Watson would each be credited with a box later. No known box is credited to the other remaining prisoner, Willson Reid.

¹⁰⁵ A petition (UCS107419) seeking a pardon was signed: “Henry X Weaver his mark.”

¹⁰⁶ Durand, *Reminiscences*, 331. Durand wrote that the box made for the child was still (1897) in existence.

Box YP038 by/for Henry Weaver



[We] would place [her] upon the prison floor and watch [her] smile and play.... One of the little boxes... with her name upon it... was made and given to the child.... This lovely little daughter...became sick and died on the 14th of August, 1838.¹⁰⁶

June

The last expenditures entered in Parker's accounts show purchases not unlike his purchases during the previous four months of the prisoners' life together:

1 June ½? Ep. salt
 1 Box [??] P[??]
 6 sheets Sand Paper
 ½ doz steel pens
 5 Butter –
 2d June
 8 Sugar
 1 Tea --

On 2 June, conditions abruptly changed.¹⁰⁷ Four Montgomery's Room prisoners, all of whom had been sentenced to be transported—John Montgomery, John Parker, Willson Reid and Leonard Wat-

son—were chained, put aboard a steamer, and shipped to Fort Henry in Kingston, the first leg of a projected journey to Van Diemen's Land.¹⁰⁸

A number of other jailed prisoners were undoubtedly transferred to fill the room, but Jesse Doan, Charles Durand, William Graham Edmundson. Michael Peter Empey, Luther E.H. Elton, John McCormack, and Hugh David Willson remained—the last of the original prisoners still imprisoned in “John Montgomery's Room.”

Epilogue

Nearly all of the seventeen Montgomery's Room prisoners who were released in April and May returned to their homes and families and, in time, settled back into something like their former lives.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Entries in Parker's account book ceased.

¹⁰⁸ They were not alone – transferred with them were 8 other Rebellion prisoners (Upper Canada State Minute Book K, p.362).

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Morrison fled to the United States, but in a few years, following a general amnesty, returned to his practice of medicine in Toronto. Reuben Parker soon moved from Hamilton to Toronto.

Charles Durand and John McCormack were held in Toronto until August, when they each were banished from the province, only to return in a few years to their former careers in the Toronto area.¹¹⁰ Jesse Doan and Hugh David Willson, in July, were transferred to the Kingston Penitentiary—in August, Doan, and in October, Willson, were released to return to family and the Children of Peace in Hope. In late July, two of four held at Fort Henry, Willson Reid and John Montgomery—along with ten other Rebellion prisoners—successfully escaped.¹¹¹ They reached freedom in New York and settled in Rochester for several years, until a general amnesty allowed their return to Upper Canada. Reid went back to his home and tannery—he was later elected as a York County councillor.¹¹² “John Montgomery, after five years in Rochester, returned home – as he had promised at his trial, he was once more “living on Yonge Street.”¹¹³

John G. Parker and Leonard Watson also attempted escape, but they were soon

re-captured. In late autumn 1838, along with other Rebellion prisoners at the Fort, they were removed to Quebec and from there shipped off to Van Diemen’s Land. However, *en route* they stopped in England, where legal actions were brought on their behalf by sympathetic British reformers. After months of legal wrangling, in July 1839 they were released on condition that they not return to Upper Canada.¹¹⁴ Parker, reunited with his wife, settled as a successful merchant in Rochester New York.¹¹⁵ Watson, according to one account, settled with his family on a farm in Guilford, Illinois, but two years later was killed by a falling tree.¹¹⁶

The Upper Canada Rebellion in Toronto may have abruptly ended in December 1837, but the Patriot War (as it was known in the United States) continued for another year. There were a series of invasions across the border into Canada, each hoping to re-ignite the flames of rebellion. All failed miserably.¹¹⁷

A final note re Parker’s account book: Parker took it with him to Fort Henry,

¹¹⁰ Durand’s 1897 *Reminiscences* describe his life in full detail. McCormack’s continued career is less clear.

¹¹¹ There are varying accounts of the Fort Henry escape. John C. Carter, “Some Period Reflections Regarding The Mass Escape From Fort Henry On 29 July 1838” *Historic Kingston* (2016),

¹¹² Durand, *Reminiscences...*, 319.

¹¹³ Perhaps the best summary of Montgomery is, Lacey, *The Trials...*

¹¹⁴ No modern study of the Rebellion prisoners’ legal encounters in England in 1839 is known. See “John G. Parker’s Journal,” *The Rochester Gem – A Semi-monthly Journal of Literature, Science, Tales and Miscellany*. XI, 6 (March 23, 1839) and Chris Raible, “‘Cast down but not destroyed’: The Trials and Triumphs of John Goldsbury Parker,” *Australasian Canadian Studies*, 29, 1-2 (2011).

¹¹⁵ Charles Parker, “John Goldsbury Parker,” <Documents file:///Filed Documents / Rebellion UC 0078/Prisoners/Parker, John GNotes/John_G_Parker.html> (consulted May, 2012).

¹¹⁶ “Notes for Richard Marsh” <<https://www.genealogy.com/ftm/h/a/l/Keith-Halvorsen/GENE3-0002.html>> (accessed 10 February 2020).

¹¹⁷ Alas, no comprehensive modern account of the events of the 1838 Upper Canada rebellion

but made no more financial entries. When he attempted to escape, the book was left behind. When examined by Attorney General Christopher Hagerman, the book's purpose was totally misinterpreted. Hagerman's paranoia convinced

him that a page list cellmates was "Chief Magistrate" Parker's list of "the signals which it is known that rebels who had fled to the United States and their friends and associated in that Country had devised for their mutual recognition."¹¹⁸

exists. The treatments by Dent and by Guillet in their works already cited are lively, but limited. My own initial summary: "Bibliography of Published Works Relating to the Upper Canada Rebellion, 1837-1838." *Ontario History* Vol. CI, No. 2, (Autumn 2009) was greatly enlarged in John C. Carter, "Bibliography of Published Works Relating to the Upper Canada Rebellion 1837-1838 and Associated Topics," in *Australasian Canadian Studies*, v 29, #1-2 (1911). John C. Carter has also written extensively (and impressively) on individual incidents – see especially his "Patriot Chronicles" series in *Thousand Islands Life Magazine*, v.8, # 2 (Feb. 2013), v. 8, #4 (April 2013), vol. 11, #6 (June 2016); and in *The Windsor Star*, (13 Jan. 2004), (3 Feb. 2014), (24 Feb. 2014), 7 (Dec. 2017) – all available on line. See also his articles in *1837 Rebellion Remembered* (Willowdale, ON: The Ontario Historical Society, 1988) and in *Australasian Canadian Studies* (2004 & 2005), v. 22 & 23, # 1. For popularized treatments from an American perspective, see Shaun J. McLaughlin, *The Patriot War Along the New York Canada Border* and *The Patriot War Along the Michigan Canada Border* (Charleston, S.C: The History Press, 2012 and 2013). A dated but valuable study of the post-Toronto rebellion that draws largely on American sources is Orin Edward Tiffany, *The Canadian Rebellion of 1837-38* (Buffalo: Buffalo Historical Society, 1905; reprinted Toronto: Coles publishing, 1960). Two modern works on rebels transported to Van Diemen's Land are Cassandra Pybus & Hamish Maxwell Stewart, *American Citizen, British Slaves: Yankee Political Prisoners in an Australian Penal Colony 1839-1850* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002) and Stuart D. Scott, *To the Outskirts of Habitual Creation: Americans and Canadians Transported to Tasmania in the 1840s* (New York: IUniverse, 2004). For the so-called "Duncombe Revolt," see Colin Read, *The Rising in Western Upper Canada 1837* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982). Other regional studies are: Catherine McKenna, *The Impact of the Upper Canada Rebellion on Life in Essex County, 1837-1842* (a report prepared for Parks Canada in 1985); Roger Rosentreter, *To Free Upper Canada: Michigan and the Patriot War, 1837-1839* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1987); and Betsy Dewar Boyce, *The Rebels of Hastings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992). A thorough study of the June 1838 invasion of the Short Hills is Colin Duquemin, *Niagara Rebels: The Niagara Frontier in the Upper Canada Rebellion 1837-38* (St. Catharines, ON: Norman Enterprises, 2001). For the December 1838 Battle of the Windmill, see Donald Graves: *Guns Across the River* (Toronto: Robin Brass Press, 2001). Extensive studies of the events at Navy Island in December-January, 1837-8, and at Windsor in December 1838 have yet to be written.

¹¹⁸ UCS 113878-91, Hagerman to John Macaulay, 25 September 1838.

Appendix—Rebellion Prisoner Box Making

Scores of little boxes were made by rebellion prisoners held in Toronto's jail in the later winter, spring and summer of 1837.¹¹⁹

These boxes

- are unlike any known similar boxes made in the 19th century;
- have been described as trinket boxes, snuff boxes, or jewelry boxes; but probably were not crafted to be of any particular use;
- were crafted as personal expressions of love

and admiration, of grief and fear, of hope and faith.

Crafting these boxes required skill, patience, and imagination. Each box is unique, yet they share common features.

Each box

- is small—nearly all are less than 4" long, 3" inches wide, 3" high;
- is made from a single piece of wood—most commonly maple or walnut;
- has a base and a lid, both made from the



Replica 1837 Rebellion prisoners' boxes crafted by Darryl Withrow

¹¹⁹ To date (June 2021) 152 boxes made by or for 70 different prisoners have been identified. (96 boxes were listed in Chris Raible with John C. Carter and Darryl Withrow, *From Hands Now Striving to be Free* (Toronto: York Pioneer and Historical Society, 2009.) Of these 152, 23 are "lost" – that is, although known about from periodical articles, family correspondence, or passing reference in books, their present whereabouts unknown.

- same piece of wood;
- has a base carved from one piece and thus has no joints;
- has a "sliding dovetail joint" to join its lid to its base;
- has no hardware: no hinges, no lock, no latches;
- has no pieces glued together, though a few have glued-on short legs or glued-in inlay panels.

Each box is inscribed in ink—usually with:

- the name of the prisoner who made it or for whom it was made;
- the name of the person to whom the box was to be given;
- a message or messages—religious, sentimental, political;
- the date and place (nearly all, the Toronto jail) it was made.

Making these boxes minimally required:

- sharp tools—knives and chisels to shape the boxes;¹²⁰
- a whetstone for sharpening the tools;
- a ruler for straight lines and right angles;
- sandpaper to smooth the finished surfaces;
- pen and ink to inscribe them;
- brushes and varnish to protect their finished surfaces.

Each box was inscribed with the name (or initials) of the prisoner to whom it belonged, and with the name of its intended recipient (most commonly, a family

member).¹²¹ However, on only 16 of the 152 known boxes was a prisoner named as the box's *maker*. Only 11 of the known 70 prisoners were named as the box's *maker*.¹²² For all others, the named prisoner's part in box-making is uncertain.

Many boxes were clearly made *for* the prisoners named on them, but not necessarily *by* them. (The owner of a box very likely would have composed or selected its inscriptions: the name of its intended recipient, its personal messages, its poems or phrases.)

Although box-making began with each of the Doan brothers making his own box, fellow prisoners soon took up the craft, making boxes with each other and for each other. Jesse Doan had a hand in making at least 16 boxes. John G. Parker inscribed 20 or more boxes with names, dates and messages.¹²³ William G. Edmundson or Michael P. Empey often added a drawing or other decoration. Other prisoners assisted in other ways. Boxes were thus made by prisoners and for prisoners before the boxes were sent to family members, friends or others in the world beyond the bars of the jail. Even skilled craftsmen with several boxes to their credit did not necessarily work alone.

In summary: *The prisoner whose name is on a box as its donor may or may not have been the box's maker, although he may well have had some part in its making.*

¹²⁰ A hatchet, used for splitting stove wood, may have been available.

¹²¹ There is one exception: Michael P. Empey's box, YP053, names no recipient.

¹²² Four boxes name Jesse Doan as maker, three boxes name Charles Lamb as maker.

¹²³ Parker probably composed many of these inscriptions.