



# Reflections



Newsletter of the Marsh Historical Collection  
Amherstburg, Ontario



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## Amherstburg Echo Available Online



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1874-1982



### NEW RELEASE

**“Soundings 1915-1919”**  
*Marine Items as reported in  
The Amherstburg Echo*

now available at the  
Marsh Collection

**\$10**

### What is the Marsh Collection Society?

Our mandate is to *collect, preserve and encourage research into the heritage of Amherstburg and the lower Detroit River district.*

This registered, non-profit organization was founded in 1983 by the late John and Helen Marsh, whose family published the Amherstburg Echo for over 80 years. Our funding comes from various foundations and private individual donations such as yours. A receipt for income tax purposes can be issued for any monetary donation of \$20 or more.

Open

Tuesday – Friday

10 am – 4 pm

235 A Dalhousie Street,  
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# A Yacht named “SIS”

by Al Jackson

At 10:30 on Monday morning October 22, 1956, a phone call was received at the McQueen Marine office from a marine insurance underwriter seeking help to release a large yacht that had run aground in the St. Clair River near Algonac, Michigan. This luxury yacht with dimensions of 104 feet in length, 19 feet in breadth and 11 feet in depth was down bound from her home port of Chicago on her way to Florida for the winter when the mishap occurred. She was named “SIS”, a nickname for the owner’s daughter.

At 12:15 the tug ATOMIC and derrick barge ACCOMODATION cleared Amherstburg on their way to assist the stricken yacht that had been stranded since Saturday. They arrived at 20:45 that evening and immediately began efforts to get “SIS” back into deeper water. BY midnight the ATOMIC and ACCOMODATION had the yacht back in the main channel and once again headed downstream.

An article in the October 24<sup>th</sup> edition of the Chicago Tribune summed it up this way:

“H. Leslie Atlass’ Yacht Freed from Mud by Tugboats...Algonac, Mich. Oct. 24, 1956

The big tug Atomic and a derrick-rigged barge last night freed the 104 foot yacht of a Chicago radio executive from a mud-bank where it had been stuck since Saturday. The yacht “SIS” owned by H. Leslie Atlass was floated into the St. Clair River around midnight by the McQueen Salvage Company of Amherstburg, Ontario which took over after Coast Guard boats failed to budge it. Algonac is about 30 miles northeast of Detroit. The Coast Guard said it did not know if the “SIS” had been damaged but it was to be dry-docked for further examination of its hull. Atlass is president of radio station WBBN and vice-president of Columbia Broadcasting System. He and his family were en route to Florida when the

yacht manned by six crewmen ran aground a half mile off Algonac.”

The ATOMIC and ACCOMODATION returned home at 06:15 on Tuesday October 23<sup>rd</sup> and the following day an invoice amounting to \$4055.25 was sent to Mr. Atlass. On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, a cheque for the full amount was received, but this would not be an end to the troubles with his beloved yacht.

The day after the grounding “SIS” was hauled out of the water on a marine railway at a small shipyard in Detroit for inspection as per Coast Guard instructions. While in dry-dock, toilet and cooking facilities could not be used, therefore Mr. Atlass and his family went back to Chicago leaving the six crewmen in charge. On the evening of Oct. 25<sup>th</sup>, all the crew went ashore to eat. Three of the crew returned early to sleep on the yacht, but the other three went to a tavern for some drinks (whiskey and beer chasers). At 2 pm, in a highly intoxicated condition, they returned to the dry-dock where two of them tried to take a short cut to the yacht, but fell between the dock and the railway into the water below and drowned.

Later, the wives of the deceased crewmen filed a lawsuit in the District Court of Illinois against Mr. Atlass, claiming damages of \$250,000 each on the grounds that Mr. Atlass was negligent in not providing a safe way to get back on the yacht and therefore was at fault for the deaths of their husbands. After a lengthy trial, the judge concluded there was limited negligence on the part of Mr. Atlass and awarded damages to each of the claimants. Atlass appealed the decision but was refused each time by the Courts of Illinois right up to the time of his death in 1960. The executors of his estate took up the cause and petitioned the Federal Court System to exonerate Mr. Atlass of all liability which they did in 1965 by.....*continued page 3*

reversing the original judgment of the Illinois Court. The Federal Court ruled that the Illinois Court erred in its refusal to exonerate Atlass of all liability and that the deaths of the two crewmen were the result solely of their own gross misconduct.

# Echo Soundings 1915-1919

*From The Amherstburg Echo, May 19, 1916*

**STR. S. R. KIRBY Engulfed - Twenty-two out of Crew of Twenty-Four Lost** - Among the drowned are Capt. D. C. Girardin and Harry Martin, Cook, of Amherstburg - Lake Superior, that graveyard of so many ships and men, got in its work early this season, one of the most appalling wrecks in marine history taking place there Monday noon when the freighter S. R. KIRBY, commanded by Capt. D. C. Girardin, of Amherstburg, went down after smashing on the rocks near Sawtooth Reef, twenty-two out of twenty-four of the crew meeting a watery grave. The vessel left Ashland, Wis., Sunday, heavily laden with iron ore and towing the barge HARTNELL, Capt. Wm. Pizer, also of Amherstburg. Monday morning a northwest storm arose and continued to increase in violence until it was blowing 60 miles an hour. The vessels were tossed about on the crest of the heavy seas, and attempted to take refuge in Keweenaw Bay. With the waves reaching a mountainous height, the vessel was finally driven onto the dangerous Sawtooth Reef, a spot which is always avoided by mariners. Utterly out of control, the vessel was carried on until suddenly striking the rocks, she shivered for a moment and then broke. The crew was engulfed as the steamer plunged to the bottom. Unable to assist, because no lifeboat would live in the heavy sea, the crew of the HARTNELL viewed the disaster which meant death to their comrades. Pandemonium reigned, sailors struggling with each other for a place of safety, which was not obtainable for in a few moments nothing was left of the steamer but wreckage. Grasping at the floating timbers some of the men attempted to swim to shore, or at least remain above water until help arrived. The only two to escape were Joseph B. Murda, second mate, Chicago, saved by the steamer BERWIND; Otto

S. Lindquist, fireman, Pequaming, Mich., saved by the steamer BLOCK. According to Lindquist, the last view he had of Capt. Girardin was about half an hour after the vessel struck the rocks. At that time Girardin's face was bleeding and his breath, as he floated past Lindquist, was coming in short gasps. A bulldog, which was the captain's constant companion, was swimming beside his master. A few moments later the captain waved his hand as if to bid goodbye, and with his dumb companion, sank from view. The HARTNELL was picked up by the steamer UTLEY, Capt. C. C. Balfour, and towed her to Sault Ste. Marie, where she is making temporary repairs.

The first body was recovered on Wednesday, and proved to be that of E. M. Douglas, first mate, of Detroit. An investigation of the circumstances leading to the loss of the KIRBY is already being made by C. H. Westcott, United States Supervising Inspector of steam vessels.

The news reached Amherstburg Monday noon, and came like a thunderbolt into the homes of those related to the lost men. Mrs. Girardin had just arrived from Detroit at noon to visit her father, W. R. Pizer, Elm Avenue, who is in a very uncertain state of health. As soon as the first telegram was received, she and her parents and Mrs. Girardin, sr., the aged mother of the unfortunate captain, motored to Detroit and upon arriving in that city their worst fears were confirmed. The bereaved families will have the sincere and whole hearted sympathy of the town and surrounding country in this awful affliction.

# Upsetting the Hour Glass

## 50 Years Ago 1966

**March** – The name of Calvert Distillers Ltd. will change April 1<sup>st</sup> to Calvert of Canada Limited.

**April** – St. Rose High School will close in June. Present staff members are Sister M. Patrick, principal, Sr. M. Francis Edward, Sr. M. Adeline, Mrs. Elizabeth Bezaire, Mr. Wayne Bedal and Sr. Rose Louise.

**May** – The new McGregor Post Office will be officially opened May 20<sup>th</sup>.

## 60 Years Ago 1956

**March** – A noted American astrophysicist says there may be a real man on the moon within ten years.

**April** – The tug Patricia McQueen sank to the bottom of the Detroit River while helping to free the George F. Rand which ran aground in the fog.

**May** – Beta Sigma Phi held their 2<sup>nd</sup> annual Variety Show Monday night which was again a huge success, Ron Reaume and Jim Grenier brought down

the house with impersonations and songs.

## 70 Years Ago 1946

**March** – Veterans returning from overseas have 3 months after discharge to report back to their jobs.

**April** – Fire destroyed the over 50 year-old Leo J. Monahan house on Bois Blanc.

**May** - Bob-lo will open June 8<sup>th</sup>. An effort is being made to get permission to resume ferry service from Amherstburg if a favourable ruling comes from Washington.

## 80 Years Ago 1936

**March** – The two stone buildings on Dalhousie Street once used as a knitting mill and foundry will be razed.

**April** – Prime rib roast is 22 cents/lb., rump is 16 cents/lb. at the Dominion Store.

**May** – The D & C café on Murray Street is now open for business. Alex Duff and Dick Cahill are the new proprietors seeking a high class trade.

## 90 Years Ago 1926

**March** – Charles Fleming of the River View Inn has leased the Amherst House which will be renovated by April 1<sup>st</sup>.

**April** – Babe Charette and Remi Bondy won first prize in the waltz contest Friday night at Chateau La Danse.

**May** – The bodies of three Toledo men surfaced down-river near Bar Point last week. They were occupants of a rum-running boat which capsized trying to cross the lake with a load of Canadian liquor from Amherstburg.



# Bricks n Beams - Contractor James Wilderspin

This column is usually devoted to researched information about specific buildings but today, instead of bricks and beams, we decided to tell you about one of this community's active building contractors in the 'old days.'

On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1878, Amherstburg became an officially incorporated town with 'town powers.' From 1851 until that time it was known as a 'town with village powers' but that's a story for another time.

During the next twenty years or so, there was a steady building boom in the community. One of the key players in local construction at that time was James Wilderspin, who was born here in 1845. When he died in Detroit 1924, his obituary in The Amherstburg Echo reported that he was remembered in Amherstburg *"as a prominent builder and contractor and many of the most prominent residences and buildings were erected by him."*

James Wilderspin was first married in 1866 to Catherine Gibb, daughter of William and Mary (Thomson) Gibb, who had recently emigrated from Scotland. Much of their early married life was spent in Detroit with their two daughters, but they returned to Amherstburg around the time it became a town. (There is a lot of Wilderspin genealogy information in the Marsh Collection files.)

In 1881 the Echo reported that James Wilderspin was building for himself a frame residence on his lot next to the Presbyterian Church, Bathurst Street. It would be 2 storeys, 18 x 26 feet, with a one-storey kitchen, 14 x 24 feet. That residence is still there 135 years later. From that time until the early 1900s Wilderspin was responsible for the construction of many residences and public buildings in and around Amherstburg. Following is a list of some of them:

1884 - The Napoleon Coste residence on the river front south of town (demolished some years ago) was a magnificent building. Coste called it "Mirielle" but in the 1930s it became known locally as "Chateau LaRose."

1891 - The Waterworks building, elevated tower, etc., (also razed) on the river bank, Dalhousie Street, behind what we know as the Park House Museum.

1892 - Wesley Methodist Church, southwest corner of Richmond and Bathurst, where the TD Bank is situated today.

1892 - He completed a 1-1/2 storey dwelling for Curtis Mickle "on the farm he purchased from John Parks."

1894 - Built the "new brick residence and schoolhouse for Father Marseille" at River Canard.

1895 - He built four 50-ton chutes for Shipman's dock behind the post office. (These were later sold to John G. Mullen.) Also in 1895, Wilderspin built a new barn for W. L. Golden, 2<sup>nd</sup> of Anderdon.

1900 - A new residence for Benjamin Ong in Malden.

1902 - Changed Mrs. Cunningham's residence, northeast corner Dalhousie and Gore, into a double house.

1903 - Built the two-storey brick block 50 x 60 feet for F. A. Hough; on the lot between the LakeView and the Pittsburg Coal Company office on Dalhousie St.

1904 - Began building John Burns' brick on Richmond Street (still there, next to the Gibson Gallery).

1905 - Built the residence on north Laird for the manager of the Solvay Process Co.

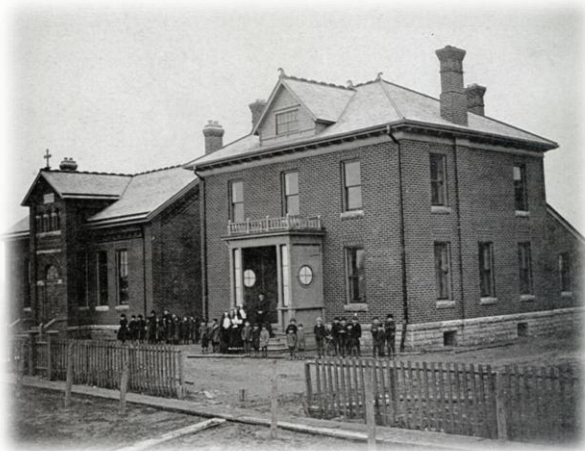
The list is long and contains references to many more of the local structures that James Wilderspin either built or altered. If you're interested in learning more, come in to visit the Marsh Historical Society.



The Waterworks



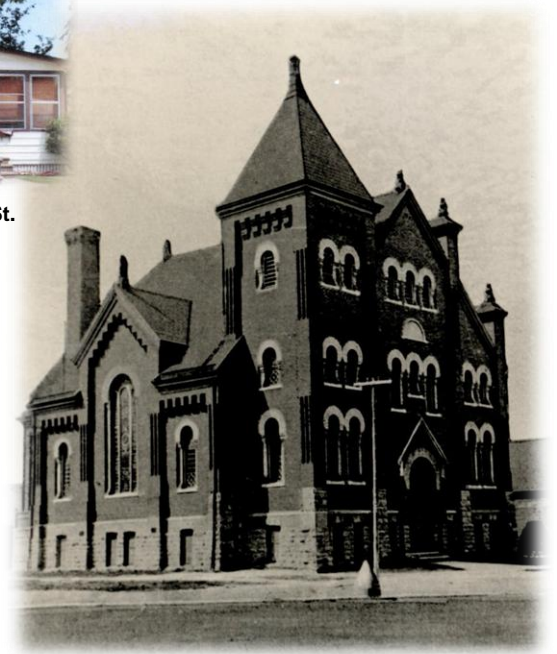
"Mirielle" later known as "Chateau La Rose"



School and convent, River Canard



Residence on Bathurst St.



Wesley United Church,  
Corner Richmond and Bathurst Streets  
photo courtesy Fort Malden NHS



Burns' Grocery Store

**Just a few of the many  
structures built by contractor  
James Wilderspin**

## The Clothesline

*A clothesline was a news forecast,  
To neighbors passing by,  
There were no secrets you could keep,  
When clothes were hung to dry.*

*It also was a friendly link,  
For neighbors always knew,  
If company had stopped on by,  
To spend a night or two.*

*For then you'd see the "fancy sheets",  
And towels upon the line;  
You'd see the "company table cloths",  
With intricate designs.*

*The line announced a baby's birth,  
From folks who lived inside,  
As brand-new infant clothes were hung,  
So carefully with pride!*

*The ages of the children could,  
So readily be known,  
By watching how the sizes changed,  
You'd know how much they'd grown!*

*It also told when illness struck,  
As extra sheets were hung;  
Then nightclothes, and a bathrobe too,  
Haphazardly were strung.*

*It also said, "On vacation now",  
When lines hung limp and bare.  
It told, "We're back!" when full lines sagged,  
With not an inch to spare!*

*New folks in town were scorned upon,  
If wash was dingy and gray,  
As neighbors carefully raised their brows,  
And looked the other way.*

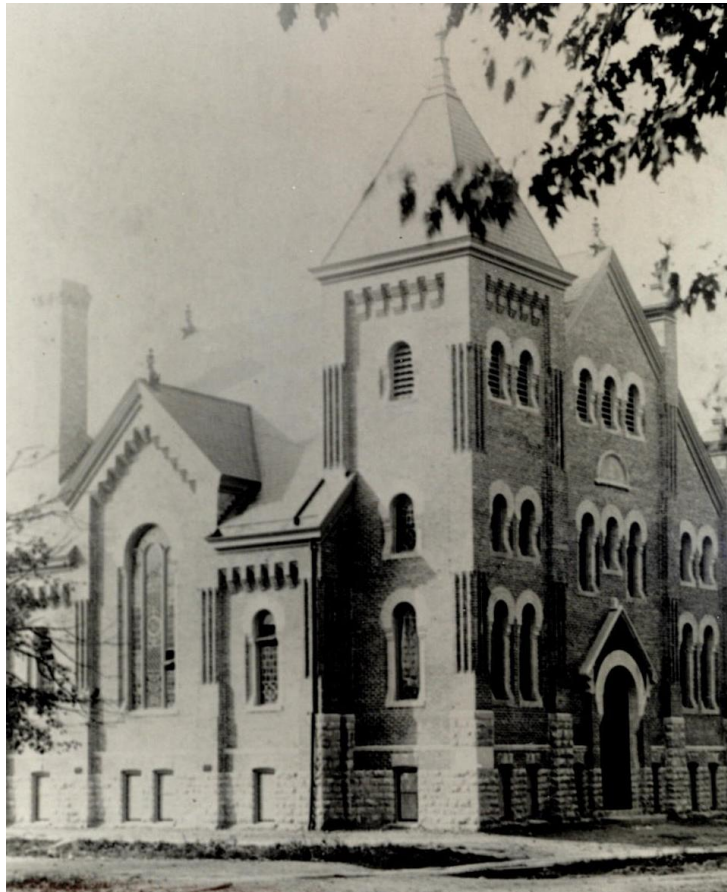
*But clotheslines now are of the past,  
For dryers make work much less.  
Now what goes on inside a home,  
Is anybody's guess!*

*I really miss that way of life,  
It was a friendly sign,  
When neighbors knew each other best...  
By what hung on the line.*

*-Author Unknown-*



# Then & Now – Southwest Corner Richmond and Bathurst



Wesley United Church, 1892



2016  
page 8