

Geography Lesson ~ Searching for Sackett's Harbor

by *David Millstone*

Several older New England contra dances bear names that seem to refer to specific people or events. Hull's Victory, perhaps the best known of these chestnuts, celebrates Captain Isaac Hull who commanded the U.S.S. Constitution in her victory over the British ship *Guerriere* in the War of 1812, the battle during which she acquired her nickname of Old Ironsides.

Another dance in this category is Sackett's Harbor, a triple minor contra dance with a distinctive figure. In his book, *An Elegant Collection of Contras and Squares* (1984, Lloyd Shaw Foundation), Ralph Page discusses Sackett's Harbor thus:

"Howe's Ball Room Hand Book" (Boston, 1858) gives the dance as "Speed the Cable". An 1862 edition of the same book gives its name as "Steamboat Quickstep". I have found no reference to it under the name of "Sacketts Harbor" until the 1890's. Don't let this multiplicity of names for the same dance confuse you too much; it has been a part of the dance world since time immemorial right up to the present day. The tune "Steamboat Quickstep" was used for it in Vermont for a great many years and that may be a reason for calling it by that name. Where, when, or why the name "Sacketts Harbor" was first given it is unknown. It has been called that name by several generations of contra dancers and is today one of our favorite dances.

It was relatively easy to continue Page's research. In recent months, the Library of Congress placed over two hundred dance manuals on the Internet, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/dihtml/dihome.html>, a tremendous resource for doing research into dance history. As Page noted, dance instructions similar to our Sackett's Harbor appear under the title *Speed the Cable* in Elias Howe's *Complete Ball-Room Hand Book*. The alleged author is that famous American inventor, better known for designing early sewing machines, who here is "assisted by several eminent professors of dancing," apparently the result of the publisher capitalizing on a well-known name.

In the 1858 edition, the directions read:

Forward and back six, swing six three-quarters round to the left—first couple chassee across the set back and cast off—turn contra corners—forward and back six and swing round to the right to place.

A quick search of the Library of Congress website revealed that this is the only dance manual to include a *Speed the Cable* title. The same figures appear, however, under the title of Sackett's Harbor in an 1863 publication, "The ball-room manual of contra dances and social cotillions, with remarks on quadrilles and Spanish dance", published in Belfast, Maine by H.G.O. Washburn and in Boston by G.W. Cottrell. All of this establishes the age of the dance but why the several titles? What do the names mean? Why name a dance after a harbor?

Some years ago, while doing research into Hull's Victory, I was looking through books of military history relating to the War of 1812. I was reminded that in addition to the naval engagements in the Atlantic, serious fighting took place in the northwestern part of the new nation, British-controlled Canada, and an invasion from that direction was a grave threat. Lakes Erie and Ontario were vulnerable, and Lake Champlain reached well into New York, giving an invading army easy access. Sackets Harbor, located at the eastern end of Lake Ontario in northern New York, was the headquarters of the American fleet on the lake during the war, a fleet intended to neutralize the British threat. But supporting this outpost was no easy feat in these days before railroads and canals and with roads in only primitive conditions. All serious trade was by water, and the British Navy was a strong presence.

There was an important battle at Sackets Harbor. A force of eight hundred British soldiers attacked on the night of May 26, 1813, taking advantage of the absence of the American fleet, which was itself then attacking British positions at the west end of the lake. The British landed and launched three separate assaults before they were repulsed. Could the dance be commemorating this event in much the manner of Hull's Victory? Possibly, but I believe that there is a more specific reference. The clue comes from Ralph Page's observation that the Sackett's Harbor dance at one time had been known as *Speed the Cable*.

One source that proved particularly helpful in my research was Willis J. Abbot's "The Naval History of the United States", first published in 1886. This dusty blue volume had been checked out by only five library patrons in

the past forty years; it was a dark book of the sort that can be found in the American history section of any older library, widely shunned in favor of more recent writing. But Abbot describes one event in detail which effectively solves the riddle:

When in May, 1814, the new United States frigate “Superior” lay at her dock at Sackett’s Harbor, her ordnance, stores, and cordage had to be brought from Oswego Falls, some fifty miles away. A clear water-route by the Oswego River and the lake offered itself; but Sir James Yeo, with his squadron, was blockading the mouth of the harbor, and the chance for blockade-runners was small indeed. To carry the heavy ordnance and cables overland, was out of the question. The dilemma was most perplexing, but Yankee ingenuity finally enabled the “Superior” to get her outfit. The equipment was loaded upon a small fleet of barges and scows, which a veteran lake captain took to a point sixteen miles from the blockaded harbor. By sailing by night, and skulking up creeks and inland water-ways, the transports reached this point without attracting the attention of the blockading fleet. They had, however, hardly arrived when news of the enterprise came to the ears of the British, and an expedition was sent to intercept the Americans, which expedition the Yankees successfully resisted. The question then arose as to how the stores were to be taken across the sixteen miles of marsh and forest that lay between the boats and the navy-yard at Sackett’s Harbor. The cannon and lighter stores were transported on heavy carts with great difficulty, but there still remained the great cable. How to move this was a serious question. No cart could bear its ponderous weight of ninety-six hundred pounds. Again Yankee ingenuity and pluck came to the rescue. Two hundred men volunteered to carry the great rope on their shoulders, and in this way it actually was transported. Along the shore of the little creek the great cable was stretched out with prodigious labor, and lay there looking like a gigantic serpent. The two hundred men ranged themselves along the line at regular intervals, and at a given signal hoisted the burden to their shoulders. At the word of command, all stepped off briskly together, and the long line wound along the narrow path through the forests. They started out cheerily enough, enlivening the work with songs and jests; but at the end of the first mile all were glad enough to throw down the load, and loiter a while by the roadside. A few minutes’ rest, and up and on again. Now arms began to ache, and shoulders to chafe, under the unusual burden; but the march continued until noon of the next day, when the footsore and weary carriers marched proudly into Sackett’s Harbor, to find sailors and soldiers assembled to greet them with bands and cannon-firing. In accordance with the custom of the time, these demonstrations of honor were supplemented by the opening of a barrel of whiskey, in honor of the arrival of the cable.

Abbot doesn’t mention it, but it is easy for us to imagine a dance in celebration. At some point, probably close in time to these events, a dance caller came up with the figures and selected a contemporary title for his composition. So, Speed the Cable it was, and as time passed and the details of that event faded, only the name of Sackett’s Harbor remained associated with the dance.

Sackett’s Harbor

Formation: Longways sets, triple minor, proper

- A1 Long lines, forward and back
Circle left six hands three-quarters around
- A2 Active couple down the center and turn alone
Return and cast off to middle position
- B1 Actives turn contra corners and return to their place in lines of three
- B2 Forward six and back
Circle six hands three-quarters around to the right.

Notes:

- A1 This leaves a line of three men facing the top of the hall and the line of three women facing down the hall.
- A2 The “down the center” is really across the hall, with the actives moving from the caller’s right to left.
- B1 Rather than meeting partner for a balance in the center, as is common after contra corners, the active couple needs a little extra hustle at the end to return to their places. They simply pass each other by the left shoulder and step in between the other two dancers of the same sex.

Since the dance is a triple minor, dancers must wait out two times at the head of the set before becoming

active. One way of shortening the wait to accommodate the tastes of contemporary dancers is to form short contra lines, four couples in each set as is common in Scottish country dancing. The head couple goes through the figures twice, once with couples two and three and again with couples three and four. These actives then drop to the bottom of the set, with a new head couple (the original twos) starting in. Eight times through the dance gives each couple two chances to be active.

Here is another twist: Recognizing that triple minor dances were falling into disfavor among contemporary contra dancers, Al Olson created an interesting variation which he named Almost Sackett's Harbor. Everything is the same except one small change that turns the dance into a triple progression. Instead of "forward and back" at the start of B2, Olson has the dancers take both hands with their partners and push to a new place, similar to the start of a poussette in English country dance. The active couple (woman pushing) moves down the set a few short steps, while the inactive couples (men pushing) move up the set a few steps to meet the next actives and form new lines of three facing three up and down the hall. These new groups join hands and circle right. When the long lines go forward and back, a new active couple starts the dance at the head of the set.

Editor's note: Yes, Sackett's Harbor is spelled several ways in this article. While the dance usually is spelled with two t's and an apostrophe, some books will differ — Ralph Page did not use the possessive in his 1984 book, but Rickey Holden did in his Contra Dance Book [1956]. And while the town name on modern maps has one "t" and no apostrophe, Holden used an apostrophe in his notes when he was talking about the spelling difference and Abbot used "t's" in his Naval History. Go figure.

D.M.

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