



The Legend of the Outlet River Gold

John A. Brebner, December 2015

Excerpted from *Picturesque Prince Edward County*, edited by Helen Merrill, 1890

A Barrel of Gold

by C.H. Widdifield, Picton

"The "Outlet" is a short, but comparatively deep and broad stream, emptying the waters of East Lake into Little Sandy bay, an indentation of Lake Ontario. The river (for in local parlance it is a "river") runs its sluggish course between great white banks of sand, whose grotesque shapes are as unique as the results of any snowstorm; and when the moonlight floods these sands, making strange lights and shadows, and the gray, dead cedars stretch forth their bare limbs, the banks present a weird but fascinating appearance. But the locality is not a faded beauty and does not depend on the moonlight for its fascinations. Many and afternoon when the bass could not be tempted to rise, have I drifted down the stream between banks of blue flags and snow white water-lilies, watching the ever varying picture of light and shade, listening to "That undefined and mingled hum" of nature, so soothing on a summer's day and over all the ceaseless rush of the waters as the waves break on the beach of Little Sandy. But if the bass do not always rise, and you do not care to smoke and dream away a summer's day, there is no lack of rock fish and perch, and now and then a gamy, golden pickerel to make the reel hum with delightful music.

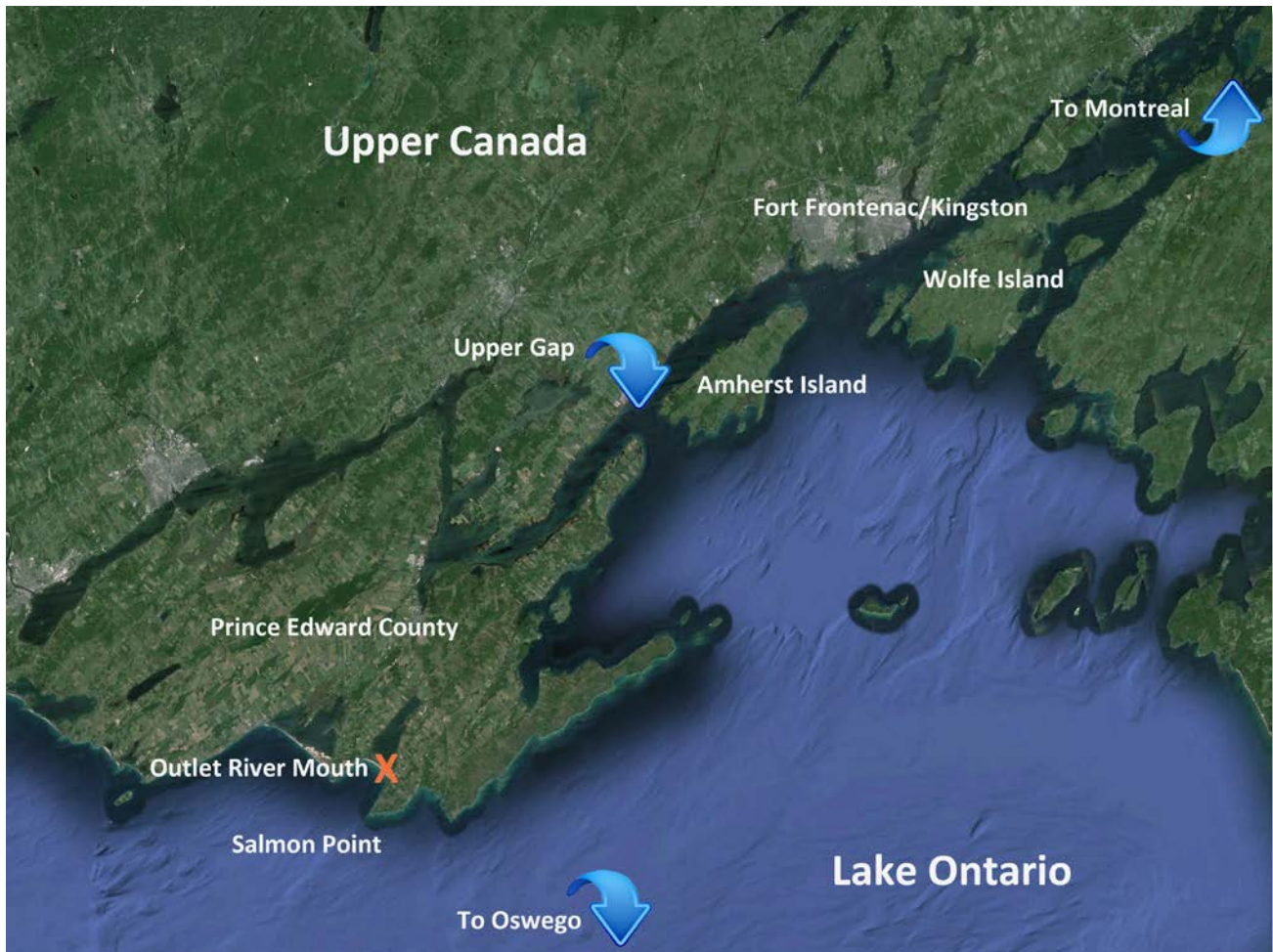


The Outlet River, 2015, Image 15-9150

"About half way between the bridge and the bay, and not far from the western bank of the river may be seen the remains of a cofferdam built there a few years ago. At the bottom of that structure there is, or should be, a barrel of gold. I have talked with the men who built this cofferdam and who worked many days to obtain the gold that has been buried there more than a century, and they assure me that it *is* there, and if they only had the proper machinery they could extract it. As an evidence of good faith they offered me a share in the treasure for a small consideration, that is, small for the profits I would surely realize out of it if I invested.

"However, they did not succeed in bringing the barrel to the surface, and it still remains there to keep alive the legend that accounts for its deposit in that place before the surrender of Quebec and the cession of Canada to Great Britain.

"In the summer of 1758 Col. (John) Bradstreet sailed from the mouth of the Oswego river to attack Fort Frontenac (Kingston), then held by De Lévis for France. As the British ships neared the Upper Gap a French gun-boat was seen beating up against the wind making for the Gap.



Area Map; Image 15-2323, but the map raises more questions than it answers...

"Two of Bradstreet's ships were sent forward to intercept the gun-boat. The French vessel being unable to reach Fort Frontenac changed her course to the west, with Bradstreet's vessels in full chase.



"The race was an exciting one for about thirty miles, but the English vessels were gradually closing up the distance between them, and as the gun-boat was no match for the enemy, her captain decided to save his crew and a barrel of gold he had on board. Accordingly he rounded Salmon Point, sailed up the Outlet, sunk the gold at a marked spot, burned his ship to the water's edge and returned overland only to find Fort Frontenac taken and destroyed.

Left: Fort Frontenac,; 1758 ruins in foreground, 15-8015

"Such is the legend that has maintained itself most sturdily in the locality for a century. Perhaps it would have passed into oblivion before this if it had not been for an incident that happened about half a century ago.

"One bright summer day some fishermen winding up their nets at Salmon Point was a strange vessel cautiously feeling her way along that dangerous shore. Creeping along, with the sounding line going, she anchored in the mouth of the Outlet and dropped her sails. It was an unusual thing for a vessel to come in there, and as there was considerable filibustering along the frontier at that time, the fishermen drew near to ascertain what particulars they could about the suspicious stranger. Her crew consisted of only six or seven men, two of whom soon came ashore. One was an ordinary sailor, the other, who interests us more, was about 30 years old, a handsome dark complexioned gentleman, whose military bearing, neat clothes and polished shoes, somewhat overawed the rough fishermen. He left much of his conversation to his companion, and when he did speak it was with a decided French accent. After enquiring about Captain C____ and learning where they would find him, they returned to their ship, and the fishermen to their homes, vainly surmising who the strangers might be.



Salmon Point Lighthouse, 15-9141

"That evening M. De Pontleroy called on Captain C____. The two gentlemen were soon together in the best parlour, looking over old maps, sketches and yellow documents. Needless to say the stranger's mission was about the barrel of gold. He was a descendant of the commander of the gun-boat who had sunk the money there some 80 years before, and the documents he produced disclosed the exact spot where the treasure lay. Captain C____ promised him all the assistance he could afford, and offered him the hospitality of his house while he remained in the neighbourhood, which might be for some time. This M. De Pontleroy declined with many thanks, as he had, he said, excellent accommodation on his boat and preferred to remain with his men.

"While these two are in the parlour another couple are in the dining-room who claim our attention for a moment. One is George Randall, a tall, fine looking man, son of an adjoining farmer; the other is the Captain's daughter, Nellie, as sweet a specimen of young womanhood as any man could aspire to. After an hour's conversation in the parlour M. De Pontleroy re-entered the dining room, was introduced to the lovers, made a stately bow and departed, promising to see the Captain on the morrow.

"In a few days the Frenchman and his men had located the spot where the gold was hidden, but he found on examination he had not brought with him all the necessary machinery, and while the boat was absent he was the guest of Captain C____. It was not Nellie's fault that she fell in love with the affable and polished stranger. His knowledge was so wide, his accomplishments so varied, and his presence so charming that he came like a revelation to her somewhat contracted world. . But she would not admit M. De Pontleroy as a lover as long as she was betrothed to George.

" But George was too busy just now to notice the intimacy growing up between Nellie and her guest. If George had one fault more prominent than another it was his passion for gain, the mean ambition of getting rich for the mere sake of being rich; and the thought of that immense treasure at the bottom of the river, so near him all these years, and now this stranger was to carry it away, worried him.

"One night about dark as M. De Pontleroy was returning to his boat he overtook George on the Sand Banks, and the two walked on together. The stranger had just left Nellie. George had just left the buried treasure, and both were engrossed with their own thoughts. George was wondering if he could propose some kind of partnership in the barrel of gold, and ventured timidly towards the subject. At the same moment M. De Pontleroy was thinking how he could best sound George's feelings towards Nellie, so he shifted the conversation by telling George he had a much greater treasure in his sweet-heart than lay buried in the river. It would be too long a story to follow up the conversation, but before they parted that night they had entered into a solemn compact by which M. De Pontleroy was to release to George all his right to the gold, and George was to release Nellie from her engagement. The contract was carried out and in about ten days the strange vessel that had attracted so much attention weighed anchor, spread her sails and departed with M. and Madame De Pontleroy.

"George spent much time and money trying to recover the buried treasure, but all his efforts were unsuccessful, and his friends and neighbours did not regret the result when they learned he traded off his sweet-heart for a barrel of gold."

What a great morality tale! But is there any truth to this legend?

The author of this excerpt in the Helen Merrill book, *Picturesque Prince Edward County* does come with impressive and substantial credentials. Charles Howard Widdifield (1859-1937) was a frequently published Picton and Toronto judge. It's likely that he was friends with author Helen Merrill's father, also a Picton judge. He contributed a further eight page article to the same book by Helen, entitled "*An Incident of '37*"

His works include treatises on the law on subjects as diverse as [1920 motor vehicle laws to discussions on the surrogate courts and executor disbursements.](#)

So, at least as far as he relates his personal "spin" on the story about the location of the gold along the western bank of the Outlet River, it may be assumed that he is telling what he knows. That's not to say that a barrel of gold actually exists there... just that some local residents in the 1880s believed that it did, and that excavations in the sand and the building of a cofferdam had been undertaken to search for the alleged treasure! And that Judge Widdifield had seen those recovery efforts first-hand.

(Those drifting sands have long-covered that mid-19th century excavation!)



Above: The Outlet River today, image 15-9519.

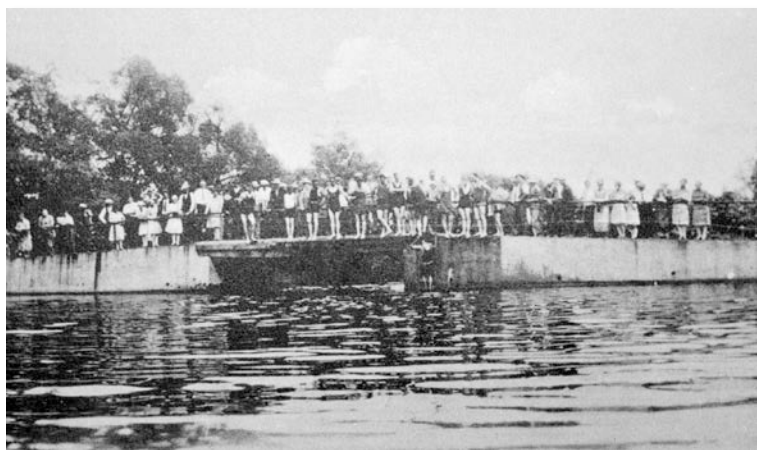
Top right: Aerial view of the Outlet , perhaps about 1950-60?; Image 12-3108. Note how much of the area is still without vegetation.



Middle right: Boaters c. 1900? at the old bridge over the Outlet River; 12-3140



Bottom right: Swimmers on a later bridge over the Outlet River, 12-3126a



The bridges shown here are at the East Lake end of the Outlet River, on what is now County Road 18.

The bridge within the Park at the campgrounds near Lake Ontario is a much later 20th century structure.

Archival images courtesy of [Prince Edward County Archives](#)

Current 2012-2015 images © John A. Brebner

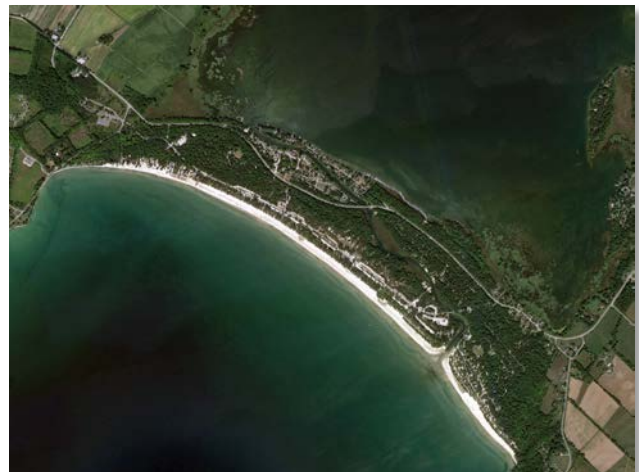
Click on any image for a larger version.

Where would it be? We have only Widdifield's description of the location as being "about half way between the bridge and the bay, and not far from the western bank of the river." But the river in the 1880's wasn't even close to where it is today. That bridge is not today's Park bridge connecting the Outlet Campgrounds, but the (at least) twice rebuilt and much older structure to the north-east.

The 1877 Ontario County Map shows a very straight and much wider Outlet River, and not the meandering stream that exists further east today. And from that it's reasonable to assume that the Outlet River of 1758 was even further west than either 1877 or today, given the sand drift in the area over 250 years.



[The 1877 County Atlas](#), scaled and oriented to overlay the 2012 satellite image ; Image 15-2325



[2012 Google Earth Map](#), the effects of sand-drift from 1877 can easily be seen in that wider bay-mouth bar; Image 15-2324

So where's the (alleged) gold? *My guess* is that it would be *at least 4 metres under the sand, and slightly above the water-table*, probably just east of Currah's Park Store and Grill in the Park! That would be very close to where the western Outlet River bank would have been in 1758 and about the midpoint between the later eastern bridge and the western river-mouth to Lake Ontario.

But don't bother hiking out to see if you can find it! First of all, [Park regulations prevent any excavations](#), and the amount of vegetation that now covers those drifting sands would require some serious mechanical digging, not to mention the removal of a considerable number of trees. That large 1758 cottonwood under which it was supposedly buried is long gone, covered by two centuries of drifting sands.

But you have to enjoy a certain sense of irony, that the over 650,000 person/day/visits each year to the Park result in some real gold for the Prince Edward County community, and especially to Currah's, who have probably reaped far more in benefits from the ever-increasing numbers of visitors than any possible treasure that may have been buried behind their back door 250 years ago!

Right: Currah's Park Store and Grill, Image 15-1265



As to the actual story about the gold, this is far more difficult to prove.

It's tempting to assume that the "M. De Pontleroy" cited in this story is a descendant [of Nicolas Sarrebourg De Pontleroy](#) who was certainly in Canada around the time in question.

But that is simply speculation! The comings and goings of this elder De Pontleroy are quite well documented, and it seems impossible that he could have actually been in Prince Edward County in July 1758.

From the story, his vessel was chased from the Upper Gap (a channel between the eastern tip of Prince Edward County and the western end of Amherst Island), around the County and Salmon Point to the final resting spot of that ship at the mouth of the Outlet River. Given the south-westerly prevailing winds, and that he was supposedly coming from Montreal, this seems highly suspect. The Upper Gap is a long way (14 miles) to the west of Kingston. Certainly it's possible that Bradstreet and his convoy, coming from Oswego would have been in those waters. But any French vessel destined for Fort Frontenac from Montreal? Not very likely!

This chase was precipitated by his discovery by Colonel John Bradstreet, a British soldier travelling with troops in three vessels from Oswego to Fort Frontenac (Kingston). It is verified that Bradstreet made that trip in July 1758.

Here's what we **do** know about De Pontleroy's activities between 1755 and 1760.

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 1755 | Arrived from France at Louisbourg, Cape Breton Island to assist in re-fortifications |
| SEP 1757 | Left Louisbourg |
| OCT 1757 | Arrived Quebec City |
| DEC 1757 | Supervised building of Communicable Diseases Hospital, Point Lévis |
| JUN 1758 | Accompanied General Montcalm for Fort Carillon, Ticonderoga, NY. Here he supervised the construction of further defensive features. Because of his rapid progress in upgrading the fort, he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel in October 1758. |
| 1759 | Left for Fort Frontenac to examine what was needed to restore the fort after it had been destroyed by John Bradstreet in August 1758. He declared the site indefensible, then returned east to Quebec, where he served under Montcalm at the battle of the Plains of Abraham. |
| after JAN 1760 | Returned to France where he remained until his death in 1802. |

So while De Pontleroy was at the eastern end of Lake Ontario, in 1759, he had not been part of the destruction of Fort Frontenac, and was in Ticonderoga at the time Bradstreet was laying siege to Fort Frontenac in Kingston. He was nowhere near Prince Edward County, and given the details of his military career that survive today, an event such as being chased by British ships, burning his vessel to the water, and making his way back to Montreal on foot after burying what must have been French government gold would surely have been remembered!

And what of the recovery... if that had been my gold, I would have gone back for it before returning to France!

So, if there is any truth to the first part of this tale, it is certain that the elder De Pontleroy could not have been immediately involved.

What about De Lévis? His is another name that features in this yarn!

My previous objections as to the position of a French vessel bound from Montréal to Fort Frontenac being at the Upper Gap stands. But perhaps, instead of bringing gold from Montréal for Fort Frontenac, the protagonist was preventing the gold from Fort Frontenac from falling into British hands? That makes more sense as to why the French vessel might have been at the Upper Gap... mitigating the loss of their gold from the soon-to-be besieged fort at Kingston. But that's just my unproven two cents worth!

Again, there is much information about a man of that name, associated with De Pontleroy at this time in Canadian history. But nothing places this De Lévi(s) in 1758 in Prince Edward County either. Is there another man of the same name? Possibly. But now we're really into groundless speculation about participants in so-called "historical events" from 250 years ago!

But let's fast-forward 50-60 years to 1830's Prince Edward County. The second part of the story ... the arrival of the younger De Pontleroy in search of that gold in what was probably 1830-1840. He was supposedly about 30 years old, born c 1800-1810, in France. Could he have been a son of the elder De Pontleroy?

Stories also suggest that he was a "grandson" of the original treasure owner, and that he had maps to substantiate the location of that treasure.

Who was the mysterious Captain C____ in the Widdifield excerpt? It may have been Captain Conger. That 1877 map shows the lands on Salmon Point and bordered on the north by the Outlet River being held by an "Eliza Conger".

Or a "Captain Cole" ... as suggested by later stories?

George Randall, son of an "adjoining farmer" would have been born c 1810-1820; as would have Nellie (Conger/Cole), Captain Conger/Cole's daughter.

There are no "Randall" families as yet found in that area from 1851-1881.

One would expect that a marriage between De Pontleroy and Nellie would be recorded; the story *does* say that De Pontleroy and *Madame* De Pontleroy returned to France. It's very unlikely that Nellie's father would have allowed her to leave as a single woman with the supposedly dashing and worldly De Pontleroy!

But **no** record of any De Pontleroy, Pontleroy, Pont*, Font*, Faunt* etc. variations have been found so far in the 1801-1901 Ontario Marriage Records. Please let me know if you find one!

This story of the gold has been told and retold many times.

In "*Mysteries of Ontario*", John Robert Colombo, Hounslow Press, 1999.

"French Gold"

The inlets and islands here are rich in lore, as noted by local historian Orval E. Kelly. "Another story concerns 'French gold'-- sometimes said to be bullion, sometimes altar ornaments -- being sunk at the Outlet, the narrow channel which drains East Lake in Prince Edward County into Lake Ontario at the famous Outlet beach. It is said that a French vessel, pursued by the English, landed there and buried her treasure, one keg of gold being lost overboard in the Outlet."

Late local Ameliasburgh poet and author Al Purdy relates another variation of the tale:

"Another story is said to be history, but sounds like legend. When Britain and France were fighting over Canada's ownership in the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), a French naval officer, one Captain de Levi, was entrusted with secret documents and a barrel of gold destined for the French Fort Frontenac (now Kingston) for safekeeping. The French ship was closely pursued by a British vessel and harried past its destination to the sandbanks of today's Prince Edward County. Levi set fire to his own ship to fool the English and buried the gold beneath a cottonwood tree at Outlet River. The captain escaped and drew a map locating the buried treasure. Years later, Levi's grandson went searching for the gold but, so the story goes, he fell in love with a woman and traded away the map to her fiancé in exchange for her. What a woman she must have been."

All in all it's a great morality tale... man loves woman, trades that good woman for supposed treasure, and dies unhappily without either treasure or his love, while suffering the scorn of his neighbours for his greed!

I love a great story, but as a "show-me" guy involved in genealogy, it takes much more to convince me that an unsubstantiated yarn like this has any real basis!

Disclaimer: The above musings are mine alone and do not represent the views of the Friends of Sandbanks!

But please let me (and more importantly, Sandbanks Provincial Park!) know if you do find the gold!

[John A. Brebner, 2015](#)