

Another KYC Treasure Re-discovered!

This story is about a KYC artefact being lost and out of mind for some thirty years, and suddenly coming to light, hidden all that time under a pile of junk. This has happened before, with the “Snow Cloud” iceboat painting, hidden behind a file cabinet for a similar period of time.

The artefact in this case is one of the Club’s signalling cannons, in fact the largest of the three that were displayed as Symbols of Office in formal Board portraits (see fig. 1, below). The Heritage Committee has dubbed the cannon “Big Bertha” as a “secret” identification while research has been undertaken into the provenance and legality of this piece of ordnance.



Fig. 1: A KYC Board portrait from 1972. Bertha is on the left, in front of Bart Dalton. The two smaller cannons have since disappeared.

The story began in fall 2014 when possible archival storage sites in the basement of the Saints Rest were being investigated. One such room was filled with material formerly used to support Saints Rest building maintenance. Every surface in the room was deep in fittings, parts and leftovers, often obscuring what lay beneath. On one such visit Heritage colleague Ralph Shaw and I noticed a brass “rump”, about four inches (100mm) in diameter protruding from other junk on the floor, under the bottom shelf. Moving the junk aside we were astonished to see that the “rump” was in fact part of a very large and intact brass cannon. We covered the cannon and did

not investigate further until a post-Christmas giveaway garage sale cleared the space which by then had been chosen as the archive storage room.

During this past winter Ralph and I decided to examine Bertha and see what we could identify about its age and provenance. A couple of hours were spent cleaning, measuring and photographing the cannon. Bertha's major descriptors are as follows:

- Type of gun: muzzle-loading, fixed breech, horizontal touch-hole in breech centre
- Barrel: brass, trunnion-mounted on rustic, two-wheel wooden carriage.
- Key dimensions: barrel length: 24 inches (600mm), bore: nominal 2 inches (50mm).
- Overall weight: 125 lb (57kg) est'd.

Following the cleanup, we searched every bit of surface looking for a manufacturer's mark: there was none. Other strange features include the lack of aiming sights and clear parting lines on the barrel indicating that it was made in three sections (four including the fixed breech) which had been pressed and/or brazed together to form a single barrel. (see fig.2)



Fig.2: Bertha, as found and cleaned up. Note simplified barrel, with obvious sections. For scale purposes, the barrel is 24ins (600mm) long.

With no real ideas to go on, we decided to seek professional advice from museum curators. Contact was made with Royal Military College (RMC) and Fort Henry curators. The RMC curator admitted scant personal knowledge of the small ordnance history, but did offer that “it looks like a signalling piece”. We had better luck with Curator Wayne Moug at Fort Henry, who said that the breech design reminded him of American pieces of the 19th century. Wayne passed our request on to other military curators, one of whom came back with additional comment. This came from John Bates, Curator of the Halifax Defence Complex, who said that the design looked like a late 19th – early 20th century American signal gun, with Dutch influence in its design. He added that the change from muzzle loading to breech loading occurred in the late 1880s, as too many barrel explosions were being experienced with the former old arrangement. As a final comment regarding the lack of identifying marks on Bertha, Wayne said that lack of markings was typical for non-military ordnance.

Ralph picked up on this dialogue and added his own thoughts regarding Bertha’s design, noting that “the design of the breech and vent (touch-hole) showed French influence”. Ralph also purchased the current “Flayderman’s Guide to American Antique Firearms”, as recommended by one of the curators. This 700pp+ catalogue is the bible in the trade, and devotes half a page to “yacht and other saluting cannons”. A comment in this guide mentions that “the majority of brass signal cannons (as antiques on the market now) are breech-loading, with muzzle loaders being rare”. This would put Bertha way back in time, to the mid to late 1880s.

Here are some conclusions that we have drawn from comments by professionals and our own deliberations:

- Bertha is a muzzle-loading signal gun. It was never intended to fire a projectile.
- It is likely American-made and dates from the muzzle-loading era, c1860s-1880s.
- It is part of a large range of such “ordnance” that was popular for yacht clubs to use as race starters before the days of radio and other methods.
- Estimated value: \$3500.

Here is what we do not know:

- How or when Bertha came to KYC. We also do not know what happened to the two smaller cannons shown in the 1972 Board photo. Rumours suggest that one or more cannons “disappeared” over the years, with at least one going over the side and now on the bottom of the harbour. Perhaps Bertha’s cumbersome size saved it from either fate!

Security footnote: the RCMP “Black Powder Firearms” website says that all black powder muzzle-loaders manufactured prior to 1898 are considered to be antiques, and as such, are exempt from licence and registration requirements. (note: may not include transporting such firearms). It would appear that KYC does not have to register Bertha.

The future: What do we do now with this weighty and elderly artefact? Should it go on display, and if so, where and how? Some of today's members may not like the idea of a dangerous-looking "weapon" pointed at them and their kids. It also must be kept securely, given that it contains ~\$2-300 worth of brass.

For the Heritage Committee,

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