

# MARINE SOUNDINGS

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Continuing Connections with the Past

August 2010, Marine Soundings

I've been reading *Four Years on the Great Lakes, 1813—1816* by David Wingfield, Royal Navy edited by Don Bamford and Paul Carroll, and I recently watched a documentary on the Escape from Stalag 3—famously known as **The Great Escape**. How different were the concepts of honour! In 1813 officers were proud to be **on parole, that is**, allowed to get to their destination jail on their own and not under guard like the ordinary seamen under their command. On the way they were treated as gentlemen and they had to travel through territories that were very sparsely settled by stage coach, by foot, by narrow boat, by barge, staying in hotels, inns, private homes and hovels and for the most part totally unsupervised or simply reporting at various stages of their journey. Wingfield gives interesting reports of early attempts at canaling in New York. We realize that years in advance, the famous Erie Canal was preceded by more modest canals following the same route.



2010 marks a lot of important anniversaries. We mark the first permanent British settlement in Canada in Cupids, Newfoundland. Previous settlements had been attempted in what is now the USA, and Jamestown was celebrated in 2008, but in 2010 after many attempts at using the Newfoundland coast as a base for drying cod or fixing ships a permanent settlement was made. Archeologists are swarming over the site right now. England claimed much of the Maritimes on the basis of John Cabot's discoveries in 1498. Numerous pottery items and trading items have survived, but I find the presence of Spanish Talers really intriguing. These pieces of eight, as they were frequently called, remind

us of how universal they were and how early they became a trusted a currency throughout the Americas. Talers and then dollars became the currency of North America. (A stamp commemorating Cupids at left)

1609 voyage



This map shows just two of the famous voyages of Henry Hudson--the discovery of the Hudson River on behalf of the Dutch and the discovery of Hudson Bay and James Bay for Great Britain.

Henry Hudson was truly one of the greatest navigators of his age and explored on behalf of the English and the Dutch. He searched for both the North West Passage and the North East Passage. His last fatal trip caused a flurry of investigation and discovery that opened up the whole of Hudson Bay and James Bay to exploration and trade. On April 17, 1610 Henry Hudson departed London on the **Discovery** with 22 other Englishmen. We remember the voyage primarily for the mutiny in which Henry and his young son and seven other men were cast adrift never to be seen again.

However between 1610 and 1616 an astonishing portion of Canada's eastern arctic were probed by Hudson and the expeditions that followed. Thomas Button took two ships to overwinter at the mouth of the Nelson River (Manitoba). William Baffin and Robert Bylor explored almost the entire west coast of Greenland and the east coast of Baffin Island. They also explored the mouth of what became known as the mouth of the North West Passage—Fox Channel. They had gone as far north as 78

degrees 45 minutes. These explorations led to the creation of Hudson's Bay Company—now **hbc**—under the Stuarts.

MARINE SOUNDINGS is a quarterly newsletter of the PROVINCIAL MARINE RE-ENACTMENT GROUP of Amherstburg. It is put out in FEBRUARY, MAY, AUGUST and NOVEMBER Ideas, questions, articles are needed at the **beginning** of the month of publication. Note the change in our publication dates.

## Marine Soundings

is published by the Provincial Marine Amherstburg, a Re-enactment Group.

Membership at \$15 a year includes the right to go on encampments, training with equipment, sailing on our vessels plus an insurance component and our quarterly newsletter. In addition we have many social events each year. Active re-enactors pay an additional \$7.00 towards insurance.

Members of similar organizations may apply for just a newsletter subscription. At \$6.00 Canadian funds and \$6.00 US, we simply recover our costs.

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To submit articles, questions, ideas e-mail

[gtmar@allstream.net](mailto:gtmar@allstream.net)

To Read articles in our newsletter on the web, visit

[www.provincialmarine.org](http://www.provincialmarine.org)

To contact Marty Burnet, our events coordinator

[Martyb17@hotmail.com](mailto:Martyb17@hotmail.com)

*P1 Anniveraries of Cupids, Newfoundland being founded and Henry Hudson's exploration of Hudson Bay*

*P2 Tri-service complications; List of officers*

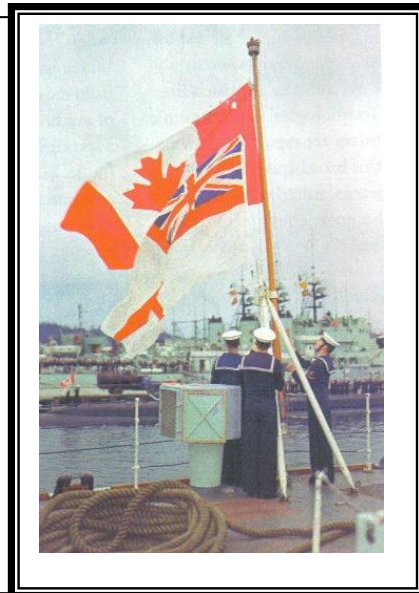
*P3& 4 Lavoisier father of chemistry and an understanding of nitrates. Gunpowder and the evolution of the gun. Midnight specials and terrorism*

*P5, List of 1812 Events and new picture collection*

*P6 Rowland Marshall's memories of VE Day*

*Pp 7-8 Gunpowder making and Photos of our annual Brick Laying Ceremony*

The white ensign came down but we had only our national flag to replace it. Traditionally naval ships showed a naval ensign to identify themselves as naval vessels. Moreover, replacing naval vessels was delayed until ships were thoroughly worn out and then a mad haste was required to produce white papers and analysis for their replacements. Our closest allies—the British and the Americans have the least respect for us, whereas we are well respected by distant peoples. Any wonder?



If you recall our last issue, at the end of WW II our navy may have built up to the fourth largest navy in the world, but subsequently it was run down very quickly so that we had a very small navy by VJ Day. In 1946, we bought a small escort carrier from the British—the **Magnificent**. We replaced it with the **Bonaventure**, laid down as the same class as the **Maggie** but later provided with an angled flight deck and a steam catapult. Then in the sixties when we converted to faster planes we undertook an eleven million dollar refit. For very little more we could have lengthened her and made her fit for the jet age. Instead she was a lethal killer of highly trained navy pilots. Two of my divisional officers were ex-pilots. It affected their nerves badly. One, it was rumoured, was the sole survivor of his class. One of my Commanding Officers, an ex-air controller from the aircraft carriers, became a ship CO. He found it difficult to make the crude maneuvers of a ship compared to the minor corrections necessary to land a plane on a carrier. One time it took him 143 engine movements to cross from one side of Halifax harbour to the other. You can imagine that stopping, then manually reversing the engines from a dead stop—then restarting--would have been impossible at that rate.

Moreover our ships seemed obsolete. Our frigates lacked revolution counters, had voice pipes and battleship linoleum held in place with brass trim. Between the brass strips and the bulkheads filth collected a quarter of an inch thick. American ships had easy-to-clean linoleum tiles clear to the bulkheads and steering from the con. The contrast was like night and day. Our answer to this crisis was Paul Hellier's tri-service unification, where every service wore a green uniform on parade, all services used the army forms, and traditions went out the window. Our naval supply forms had been perforated to come apart and be sent to the parts of the depot required so we could resupply in hours but we had to use a long army type lists that appeared to come from another age. Meanwhile ties with our heroic past were thrown away. It seemed to be part of a deliberate policy—throwing away long standing traditions of British origin without having any Canadian traditions to replace them with. There was a long period of malaise.

**MARINE SOUNDINGS** promotes the history of the Provincial Marine, most particularly in the War of 1812, and is available as part of the membership of the Provincial Marine. We undertake to send it to other groups at cost for \$ 6.00 CAD or US including postage and handling. MARINE SOUNDINGS/AUG p3

**Please submit**

Contributions in the form of photos or articles or suggestions of links or notifications of websites that might interest members.

David May  
[mrdavemay@sympatico.ca](mailto:mrdavemay@sympatico.ca)  
 President  
 Provincial Marine Amherstburg

**Please contribute to our new website**

By George T. Marshall  
 We have a new free website and a very good webmaster! Google [www.provincialmarine.org](http://www.provincialmarine.org). Kenneth Cyr is our webmaster and gets our newsletter on the site within days of publication. He also updates our main site.  
 Please submit photos, downsizing if possible. Photos of new members are especially welcome, and would raise our visibility considerably.

**BLACK POWDER**

We haven't looked at blackpowder for quite a while. It all seems so simple now, but collecting enough saltpeter, as potassium nitrate was known in those days, was quite a problem and involved the best minds of the eighteenth century. Among them Antoine Lavoisier. His discovery of an efficient way to make saltpeter—one of the essential ingredients of gunpowder changed history. At the time of his discovery, saltpeter (from Latin *Sal Petre* or salt from stone), was collected by royal monopoly. People paid for a license to farm it; that is, scrape it from caves, tunnels and cobblestones.

Lavoisier was awarded with the position of supervisor of gunpowder production with a generous salary and a four-storey mansion free of charge. This income and that he gained from the General farm—a tax farming cooperative that he was part of—paid for his scientific work and committee work that he undertook as part of his service to France. His discovery which turned normal farming wastes into highly valuable potassium nitrate was scalable. It could be done on the farm or by a state monopoly. Barrels were filled with stale piss and feces, ashes and straw and small stones, and the reactions in the barrels produced a high quality potassium nitrate usable once dried for gunpowder.

His discovery made France a power in gunpowder and they supplied the americans in their revolution liberally.

The nation was grateful for his work but not so grateful that he could escape the guillotine. His crime was being involved in being part of the tax farming scheme. Finding a safe way to make saltpeter did not save him.

Making gun powder was still dangerous and scaling the process up to national arsenal size cost many lives as it still does today. Weaponizing gunpowder was still worse. One of the first weapons was the handgonne or hand cannon. (seen below)

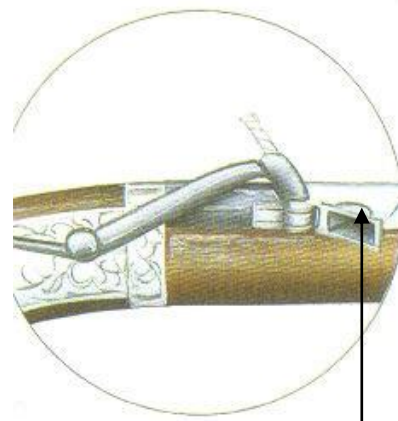


This primitive weapon required a touch of a hot poker or coal to set it off. A slow match (potassium nitrate-soaked hemp rope) was a slow burning fuse that was fairly hard to put out. Too much saltpeter and it burned too quickly, too little and it burned slowly and got blown out by the gun's discharge.

They often had both ends burning as in this drawing:



The invention of the matchlock gun meant gunners could aim and fire with the lighting of the gun handled by the spring matchlock. "Lock" simply meant mechanism in those days.



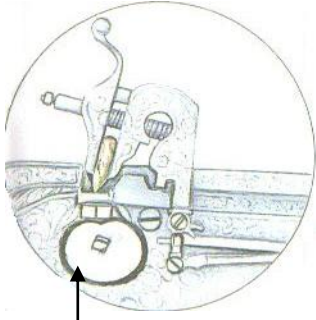
This matchlock shows a safety cover open. When closed the open flame of the slow match will not set off the weapon.

However, matchlock weapons have a severe problem at night. Every move you made was noticeable. Now the problem was to find some way of producing a

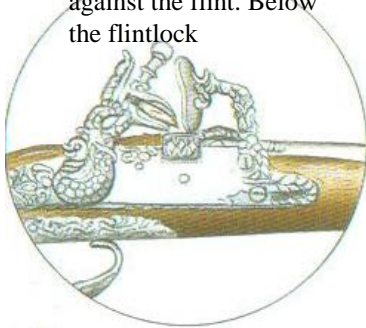
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spark when needed. The first solution was the wheellock (seen below)



Wheel causing friction against the flint. Below the flintlock



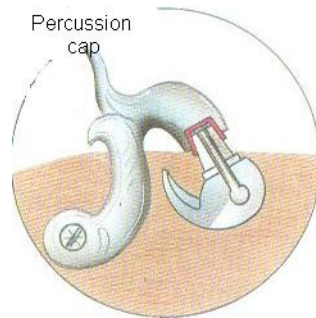
#### A SPARK WHEN NEEDED?

The answer was the wheellock (lock means mechanism); a wheel turned past a flint held in a vice grip producing a spark which went to the firing chamber. It was a well regarded weapon by the nobles who could afford it, but it was hard to produce in mass numbers. The inventor, we believe, was a German clockmaker Johan Kuhfuss about 1510.

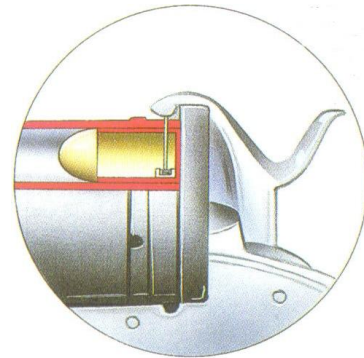
The Flintlock, the next improvement and the one we are familiar with, was a French improvement on a Dutch invention. In it the flint, released by the trigger, went forward hitting the strike plate creating a spark (the flash in the pan) that entered the breech.

Sometimes the flash in the pan caused no explosion in the breech. A very scary moment. Would the gun go off or was it *just a flash in the pan*? This is an expression we still use today without understanding its origins. Also the pan was exposed to the elements. It could get wet and render the gun non-functional. Then the bayonet was the soldiers' only weapon.

The percussion cap was invented in 1807 by a Scottish minister but it needed a lot of fiddling before it was reliable (about 1820) and so it did not see service until long after the War of 1812.



The percussion cap contained the germ of an improvement that would go forward when the breechloading gun became reliable in the 1860s. In the gun breech below we see the revolver mechanism, the six chambers with one lined up with the barrel, the projectile and the charge cartridge are made one unit with a detonator at the rear—all held in a brass cartridge case. The only difference from a modern six-shooter is that the firing pin enters vertically.



Above a six-shot Belgian revolver common in the 1860s. All that remains is to move the pin to the rear and make it part of the base of the brass cartridge, then we are ready for the mass carnage of WW I, and the cheap bedside gun ready at a moment's notice for finishing off an intruder or an obstinate spouse.

#### Our History is Alive.

By George Marshall

The nineteenth century is with us still, and we are still working out consequences of the First World War. *The Shock of the Old* is just one book recently published dealing with this. Hitler's WW II's invasion of Russia used more horses than Napoleon had about a hundred and forty years before. In other respects the world has changed an awful lot just recently. One hundred years ago just ten percent of us lived in cities. Now over half of the world live in cities. And so we are all combatants in an Ideological War much like the Cold War, but this time it is religious extremists instead of ideological extremists. Weapons produced at the end of the nineteenth century, and chemical processes described at the end of the eighteenth century make us all vulnerable to attack.

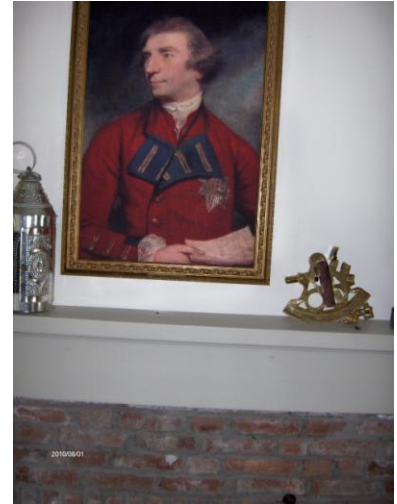
*That is why standing tall with our old allies is just as important as it ever was. Tony Blair discussed these ideas with Peter Mansbridge in ONE on ONE. We will only defeat these extremists by remaining vigilant, remaining on message and cleaning up our own act as much as we did in our fight with the Communists. There is recognition that with the longest coastline in the world our haphazard way of renewing our fleet will have to end, and a permanent replacement policy put in place otherwise we won't have the capacity when we need it. There is even talk of entering the Common Market to counteract our reliance on the US.*



**MARINE SOUNDINGS of the Provincial Marine**  
**Windsor Charity Bingos, Hbc, Trillium Corporation, ECFDC**  
**CAPTAIN'S CORNER**



**At right** General Amherst after whom Amherstburg was named. On the mantel a workable sextant. **Below** Marty Burnet looking at a large reproduction of George III's portrait hanging in the House of Commons, which was recently identified as a genuine original by Sir Joshua Reynolds. These are on loan from Terry Hart who collected pictures of interest to the Town of Amherstburg. The King's picture had never been professionally reproduced before. We have applied for a grant to purchase these pictures permanently for our collection. Congratulations to Terry for his detective work in locating these pictures and especially for his role in identifying a valuable picture in our nation's portrait collection.. This, I believe, should be in the capital. The very large picture of Queen Victoria was recently removed from Rideau hall. If ever there was a promoter of Canada it was Queen Victoria, who was our Queen when we became a dominion and who helped chose the site for our capital city.



**Some Reminders about our membership fees. We're holding the line on prices.**

Jane Teeple is still our membership chair and has sent out reminders. Membership is \$15 single; \$30 family. Insurance is an extra \$7 per active re-enactor member. Single with insurance is \$22. Family is \$30 plus \$7 for each insured member. Jane's address is:



**Jane Teeple, 443 Dalhousie Street, Amherstburg Ontario, N9V 1X4**

**Marty Burnet's: List of 1812 Events for 2010 - Provincial Marine Amherstburg**

- Jul 30 - Aug 1 - Ft Malden Heritage Weekend - Amherstburg, ON  
 - Grand Tactical - Sackets Harbor, NY \*
- Aug 7-8 - Siege of Ft Erie - Fort Erie, ON**
- Sept 4-5 - Fairfield - Thamesville, ON
- 11-12 - Backus Mill - Port Rowan, ON
- Oct 2-3 - Fanshawe 1812 - London, ON**
- 8-10 - Mississinewa 1812 - Marion, IN \*
- Dec 4 - Sutlers' Christmas Gathering, Hamilton, ON \***

**A number of items show up in the late fall involving our members: 11 November when we join the legion in remembering the fallen. We usually fire our cannon. We salute the Christmas parade and lighting of the town tree with a cannon shot. We usually light the way to the Christmas concert at St John the Baptist in uniform and using our 19<sup>th</sup> century lanterns.**

## MARINE SOUNDINGS

### The Provincial Marine Newsletter

#### Remembering VE Day in Northern Ireland

*By Rowland C. Marshall, an underage sailor at the time.*

The ships of EG9 ( Squadron of escort ships) secured alongside at Lesahally, Northern Ireland, either the evening before, or about 0900 on the 8th of May 1945. A message was received that Germany had surrendered, hostilities were to cease, and His Majesty's Ships were authorized to "Splice the Main Brace." This meant that an extra tot of rum was to be issued in honour of the great event.

Each member of the crew was in possession of a Station Card which listed his watch, action station, part of ship, mess, religion, and of course, name and rank, plus either G, T or UA. The "G" was understood to mean 'entitled to grog,' the "T": 'Temperence' and that the man concerned would receive an extra 6 cents per day in lieu of grog, and "UA": underage, not entitled to a grog issue.

At 1130, "Up Spirits" was piped. The men shouted, 'And stand fast the Holy Ghost' (sailor humour), and extra rum was drawn from the Spirit Locker for this very special occasion. In every mess celebratory rum and grog appeared (By regulation, grog was 2 parts water to 1 part overproof rum but in many Canadian ships Coca-Cola was allowed either with grog as such or sometimes in place of water). On this day, as either straight rum or grog was available in generous quantities, crew members shared.

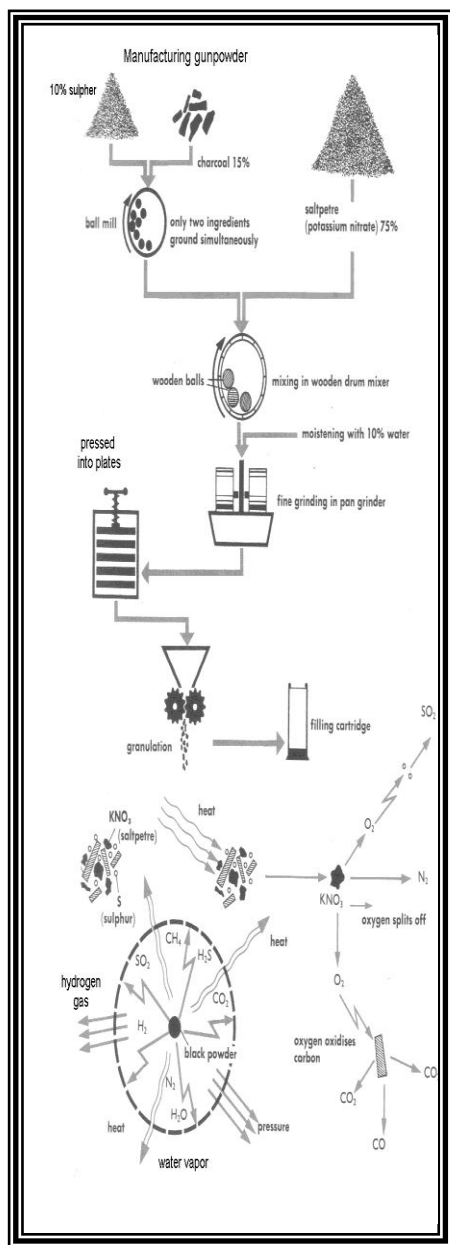
My messmates decided that although I was UA, on this day I should not be deprived of a share of the "Splice the Main Brace." Various lads made sure I had a glass or cupful. So my first taste of "Pusser Rum!" After lunch, once an hour, the liberty boats were piped. Most people not on watch headed ashore in successive groups, (following dress inspection of course). By about 1330 I was on a train heading for Londonderry. A while later I found myself amid happy Irish people banging pots and pans along the streets of the city, next in a pub giving away packages of Canadian Sweet Caporals, which I had purchased at 10 cents per from the ship's canteen. However the rum caught up to me, and I suddenly felt sick. After that I wandered into a movie--- they were all free that day to service people ---and probably snoozed through most of it. Next I wandered over to the other side of the River Foyle, and into a dance, which was also free. By Midnight I and hundreds of other sailors were on the train back to Lessahally. Quite a sight, once there: a weaving line of sailors moving down a hill toward the ships, and in the hills about, bonfires were burning for the occasion. Ships' searchlights played the skies, accompanied by sirens and rockets. Back aboard, hardly a sober Crewmember.

**Rowland Marshall**





# The Making of Gunpowder



Gunpowder is typically 75% saltpetre, 10% sulphur, and 15% carbon (charcoal). Collecting saltpetre was a major problem for any country that wanted to be a major power.

Antoine Lavoisier was responsible for finding a method of making the stuff from

common items easily available on most farms, ashes for potassium, stale piss, and feces from livestock, straw, small stones and very large barrels.

Water is added. The water dissolves the rare element potassium in the ashes (creating the base potassium carbonate), the piss and feces create acids, the two mixing together create potassium nitrates (the chemical name for a salt named saltpetre.) Salts are created when you mix acids and bases together to neutralize one another. The salts produced are strained by the straw and stones and are drained off periodically from the bottom of the barrel. Lavoisier's method worked easily well in farms and state facilities. One simply added extra barrels to increase production.

By experimentation chemists discovered that other salts could be substituted for part of the 75% of gunpowder that was saltpetre. It was the oxygenator for the two combustibles sulphur and carbon. It was the work of Lavoisier who added nitrates and carbonates to our vocabulary that permitted this work to proceed rapidly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Some salts produce very different colours from potassium: Magnesium, strontium, and barium salts producing whites, greens and reds that were not available in early pyrotechnics. Gunpowder produces its explosions by

expansion: a small charge suddenly expands to 5 cubic feet.

Explosions like gunpowder's can be produced when coal dust or flour are floating in large masses of air. It is theorized that it was a coal dust explosion which gave the Americans the excuse they needed to take on Spain at the turn of the twentieth century.

Homemade potassium carbonate or lye was used in making soap. The lye was the caustic or strong base, the clarified fats collected from cooking or rendering left over fat were mixed together to produce soap which is in fact a salt soluble in water. Making soap is a farm or home activity that carried on until quite recently.

Fats were collected for cooking and baking as a matter of course and in many homes burning wood, the housewife could place the ashes from the Quebec heater in a barrel with water-- a safe way of disposing of ashes. With some way of straining the mixture such as small stones and straw you could open a valve and have a strong base to mix with your fatty acids. All fats are acids. When thoroughly mixed, soap would result. The soap had to be thoroughly washed lest there be any unmixed lye present.

Today fine soaps are still made at home and mixed with unusual herbs and scents. This has become a cottage industry in the Eastern Townships of Quebec.

# Final Images—Brick Laying Ceremony

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