

Foreword

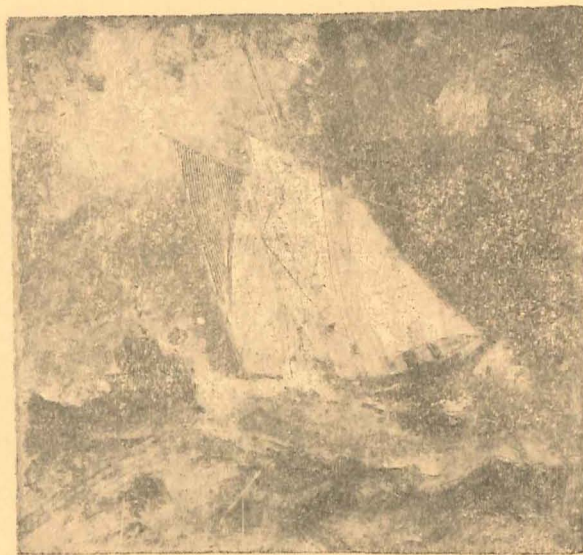
Wood engravers toiling away at their trade during the last quarter of the nineteenth century could be forgiven for feeling a touch of despair. Since the early 1800s, they had practiced a viable trade, with graver in hand over an endgrain block, cutting illustrations for a healthy proportion of books, newspapers and periodicals. In the 1880s, they witnessed the advent of photomechanical printing plates and, in direct competition, felt the ominous rising tide of obsolescence. As this new technology became more efficient, less expensive and generally accepted over the next twenty years, commercial wood engravers would begin to pack up their blocks, wrap up their tools and seek other employment. It could well be this very occurrence that lay behind the discovery, 130 years on, of a collection of nineteenth century engraved boxwood blocks and, ultimately, the creation of this portfolio.

Collections of hand engraved blocks exist in public and private hands, but they are scarce on the open market. The blocks used to print this edition were discovered in Brockville, Ontario – a Canadian city located on the St. Lawrence River, which serves in that region as a border between Ontario and upstate New York.

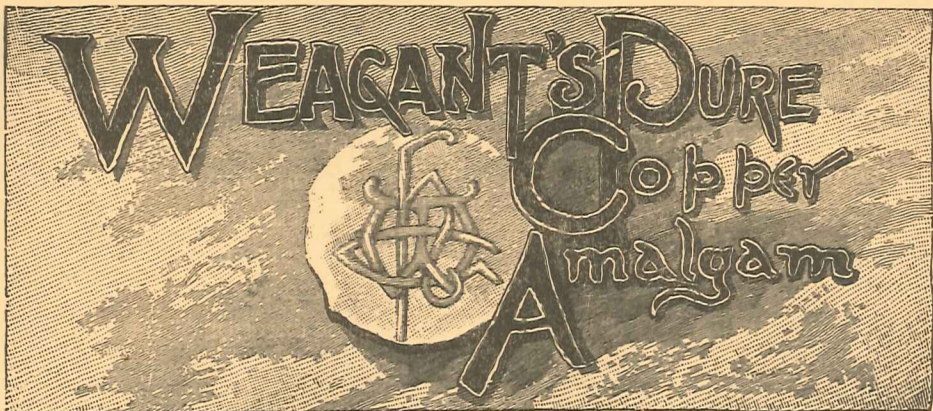
When found, the broad, shallow, late nineteenth century felt-lined wooden case contained fourteen engraved wood blocks, one wood block prepared with an illustra-

tion but not engraved, a practice block depicting Abraham Lincoln and an advertising block cut from lead. The box also held three mushroom graver handles, one loose blade, a sharpening stone and two vintage amateur linoleum cuts. A partial page from the *Illustrated London News* had been pasted to the exterior of the lid, displaying early twentieth century advertisements.

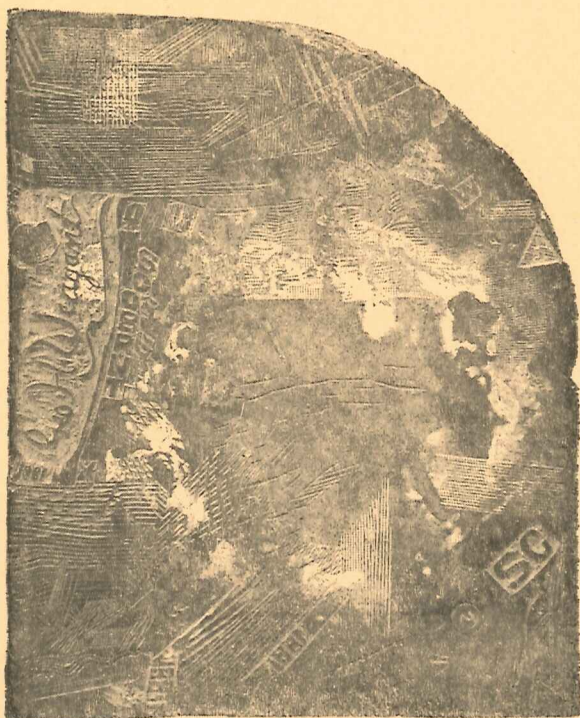
The boxwood blocks are in surprisingly good condition considering they are more than 120 years old. They measure in size from the smallest, the monogram shown on the title page, at less than one inch square, to the largest, a vignette measur-



Boxwood block with an India ink illustration of a sailing ship – engraving begun on topsail. Unsigned. Circa 1875. (80 mm x 78 mm)



*An advertising block engraved from lead. Unsigned.
Circa 1880. (125 mm x 55 mm)*



*The reverse face of the Lincoln block showing
practice marks, the name 'Geo. H. Weagant'. Dated
1881. Signed on reverse 'F. Archibald'. (77 mm x 95 mm)*

ing approximately six by eight inches. The matter and style of the illustrations suggest a mid to later nineteenth century origin. They range in technique from simple line illustrations to highly sophisticated work with detailed tones. Many of the blocks are composites, made up of two or more pieces of boxwood glued together. Over time, these have parted slightly, creating visible gaps in some of the prints. No attempt has been made to fill, repair or alter the blocks from their original state (with one unfortunate exception), and the prints are presented here as such.

It is difficult to say how many hands are responsible for the blocks in this collection, but three names can be identified: Samuel

Smith Kilburn, a Boston wood engraver; George Matthews from Boston and Montreal; and the name, initials and monogram of F. Archibald, which appear on three or possibly four of the blocks. Three blocks are dated 1881, situating them in time near the end of the engraving era. A lead cut for Weagant's Pure Copper Amalgam refers to Cornwall, Ontario dentist George H. Weagant (b. 1853). The inverse face of the Lincoln practice block signed by Archibald shows an attempt at engraving the name 'G. H. Weagant', which offers a tantalizing connection between Archibald and Cornwall – another Canadian city located some 100 kilometers (approximately sixty miles) down river from Brockville.

Printing the Engravings

This portfolio is intended to be a celebration of the skill of these nineteenth century wood engravers as opposed to a demonstration of perfect printing, something difficult to achieve even by the most experienced of printers with blocks that are 130 years old. Accordingly, printing the blocks proved to be an education in frustration, and a study in contrasts. Three blocks printed beautifully, requiring almost no make-ready, while the balance required extensive make-ready: underlays and overlays. Five blocks demanded reprinting entirely. Part of this must be attributed to the printer's own arcing trajec-

tory on a steep learning curve. In the end, the fourteen wood engravings, in an edition of 100 impressions each, required over 2,700 impressions – the tuition paid for experience gained.

An accord had to be reached between crisp black lines and the preservation of fine detail. The engravers designed and cut their blocks with printing on smooth commercial papers in mind. Proofs pulled on coated stock produced prints of startling clarity. To achieve a similar effect on finer paper, it called for the conservative control of ink on the press to avoid obscuring fine details.