

# MECHANICAL GENIUS

## John Dittrick (1849-1925)

John Dittrick<sup>1</sup> was a mechanical genius. From a clan of craftsmen, working in metal and wood, he could mend the apparently un-repairable, solve the most complex of technical problems and the creations of his own invention were uniquely remarkable.

Having arrived in the American colonies from Segendorff, Rheinland-Pfalz, Germany, in the early years of the 18th century, the Dittrick family originally settled in what is now Ulster County, New York, USA. Three generations later, when the colony revolted against King George III, descendent Jacob Dittrick (1755-1828), a prosperous farmer living in Tryon County, New York, chose loyalty to the Crown. He enlisted with the Indian Department in 1776 and transferred to Butler's Rangers the following year. During the Revolutionary War he married Margaret Pickard (1762-1845) and when the Treaty of Paris secured American independence in 1783, Butler's Rangers, including Sergeant Jacob Dittrick, his wife and two young children, were camped at Fort Niagara. As the east bank of the Niagara River had become American territory, Butler's corps were re-settled across the river in Upper Canada, where Jacob Dittrick received a 500 acre land grant on Twelve Mile Creek<sup>2</sup>, thus becoming the first settler of what is now the city of St. Catharines, Ontario<sup>3</sup>.

In Upper Canada Jacob and Margaret Dittrick became parents to another 10 children. Their eldest son, Robert Addison Dittrick (1783-1847)<sup>4</sup>, who had been born in the army camp at Fort Niagara, married Annie Foster (1790-1828) in about 1804 and their second son, William, born in 1807 at St. Catharines, moved to Perth in 1820<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> There appears to be no 'standard' or 'correct' spelling of the surname. The family themselves used various spellings at different times and siblings sometimes used different spellings simultaneously. A variety of spellings were applied by census enumerators, court clerks, church wardens, newspapers, patent attorneys, business directories, historians, and on gravestones. Spelling sometimes varies within the same document. At different times and places the name was spelled no less than 10 different ways; Dittrick, Dettrick, Ditterick, Detterick, Detterich, Dederick, Deiterich, Deitrick, Deitrich or Dietrich. The family's UEL ancestor appears on the muster rolls of Butler's Rangers not only as Sergeant Jacob Dittrick, but also as Jacob Tederick, Jacob Tidrick and Jacob Frederick. In the case of the principal figure of this account, his father used the spelling 'Dettrick', although the grave stone of his mother and brother James reads 'Ditterick', and his sons spelled their name 'Dietrich', while he himself usually (but not always) used 'Dittrick' in advertisements for his workshop, on patent applications and on his gravestone. In view of the impossibility of keeping track of who spelled their name how and when, 'Dittrick' has been adopted here as a common spelling in an effort to minimize confusion.

<sup>2</sup> In June 1813, as American troops retreated from the Battle of Stoney Creek, a skirmish with a pursuing British patrol was fought on the Dittrick farm at 12 Mile Creek.

<sup>3</sup> Their land grant extended from Westchester Avenue to Lockhart Drive, bounded by Twelve Mile Creek to the west and what is now the Pen Centre to the east.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Addison Dittrick, and his brothers James (1785-1863), Walter (1793-1862), and William (1795-1833), served with the 1st Regiment Lincoln Militia at the War of 1812 battles of Queenston Heights, Fort George and Lundy's Lane.

<sup>5</sup> See Dederick, William (unaccompanied), *Early Settlers to Bathurst District, Arriving Prior to 1822*, by J. R. Ernest Miller and Robert E. Sargeant (1988), Kingston Branch, Ontario Genealogical Society, from Colonel William Marshall's 1834 report, 1842 census returns and baptismal records of Rev. William Bell.

What brought William east is uncertain, but as a “*pioneer of Perth*” he made his living as a butcher and by “*the manufacture of grain cradles*”<sup>6</sup>. According to his obituary he worked from a shop and home located near the corner of Foster and Drummond Streets, and became “*as well known here as anyone in the county ... a man of original character and in his way a genius*”<sup>7</sup>.

Reference to William’s “*genius*” was a nod to his originality and capability as a craftsman, talents he would pass down to his sons and grandsons. That he was “*well known*” across Lanark County as an “*original character*” alludes, in part, to his numerous appearances before the magistrates. From the 1850s onward, he was frequently convicted and fined on drunk and disorderly charges. In 1868 his affection for the bottle brought a 10 days jail term and, two decades later, in 1890, at the age of 83<sup>8</sup>, he drew a six month sentence for vagrancy.

In 1832, more than a decade after his arrival at Perth, William Dittrick married English-born Christina Thornton (1814-1897)<sup>9</sup> of Drummond Township, and over the following 25 years fathered a family of 13 children<sup>10</sup>. He died in 1890 at the home of his daughter Jane Dittrick-Burch-Singer<sup>11</sup> in St. Catharines. Christina Thornton-Dittrick died at Perth in 1897, aged 83 years, and was buried in Elmwood Cemetery. Among William and Christina Dittrick’s 13 children were seven sons.

Robert (1838-1918) moved to St. Catharines as a young man. When he married Sarah Jane Berryman (b.1841) in 1861 he moved to Niagara Falls, New York, USA, where he worked as a carriage maker and then as a photographer. Robert and Sarah were the parents of six children.<sup>12</sup>

William Jr. (1842-1918) apprenticed as a printer at Perth before moving to Erie, Pennsylvania, USA, where he became a pattern maker employed by the Modern Tool Company Ltd. He married Margaret Viskie (b.1848) in 1866 and became the father of nine children.<sup>13</sup>

The remaining sons all lived their lives at Perth, although life for four of them was relatively short.

Walter, born in 1845, was the first to become a machinist. He worked at Robert Lillie Sr.’s Perth Foundry and Machine Shop, at the corner of Gore and North Streets, before joining his brothers John and Alvah in establishing their own moulding and machine shop business in 1875. For a time, he also filled the post of engineer of the Tay Fire Engine steamer. In 1883 he married

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<sup>6</sup> *Perth Courier*, March 24, 1905.

<sup>7</sup> *Perth Courier*, March 28, 1890.

<sup>8</sup> Although his Lincoln County death certificate of 1890 records his age as 86 years.

<sup>9</sup> Probably the daughter of English immigrant John Thornton who arrived in Canada September 1, 1816 via the ship *Royal Sovereign* accompanied by a wife, a son under 12 years of age and four daughters under 12 years of age. Thornton was located on Drummond Township C-1/L-8(N.E) on September 30, 1816.

<sup>10</sup> Mary (1836-1923), Jane (1837-1923), Robert (b.1838), Caroline (b.1840), William (b.1842), Christina (1843-1869), Walter (1845-1855), John (1848-1882), Serina (1849-1882), Alvah (1851-1880), Alonzo (1854-1890), Rebecca (1859-1944), James (1862-1905).

<sup>11</sup> Jane Dittrick (1836-1923) first married Orren Burch (1814-1866) in about 1860 and then married Thomas Singer (1846-1915) in 1870.

<sup>12</sup> Annetta (b.1863), William A. (b.1865), Robert E. (b.1868), Francis A. (b.1870), Robert (b.1875), and Bessie (b.1885).

<sup>13</sup> Christina (b.1864), George (b.1868), William (b.1872), Charles H. (b.1874), Della (b.1879), Lulu (b.1880), Albert (b.1886), Lemuel (b.1907) and Harold (b.1909).

Elizabeth McLean (1845-1928), daughter of William McLean and Elizabeth McKay, and fathered two children<sup>14</sup> Although “*he was one of the best machinists and metal workers in central Canada, ill health forced him to quit the more active work for a less laborious occupation*”.<sup>15</sup> In about 1880, he became Market Clerk and caretaker at Town Hall, and died of heart disease in 1885 at the age of 40.<sup>16</sup>

Alvah, born in 1851, married Eliza Jane Weatherhead (1857-1892), daughter of Alexander Weatherhead and Mariam Rye, in 1874 and fathered one daughter.<sup>17</sup> He also worked as a machinist for foundry owner Robert Lillie Sr. before joining John and Walter in establishing their partnership in 1875. Five years later, however, Alvah died of tuberculosis at the age of 29 years.

Alonzo, born in 1854, married Caroline ‘Carrie’ Donegan (1861-1885), daughter of Patrick Donegan and Bridget Foley, in 1881.<sup>18</sup> From about 1880, he operated a sewing machine sales and repair shop that had been started by his brother John. At the same time, he owned a bowling alley at the corner of Gore Street and Market Square opposite Town Hall.<sup>19</sup> In 1885 Alonzo was manager of the Hicks Hotel<sup>20</sup>, 80 Foster Street, and in 1887 became manager of the Provincial Hotel in Gananoque. He died, also of tuberculosis, in 1890 aged 36 years.

James, born in 1862, was a tailor by trade and worked for H. B. Wright & Co.<sup>21</sup> He died, unmarried, of dropsy<sup>22</sup> at age 42, in 1905.

Born in 1847, John Dittrick attended elementary school at Perth and, with his brothers Walter and Alvah, apprenticed as a moulder and machinist at Lillie’s Foundry and Machine Shop. At age 19 he was already an active militia volunteer, serving with the Perth Light Infantry Company, and among those called up in 1866 to secure the Brockville-Prescott-Cornwall front against threats from the Fenian Brotherhood. During the Fenian raids of 1870 he was a bugler with the Perth Rifle Company but did not see active service.



*John Dittrick (1848-1925)*

In his early 20’s Dittrick unveiled what was perhaps his first invention.

*... at an exhibition of our Agricultural Society in the old drill shed ... he had as an exhibit a miniature machine for making bolts, of wooden construction, which drew universal observation and admiration.*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Washington (1879-1881) and Christina ‘Gina’ Mable (b.1885).

<sup>15</sup> *Perth Courier*, July 10, 1885.

<sup>16</sup> In 1889 Elizabeth McLean-Dittrick was remarried to Robert McFarlane, s/o James McFarlane & Anne Cunningham of Derry, Northern Ireland.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Ann (b.1876).

<sup>18</sup> Alonzo and Caroline Dittrick seem to have been childless.

<sup>19</sup> A site now occupied by the Red Brick Emporium.

<sup>20</sup> Then owned by James Spalding Jr. and Robert Stewart. Now the Red Fox Pub.

<sup>21</sup> From 1860 through 1930, the Wright family of Perth operated H. B. Wright & Company at 63-65 Gore Street East, “*hatter and furrier ... merchant tailor, clothier and dealer in gents’ furnishing goods*”.

<sup>22</sup> Edema due to congestive heart failure.

<sup>23</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 22, 1925.

In December 1871, John Dittrick married Isabella McLean (1852-1911), daughter of William McLean and Elizabeth McKay of North Elmsley Township, and thus a sister of his brother Walter's wife, Elizabeth McLean. The following year he went to work as a tap and die maker at the Perth Sewing Machine Factory.

Entrepreneur James Morton Millar (1842-1889), brother-in-law of John Haggart (1836-1913)<sup>24</sup>, then serving as Perth Mayor and later MP and Minister of Railways and Canals, had purchased the patent to the 'Venus' lock-stitch sewing machine and, in 1871, established the Perth Sewing Machine Factory on Victoria Street<sup>25</sup>. The plant produced the gracefully designed, though not very robust, Venus, until poor sales drove the company under in 1875.

At the same time Dittrick began making tools for Miller and Millar, he also formed a partnership with James Bell Jr. (1847-1933)<sup>26</sup> to build a tug-boat. The 50 foot sidewheeler, with a 10 foot beam and draught of 12 inches, was constructed at the Hamilton, Ontario, boatyard of Martin Stally<sup>27</sup> and christened the *Maggie* when launched on May 15, 1873. It was fitted with a single high-pressure, 24 inch stroke, steam engine generating 22 horsepower, designed by John Dittrick and built by the F.G. Beckett Company of Hamilton. That summer Dittrick left sewing machines behind as he and Bell,

*... navigated all the way from Brockville to Winnipeg wherever there were water stretches. Thus, in the ocean-like lakes most of the way, was the undertaking of no small labor and skill, to say nothing of the danger where wind and waves met them in their strength now and then along the course.*<sup>28</sup>

They sailed the *Maggie* up the Great Lakes to Duluth, Minnesota, at the head of Lake Superior, then transported her 180 miles (290 kilometers) "overland via the Northern Pacific Railway to Moorhead [Minnesota], from where she steamed down the Red River, reaching Winnipeg in early August 1873"<sup>29</sup>. From August through freeze-up that year she hauled barges on the Red River, working "night and day all season and making a good thing for her proprietors".<sup>30</sup> That fall the *Maggie* was sold to John Christian Schultz (1840-1896)<sup>31</sup> and Magnus Brown (1811-1888)<sup>32</sup> of Winnipeg<sup>33</sup>. Dittrick returned to Perth, but Bell stayed in the west for the rest of his life.

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<sup>24</sup> Millar had married Haggart's sister, Isabella Maxwell Haggart (1846-1917), in 1868.

<sup>25</sup> Also known as J. M. Miller & Company or the Venus Sewing Machine Company, the factory was located between North Street and the present site of the Perth & District Collegiate Institute.

<sup>26</sup> James Horatio Bell (1847-1933), son of James Bell Sr. (1817-1904) and Jane Judd (1818-1864), and grandson of Reverend William Bell (1780-1857).

<sup>27</sup> Martin Sr. (1807-1899) & Martin Jr. (b.1841).

<sup>28</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 22, 1925.

<sup>29</sup> *Ten Years in Winnipeg, 1870-1879*, by Alexander Begg & Walter R. Nursey. Begg and Nursey say the *Maggie* was "... the first screw tug-boat" to arrive at Winnipeg, but all other sources describe her as a side-wheeler.

<sup>30</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 31, 1873.

<sup>31</sup> Sir John Christian Schultz, KCMG, a Manitoba businessman and politician, an MP 1871-1882, a Senator 1882-1888, and the fifth Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba 1888-1895.

<sup>32</sup> Magnus Brown, a businessman, real estate developer and farmer in the early days of Winnipeg.

<sup>33</sup> In 1876 the *Maggie* was retired. Her hull became a barge, but her Dittrick designed engine was transferred into the 71 foot sternwheel steamboat *Keewatin* where it served until the *Keewatin* was wrecked in an 1884 storm on Lake Winnipeg.

Back in Perth, as the Perth Sewing Machine Factory drowned in red ink, John Dittrick purchased the company's entire inventory of 100 machines and began advertising himself as a Venus agent and in the business of,

*Sewing Machine Repairing ... Especially the Venus ... At his Residence, End of the Long Bridge ... Bring your machines and have them made new again*<sup>34</sup>.

Younger brother Alonzo Dittrick would continue to operate the sewing machine sales and service shop from a location at 56 Gore Street East into the 1880s, but in early 1875, John's interest turned to heavier engineering.

*New Finishing and Machine Shop — Mr. John Dittrick, having leased a part of the premises in connection with Mr. Robert Lillie's foundry, has purchased a lathe and other appliances of a finishing shop and will thus supply a want badly felt in Perth. Mr. Dittrick is a skilled craftsman and will give satisfaction....*<sup>35</sup>

John Dittrick's brothers Walter and Alva were partners in the new 'Dittrick Brothers' business, with Walter in charge of operations as, from time to time, John took advantage of other opportunities. In 1878 the local newspaper mentions that "*John Dettrick has left Perth to manage the dyewood works*<sup>36</sup> *at Brockville, owned by Messrs. Campbell*<sup>37</sup> *and Walker*<sup>38</sup> *of this place*".<sup>39</sup> In 1880, however, when Alva died and poor health forced Walter to leave the family business, John became sole proprietor. By 1882 the Dittrick machine shop had moved from the Lillie building to 35 Wilson Street West<sup>40</sup>, where it would remain until 1935, but, in about 1884, John Dittrick again left day-to-day business in other hands as he briefly took on the job of Superintendent at the Smiths Falls Bolt Works.

When he first opened his own shop in 1875, John Dittrick was already well known by the farmers, tradesmen, artisans and manufacturers of Lanark County for his remarkable ability to repair almost anything. From firsthand experience, the *Perth Courier* was among those who sang his praises.

*Any person wishing to see a specimen of his genius and handiwork need only call at this office and take a look at the machine that folds the Courier each week.*<sup>41</sup> *He changed [the] machine from a bit of mechanism which never worked right, into a complete machine, attached to the newspaper press, the operation of which was never surpassed by a product in that line from the best factories.*<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Perth Courier*, March 6, 1874.

<sup>35</sup> *Perth Courier*, March 12, 1875.

<sup>36</sup> The Canada Dye Work Mill at Brockville was the only establishment of its kind in Canada at the time. It imported wood from South America, via New York, the Erie Canal, and the lakes, from which it produced about 600 tons of product annually that was sold to woollen mills, dye works, tanneries, furniture factories, etc. Its specialty was a product for coloring pine to resemble mahogany and rosewood.

<sup>37</sup> John Gray Campbell (1826-1915), lumberman, mill owner, Perth town councillor.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Walker (1841-1916), who appears in census records as a carpenter.

<sup>39</sup> *Perth Courier*, January 4, 1878.

<sup>40</sup> The present location of the NAPA Auto Parts store.

<sup>41</sup> *Perth Courier*, November 27, 1891.

<sup>42</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 22, 1925.

When the *Courier* moved locations, Dettrick “without special knowledge of printing presses” twice disassembled its presses and “put them together again without a mistake or flaw when they came again into operation ... he seldom or never was ‘stuck’ when emergency or mechanical troubles called him in to relieve a situation”.<sup>43</sup>

In 1884, while directing operations at the Smiths Falls Bolt Factory, John Dittrick’s genius for conceptualization combined with hands-on practicality led him beyond the bounds of machines and tools fashioned for farm and factory.

*Mr. John Dittrick ... of this town ... has invented a fire escape of a unique kind which promises to take the load off all others of this kind. It is only 18 inches long and 8 inches wide and high. The escape is fastened to the window, a cable attached to it which is seized by the person wanting to use it and this unwinds by the weight of the body [and] in descending sends a fan revolving at high speed. This prevents the person descending quickly and the fall to the ground is very like that of alighting from a carriage.*<sup>44</sup>

In June 1885, the *Perth Courier* further reported that,

*... the simple and effective fire escape invented by John Dittrick has been exhibited in Chicago with results satisfactory to a number of capitalists there. The trial was made from a ten story building. The results should be reassuring to Mr. Dittrick for all other fire escapes have been impractical for one reason or another.*<sup>45</sup>

According to the *Toronto Mail* Dittrick’s fire escape mechanism,

*... received great attention in Canada, the USA and Great Britain, where it has been patented.*<sup>46</sup> *It has been put to vigorous tests in Montreal, Chicago and elsewhere and met with hearty endorsement from building inspectors and other experts. It is compact, safe, automatic, and always ready in case of emergency. The machine occupies but little space being only 13 in. wide 17 in. long and 11 in. high, is fastened to the floor below a window and when not in use is covered with a neat cabinet case. It is made of malleable iron and practically indestructible. All that is needed for its use is for the endangered person to buckle the belt around his waist and step out the window, where he will alight on the ground in safety.*<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> *Perth Courier*, October 24, 1884.

<sup>45</sup> *Perth Courier*, June 26, 1885.

<sup>46</sup> Canadian Patents 20.355 (1884) in the names of John Dittrick, James H. Chambers and George F. Cairns, and 23.203 / 24.696 (1886) in the name of John Dittrick. Perth native James H. Chambers (1850-1892), resident in Smiths Falls in 1884, was described in his *Perth Courier* obituary as “a scion of one of the oldest and wealthiest families in town”. George F. Cairns (1857-1903), a son of Perth Postmaster Thomas Cairns (1828-1896), was a Smiths Falls lawyer. U.S. Patents 361.580 / 319.888 / 326.726 (1887) in the name of John Dittrick.

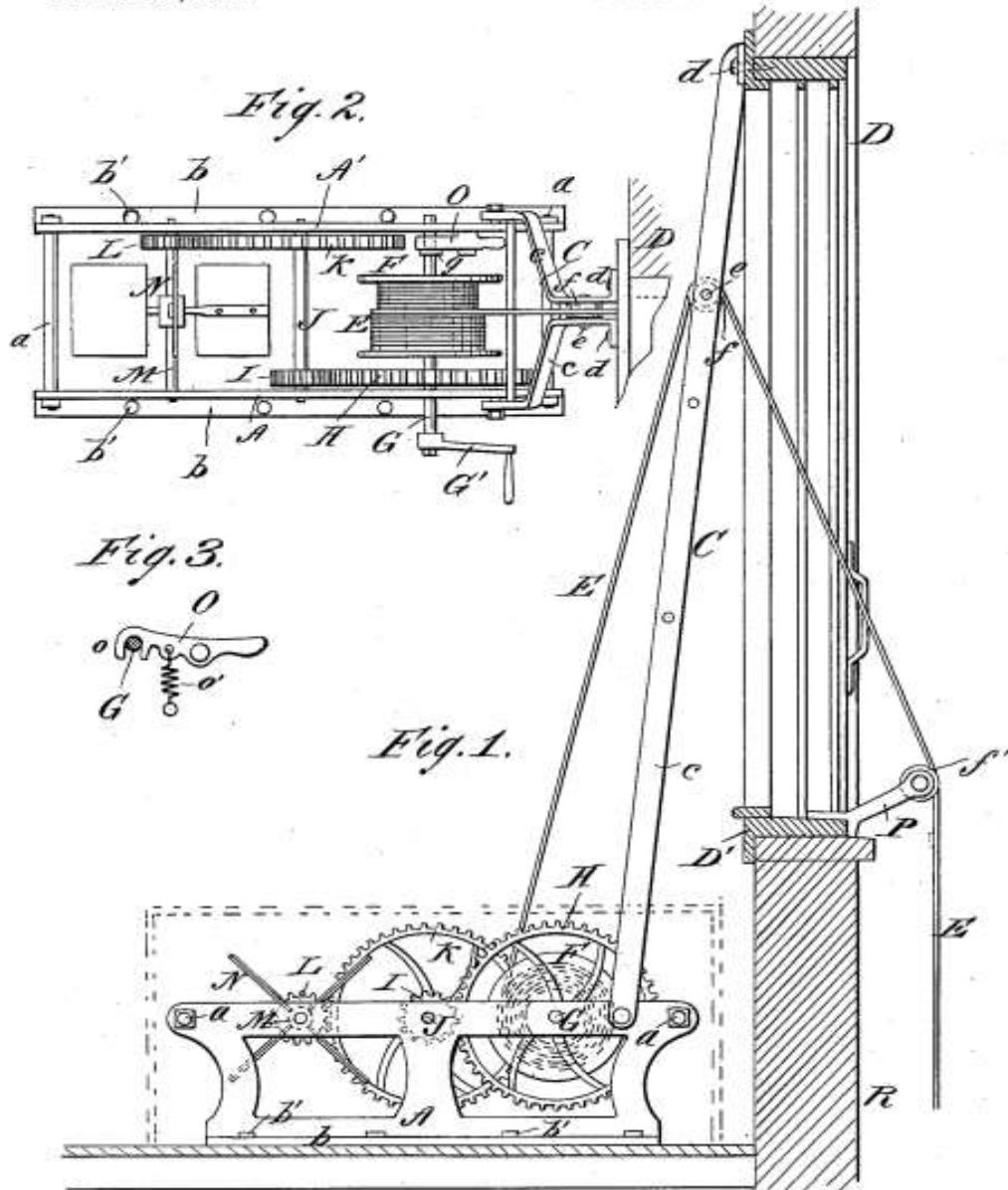
<sup>47</sup> *Toronto Mail*, 1887.

(No Model.)

J. DITTRICK.  
FIRE ESCAPE.

No. 319,888.

Patented June 9, 1885.

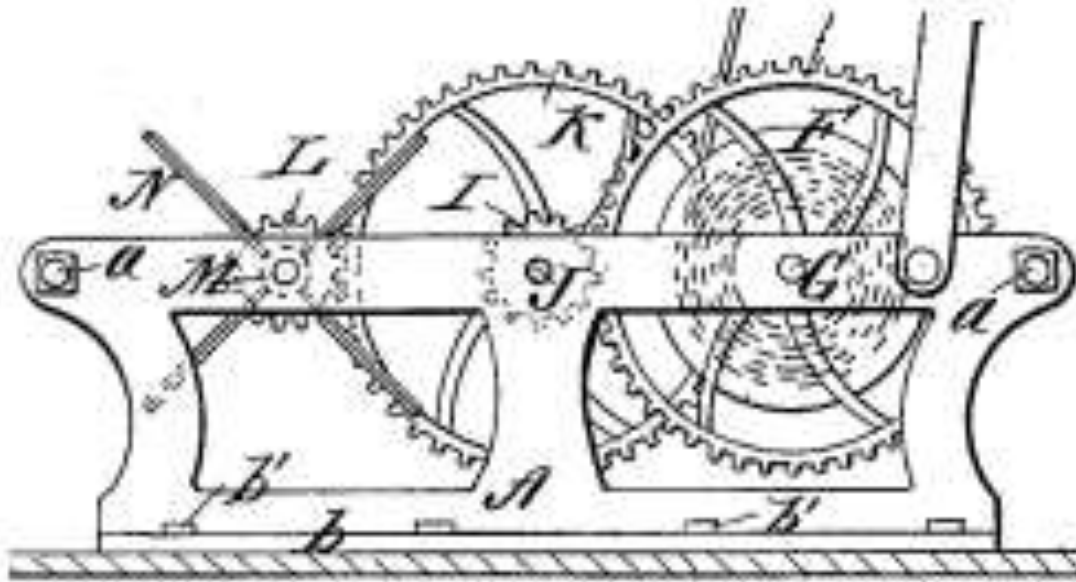
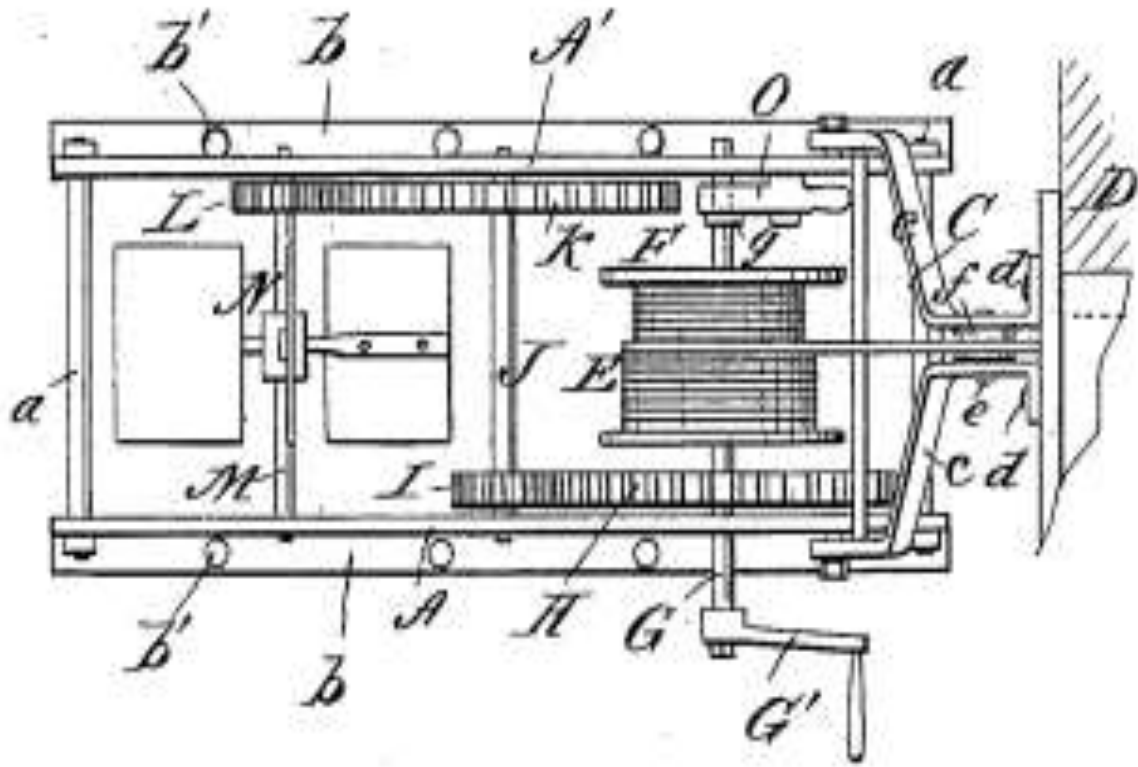


WITNESSES:

*Dom Twitchell.*  
*Co. Sedgwick*

INVENTOR:

*J. Dittrick*  
BY *Munn & Co.*  
ATTORNEYS.



The charter application for a company to manufacture the Dittrick fire escape was announced in the November 7, 1885 edition of the *Engineering News & American Contract Journal*; the firm to have capital stock of \$20,000 in 400 shares of \$50 each, and the chief place of business to be at Perth, Ontario, Canada. Operating from the machine shop on Wilson Street, the Dittrick Fire Escape Company Limited went into production in February 1886.



In its original form, however, the Dittrick system was found wanting by some. In June 1886 his Montreal Agent, J. K. Reid, organized a demonstration of the device at the A. H. Sims & Company shirt factory for the City Fire Committee, Building Inspector, and members of the press. Although Reid announced that Eber Hubbard Dunham (1846-1926), owner of the Balmoral Hotel, had already decided to provide *“for the safety of his guests in the upper stories by putting in a number of the escapes”*<sup>48</sup>, not everyone was so impressed.



**Balmoral Hotel, Montreal**

*... it was condemned by the building inspector on the ground that the cable would have to be wound up by hand. He held that in case of a fire the person turning the crank would most likely lose his presence of mind, get bewildered and so the escape would get out of order. He suggested there should be a double line and that the machine be automatic.*<sup>49</sup>

In less than a month Dittrick had developed a double-line automatic re-wind solution and was back in Montreal for another round of demonstrations promoted by a new agent, F. H. Davis. This time the Building Inspector and the press gathered at the *Montreal Herald* building to test a machine now

*... composed of three drums, one in front and two behind. To these drums are attached two annealed steel wire cables, each composed of 119 single wires, and capable of sustaining over a ton in weight. Above the window, inside the building, are two wheels of malleable annealed iron, on which the cables work. Outside, just below the window, is a projecting iron frame with a roller at the end, and over that the cables run. This is for the purpose of keeping the descending person clear of the building.*

*When a person wishes to descend all that he has to do is to attach a strap, which is connected with one of the cables, round his body under the armpits, and get out. The machine then starts automatically, and as he goes down the unemployed cable winds round one of the drums and is ready to lower another person the moment the first part reaches the ground. No time is lost, and there is no complication to distract those who lose their self-possession in the presence of danger.*

*Suppose a woman faints? All that has to be done is to attach the strap under her arms and then sling her out. The machine does the rest. It takes her safely to the ground and also sends back the returning cable.*

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<sup>48</sup> *Montreal Gazette*, June 22, 1886.

<sup>49</sup> *Montreal Gazette*, July 31, 1886.

*At the exhibition yesterday several descents were made by citizens from the fourth storey of the Herald building and it took them only 12 seconds to reach the ground.<sup>50</sup>*

Building inspector Lacroix was so impressed with the modified fire escape that, after making a descent himself, he announced “... *it had his entire approval and was the very thing he wished to see adopted in Montreal*”.<sup>51</sup> The *Montreal Gazette* concluded that, at a cost of “*only \$50*” the fire escape was “*admirably adapted for use in dwelling houses, hotels, theatres, nunneries, schools, boarding houses, etc.*”<sup>52</sup>

Following the success at Montreal, the first annual meeting of the Dittrick Fire Escape Company Limited was held in August at Perth.

*Secretary Treasurer, Mr. F. B. Allan<sup>53</sup>, read the director's report showing that after the usual struggles and disappointments and preliminary outlay the fire escape had at length been established on an exceedingly prosperous and promising footing and that a large market for the machine had been secured. Now that the machine has been so improved that it is practically perfect and pronounced by competent authorities to be the best ever invented or made, the machines are being turned out in large numbers.*

*The following were elected directors for the ensuing year: John Armour<sup>54</sup>, F. B. Allan, John Dittrick, Henry Taylor<sup>55</sup>, and J. M. Walker<sup>56, 57</sup>*

As fire escape sales and production were getting off the ground, John Dittrick, inspired by reconstruction work on the Tay Canal begun the previous year, established a small boat livery in 1886. That summer he offered rowboat rentals at a rate of 25¢ for the first hour plus 10¢ for each additional hour, or 50¢ for half a day or 75¢ for the whole day. Those seeking the romance and privacy of a late-night on the water were charged a premium of 10¢ an hour for boats out after 9 p.m., but no business was conducted on Sundays.



**Montreal Herald Building**

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Francis B. Allan (1843-1918), local lawyer.

<sup>54</sup> Either John Armour Sr. (1818-1899), recipient of a large inheritance from family in Scotland and Perth businessman, or his son, John Armour Jr. (1842-1917).

<sup>55</sup> Henry Taylor (1845-1926), Perth hardware merchant and coal dealer with a store on Gore Street East.

<sup>56</sup> James Murray Walker (1845-1938), publisher of the *Perth Courier*.

<sup>57</sup> *Perth Courier*, August 27, 1886.

With excavation of the canal and the turning basin at Perth complete in 1891, Dittrick commissioned construction of a steam yacht from Kingston boat-builder William Robinson (1849-1936). When the *Eva Bell* (named for his daughter) arrived at Perth in 1892 it was described as,

*... a very neat, even beautiful, design. It is 40 feet long by 7 ½ feet beam ... fitted up with cabin, berths, washroom, and other conveniences. Mr. Dittrick intends the yacht for hire to private persons or parties for outings down the canal or on the Rideau, and certainly those wanting a boat for this purpose will get no other on or about the Rideau as good.*<sup>58</sup>

Over the next few years, the *Eva Bell* carried groups ranging from the Methodist Church choir to Lanark County Council on excursions along the Tay Canal and on Rideau Lake. She could make the trip from the Perth Basin to Beveridges Locks in under one hour. Dittrick operated the *Eva Bell* as a charter yacht until 1897 when he sold it to the federal government for use as a fishery inspector's boat on the Rideau Canal.

For a time in the early 1880s, John Dittrick had a number of other business interests in addition to his machine shop and boat charter ventures. These included his father's butcher shop and a tailor shop, both of which he sold in 1887.

In late 1891 Dittrick invested in up-dated machinery and a new industrial boiler and went before Perth Town Council with a proposal that *"the corporation furnish him with a free lot and grant the property exemption from taxes"*<sup>59</sup> in exchange for his establishment of a new, larger, moulding and machine shop. Always a supporter of John Dittrick, the *Perth Courier* thought the town fathers should take up the offer.

*No doubt such an establishment is badly needed in Perth, for at present any planning or finishing wanted here has to be sent to Smiths Falls to be done. We think every encouragement should be given John, for his capabilities are undoubted, and no one that we know of can do the work he does continually.*<sup>60</sup>

The corporation seems to have declined a partnership in the moulding and machine shop business, at least to the extent of providing a building lot. Dittrick continued to operate from the 35 Wilson Street West location, where he offered a very wide range of services,

*... a general blacksmithing business and ... a large line of goods. He repairs everything that can be repaired by the use of iron, steel, brass, and wood, making a specialty of repairing bicycles, mowing machines, lawn mowers, etc., etc. John Dittrick Jr.<sup>61</sup> has spent an apprenticeship at the Wellandale Bicycle Works<sup>62</sup> in St. Catharines where he received special training in their repairs.*

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<sup>58</sup> *Perth Courier*, August 5, 1892.

<sup>59</sup> *Perth Courier*, November 27, 1891.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> John Lawrence Dittrick (1875-1950).

<sup>62</sup> Welland Vale Manufacturing Company, St. Catharines, Ontario; founded in 1874, merged with CCM in 1899.

*Mr. Dittrick does all kinds of steam fitting, hot water heating, puts in hot water ranges, wood or coal hot air furnaces, baths, and closets, and carries a large stock of pipes, valves, inspirators, injectors, ejectors, steam gauges and sight feed lubricators. He does general blacksmithing work, he makes plows, harrows, cultivators, and general castings. He sells and puts up windmills and fits up and repairs cheese factories ...*<sup>63</sup>

In addition to providing repairs and offering products of his own manufacture, in the 1890s Dittrick took on the local Deering Agricultural Machinery dealership.

Active in the community life of Perth, John Dittrick served for many years with the Perth Fire Brigade as engineer of the Tay Steamer, a post formerly held by his brother Walter. In 1899 he was elected to Town council and served through 1901. He was also active in the South Lanark Agricultural Society and a frequent winner at its fall fair for his flowers, vegetables, and honey.

The same year he was first elected to Town Council, Dittrick undertook construction of a new and larger shop equipped with up-dated machinery, some of it of his own invention.

*The building will be 84 feet by 30 feet wide and ... his large and powerful bolt header, of the latest improved American pattern, passed through the town. The weight of the machines is almost 1,300 pounds.*

*He also has to put in a large iron planer ... which, he says, will soon be running day and night doing work for the new machine he has invented. This machine is for making hot pressed nuts. He has the large patterns at the Kingston foundry getting castings while the smaller pieces are being cast in his own foundry. Mr. Dittrick is taking out a patent on this machine and says he will have the best machine on earth. It will be a sight to see when it is completed. Mr. Dittrick is a pusher and not afraid to spend the money he made.*

In 1905 John Dittrick retired and the business once again became Dittrick Brothers Ltd. when he sold it to his sons George Wilfred (1876-1944) and John Lawrence (1875-1950).

Eldest son William Norman (1872-1927), became Manager of the Tay Electrical Company, then Supervisor of the Test Department at Montreal Heat & Light. He later worked for Ross and Holgate Engineers, Montreal before joining the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) as Supervisor of its Angus Shops fabrication and repair facility. He was later appointed the CPR's Chief Electrical Engineer with country-wide responsibility. When he left the CPR in 1909, he founded Dietrich Consulting and Contracting Engineers Limited, Montreal. His younger brother, Frederick (b.1884), also worked for the CPR and became Supervisor of the Angus Shops when William Norman was promoted to the post of Chief Electrical Engineer.

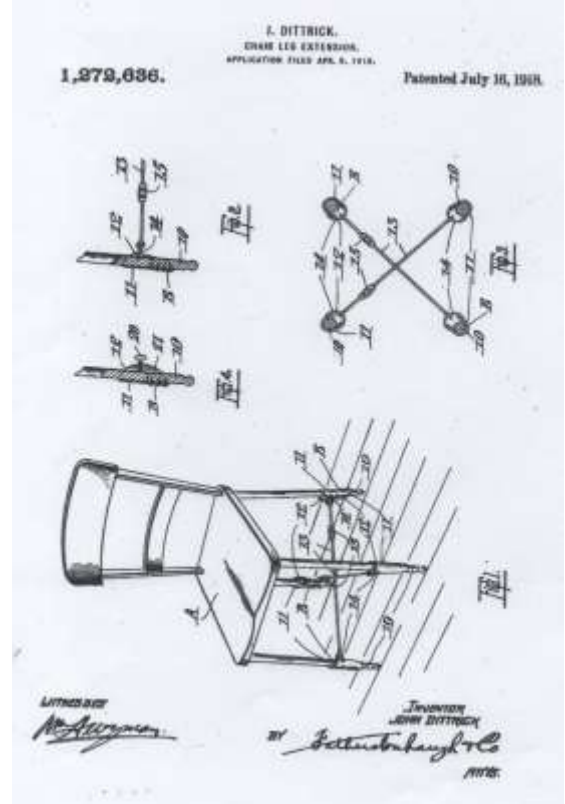
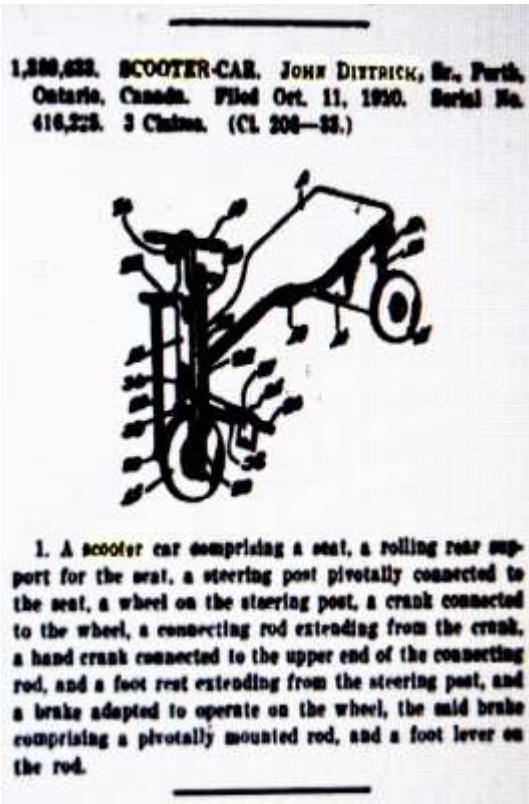
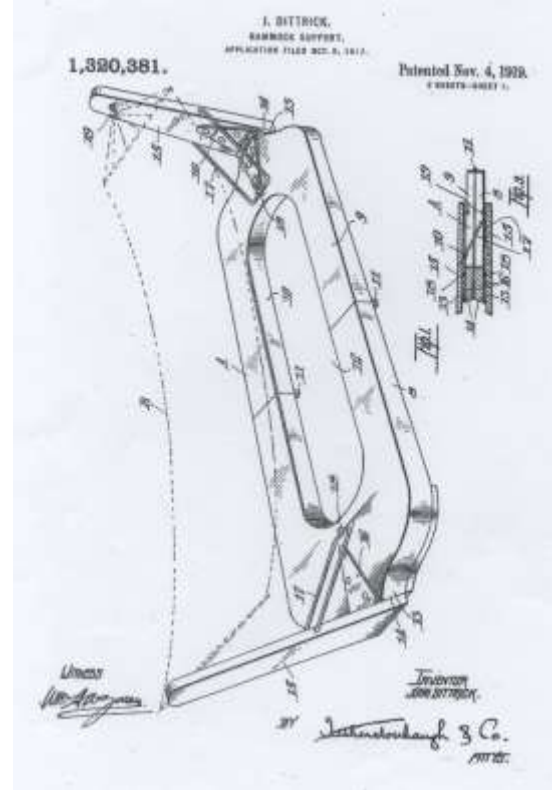
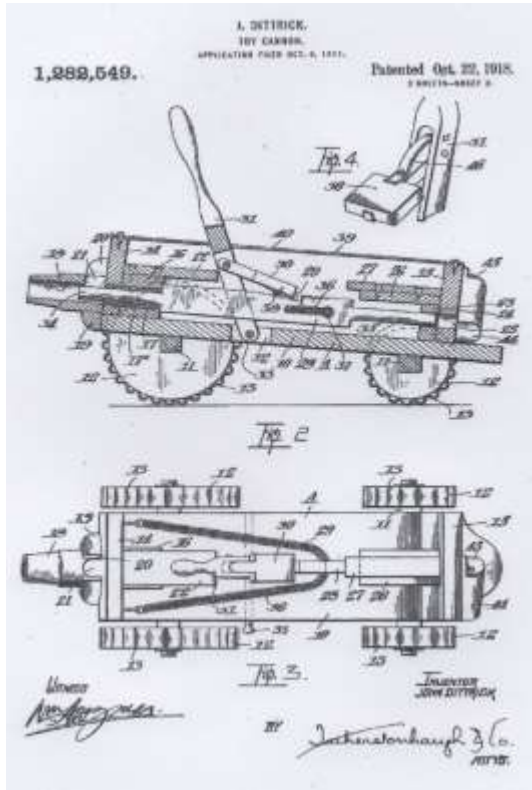
In retirement, John Dittrick bought a piece of land near Rideau Ferry and "*farmed*<sup>64</sup> *it with the care and skill that were part of his nature*"<sup>65</sup>; but he also continued to invent.

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<sup>63</sup> *Perth Expositor*, Trade Edition, 1896.

<sup>64</sup> His death certificate describes John Dittrick as a "Market Gardner".

<sup>65</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 22, 1925.



In 1918 he secured a patent<sup>66</sup> for “a simple and effective device by which the legs of a chair of any usual construction may be extended to convert it into a highchair, suitable for children”.<sup>67</sup> In 1919 he designed and patented<sup>68</sup> a collapsible or folding hammock support/frame that occupied “a minimum of space when folded up, thereby facilitating shipping or storing during winter months when hammocks are out of commission [and rendered] the support of a portable nature so that the hammock may be readily placed in any position to suit the requirements of the user”<sup>69</sup>. The device looked remarkably similar to patio or back-yard hammock frames available today.

In his farm workshop at Rideau Ferry, Dittrick also designed children’s toys. In 1918 he secured a patent<sup>70</sup> on a toy cannon and in 1920 was granted a patent<sup>71</sup> for a “Scooter Car”, a child’s hand-pedaled tricycle with foot brake. The Dittrick Brothers shop at Perth was soon “manufacturing toys [and] received one order for \$1,500”<sup>72</sup>. The toys were “sold to the Eaton Company of Toronto and other firms in Canadian cities and showed his versatility and adaptability”.<sup>73</sup>

Always interested in boats, from the steam tug *Maggie* in the 1870s, through his boat livery of the 1880s and the charter yacht *Eva Bell* of the 1890s, John Dittrick and his sons were among the founding members of the Rideau Ferry Boating Club established in the summer of 1909<sup>74</sup>. With an elected representation of those from Perth and Smiths Falls with Rideau Ferry cottage connections, the first managing committee included John Dittrick’s youngest son, Frederick.<sup>75</sup>

John Dittrick’s wife Isabella McLean died in 1911 and in 1913, at age 68, he married Mary Margaret Richardson (1877-1965). Born in Scotland, she had arrived Canada 1909.

In 1916, as the automotive age came to Perth, Dittrick Brothers became agents for Overland Automobiles and then secured a Studebaker dealership in 1919. Although they would continue to do custom machine work and repairs, and to represent Deering farm machinery, in the mid-1920s the Dittrick brothers converted much of their business premises on Wilson Street to a gas station and automobile repair garage. From 1932 the business operated as J. L. Dittrick Garage & Service Station until 1935 when, after 60 years, the name Dittrick<sup>76</sup> was removed from the business and industrial landscape of Perth.

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<sup>66</sup> U.S. Patent 1.272.636 - July 16, 1918.

<sup>67</sup> *Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office*, July 1918.

<sup>68</sup> U.S. Patent 1.320.381A - November 4, 1919.

<sup>69</sup> *Official Gazette of the United States Patent Office*, November 1919.

<sup>70</sup> U.S. Patent 1.282.549, October 22, 1918.

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Patent 1.389.633, October 11, 1920.

<sup>72</sup> *The Merchants, Professionals and Tradespeople of Perth*, by Gus Quattrocchi (1998).

<sup>73</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 22, 1925.

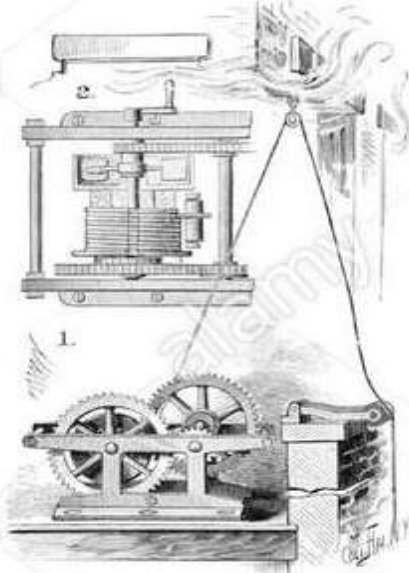
<sup>74</sup> The Rideau Ferry Boating Club organized the first Rideau Ferry Regatta in the same year.

<sup>75</sup> In 1908 sons, William, John Jr., George, and Frederick, had purchased a family cottage at Rideau Ferry; a property formerly owned by Norman Gilchrist Devlin (1877-1914), son of tannery proprietor and merchant Michael Devlin (1843-1891).

<sup>76</sup> By the 1930s, the name had found its way back to Deitrich, a minor mis-spelling of its German origin of Deitrich.

#### IMPROVED FIRE ESCAPE.

The frame consists of two side plates bolted together, and formed with flanges at their lower edges, through which the fire escape may be bolted to the floor near the window. Journaled in the frame are two shafts; on the crank shaft is a drum carrying the descending rope, and a loosely mounted large gear wheel. A properly arranged pawl and ratchet wheel turn the wheel when the drum is revolved by the drawing off of the rope. Upon the other end of the crank shaft is a



DITTRICK'S IMPROVED FIRE ESCAPE.

loosely placed fan inclosed in a circular casing fixed upon the shaft. The hub of the fan is formed with a small gear wheel meshing with a large wheel upon the end of the second shaft; upon the other end of this shaft is a pinion meshing with the large wheel on the crank shaft; when the latter wheel is revolved by the drawing off of the rope, the fan will be rapidly revolved, and will act as a governor to prevent the too rapid unwinding of the rope. The arrangement of the parts is clearly shown in the plan view. By turning the crank the rope may be wound upon the drum without turning any of the gearing. A simple device acts as a guide in winding up the rope, and also prevents any slacking of the rope when wound upon the drum.

The rope passes from the drum up over a pulley secured at the top of the window, so that in use a person to descend has simply to attach himself to the rope and swing out of the window, when his weight will draw the rope from the drum with a slow movement governed by the fan. The rewinding of the rope upon the drum can be quickly done. A hinged frame provided with a roller prevents the rope from chafing upon the window sill. The frame, being wider than the sill, the roller is held beyond the wall, and the rope is clear of the building.

This fire escape is the invention of Mr. John Dittrick; further particulars can be had from Mr. J. M. Millar, 12 Sherman St., Chicago, Ill.

*Dittrick Fire Escape description published by Scientific American, Vol.53, Pg.258, October 31, 1885.*

Skilled artisan, businessman and inventor John Dittrick Sr. died, aged 76, at Perth on May 24, 1925.

*The funeral was of a fraternal and military nature ... the procession was headed by the 42nd Regimental Band, followed by the remaining veterans of 1866, now very few, in a body, and the veterans of the Great War, in a body, and following were the members of Fraternity Lodge IOOF.<sup>77</sup>*

John Dittrick was buried at Elmwood Cemetery, Perth, beside his wife, Isabella McLean-Dittrick, who had pre-deceased him in 1911.

As in the case of so many inventors, then and now, John Dittrick's creations failed to bring him great wealth. Children's toys and hammock stands, however clever, did not enjoy the mass market opportunities they might have found today. His machine for manufacturing "hot pressed [bolt] nuts" seems to have failed to secure a patent and despite its early hype, his fire escape did not achieve the success anticipated.

About a year after it had been granted in September 1885, Dittrick "sold his American patent to a Chicago firm for \$50,000"<sup>78</sup>, the equivalent of more than \$1,000,000 today<sup>79</sup>. The buyer was James Morton Millar, the man behind the failed Perth Sewing Machine Company.

Millar had been born in Quebec and lived at Perth in the late 1860s and early 1870s while he owned the Perth Sewing Machine Factory. He was instrumental in the acquisition and installation of the Town Hall clock in 1870, meeting much of the cost himself, and was elected Mayor for the 1873-1874 term. With the exception of those few years at Perth, however, Millar lived most of his life in Chicago. City directories between 1865 and his death in 1889 regularly list Millar or J. M. Millar & Company as a General Commercial Merchant & Vessel Agent, Trader, Provisions Dealer, or Salesman. His death

<sup>77</sup> Perth Courier, May 22, 1925.

<sup>78</sup> Montreal Gazette, June 22, 1886.

<sup>79</sup> See <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1885?amount=50>

certificate recorded his occupation as “*capitalist*”. When the Dittrick Fire Escape was publicized in the *Scientific American* edition of October 1885, readers were advised that “*further particulars can be had from Mr. J. M. Millar, 12 Sherman St., Chicago, Ill*”.<sup>80</sup>

When John Dittrick died in 1925 the *Perth Courier* observed that his fire escape had “*missed by a narrow chance of making him a wealthy man*”.<sup>81</sup> Despite claims that a “*trial was made from a ten story building*”<sup>82</sup> in Chicago, the Dittrick Fire Escape may not have been fully up to the challenge of American high-rise buildings. In Canada, the success of the Dittrick Fire Escape Company was undermined when the start-up was double-crossed by its own agent. In the same edition in which the *Montreal Gazette* enthusiastically reported the praise of the city Building Inspector and Fire Committee for Dittrick’s invention, it also reported that



... our representative has been shown the drawings of a ‘Montreal Patent’ which practical machinists have pronounced a superior and cheaper article to any yet tested. Mr. J. K. Reid, formerly agent for the Dittrick escape, is the patentee, and hopes, in the course of a few days, to have his escape tested by the Building Inspector and Fire Committee.<sup>83</sup>

Whether James Morton Millar ever paid the full \$50,000 owing on the patent is in some doubt, but proceeds from the patent sale and/or some fire escape sales appear to have been sufficient to help finance his 1899 purchase of the “*latest improved American pattern*” bold header machine.

Whatever the reasons, the Dittrick Fire Escape failed to live up to its full promise. Press mentions of the device, at Perth or anywhere in Canada and the United States, disappear entirely by mid-1887.

Over three decades in business at Perth, however, as a highly skilled and inventive artisan, “... *ever willing and ready when machines, electricity, or plumbing demanded his energies*”<sup>84</sup>, John Dittrick nevertheless secured financial prosperity, if not great riches, while his talents earned him the admiration, respect and appreciation of the people of Perth and Lanark County.

- Ron W. Shaw (2020)

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<sup>80</sup> *Scientific American*, Vol.53, October 31, 1885.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Perth Courier*, June 26, 1885.

<sup>83</sup> *Montreal Gazette*, July 31, 1886.

<sup>84</sup> *Perth Courier*, May 22, 1925.