

Who was Edward Frederick Babbage?

08/07/22

Who was Edward Fredrick Babbage? I'm guessing the generation before me all know, and the generations after me have no idea. His story has been told before, but not in a while that I can find, so I am telling it again today.

Edward Frederick Babbage was born in Rochester, NY a twin. His brother was Dr Edwin Francis Babbage, and they grew up as normal boys. As they grew older, Edward began to gain more weight than his brother Edwin. He was considered large at age 6 and weighed 200 pounds by the age of fourteen. As adults, it was clear that Edward was the heavier twin. When a friend was sending a telegram to Edward, knowing the brothers had the same initials, he sent the telegram to "Phat Boy Babbage". The nickname stuck and that is how many knew of him.

Phat Boy had a large girth and a large personality. In his twenty's he worked as a hotel porter, hotel manager, traveling salesman, museum manager and glassblower. He was the lead agent for a group of performing glass blowers. After the Civil War ended, several veteran soldiers formed a minstrel troupe and Edward successfully worked as their road agent for three years. He became somewhat of a celebrity in his own right, courtesy of his large size, charming personality, handsome looks, and great sense of humor. He was always good for a laugh and people gravitated to him. For more than 10 years he traveled far and wide with them. He boasted 'there was not a town of 5000 people in the United States that he had not visited'. His travels brought him to the St Lawrence River in 1873 where he found a different type of promotional work that suited him. He was hired as a tour guide on the Royal Mail line of steamers running between Toronto and Montreal. He held court while seated in the bow of the boat, and always wore his two signature items: a felt hat with a large brim and a diamond pin on his chest. As each island passed, he would spout 'There's another one!' and tell colorful stories with plenty of humor. During this position, he became smitten with the River and hired on as a travel guide by tours on *Sylvan Stream*, *Islander*, *Island Wanderer* and the *New Island Wanderer* to name a few.

He may have been the first tour guide. I am picturing a stout, Humpty Dumpty of a figure entertaining as WC Fields might have, or Jackie Gleason, adding humor along the way and capturing everyone's attention.

Phat Boy kept this up for many years and never settled down along the River. I found a photo of his family, his wife and daughter, and it was taken in Ottawa. Perhaps where they lived. He lived at the Marsden House in Alexandria Bay and other establishments. He set up a 'house' next to the Cornwall Brothers Store and dubbed himself the 'Bureau of Information'. Every day, as the steamers came in with their passengers, he answered hundreds of questions regarding the Thousand Islands. The sign on his 'house', (just a large square wooden box if you look at the photos) advertised all kinds of hotel services. *'Rooms secured by wire without extra charge for the following named Hotels: St Lawrence Hall – Montreal, St Louis Hotel-Quebec, Hotel*

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Champlain-Bluff Point, Lake View House-Ausable Chasm, The Sagamore-Lake George, United States and Adelphi-Saratoga, Kenmore Hotel-Albany, Murray Hill and Grand Union-New York, Grand Central-New York, United States-Boston, Niagara Hotel-Buffalo, International and Spencer-Niagara Falls, Queens Hotel-Toronto.

He could be found standing next to this advertisement wearing a knee length black overcoat, a clean white shirt and bow tie, his diamond pin, and a black felt wide brimmed hat. Often, he carried a brass knobbed cane. He had maps describing excursions and created his own excursions. One was named "Phat Boy's Ramble Among the Islands". This was piloted by the *Islander*, and he hustled the tour along the waterfront. At this point, his weight topped 330 pounds but he did not let that intimidate his customers. He was courteous and obliging to all patrons regardless of social status. He also ran a popular 'Illumination' excursion on the *New Island Wanderer* every Saturday leaving Clayton at 7pm and ending in Alexandria Bay. He was full of tales from his experiences with the public through the Minstrel tours and along the docks. His humor was well known and welcome.

He also found time to write. The first was *The Phat Boy's*, then came *The Phat Boy's Delineations of the St Lawrence River*, *The Phat Boy's Racy Description of the St Lawrence River and its Environs: A Guide for the tourist and traveler* and, *The Phat Boy's: 15 years on the St Lawrence River: The People I have Met and the Things I have Seen*. Each year he wrote a new copy, with a new title and sold thousands of copies to his followers for 25 cents each. As always, each edition was loaded with humor. He also wrote of encounters with famous people, many of whom sought him out for his own fame as a guide. Among them were President Grant, George Pullman, Mark Twain, Sir John A. MacDonald, and members of various royal families. Other too numerous to mention were captains of industry, including many who owned St Lawrence River Island that were part of his tours.

In 1891 he purchased a lot at Palisades Park, a new development at the foot of Murray Isle near the narrows. He was ready to settle on the River. On Tuesday, June 24, 1891, he left his 'house' by the Cornwall Brothers Store and headed for the Marsden House telling his staff he was ill. Upon entering the lobby, he told the desk clerk he did not feel well and was going to retire to his room. He whistled his way up the stairs and stopped abruptly at the top. He called the clerk and asked him to call for a doctor immediately and then collapsed. Before the doctor could arrive, he passed away. He was 51. Flags were lowered to half-staff along the river in his honor. He never started building his home on Murry Island. His daughter arrived and tried to take over his business, but his shoes were too big to fill, she did not succeed, and the business closed.

So was the life of Edward Frederick Babbage, known to most as Phat Boy. I have not read his books and we do not have a copy in the museum. I looked and found that these books are still available, and I found copies for sale on Amazon and Thriftbooks. If you have any information

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or questions, please send to info@alexandriahistorical.com. If you have a story, you think I should tell, I would be interested to hear that also!

Edward F. Babbage and family, Montreal, QC, 1878



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