



# American Canals

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## When Oswego was Spelled Lumber

Richard Palmer

There was a window in history when Oswego, New York, on Lake Ontario was one of the busiest lumber ports in the country. Nearly every square foot of waterfront was piled with lumber.

In the heyday of the lumber trade, Oswego operated a score of sawmills, planing mills, shingle mills, stave factories, barrel shops and almost every conceivable kind of woodworking plant. The city whined with the ring of saws and planers. Lumber was used to build ships and canal boats in the city's many shipyards and boat yards.

Lumber was on every tongue. It was the source, directly or indirectly, of a major portion of the region's income. Logically enough. The town was surrounded by virgin forest for miles in the 1830s when this great water borne commerce began. The speculative lumber trade experienced violent ups and downs and left mountains of sawdust, fire and romance in its wake.

At first, posts, staves and squared timbers were the principal items imported. Nearly all of the lumber brought into Oswego had been cut and shipped from the vast forests along the northern shores of Lake Ontario. Vessels in this trade ordinarily anchored offshore there, where the timber and staves had been collected for shipment. The timbers were floated out to the vessels and the staves were taken out in scows. Upon arrival at Oswego, the ships were unloaded directly into canal boats for shipment inland, or deposited at the local lumber mills for further processing.

Large quantities of these items were also shipped from other Lake Ontario ports to the St. Lawrence River and discharged at Cape Vincent,

Carleton Island, Clayton and points east. They were then formed into large rafts and floated down to Montreal and Quebec. The old war brig Sylph, owned by Smith & Merrick of Clayton after the War of 1812, from about 1830 on, was used entirely in this trade, as was the famous old brig Oneida, built in Oswego in 1808. She was owned by E. G. Merrick after the war. It is said the aging warship Madison was also used in this trade by Captain Robert Hugunin.

The growth of the lumber trade was typical of the prosperity that followed the War of 1812 and jumped significantly with the completion of the Oswego Canal in 1828. With the advent of steamboats nearly every harbor in the country had a shipyard. Enrollment records testify to this.

Oswego's first lumber yard was established in 1835 by Simeon Bates. He continued the business for 25 years. Later, Peckham H. Smith and John K. Post entered the firm. Business steadily increased until the yard was handling 80,000 board feet a year.

Ship by ship, the lumber fleet grew. Dock after dock was dedicated solely to transportation of lumber. More and more, solid businessmen entered this field to deal in a commodity that seemed unending in supply and profits. Daniel L. Couch handled 80 million feet a year; O.M. Bond & Co., L.A. Card, E.W. Rathbun & Co., E. & S. Thornton; Page, Clark & Co. and George B. Powell were some of the larger forwarders.

Records show the lumber trade at Oswego

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The objectives of the American Canal Society are to encourage the preservation, restoration, interpretation, and use of the historical navigation canals of the Americas; to save threatened canals; and to provide an exchange of canal information. Manuscripts and other correspondence consistent with these objectives are welcome.

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increasing in huge jumps each decade:

Board feet (Imported) 1840 - 19,560,997;  
1850- 50,685,682; 1860 - 190,402,228; 1869 -  
284,539,533; 1873 298,881,000

### Port Ontario

Much of the domestic timber that passed through the port of Oswego came from a region some 40 miles to the east known as the Tug Hill Plateau. Logs were floated down the Salmon River to Port Ontario from which they were floated across Lake Ontario to Oswego. In the *Pulaski Democrat* of Feb. 21, 1940, Orrin J. Russell gave an interesting account of these log drives:

*" Percival Holmes of Port Ontario was the Boss of River driving operations. Four foot spruce pulp blocks were floated down the Salmon River from the place where that river is joined by the Mad River near the village of Redfield. The pulp logs were cut in the winter time farther up the Mad River and in the spring freshet floated' down the Salmon River to the mouth of the river at Selkirk (Port Ontario). This was commonly known as the spring drive and required a large force of men to free the logs along the banks and keep them moving with pike poles - at that time there were many dams in the river to pass the logs over and many log jams had to be broken up.*

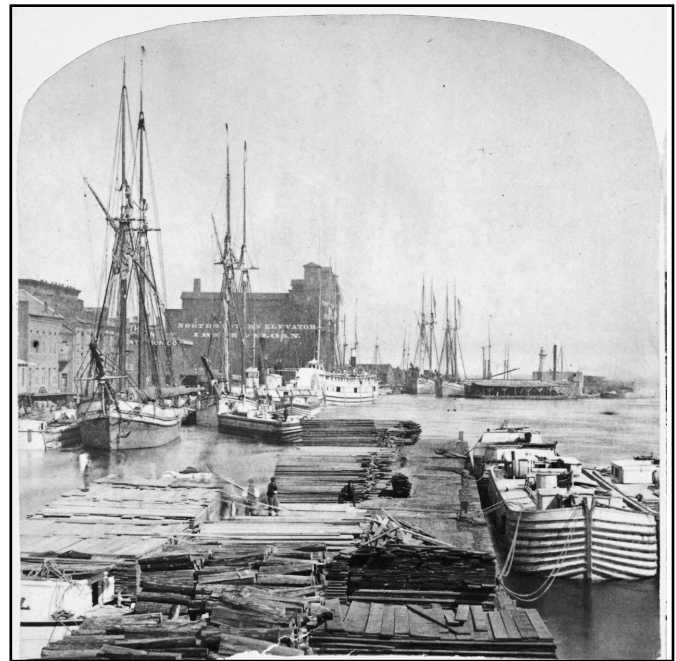
*" Booms were stretched across the river below the bridge on the south channel and the upper end was attached to the Tilkins Island. These booms were long strings of logs fastened together by chains at each end and fastened to heavy posts driven in the bottom of the river. It was boomed to guide the logs into Selkirk Pond and not allow them into the lake. About 45 years ago these boom logs were hauled out on the bank and the ends cut off to get rid of the bolts and chains in the ends of them to they could be sawed into lumber.*

*" At the end of the island now owned by Charles Roth in the lower end of the pond, the logs were loaded into lake boats and towed by the steamer William Gilbert to Oswego and up the canal to the pulp mills at Battle Island and Phoenix*

*and Percy Holmes was the foreman of this whole job, for Snell who owned large tracts of timber. Some of the heavy posts which were driven by pile drivers on the ice in the winter time, along the shore and some places in deeper water to hold the boom logs, are still here to be seen.*

*" I worked as a boy on these log drives with gangs of men and I enjoyed the danger and the thrills. Ben French of Albion Township tells me, that at a little earlier date, when the lakes were covered with sailing vessels, there was a great demand for tall spars, for new boats and some which were needed to replace broken ones and that his father would work all winter cutting trees in the Albion swamps for that purpose, and hauling them with teams and sleighs down to Selkirk Harbor, where they were placed on skids and in the spring formed into rafts and towed to Oswego by tugs,*

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This view of Oswego harbor, taken from the lower bridge about 1870, to some degree, shows the extent of the lumber business. Here, "lumber shovers" are at work neatly piling up planks. This was a major transfer point between schooners and canal boats. In the background is Irwin & Sloan's Northwestern grain elevator, which stood until 1921. Note the railroad ties in immediate foreground, next to canalboat, at left, being piled high with lumber.

*where they found a ready sale to vessel owners. Old timers say at times there were so many sailing vessels in Oswego harbor that it was a regular forest of spars at all the docks."*

An 1838 report to the Chief of Engineers mentions that 1,500,000 feet of pine lumber had been shipped from Port Ontario.

Oswego entrepreneur DeWitt C. Littlejohn was heavily involved in the lumber business. He also owned a fleet of line boats on the Erie Canal. It is said Littlejohn was second only to God in this region, but people disliked his using the Salmon River for sending logs down from Redfield, as they created jams that caused flooding.

### Oswego Boom

From the profits came a number of the larger mansions along Oswego's residential streets; the spanking teams of horses and the handmade carts and drags; the lavish entertainments that seemed to go hand-in-hand with the business; the rise to great levels and the sudden, all too sudden, drop to lower ones .

Docks in Oswego in this era came to be known by the names of firms engaged in the trade; docks that were made when mainland resources and areas were insufficient, such as the two islands in the river, now gone like the business; islands created from dredged materials behind protecting crib-work.

There was the "Georgian Bay," connoting the source of the lumber it stored. There were the "Kingsford" docks where annually five million feet came for the box shop operated in connection with the famous starch factory. Then there were the Rathbun docks where the steamers Reliance and Resolute docked with clockwork regularity, sailing between the Bay of Quinte and Oswego.

The Rathbuns were Canadian manufacturers and wholesale dealers in lumber, shingles, sash, doors and blinds. They owned 400,000 acres of timber lands in Ontario and maintained sawmills, a sash and door factory and extensive wharves. Oswego was the firm's chief point of distribution for the United States.

There were the Page and Fairchild docks and

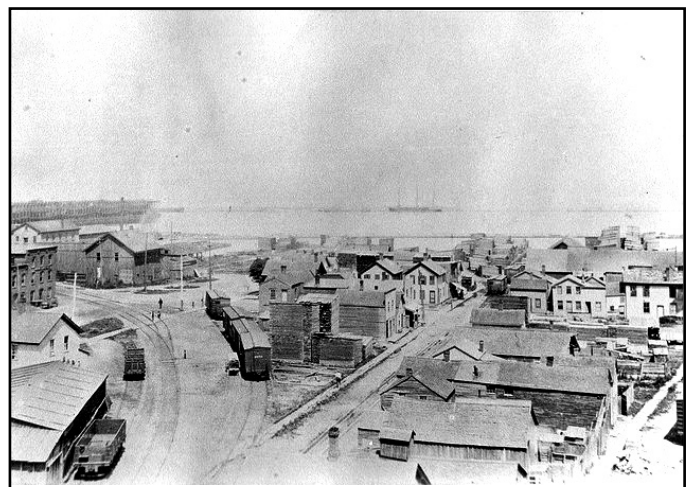
numerous others not dedicated to one firm, but open to the casual dealer and forwarder. Even above the lower bridge which swung many times a day to permit the lumber schooners to pass, there were middle piers piled high with lumber.

At the west end of the harbor, the Standard Oil Company box shop received as much as 122 million feet a year while other concerns such as Wright & Boyle, located in a sash and blind factory at West First and Seneca Streets, used five million feet a year. The Oswego planing mill at East First and Utica Streets used up two million board feet a year.

Much of the lumber coming to Oswego was forwarded by canal boats eastward. The transfer of cargoes provided employment for hundreds men, for lumber was a commodity that required the human touch. Every piece had to be handled by hand. The work was hard, but the pay was high. When markets were right, the profits were tremendous.

Profits, indirectly from the lumber trade, made possible the Oswego City Library, a gift from Gerrit Smith, who drew annually more than \$50,000 in rentals alone from his five small piers in Grampus Bay, now the site of the Oswego Port Authority facilities.

These docks were built behind the privately constructed breakwall of the old harbor, where



The lower end of West First Street where most of Oswego's lumber business was located, was known as "Pea Soup Flats." It had a notorious reputation for being a rough neighborhood that included many saloons and houses of ill repute.

schooners could be berthed on one side and lumber transferred to a canal boat on the other. Profits from this operation, too, it was said, financed the expedition of John Brown to Kansas and to his end at Harper's Ferry. Gerrit Smith was an ardent emancipation advocate, risking a federal prison term for the cause.

Schooners hastening back to Canada had no return cargoes, none that paid, that is, although in the holds under the hatches were often fugitive slaves fleeing the country. They sought safety where U.S. marshals had no jurisdiction, while the nation debated slavery and rushed forward to the Civil War.

Oswego was at the northern end of the underground railroad, and lumber carriers played their role in the national drama to which Mr. Smith was a sympathetic contributor.

Out on the wastelands where James Fenimore Cooper once gathered cranberries to garnish his game, the swampland along the creek west of Liberty Street became depository for thousands of tons of shavings and sawdust from the "box shop." Night skies were often illuminated by flames from burning waste. For years, the area was known as "The Shavings." The area along lower West First Street was known as "Pea Soup Flats."

### Shipping West

In the mid 1850s an extensive business developed in Oswego in the manufacture of lumber for western markets. Canadian lumber was sawed, grooved and fitted for laying by machinery. It was then reshipped to western ports more cheaply than it could have been shipped eastward because of the low-western or "up" freight rates. Hence, a thousand board feet of lumber could be shipped to Chicago for three dollars, a distance of 1,100 miles, whereas it cost four dollars to send the same amount only 200 miles by canal to the Hudson River. Thus Canadian lumber from the Lake Ontario watershed was shipped to Oswego, fabricated and finally taken to the upper lakes ports.

One lumber merchant in Oswego in 1850 noted that the "chief article of commerce of the place at present is the lumber trade. The extent of that

business appears to be rapidly advancing. There is much lumber from Lake Erie through this place that used to be through Buffalo."

In later years Canadian lumber amounted to about 80 percent of Oswego's business, and by 1870 it had reached nearly 95 percent. As late as 1860 lumber cut in Oswego County was a factor in this trade, but it declined thereafter.

### Lumber Shoving

The lumber trade - called "lumber shoving" by those in it (although that strictly applies only to the handling of the lumber on the dock or the deck - including boards, posts, ties, shingles and stave bolts), was hard on schooners and hard on men, especially when the trips were daylong runs, and the crews had to work cargo. The vessel would haul alongside at daylight, with hatches off, booms topped up ten feet high on lumber-saddles, and an empty hold.

The mate would serve out canvas aprons and "harvest mitts" before sun-up and, without sparing a moment to light a pipe, all hands including his own would be laid upon the top courses of the fresh sawn pine, spruce or hemlock plank, piled in rectangular crags overhanging the dock.

Down the boards would come end on to the schooner's deck, from the lumber shovers on the piles, to be caught and carried to the hatches, passed down to splinter-filled fists in the hold, and laid along carefully on the floor-ceiling, starting at the bilges and sides, until they mounted up to the deckbeams, like haystacks in a mow.

The men worked in pairs. When they had the hold "full to the guntline," they jammed that space with boards of appropriate length to keep the long piles from shifting, and started on the deckload. Upended planks inside the bulwarks enabled them to pile the lumber from five to ten feet high above the deck, until it smothered the cabin top and overhung the forecastle. Chains were then toggled from rail to rail, to keep this mountain from shifting. Wells would be left to get at the steering wheel and cabin

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companionway, the center board winch and the pumps.

If the wind was fair the vessel would cast off at once, set her lumber-reefed sails above the high piled deckload, and blow off for her destination, some south shore port. The great box factory at Oswego denuded old Ontario of softwoods for a hundred miles inland.

Dock workers and lumber shovers only worked from daylight till dark, but the ship's crew who had been working that long already would have to get what sleep they could on the passage down the lake - sometimes 12 hours, sometimes 12 days, but never, by reason of the watch-and-watch system necessary to keep the vessel moving, could they sleep more than four hours at a stretch. If they made a good passage they might be in Oswego next morning, unloading all day, out again into the lake at night, and back again to load next morning.

Such a grueling grind could not be sustained. In Whitby, Port Hope and the sawmill ports of the Bay of Quinte and Georgian Bay, developed gangs of lumber shovers from among the mill hands, who greatly lightened the labors of loading. Vessel owners were no longer able to wring this stevedoring out of sailors without paying for it as overtime or supplement their princely wages - \$25 a month, without layoffs, or \$1 a day and upward subject to being paid if the vessel had to wait for cargo.

### Shipping North

In its 1858 review of trade and commerce in Oswego, the Oswego Commercial Times reported on March 11, 1859:

*"A remarkable feature in this branch of business is the fact Canadian lumber has been 'dressed' in this city, and sent back to the Province, where it has been used for various purposes. The sales here are chiefly for city use."*

The extent of the business in Oswego Harbor is illustrated in the following article from the Oswego Palladium of November 8, 1860:

*"Business - So large a fleet of lake and canal craft as is collected today never was seen in Oswego harbor before. The port really presents*

*the appearance of a section of the New York docks, a red smoke-stack looming up at intervals would complete the illusion. The receipts of grain and lumber for the past three days has been immense; yet our business facilities do not appear to be overwhelmed, and a steady and rapid transshipment is progressing. The closing weeks of the season of navigation exhibit the increase of business which has been steadily maintained since the opening. This great activity in commercial trade certainly imparts an impulse to other branches, and the general business of Oswego was never in a more prosperous condition." That day, four steamers and 20 schooners arrived in Oswego. Five steamers, 18 schooners and 25 canal boats cleared.*

### Short of Sail

Sailing a schooner loaded with lumber into Oswego harbor could be tricky business, particularly if the sea was running. On the afternoon of August 27, 1876, the schooner Gladstone with a cargo of lumber for D.L. Couch, missed the entrance to the harbor and sagged down to the outside of the east pier. The sea was running heavy and the wind was fresh from the northwest. The schooner struck the pier broadside and pounded heavily against it. The tug Major Dana which was waiting for the schooner, promptly steamed to her rescue without delay. A line was thrown to the tugboat and the schooner was towed to quieter waters. However, before she broke away from the pier about 20,000 board feet of lumber spilled off her and floated down lake. Also, some of the schooner's stanchions, timberheads and wales were broken. Fortunately, most of the lumber was retrieved - a gang of willing men taking charge of it as soon as it washed up on the beach.

The schooner captain said his steering gear was out of order, but to a man on shore it was evident that the vessel could not make the harbor under the canvas she had hoisted.

The editor of the Oswego Palladium the following day noted:

*"Why good sailors will persist in shortening canvas in entering this port 'is a thing no fellow can find out.' There is always more or less current from*

*the river, and if a vessel wants canvas at all she wants it when she reaches the beacon light. More vessels have been wrecked in attempting to enter this harbor for want of sufficient sail than from any other one cause."*

Wharfage facilities, in spite of their vastness, lagged shipments. In 1868 lumber merchants were obliged to suspend shipments from Canada for that reason. However, it improved in subsequent years. Of the nearly 300 million board feet of lumber imported in 1873, 23 million feet were white pine. At that time Oswego was one of the largest white pine lumber markets in the United States.

### Over The Peak

From 1873 to 1879 the imports declined to 108,459,000 board feet due largely to the recession. With the revival of business and the opening of the improved Welland Canal, imports rose to 214,323,000 board feet in 1882. But by now the lumber business was declining. This was accentuated by the passage of the so-called McKinley Tariff Act of October 1, 1890. Wood and manufacturers of wood were taxed from 10 to 35 percent ad valorem, the higher rates being on the partly manufactured products of wood.

The removal of lumber duties in 1895 revived the Canadian lumber trade somewhat but not for long. By 1900 importations were only 35,211,000 board feet. Beginning in 1891 coastwise receipts of lumber rose in relative importance from about two percent that year to more than 60 percent in 1900. In 1893, because of huge coastwise receipts the total amount of lumber received at Oswego reached its maximum with 350,402,666 board feet.

In 1900 lumber received by water in Oswego totaled only 35,211,000 board feet. Once considered inexhaustible, the forests of Canada were cut away adjacent to the lake. Farther and farther inland crept the lumbering crews, pushing costs higher. Growing numbers of steamers entered the trade of carrying lumber from the Michigan peninsula.

Competition became stiffer as did the demands for protective tariffs, the imposition of which stymied the Oswego lumber trade. Eventually the

business vanished. With it disappeared the wharves, lumber piles, the white-winged schooners, symbols of the business.

But no tariff or steamship could efface memories of red-shirted longshoremen, pulling lumber under a summer sun, with the voices of lumber scalers rising and falling in the cadence and rhythm. Long remembered by boat watchers on the lower bridge were the puffing tugs shepherding canalboats into the wharves, which eventually disintegrated into mounds of stone and rubble, frequented only by fishermen when the perch or pike were running.

Most of the lumber business in Oswego was conducted by E. W. Rathbun & Co. of Belleville. It was established here in 1870 and continued operations until 1912. Many members of the Rathbun family moved here and became prominent citizens of the city.

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# Canal Tidbits and News

I want to thank Richard Palmer for his many contributions to this issue. Dick is a prolific writer and this issue is a bit of a catch up of his contributions.

I goofed a bit in the Fall 2020 issue by not including the ballot for the **ACS 2020 elections**, and so you will find it included here. It is more of a formality at this point but something the bylaws require. Due to the ongoing pandemic, our 2020 Annual Meeting was more of an exchange of emails than a meeting. We hope to meet again at the World Canals Conference this fall. I will continue to note that we are in need of new people who wish to serve as board members.

The ACS is now participating in the **Amazon Smile** program, so if you use Amazon and have not yet chosen an organization to support, please use Smile.Amazon and select American Canal Society. Then when you shop, just use the Smile option. (It will usually remind you.)

The big news from New York is that the **Empire State Trail** is now fully open creating the longest recreational trail in the nation. The Empire State Trail is the rebranded Canalway Trail of old, with the addition of a north to south trail along the Hudson and Champlain rivers, between New York City and Plattsburg. In order to complete the trail, the state had to complete two very expensive sections.

The first was a bridge over the CSX Railroad mainline near Onondaga Lake. This multi-million dollar bridge project was the last piece of a new trail route through Syracuse that connected the established trail in the Liz and Dave Beebe Erie Canal Park in Camillus to the existing trail at the Old Erie Canal State Park in Dewitt. The new bridge, along with a new trail down the middle of Erie Boulevard, completed one of the most difficult sections of the trail.

The other section was a new tunnel under a railroad embankment at Rotterdam Junction (Photos on next page). This tunnel allows access to a canalside trail that had been built along the old Erie in 1977. When the trail first opened, all access was by way of a dead-end street in the hamlet. This street also crossed over the western end of the old Boston and Maine Railroad yard and connecting spur that led uphill to the old New York Central lines. As long as the street was in use by the local homeowner, all the parked trains were required to break apart at the crossing. When the home burned decades ago, the railroad company decided that it no longer needed to break their trains, and physically blocked access to the trail. In the meantime, the canal trail had been extended west toward Pattersonville. So for a time, although you could see from one trail section to the next, the users were forced to follow a three-mile-long detour along a busy highway. The only option to reconnect the trail was a bridge or a tunnel. As the old canal in this area was quite a bit lower than the railroad, it was decided that a tunnel was the best option. After years of negotiations and a season of actual constructio, the trail users can now safely ride under the tracks. So although there is still considerable work to do, officially the trail is open. This work also opened up access to the nearby Enlarged Lock 25.

## Photos

Top-The western approach to the tunnel. A train can be seen parked above it.

Middle-The eastern approach. The enlarged canal can be seen to the left.

Bottom-A bit of Enlarged Lock 25. In the distance you can see the train.

Photos courtesy of Chris Brucker.

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The **Middlesex Canal Museum** now has a roof! If you are on Facebook, you can watch the changes almost in real time. On December 21, they updated their cover photo to show the rafters with a coating of snow, and by January 7, the roof was complete. This is a big step in any project as the building is now secure and work can progress inside regardless of the weather.

There has been considerable discussion among our Ohio friends as the city of Canal Fulton announced that they would no longer operate the **St. Helena III boat ride** after the 2020 season closed. In November the city posted a Request For Proposals, seeking a private party or organization to run the boat ride operation. The city has offered

The St. Helena III is seen in the fall of 2019. The mile-long ride begins at Canal Fulton and runs south to Lock 4. I was making a video of the team and boat going by, so I didn't get good views of the front.

to provide administration and oversight, along with maintaining the boat and equipment (not clear if this included the horses). The private party would be responsible for the day to day operations. The RFPs were due by December 11, 2020, and the recent newsletter of the Ohio Canal Society noted that the city had received a number of inquires and expected bidders. A news release on January 25, 2021 announced that the city had selected Tom Bauer and the Copper Horse Crusade as the operator for a two-year contract. Mr. Bauer will provide the horses and towing operations, while the city works on marketing. The St Helena III was first launched in 1992. The boat was first operated by the Canal Fulton Heritage Society. The city assumed all operations and costs in 2015.





As of this publication, the plans for the **WCC 2021** continue. It is scheduled for August 30 to September 2. There are the usual pre and post-conference tours that will stretch your stay to August 26 to September 3. The theme will be; Historic Canals Today: Education, Recreation, and Tourism. I would encourage everyone to go to the website ([wcc2021.org](http://wcc2021.org)) and sign up for the updates. The chairman of the WCC is Bill Holdsworth, 2021 World Canals Conference, Hagerstown, MD, [wcc2021.org](http://wcc2021.org), 301-762-9376 (h), 240-688-5889 (m).

The American Canal Society board will hold its **annual meeting** at this conference. We will do our best to schedule our meeting at a time that will not be in conflict with the WCC events. If you are attending the conference, please think about attending to hear what is going on. The meetings typically run less than two hours.

It appears that the **NYS Canal Conference** will be delayed yet again or cancelled. This event was scheduled to be held in Schenectady in the fall of 2020, and like most events, it was postponed to late spring or early summer 2021. However as Covid is far from being under control, the Canal Society of NYS is working with the sponsors on the best way forward.

As this issue was being finalized, the Buffalo News published an article titled, “‘Death by 1,000 cuts’ as Erie Canal stakeholders fear short season, reduced hours.” The point of the article was that New York State was once again shortening the canal season to Memorial Day to mid-September, and reducing the daily operational hours from 15 to 10 per day. There was also some annoyance at the proposal to rebrand the canal and canalside trail as the “Empire Line.”

The **Preservation League of New York State** has been an loud and active voice for the canal system, showing little fear in speaking out about the cuts to the canal season and the long-term plans. As I pointed out in prior columns, many of the stakeholders across the state are afraid to speak out in fear of losing grants and other funding sources that must pass through state government.

In 2020 the canal season was shortened with the excuse that the pandemic made winter work impossible, even though work continued unabated on the canalside Empire State Trail. In prior years the season was shortened to allow workers to begin the winter maintenance and heavy reconstruction with the promise that these shortened seasons were only temporary.

State residents are being urged to contact their local representatives and urge that the season be restored. Anyone with an interest should be following the ACS and Preservation League on social media to stay current with the latest news.

Mike

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## Canal Comments

**Number 132 from September 27, 2017**

### **LEADING TO THE LEASE OPERATION IN THE DECADE OF THE 1850s**

The decade of the 1850s saw dramatic changes in canal tonnage, types of cargo carried, and finally, in operation on the Ohio Canal. There had been interest in railroads in the state as early as 1826, but that technology hadn't really been ready. Then the economic panics of the late '30s and early '40s delayed railroad development. With the improvement of the economy in the late 1840s, many of the old railroad plans were dusted off. The State Legislature was appealed to for funds or sanctions, and the rush to build railroads was on.

Beginning in the early 1850s railroad competition hit the canals hard and often. The Sandusky, Mansfield and Newark Railroad began through operation from Newark, a vital shipping point on the Ohio Canal, to the lake at Sandusky in 1851. Officials of the railroad quickly offered faster and cheaper service to a lake port than did the canal with the result that grain shipments north on the canal from Newark fell to less than half of what they had been prior to 1851.

Total tonnage shipped on the Ohio Canal actually increased during the early 1850s with coal more than making up the loss in grain shipments. This drastic shift in cargo content had a long-lasting effect on the Ohio Canal. Coal was a relatively short haul commodity, beginning at the coal fields along the Hocking Branch Canal or from the mines of Tuscarawas and Stark counties, and traveling along the northern reaches of the Ohio Canal to the lake or to local industries situated on the canal. Forwarders, warehousemen and long-haul freight lines felt the pinch. Many of them closed. More three-cabin freighters were seen on the canal with many captained by independent haulers. The last big boat building

boom on the Ohio Canal was seen in the early 1850s as coal carrying craft were constructed. In fact the total number of boats operating on the Ohio Canal in 1856 approached or possibly exceeded the number operating in those halcyon days of 1838.

However, the tolls on coal were low and as the hauls were relatively short, overall receipts on the Ohio Canal fell. The Toledo & Western Railroad opened along the route of the Miami & Erie Canal, diverting more than half of the wheat, corn, and oats carried to Toledo. Incoming receipts for all of Ohio's canals fell below expenditures for maintenance for the first time in 1856, though receipts on the Ohio Canal did not fall below expenditures until 1858. The Cleveland & Mahoning Railroad gained control of the Pennsylvania & Ohio Canal in 1858. Tolls on that canal were raised so high as to divert all business to the railroad, and the tonnage that had previously been funneled into the Ohio Canal at Akron from the P & O. was lost. The Tuscarawas Branch of the Cleveland & Pittsburgh Railroad came into direct competition with the Ohio Canal between Akron and Canal Dover. In 1860 the railroad secured written contracts from all shippers of freight to and from Canal Dover to use the railroad instead of the canal. Now, as many people saw it, the canals of Ohio were a definite liability. And the wolves began to howl.

### **DISILLUSIONMENT & LEASE:**

In 1850 the Board of Public Works had bypassed the Legislature by employing its discretionary administrative powers, and had ordered extensive repairs on the canals, which included the rebuilding of nineteen locks on the Ohio Canal. In 1851 the Board made a proposal to the Legislature that, in order to meet railroad competition, the State should undertake a \$2,000,000 program of reconstruction, enlarging and deepening the State's canals. The legislature turned this proposal down, as well as similar requests afterward.

As early as the session of 1852-53, a proposition was introduced into the State Senate to dispose of the canals. The committee on public works made a favorable report on the proposal stating that the canals could be sold for \$4,000,000. No action was taken on this bill, but both the Legislature and the people of Ohio began thinking in terms of ridding themselves of the burden of maintaining the canals. At first a few of the least profitable and useful of the Public Works were disposed of. The Warren County Canal, a small branch on the southern portion of the Miami & Erie, was sold in 1854 and a portion of the National Road between Springfield and Bridgeport was leased.

In an attempt to reduce the annual maintenance costs on the state's canals, in 1855 the Legislature, bowing to the prevalent thought that "private enterprise is more efficient," concluded a five-year contract with private firms for maintenance and repair of the canals. This plan was a failure from the beginning. Rather than demonstrating the efficiency of private enterprise, the contractors neglected all but emergency repairs to maintain their own profits. By 1856 the canals were nearly impassable as sections of the prism were allowed to collapse, culverts and locks deteriorated, and vegetation was allowed to grow unchecked, clogging reservoirs, feeder channels, and the main canal itself. The legislature cut the Board's budget so sharply that even adequate supervision of the contractors proved impossible.

The legality and worth of the canal maintenance contracts were debated furiously within the legislature and among the populace. The contracts were finally repudiated by the legislature in 1857 when a special committee concluded that fraud and collusion had occurred during the original negotiations. However, after the contract system was nullified, the Board of Public Works continued to use four of the five contractors for maintenance work.

During the debate on the legality of the 1855 contracts, one strong faction of the Legislature sought to rid the state of its canals altogether with

a sale to private interests. Opponents of that plan blocked it successfully, but later in the 1850s the disposal or retention of the Public Works became one of the principal questions in Ohio. In 1857 Governor Chase recommended the sale of the canals for their "fair value". Later that year the State Auditor placed a value of \$3,000,000 on them. A year later, due to decreasing tonnage and revenues, this estimate was reduced to \$2,000,000. In 1859 the legislature passed an act providing for the leasing of the entire Public Works for five years at \$54,000 per year. Any leasing company was required to have a \$510,000 bond, and the railroad companies were forbidden to bid. The high bond price, along with the rigid conditions of maintenance and repair, found no bidders.

Early in 1860 a firm made a proposal to lease the canals for ten years beginning May 16 for \$200,000, or \$20,000 per year. The proposal included the promise to keep the canals in repair and return them to the state in good condition. The company also agreed to purchase all the state's equipment at a fair appraisal and promised that the tolls would not be raised over those of 1858. The legislature was not yet ready to lease the canals and that year it passed two acts designed to shave operating expenses on the canals. In March 1860 the Board of Public Works was directed to release all the men who had been acting as locktenders along Ohio's canals except for those stationed at feeder gates. The legislature also passed another act in March limiting expenditures on all the public works to \$2,000 per month.

The harvests of 1860 were good in Ohio. The canals might have shown a modest profit had not disastrous flooding in April caused great damage to the system. The through canal from Cleveland to Portsmouth wasn't opened until May 30 and the costs to repair the canals after these floods far exceeded the monthly maintenance allowance laid down. Many in and out of the legislature decided that it now seemed desirable for the State to rid itself of such an expensive burden. The legislators applied themselves to the problem and on May 8, 1861, an

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Right column*

# Historical Newspaper Archives

New York Tribune

January 3, 1896

## CANAL BOAT CHILDREN

### The Have Hard Work Keeping Track of Their Homes

### While They are at School the Parental Domicile May Be Moved Many Miles - Comfort in a Tiny Cabin

There was a scurry of feet, a triumphant whoop, and the door of the dockmaster's little office burst open as if it by a cyclone and the crowd poured in. The undulant drapery of tobacco smoke overhead writhed and fled before the gust of frosty air that whirled in with the crowd, and somebody's dissertation upon the decay of the merchant marine was abruptly drowned in a babel of childish voices.

It wasn't much of a crowd either: three breezy boys and a slip of a girl on the way home from school. That was all, but they filled the standing room in the little office as, still panting from their made race through the streets, they crowded and jostled one another about the stove.

"Oh! Mr. Palmstine, where's our boat tonight?" queried one little fellow as he jabbed another with this elbow and made room for the girl to put her foot on the stove hearth.

"Let me see, Johnnie," mused the dockmaster, smiling as he looked down the index of his big record book and turned to the page for that day. "You belong to the Mayflower, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, she's gone over to Watson's Stores but she'll be back tonight, so you'd better wait right where ye are, Jennie," turning to the little girl, "your boat is up in the head tier now, third boat out. Paul, you're all right, same place as last night. Your boat has gone to the Erie Elevator, Chris," turning to the last one of the bright-eyed group, "and your ma said if they weren't back by 7 o'clock you was to stay with Paul tonight. So there you are, and now get out in the air or you'll

all be smoked like herrin' in this box."

### Little Chance For Schooling

"You see," continued the dockmaster, thus rid of his eager questioners, who riotously departed, letting another gust of frosty air in at the door, "I have to keep tab on the youngsters as well as on the boats. Two of these boys come from way up in Canada, and the other one and the girl from somewhere out on the line of the Erie Canal. They belong to some potato boats that have discharged their cargoes and are now doing lighterage business around the harbor.

"This is the only chance the little ones have to go to school, for the boats are on the go all summer, making sometimes three or four trips from Canada or the West, but as soon as they go into winter quarters here the children are hustled out and into the nearest public school. A good many of the boats go over into the Atlantic Basin and live there until the canals open in the spring for navigation.

"Sometimes the people who live on board all the summer leave them to the dock-watchman and take rooms in the city for the cold weather term. The most of them, however, live on board the year round, and wile in winter pick up what they can of lightering business. So they are constantly shifting their positions. Therefore it is that when then the little folks get out of school they come down on me like a thousand of brick to find out where they are to go. Know the city? Well, I should say they do, the little rascals. They know every foot of wharfage territory."

So Dockmaster Palmatine, of Coenties Slip, told the story of the canalboat children, and it was all very interesting, for city folk have but shady notions of this phase of the many-sided life of the world of commerce. The more closely observer may have sometimes wondered what became of the canalboats in the winter. The thought of them is inseparable from visions of serene summer skies, banks of willows and sweet scented meadow grass.

The canal boatman of the artist and the storyteller leans in perpetual indolence against his tiller watching the children as they ride the patient mules

or romp along the towpath echoing with their silvery laughter the joyous songs of the birds.

One always imagines the boatman's wife as a comfortable matron standing "hull down" in the cabin hatch to taking her husband's place at the tiller, while he drowns the hours away under the awning. If one's fancies were only logical he would conclude that with the approach of winter all hands withdrew to the cabin like the turtle into waters of the canal or that they migrated to some tropical clime like the birds that build their nests in the overhanging tree tops.

### **Canal Boat Domicile**

But here in the streets of New York, far removed from any world of fancy, were the children, and as they scattered. the dockmaster and his caller started on a tour of investigation. Outside the little office in the waters of the slip there were tied up between fifty and sixty canal boats lying as snugly toe to heel as the squares of a checker board. With an ease born of experience, the dockmaster stepped to the deck of one of the boats, and then across to the second, where a stalwart, bronzed Canadian was spreading sawdust in a deep layer under the main hatch of his boat to protect the cargo of potatoes from frost.

Down the companionway of the half cabin the owner went, followed at close hand by his visitors, and in another few minutes the Tribune reporter was sitting in a comfortable chair with a winsome little lass of three or four summers on his knee feeling for his watch to hear the "tick, tick." It was Liberty Hall, this little home, and soon one, dock massage and newspaper man were smoking and chatting with the boatman and the sweet-faced mistress of his floating home.

A snug home they had, too, made bright with a brilliantly colored carpet on the floor, dainty lace curtains at the half windows, its one scarlet geranium and a twittering canary bird that seemed not to care in the least for the domestic cat that stretched blinking in the sunlight on the narrow window ledge only a few inches away.

"No, indeed I don't find it lonesome," the wife said, to answer the visitor's question., "You see,

we are a neighborly sort of folk and run about a good deal. So we soon get to know everybody in the business and never lack for company. We really can't dance," she added with a smile and a glance about at the small cabin not more than six by ten feet, "but we do get together and sing. There's always someone in the slip who has a melodion or a piano."

"But how about the bitter cold weather? Can you keep warm here?"

"Warmer than you can in any flat in the city, for you know the cargo fills all round the walls and underneath the floor for two or three feet and see! I don't have to go outside to get either coal or water." And she opened in triumph a little slide into the coal bin holding half a ton ore more of coal and indicated a faucet that connected with a five-barrel tank in the stern of the boat. There was no need to inquire about other housekeeping conveniences for they were scattered all about. The tiny kitchen, with shining pans and polished irons hanging on its walls, looked for all the world like an overgrown doll's house, and china cupboards, pantry shelves and drawers for linen filled every available nook and corner. The little bedroom was as neat as wax and just big enough got two.

### **Niches For The Children**

"But where do the children sleep?" for by this time a round, rosy-cheeked boy had crept shyly half way down the cabin stairs and was taking grave mental measurements of the intruders.

"Right behind you, sir," and sure enough there in the side of the sitting room was a curtained bunk built back into the cargo space for all the world like a niche in the catacombs and containing two snowy beds.

"They're a fine, good hearted, hospitable lot of people," said the dockmaster a little later, "with only one peculiar failing. They are always squabbling about positions in the slip. They will come for hundreds of miles in the same fleet without friction

*Continues on Page 16*

*Left Column*

or difficulty, but the minute they get here it is every fellow for himself in the scramble for good berths.

“They ask no favors and give none and will toil single-handed for hours, with only abuse for each other to do what they might accomplish jointly in a fraction of the time. They come to me constantly with fanciful complaints about fouls and interferences. You’d think they were all Dunravens to hear ‘em talk.

“Why, they rail tag each other like so many fishwives, but they don’t mean it, bless you. Let one of ‘em fall ill or get into any kind of trouble and his most abusive neighbor will be the first to offer help or start a subscription for his benefit. Oh, they’re a fine lot of fellows, these canal boatmen, and I like them.

Thanks to Dick Palmer for transcribing this article.

act was passed providing for the lease of the Public Works of the State of Ohio for a period of ten years to the highest bidder. Bids were advertised, two were received, and on June 2, 1861, the canals of Ohio passed into private hands.

## Canalendar

**Note- The Canalendar is hopeful for a better 2021 and beyond. The best advice is to check a group's website or social media for updates.**

March, 2021: Canal Society of New York State Winter Symposium, this is scheduled to be a virtual event. Check with the website for more details. [www.newyorkcanals.org](http://www.newyorkcanals.org)

April 16-18, 2021: Pennsylvania Canal Society, Spring Trip, Lower Division of the Lehigh Navigation, Weissport to Easton. [www.pacanalsociety.org](http://www.pacanalsociety.org), emails to [PaCanals.info@gmail.com](mailto:PaCanals.info@gmail.com)

April 23-25, 2021: Canal Society of Ohio, Spring Trip, Indian Lake Region, [www.canalsocietyohio.org](http://www.canalsocietyohio.org)

May 2021: Canal Society of New York State, New York State Canal Conference, Schenectady, NY at the Mohawk Harbor Resort and Casino. <https://www.nyscanalconference.org/>

August 30-Sept 2, 2021: World Canals Conference 2021, C&O Canal, Hagerstown, MD. [www.wcc2021.com](http://www.wcc2021.com)

October 1-3, 2021: Pennsylvania Canal Society, Fall Trip, joint tour with the Ohio Canal Society, Pittsburgh Riverboat Tour, [PaCanals.info@gmail.com](mailto:PaCanals.info@gmail.com)

April 15-17, 2022: Pennsylvania Canal Society, Spring Trip, Upper Grand Division of the Lehigh Navigation, [PaCanals.info@gmail.com](mailto:PaCanals.info@gmail.com)

May 30 - June 3, 2022: World Canals Conference 2022, Leipzig, Germany. This is a reschedule of the 2020 event.