

## INTRODUCTION

Oswego was the first fresh water port in the United States and an important gateway to the West. The following paper regarding the Port was written by John W. O'Connor and read before the Oswego County Historical Society on February 24, 1942. It has been edited by Ann Callaghan Allen, Professor, LeMoyne College, Department of Communications and Film Studies.

Mr. O'Connor was the Chief Executive Officer of the Port at the time he prepared this paper. He had a distinguished business career. He also was active in many civic organizations in Oswego. They include: a) the Oswego Players; b) the Oswego Historical Society; c) Rotary for which he served not only as the President of the local club but also as District Governor; d) the Elks for which he served not only as Exalted Ruler of Oswego's Lodge but also as New York State Vice President; e) the Chamber of Commerce for which he served as President; and f) the Oswego Civic Music Association for which he served as its first President.

Mr. O'Connor passed away in 1970.

Lou Iorizzo  
Oswego City Historian

## A History of the First Fresh Water Port in the United States

(From a paper read before the Oswego County Historical Society, February 24, 1942, by John W. O'Connor, Deputy Collector of United States Customs, at Oswego.)

(Edited for City of Oswego Historian's website, August 11, 2010)

*(Author's note: From that day, so long ago, when the first intrepid, little band of Phoenicians sent the prow of their battered vessel foaming gaily through the Gates of Hercules, and with only the North Star to guide them, brought their small cargo of Oriental spices and Babylonian pottery to a haven beneath the chalk cliffs of Dover, all Culture, all Progress, all Advancement in Civilization has been disseminated throughout the world, on the waterways of the world. And to those brave souls, who in every age, have gone down to the sea in ships, this paper is dedicated, because they, too, have made Oswego.)*

### Four Great Periods of Port Development

The geographical setting of Oswego has been the most important factor in its development since the earliest days of its history. The first map of North America was published in 1569, and all subsequent maps showed the Oswego River flowing into Lake Ontario, and forming a natural harbor. Even the earliest explorers realized the value of an all water route connecting the French settlements along the St Lawrence with the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam (New York City) at the mouth of the Hudson. The natural canoe route of the Indians had always been along the southern shore of the lake, since the northern shore abounded in shoals, rocks and islands. Consequently, the advantages of Oswego's location were immediately recognized by the early traders.

Since the time the Iroquois Indians were banished from the vicinity of Montreal by hostile tribes and built a new village at the mouth of the Oswego River, there were four great periods of development of port activity in Oswego.

**The Fur Trading Era** began when the first Dutch settlers at Fort Orange (Albany) strove unsuccessfully to wrest from the hands of the French Traders the monopoly the latter had established upon the shores of Lake Ontario.

The second great period might be called **the Salt Era**, which ushered in the gradual development of river and canal traffic throughout the nation, a period of extreme economic changes which brought about the establishment of Oswego as the foremost fresh water port in the country. This was a period of ship-building and commerce, during the latter years of which, great fleets of sailing vessels plied in and out of Oswego harbor, carrying westward in their holds, the salt, sugar and rum, the powder, cloth and manufactured goods needed to feed the growing demands of the settlers of the West.

This period was followed by **the Lumber Era** which was the most prosperous in Oswego's history, a period which made a subtle change in Oswego's commerce. The trek to the West had subsided. The vast spaces and open country had become settled and self-sufficient. The railroads were reaching parts of the continent never before served by waterborne commerce. The ringing of a thousand axes in the dense pine forests along the shores of the Great Lakes were being echoed every day in Oswego harbor, and millions of board feet of lumber were being unloaded from entire

fleets of lake vessels; were being planed and processed in Oswego's mills; and then transshipped by scow and barge to the markets of the East.

The Coal Era saw the bateaux and keel boats replaced by motor ships and tankers, and the port of Oswego once again raised her head above tariff walls and depressions, and regained the important position she once held – “The Gateway to the Atlantic.” During the navigation season of 1941, for example, there were nearly 500 direct entrances and clearances of vessels to foreign ports, and from Oswego nearly 1,000,000 tons of coal were exported, a quantity twice as large as had been shipped in any previous season.

Insert the following links from story introduction:

**THE FUR TRADING ERA**

**THE SALT ERA**

**THE LUMBER ERA**

**THE COAL ERA**

## **THE FUR TRADING ERA**

**1610 - 1796**

The Fur Trading Era was roughly divided into three sections: the Dutch from 1610 to 1650; the French from 1650 to 1700; the English from 1700 to 1775. However there seems to be no documentary evidence covering the Dutch influence. That the French not only traded at Oswego in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, but also distinctly claimed and utilized the territory, is amply supported by documents. In 1680 the English traders from Albany had begun to make annual trading expeditions to the mouth of the Oswego River, but the French had already established definite trading posts all along the shores of the Great Lakes, and were not inclined to give up to the English a port so important as Oswego.

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century then, Oswego is a center of conflict among three groups who alternately claimed the right to navigate the Oswego River and utilize its natural advantages: The French who claimed it politically, not because they needed it, but because they feared that the English would be able to penetrate westward by way of Oswego, and threaten the main stream of their trade; the Iroquois, whose home it was, and who used it practically, playing one faction against the other; and the English, who saw in Oswego a key position which they must possess if they hoped to dominate the western fur trade and hold the Iroquois to the English cause.

The Fur Trade was very important to the colonists of that period as well. Then, as now, foreign exchange played no small part in the relationship between Europe and the Colonies. The farmers, trappers, and small tradesmen here depended upon Europe for nearly all the manufactured goods they required, as well as for the few items of luxury they allowed themselves. In a land where the streams and forests abounded in fur-bearing animals, it was only natural that the pelts of these animals should be used as a medium of exchange with a luxury loving Europe.

Thus, through the years, the struggle for supremacy over Oswego was being waged between the French and the English. At first, all the advantages seemed to be in the hands of main outlet to the sea, the St. Lawrence River, which was controlled by the French. They dominated all the lands surrounding the Great Lakes. But the English had become friendly with the Iroquois. They had learned that they, too, could possess an all water route into the interior, with only a few easy portages to bar their way. Furthermore, they were willing to pay high prices for the fox and otter, the beaver and muskrat, the raccoon and mink that were so much in demand in Europe.

The fur trade at Oswego was primarily an exchange of beaver pelts for rum. Rum, produced by slave labor in the West Indies, was a much cheaper product of exchange than French brandy, and perhaps just as potent. At any rate, when the Indians from the West began to realize that a fully loaded canoe would bring nearly twice the quantity of "fire-water", or other exchange material, at Oswego, as a similarly loaded canoe would bring at Niagara, they quickly deserted the French controlled trading posts, and year after year, came in ever increasing numbers to the nearest British outpost of trade, Oswego.

### **Canoes Brought 1400 Pelt Packs a Year**

The value of fur pelts at Oswego during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century was extremely high. The canoes used by the Indians from the West were usually about 33 feet in length, and, when fully loaded, carried seven packs of peltry, each pack valued at that time at approximately 15 pounds sterling. About 200 loaded canoes traded into Oswego during each season so that the total value at that time was about \$100,000.

As the volume of business increased at Oswego, trade diminished at the French ports of Niagara and Frontenac. It finally became necessary for the French Government to take up the unexpired leases held by individuals and operate these posts at a loss. The trading post of Oswego became such an important issue in French politics, that at the outbreak of the Seven Years War, one of the first objectives of the French under Montcalm was the destruction of the dockyards and partly completed forts at Oswego.

In 1755 the British realized that only by fortifying Oswego and building a fleet here could they ever hope to attack Niagara and cut off the French settlements in Louisiana and the West. So they belatedly set to work on these projects using, for the most part, contract labor. The first naval vessel ever built by the British on fresh water was launched here in that year, and appropriately named the "Oswego". But before the entire program could be carried out, Montcalm attacked with 3000 French and Indians, and completely destroyed ships and dockyards, forts and civilian establishments. This was a severe blow to the British cause; especially since the Iroquois, always so necessarily a part of the British fur trade, had become ardent admirers of the French and their leader. Nearly two years passed before the British were in a position to again use Oswego. New docks were built and new vessels launched at the mouth of the river. Within the next few years, various expeditions were made against the French from this port, and vessels built at Oswego were largely instrumental in the ultimate capture of Fort Frontenac and Montreal.

### **British Dominance Killed Oswego Fur Trade**

This war and the resultant treaty of peace completely changed the status of Oswego as a port. With the acquisition of Canada by the British, fur trading in Oswego became almost non-

existent. No longer the sole outpost of English safety and trade, it was reduced for a time to a low level of commercial importance. Some trade with the Iroquois was retained, but the main stream of cargo bearing canoes now passed it by, to be unloaded at the more important markets of Niagara, Toronto and Montreal. Shipbuilding continued and Fort Ontario, alone of the three forts which fell to Montcalm, was rebuilt, but the commerce that had grown so steadily at Oswego for nearly 150 years gradually subsided, and during the American Revolution, ceased entirely.

British occupation of Oswego, as well as of many other frontier points on the Great Lakes continued for many years after the surrender at Yorktown. The many restrictions placed upon American trade during this period were not alleviated until the British finally yielded Fort Ontario to the United States and retired to Canada in 1796.

### **Loyalists Pass Through To Canada**

During the years of military occupation of Oswego by the British a new type of trade was inaugurated. No American vessels were allowed to pass through the port if they carried any cargo produced in the United States other than grain, flour, cattle or provisions; and no commodities of any kind could be imported into the United States through Oswego. All American traders were stopped at Fort Ontario, and their goods confiscated. During this period, Oswego became a main outlet for Loyalist migration to new settlements in what is now the Province of Ontario in Canada. It is estimated that over 7,000 British sympathizers passed through Oswego in the years immediately following the Revolution, en-route to Canada, and taking along with them such of their worldly possessions as they could carry.

While the British occupation of Oswego was still at its height, a new industry began to develop on the banks on the Onondaga River. At first, purely local in character, mainly because of trade restrictions at Fort Ontario, it soon outgrew its swaddling clothes. By the time the British finally relinquished the Fort to the Americans on July 14, 1796, the Salt Industry was ready to take its place as a very necessary cog in America's wheel of commerce.

## **THE SALT ERA**

**1796 – 1873**

The exportation of salt in the years that followed the dawn of the new Republic was symbolic of the growth and expansion of a small disintegrated people into a vast cohesive nation. Born out of the necessity of war that effectively shut us off from the European markets, only 600 bushels of salt were produced during its first year, but as the tide of civilization moved westward, as the ever-changing frontiers were pushed back by the swelling throng of immigrants, so also did New York State's first great industry expand. Every mule pack, every knapsack, every vessel sailing out of Oswego harbor was supplied with salt as a commodity of prime necessity. In the first few years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, over 600,000 bushels were exported from Oswego alone.

### **Oswego Made Port of Entry in 1799**

The first United States Tariff Act was signed by President Washington on July 4, 1789, sixty-five days after he took the oath of office. Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, set up

Customs Collection Districts along the Atlantic seaboard, and from that time on, a substantial portion of Government income has been derived from duties on imported materials. The passage of this Act effectively stopped for all time the violent quarrels between the States over tariff boundaries. The individual State laws, which had previously required the payment of duties on merchandise moving from one state to another, were repealed, and the mandated policy of a protective tariff has been administered ever since by the Secretary of the Treasury.

During the years of British occupation, no attempt was made to administer the new tariff act along the northern frontier. But when in 1796 the last British outpost was evacuated from the southern shores of the Great Lakes, legislation was introduced into Congress to revise the original bill. The second Tariff Act was passed in 1799. Under this Act, duty schedules were slightly changed, the boundaries of the United States were outlined, and a new Customs Collection District was established. The honor of being the headquarters port of this district, the first port of entry in the United States west of the Atlantic seaboard, was given to Oswego.

From this time on, lake shipping in and out of Oswego developed steadily. It became recognized as the most important port on the newly opened water route to the West, the route over which thousands of immigrants and emigrants passed. An average of 150 complete trips per year were made between Oswego and Niagara by vessels measuring between 40 and 100 gross tons. The open boats, used exclusively at the turn of the century, were gradually supplanted by larger sailing vessels, as Americans began to realize the important factors of speed, comfort and cost in lake navigation.

### **Pole Boats Replace Canoes**

The mode and speed of transportation had changed very little during the Fur Trade Era. Canoes were ideal in a region of frequent portages, and dangerous rapids, and since the loads were relatively light, the early traders emulated their Indian friends and learned to use the canoe to their best advantage. But as the traffic expanded, the necessity for a safer, less costly means of transportation became evident. Gradually the canoe was replaced on the water route from Albany by the "pole boat". This was a wooden vessel, usually about thirty feet in length, capable of being propelled in less than a foot of water. This type, in turn, gave way to the "keel boat" which was the direct ancestor of the modern canal boat. Seventy-five feet in length and built of planked pine, it was protected throughout its length by a stout wooden keel, four inches square, which took the shock from any submerged obstruction. This type of vessel was capable of carrying over five tons of cargo.

### **First Commercial Ship Built**

The first commercial sailing vessel built at Oswego was a schooner of 90 tons, named "Fair American." It was launched in 1804, and was later sold to the United States Government for use in the War of 1812. From 1807 to 1817 there were 23 known sailing vessels built in Oswego harbor. In 1810, out of the 60 sailing vessels then trading on Lake Ontario, 31 of them were registered in Oswego. While it is true that anticipation of war with Great Britain was partly responsible for the impetus in shipbuilding, it is of interest to note that increased lake traffic expansion put these vessels to immediate use, and for many years after the war of 1812, schooners built at Oswego during this period continued to carry the greater share of Lake Ontario commerce.

The first of many governmental set-backs to be experienced in Oswego came with the passage of the Jeffersonian Embargo Act on December 20, 1807. This Act was aimed primarily at British trade, but Oswego, as the shipping center for salt, potash and general merchandise to Canada was so adversely affected that by July 1808, local opposition had reached almost the height of armed insurrection. The Collector of Customs here was forcibly prevented from enforcing Federal Regulations, and was obliged to request Governor Tompkins to order out the militia.

Shortly after this episode, the government designated Oswego as its official naval base on Lake Ontario, purchased all available and desirable vessels on the lake and moved to Sackett's Harbor. The fact that naval supplies were stored here, and transferred to ships to be delivered to Sackett's Harbor, was the principal reason that led to the British attack on Oswego on May 6, 1814 and the capture of its port.

### **Oswego Center of Shipbuilding**

Economically and commercially, the growth of the United States in the years that followed the War of 1812 was a phenomenon unparalleled in world history. The steamboat was invented, and immediately every harbor in the country became a shipyard. The Erie Canal was opened and immediately every inland city made plans for an all water connection with the Seaboard. The first railroad was built and immediately each crossroad hamlet pooled its meager resources in its dream of becoming a shipping center. And in this dream of greatness, Oswego, too, played its part. Already recognized as a shipbuilding center, the community continued to expand the industry until it reached its peak in 1847, when 26 vessels slid down the weighs here into Lake Ontario to carry Oswego's message of commercial superiority to the world beyond its shores.

### **Oswego Canal Opened**

The opening of the Erie Canal proved a severe political blow to Oswego's businessmen, and a legislative victory for the producers of Western New York. Using every legal subterfuge available, these champions of localization had convinced the Governor and the Legislature that the all-water route through Oswego, which had adequately served 200 years of traffic, should be abandoned in favor of a route that would directly connect Buffalo and Rochester with Albany. For only a few years, however, was Oswego in eclipse. Realizing that the completion of the Erie Canal would divert the greater share of commercial traffic from Oswego to Buffalo, several local civic leaders formed the Oswego Canal Corporation for the purpose of improving the waterway from Onondaga Lake to Lake Ontario. Within a few years, the State was persuaded to take over the work begun by this corporation, and on April 28, 1829 the Oswego Canal was completed and formally opened to Connect with the Erie Canal at Three Rivers.

### **Welland Canal Gives Great Stimulus**

The following year, the Welland Canal was completed, and on August 4, 1830, the first vessel cleared from Cleveland to Oswego. This combination of events probably had more to do with the development of port activity here than any other event in its entire history. By opening up a cheaper and more rapid route for carrying passengers and freight from the seaboard to the interior Great Lakes region, this new canal established a larger market for all products. By the consequent lowering of transportation costs, the way was paved for the production of additional commodities whose market had been limited previously.

As evidence of the enormous commercial expansion that the port of Oswego enjoyed during the next several years, the records show that from 1830 to 1836, canal tolls increased from \$3,673 to \$53,677. The number of vessels annually arriving in port rose from 546 to 2,004 in the same period. The enrolled tonnage at the port increased from 521 tons in 1830 to 21,079 in 1848. The direct entrances and clearances jumped from 6,910 tons in 1830 to 188,919 tons in 1848. The total value of lake business in 1830 was \$277,000, but in 1848 it had reached \$18,166,907.

### **Salt Shipments Subsided After 1858**

Throughout this period, salt continued to maintain first place as the most important commodity handled, and rose from 300,000 bushels exported in 1830 to over 2,000,000 bushels in 1848. The peculiar position of salt as an item of trade at Oswego deserves brief explanation. Prior to 1860, the more bulky goods handled here were from the West, and consisted principally of grain and lumber, characterized by large bulk and low value. Goods shipped westward were, on the other hand, less bulky and of higher value. Consequently, sailing vessels and later steamers making the western trip often traveled in ballast. So, while the records show that nearly 5,000,000 bushels of salt were shipped in the year 1858, the peak year, it must be remembered that most of it was carried as pure ballast. The actual cost of transporting a barrel of salt from Oswego to Chicago in 1859 was only eight cents. Even seasoned shippers were at a loss to explain the paradox that allowed a pound of Onondaga salt to be sold cheaper in the Chicago market than in Cazenovia, a town only 20 miles from the salt works. However, after 1860, the business slowly declined, and in 1873 ceased altogether. The discovery of new salt deposits in Canada, Michigan and West Virginia, together with changed technique in manufacture finally terminated a business that had for many years been a profitable item of commerce at Oswego.

## **THE LUMBER ERA**

### **1840 (approximately) - 1928**

For many years the commercial face of Oswego had been gradually maturing as lumber began to assume more and more importance in the business index of the port. The lumber trade here was by no means a new one. The tree growth of the section was early noted for its density and variety. In Colonial days, much of the pine had been cut and shipped to England where it had been utilized in the manufacture of masts and spars. Lumber continued to be a thriving local business as late as 1860, but the chief lumber trade at the port throughout its development, was a matter of importation.

Posts, staves and squared timbers were the principal items received, and nearly all the lumber brought into Oswego had been cut and shipped from the vast forests along the northern shores of Lake Ontario. Although modern methods of mechanization have been successfully applied to the lumbering industry, it is curious to note that the actual manner of shipping has not been materially changed since those early days. The vessels in the trade were ordinarily brought to anchor offshore, where the timber and staves had been collected for shipment. The timbers were then floated out to the vessels and the staves brought out in scows. Upon arrival at Oswego, the vessels were unloaded directly into canal boats for further shipment, or deposited at the local lumber mills for further processing.

## **Freight Rates to West Cheap**

Another case that illustrates the importance of lower rates on shipments to the West was evidenced in the local lumber trade in the period prior to the Civil War. Much of the lumber brought into the port was consigned to local sawmills, where it was sawed, grooved, and fitted for laying by machinery. Because of the low western freight rates, it was considered more feasible to reship most of the processed lumber to the western ports. A thousand board feet of lumber could be shipped to Chicago for three dollars, a distance by water of 1100 miles, whereas it would have cost four dollars to send the same quantity to Albany, a carry of only 200 miles by canal boat.

The records show that the lumber trade at Oswego increased tremendously from 1840 to 1870. Some conception of this growth may be gained from the following figures:

1840 - 19,560,997 Board Feet.  
1850 - 67,586,985 Board Feet.  
1860 - 190,402,228 Board Feet.  
1870 - 284,539,533 Board Feet.

The best single index to Lake Commerce over a period of years is the figure which represents the tonnage of all vessels entering and clearing in the district. From 952,926 gross tons entered and cleared in 1848, the figure increased to 1,693,486 gross tons in 1870. During the same period the tonnage, of all vessels enrolled in the Oswego District increased from 21,079 gross tons to 100,040 gross tons.

## **Largest Flour Mill Built Here in 1860**

It was during this period, too, that the grain trade was born. With the opening of the prairie lands in the West after 1830, and improvements in water transportation facilities, great quantities of wheat, corn, barley, oats and peas were shipped into Oswego from the areas bordering upon the Great Lakes, and the trade reached its peak in 1856, when 18,646,955 bushels were received. As flour milling expanded, a larger proportion of the wheat was ground, and the balance shipped by way of the canal for eastern domestic markets, and for exportation to Europe. The number of flour mills increased from seven in 1841 to twenty in 1870. In the 1850s Oswego ranked with Baltimore, Rochester and St. Louis as the most important flouring centers of the United States, and for a few years of that decade, it surpassed Rochester "the Flour City" in total production. The largest flour mill in the country was built in Oswego in 1860. It had a capacity of 300,000 barrels a year. The volume of business naturally fluctuated with the size of the wheat crops, and the demands of European markets. During the late 1840's, unsettled conditions in Europe and the famine in Ireland made such demands upon the local facilities that the mills were kept in operation night and day. On the other hand in 1860, a huge grain crop, and a declining market, caused all the mills and elevators to be filled, and 25 loaded vessels were forced to winter in the harbor.

## **Reciprocity Early Boosted Canadian Trade**

One highly important factor in the tremendous expansion of Lake commerce at Oswego during this period; a factor that has been almost completely forgotten in the intervening years, was the Reciprocity Treaty with Canada in 1855. After the repeal of the British Corn Laws in 1846, and

the general relaxation of European trade barriers which followed, there gradually grew up in the political minds of the United States and Canada, a tendency toward Free Trade.

Into this controversy, the citizens of Oswego entered with exceptional enthusiasm. Since it was considered essential that the interests of Oswego's merchants be properly presented to the legislators, and the movement for reciprocity be kept alive, Alvin Bronson was sent to Washington as a lobbyist in December 1852. It was largely through his efforts and the cooperation of Gerrit Smith, then the newly elected Congressman from this district, that the Treaty was passed and signed on June 5, 1854.

The agreement covered all fishing, trading and navigation rights for a period of ten years. Oswego's interest in the document was based upon the chapter devoted to trading rights. In effect, this chapter proclaimed that the natural products of the two countries should be admitted free of duty into each country respectively. The products covered by this general rule were specifically enumerated, and included extractive raw materials of agriculture, lumbering, mining and fishing.

The immediate impact of the Treaty upon business in Oswego was very favorable. The first full year of operation showed an increase in foreign trade value of over \$9,000,000, and during the life of the Treaty, which was repealed in 1866, Oswego experienced peak years in the following classifications: 1--Greatest tonnage moved on the Oswego Canal. 2--The greatest quantity of salt exported. 3--The greatest quantity of grain received. 4--The greatest quantity of grain moved on the Canal.

### **Government Lost Revenues through Treaty**

But the picture disclosed by these figures does not give a detailed outline of the true effects of the Treaty. It is true that more merchandise moved in and out of Oswego harbor during this time than during any other period. It is true that this remarkable increase in business took place during a major depression, followed by Civil War. Nevertheless, the true index of port activity shows that instead of the decrease in business predicted by the exponents of the Treaty, to follow its termination the foreign trade in Oswego continued to grow.

Direct entrances and clearances of vessels in foreign trade maintained a steady increase up until 1873, and the money value of imports also continued to grow. Since most of the articles imported during this time were free of duty, there naturally had been a decline in Customs revenue. The net revenue recorded at the Custom House for the year 1854 was \$160,669. Two years later, after one year of Reciprocity, the revenue had dropped to \$4,275. In 1866, after the termination of the treaty, the revenue had increased to \$969,365, so that it is estimated that the Federal Government lost approximately \$5,000,000 in revenue during the 11 years the Treaty was in effect.

### **Lake Trade Fell Away After 1870**

From this time on, the story is one of discouragement and regret, Oswego had seemingly reached its zenith as a port. For 60 years, beginning in 1870, there was a gradual but nevertheless, persistent decline in port activity. In general, the recession was very marked during the years from 1870 to 1874. Conditions remained quite static from 1875 to 1894, when a further drop began that carried Oswego down from its heights as one of the most important shipping points in the country, to the level it had reached in 1930, an obscure port of entry, hugging the banks of Lake Ontario.

The story of a bridge of ships across the harbor was only a memory. The last bushel of Onondaga salt had passed through the port in 1873. A century of promiscuous cutting had denuded the timberlands in the Lake Ontario watershed, and the last entry of Canadian lumber was made in 1928. The 20 flour mills that dotted the Oswego landscape in 1870 had disappeared. Some had burned, more had been absorbed by the larger corporations that had been attracted to the western milling centers by better transportation facilities and improved methods of manufacture. Only the coal business remained active. By some perversity of fate, it happened that one of the factors that had ruined Oswego as a port, the competition of the railroad, was in a large measure responsible for the continued increase in the exportation of coal.

The causes underlying the decline of port activity could not be due to the business cycle, since the years of prosperity during the period were nearly as many as the years of depression. Instead, Oswego's position as a port had been undermined by fundamental outside changes. Superficially, it must be noted that the port of Oswego had lost its natural advantages as a gateway to commerce. However the direct and indirect causes should be evaluated more definitely.

### **Fundamental Changes Affected Port**

During the Colonial period, and later, during the salt era, the mouth of the Oswego River had occupied a kind of monopolistic position as a point where transportation routes converged. A large part of all water borne trade from the eastern seaboard was routed through the portals of Oswego. Its only rival, for many years, was the St. Lawrence route, but as the years passed by, other more advantageous, routes at first threatened, then affected, and finally nearly destroyed the position Oswego had attained.

Certain other elements directly affected port activity. One of these was the failure on the part of the federal government to complete the improvements of the Great Lakes. As late as 1935, the United States Army engineers recommended the Oswego route to the seaboard as being more economical, yet years of agitation on the part of local representatives for the building of the often proposed Niagara Ship Canal, which would enable upper lake vessels to trade in Oswego, brought no result. Furthermore, the tariff policy of the United States during this period, with its inherent elements of protection, was clearly a negative factor in Oswego's trade. Canadian goods were kept out of the United States, and in retaliation, American goods were heavily taxed in Canada.

Perhaps the greatest single, short-term, positive cause of port decline was the successive removal of Erie Canal tolls, which had the natural effect of building up Lake Erie ports at the expense of those on Lake Ontario. Prior to the removal of the tolls, boats passing through the Erie Canal paid low tolls, while those using the Welland Canal from Lake Erie and the waters of Lake Ontario and Oswego escaped these. The Welland Canal had reached its capacity in the 1860's, and the average size of vessels on the Great Lakes increased more rapidly than locking facilities were improved upon. Canal to Lake Ontario shipping was gradually choked off from the main stream of Great Lakes commerce. During the same period, Canada, realizing the disadvantages accruing from shipping its products "in bond" through the United States to Europe, had improved the St. Lawrence waterway by the construction of six short canals. These improvements gradually diverted much of the western and Canadian traffic from Oswego to Montreal.

Fully as important to the loss of volume tonnage to the Port of Oswego was the perfection of a new technique in transportation to which Oswego had not been able to adapt itself. The

continued success of the railroads as freight and passenger carriers finally destroyed the advantages that Oswego had formerly enjoyed as a transshipment point for waterborne traffic. From the earliest days of the railroads, most of the successful companies had built their roads from the Atlantic seaboard to the West, and the principal eastern cities, New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore, had financially aided in the construction of railroads that would provide direct connection with the upper Great Lake ports of Chicago, Cleveland, Erie and Buffalo. Although the citizens of Oswego also contributed financially to various projected railroads which would follow a direct route to the coast, none of these projects materialized.

### **Changes in Transshipment Methods**

One final factor contributing towards the decline of the port must be considered. In the years that followed the invention of the steamboat, many changes had been made in the field of transportation. Oswego's prime had been reached in a period when vessels were small, and cargoes were transferred by manual devices from one kind of carrier to another. It began to decline when transfer utilities were no longer in demand, and when larger vessels, carrying larger cargoes, loaded and unloaded by machinery traveled longer and longer distances without breaking cargo.

Many attempts were made during this time on the part of Oswego's civic and business leaders to stem the tide of destruction, but each sincere effort was minimized by conditions beyond their control.

### **Effects of McKinley Tariff**

Nearly all the lumber received at Oswego after 1870 came from Canada. In the peak year of 1873 there were 298,681,000 board feet imported. Even though the lumbering areas were moving westward, Oswego, because of its position as the nearest lake port to the seaboard, and because of low transportation costs, continued to retain its place as the foremost lumber distributing center in the United States. This trend continued until the passage of the so-called McKinley Tariff Act in 1890. The tariff policy of the United States had always given a certain measure of protection to American producers and manufacturers against inferior and less costly competitive products of foreign countries. This was the first tariff act designed primarily to protect the American farmers and producers of raw materials, and was strongly favored by the general public.

However, since under the terms of this act the duties on wood and manufactures of wood were increased to 35 per cent ad valorem, there developed a gradual tendency on the part of Canadian producers to fabricate their own lumber products, and export them directly through Montreal, rather than to submit to the prohibitive duties prevailing across the lake.

It was this same act that sealed the doom of Oswego's thriving grain trade. The total quantity of all grains received in 1870 was 13,389,547 bushels. Many malt houses were established in Oswego during this period using barley imported from Canada in their manufacturing processes. Imposition of the high McKinley tariff rates caused mid-western growers to take up growing barley and the malting business of Oswego was gradually lost to the mid-west. At one time there were 13 malt houses operating in Oswego. By 1900, importation of grains at Oswego had virtually ceased. The mark-up of duties from a uniform ten cents per bushel to an amount as high as forty-five cents a bushel left Oswego's elevators empty, and dissipated its dream of becoming the leading grain market in the East.

## THE COAL ERA

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### Coal Exports Rise Steadily

The exportation of coal remained the one business index of port activity which showed consistent improvement. Certain regions in Pennsylvania enjoyed a complete monopoly of the Anthracite Coal industry, so that the source of supply was singular and not subject to change. Therefore, although in the course of time other routes were established, Oswego was able to retain its natural advantages. But by becoming a port primarily devoted to exportation, rather than to importation, the balance of trade had been disrupted. In the peak year of 1870, there had been collected in the port of Oswego, a total of \$1,112,352 in customs revenue. In the early 1930's, this figure had dropped amazingly to less than \$1,000. The records show that during these same years the exportation of coal had increased from 54,526 tons in 1870 to nearly 1,000,000 in 1941. Since the importance of a port is tabulated by the Federal Government on the basis of its revenue, perhaps it was only natural that when the Reorganization Act was passed in 1913, Oswego was demoted as a distinct Customs District, and attached to the District of Rochester as a port of entry.

Thus, another blow had fallen. After over 100 years of leadership, headquarters during that time to the vast territory of Central New York, maintaining sub-ports at Syracuse and Utica, Oswego too was labeled a sub-port, and its destiny ruled thereafter by its rival in the West.

### Port Activity Increasing Since 1931

But the gloomy picture has faded. With the opening of the new Welland Ship Canal in 1931, the period of commercial isolation for Oswego is over. During the last ten years, the largest vessels of the upper Great Lakes have been in and out of Oswego Harbor many times. The grain trade that had been lost to Buffalo has again become an important factor in port activity. Realizing that the opening of the Welland Canal must inevitably bring about a revival in the grain business in Oswego, the State of New York, in 1924, erected a million bushel elevator, designed to accommodate the largest lake vessels afloat, and providing also for transshipment of grain by way of the Oswego Canal.

In anticipation of the expected revival of business, the citizens of Oswego created a Harbor and Dock Commission in 1923, which was authorized to "promote and regulate the commerce of the city of Oswego, and its harbor." As a result of these changed conditions, and revival of interest, Oswego has again become an important transshipment point for vast quantities of grain. In 1940 several of the largest steamers on the lakes, carrying as much as 400,000 bushels each, were docked and unloaded at the State Elevator. The total quantity received during that one year was over 10,000,000 bushels.

### New Type of Shipping Vessel

The exportation of salt, which had for so many years, been the chief article of commerce, has never been revived, but the loss of this in-transit business is no longer a burden. In 1923 a new type of vessel made its first appearance on the canal. With a gross tonnage of over 1500 tons, the vessels were really power driven barges, capable of navigating the Great Lakes as well as the canal. Since the vessels could be fully loaded at the point of debarkation, and proceed directly, without

breaking cargo, to the post of destination, it at once became apparent to shippers that the saving in time and transportation costs had opened up an entirely new field in water borne commerce. Consequently, newer and larger units were built, and the great quantities of gasoline, kerosene, raw and refined sugar, molasses, sulphur, chemicals and wood pulp that have passed through the port in recent years have aided materially in establishing a new era of prosperity.

### OSWEGO'S COLLECTORS OF CUSTOMS

On March 3, 1803, President Thomas Jefferson appointed Joel Burt as the first Collector for this District. During, his tenure of office, he occupied quarters in the same building that housed the Post Office at that time, a store operated on West First Street by William Dolloway. Mr. Burt's successors, and their business addresses follow:

- Nathan Sage – appointed June 11, 1811 – operated Custom House from his home on West First Street
- John Grant, Jr. – appointed May 31, 1826 – operated office at this home on West Seneca Street
- George H. McWhorter – appointed May 1, 1834 – opened new Custom House in building at corner of West Seneca and Water Streets
- Thomas H. Bond – appointed August 2, 1841 – continued to occupy Custom House at corner of West Seneca and Water Streets
- George H. McWhorter – appointed again on May 23, 1843 upon the death of Mr. Bond
- Jacob Richardson – appointed June 4, 1849 – moved the office to a new building on Water Street, the Burckle Building where it remained until the new Federal building was erected on the corner of West First and Oneida Streets.
- Enoch B. Talcott – appointed May 28, 1853 – continued to occupy Custom Office in Water Street building
- Orville Robinson – appointed March 31, 1858 – Custom House make its final move to present location in the Federal Building on October 5, 1858.
- John B. Higgins – appointed April 1, 1860
- Charles A. Perkins – appointed October 1, 1861
- Andrew VanDyke – appointed September 1, 1864
- Charles C.P. Clark – appointed April 1, 1869
- Elias Root – appointed May 1, 1871

- Daniel G. Fort – appointed July 10, 1877
- John J. Lamoree – appointed January 14, 1882
- Issac B. Poucher – appointed July 31, 1885
- Henry H. Lyman – appointed August 1, 1889
- W. J. Bulger – appointed December 1, 1893
- James Cooper – appointed April 1, 1897
- John S. Parsons – appointed April 2, 1910

Upon the passage of the Reorganization Act of 1913, Oswego lost its status as a Collection District, and the succession of Collectors appointed by the President came to an end. Charles A. Bentley, who had held the Civil Service office of Special Deputy under Mr. Parsons was immediately sworn in as Deputy Collector of Customs in Charge, and held that office until the Civil Service age limit forced him to retire on July 1, 1932. Upon the retirement of Mr. Bentley, Benjamin P. Legg was designated to take his place, and held office until his untimely death on October 15, 1939. After Mr. Legg's death, the present incumbent, John W. O'Connor, was appointed in his place.