

Inland Seas  
v 39 # 4  
Winter 1983

*The eternal triangle on the lakes has always been: greater cargo tonnage seeking larger ships seeking wider canal locks. One leg of that triangle was always out of step . . . which is what drove progress. It could also drive an owner-captain to desperation because just a few inches too much beam could bottleneck his ship from thousands of miles of commerce and the best market ports. Author Richard Palmer tracks down the ultimate case, in which one inch broke a vessel master's heart.*

## ONE INCH FROM SUCCESS :

### Captain Pickering and the *Columbia*

By RICHARD F. PALMER

**T**he typical 19th century Great Lakes captain was willful and colorful. Many became folk heroes and their exploits legendary. One such tar was Captain Augustus A. Pickering. He was the son of shipbuilder Joshua Pickering, one of the most prominent citizens of Sackets Harbor, N. Y., in 1817. His son, Augustus, is said to have built and launched the first commercial ship to reach Chicago from Lake Ontario.

Today the Pickering home is the Pickering-Beach Museum. Guides tell visitors that Captain Pickering sailed the first ship into Chicago Harbor and a few years later, committed suicide after he found his ship was a few inches too wide to squeeze through the Welland Canal locks. Initially, these stories seemed hard to believe; probably embellished down through the years.

Yet there seemed to be a base of truth. Surprisingly, some research revealed the stories amazingly accurate. The search for Augustus Pickering first led this writer to the Jefferson County Courthouse. Having some experience with public records, I soon discovered that Captain Pickering died intestate. He left an estate valued at \$5,000 and was survived by his wife, Caroline, and six children.

The record in the Surrogate's office revealed he died on June 5, 1844, in St. Catharines, Upper Canada. He owned a half interest in the schooner *Illinois*, and apparently owned the schooner *Columbia*, outright. Some investigation at Sackets Harbor revealed that he is buried in the family plot there, in an unmarked grave, surrounded by an iron fence.

Robert Brennan is the local historian and knows as much about his community's past as anyone. For years he has spent his time preserving and pointing out the historical significance of the community.

He had heard the stories about Captain Pickering too. We pooled our research efforts, with the aid of Mrs. Sheila Wilson, Special Collections Librarian at the St. Catharines Public Library, and Steven A. Hawley, Great Lakes specialist at Bowling Green State University.

## The *Illinois*

During the winter of 1833-34, Captain Pickering built the schooner *Illinois*, 80 feet in length, 20 feet wide, with an 8-foot hold. The vessel sailed from Sackets Harbor on May 12, 1834, with 104 passengers bound for Chicago. George L. Dickinson, later of Muskegon, Mich., one of the carpenters who helped build the schooner, and his young wife were among the passengers.

The cargo consisted of household goods and farm implements of the passengers bound for the west. There were no interconnected railroads at the time and many people did not yet trust their lives and property to steamboats.

Walter B. Camp of Sackets Harbor recalled:

"I remember seeing her equipped with farming and household effects from the deck to masthead. Wagon wheels were so locked to shrouds that men could climb the topmast on them. Captain Pickering was so highly esteemed that our pioneers felt secure and in the hands of a capable navigator and watchful guardian, who could be trusted to lead them to their new homes, not yet made. A very perlitte young gentleman had visited the outgoing vessel, and gave to a lady his description of the animated and picturesque scene, as follows: 'I have just seen Capting Pickering on board the *Illynoize* (sic). The cabing (sic) is full of wimming (sic), the rigging full of waggings (sic), and the Capting (sic) says they are going out immedgiately.' "

After calling at several places to rest the passengers and replenish the sea stores, the *Illinois* arrived off the mouth of the Chicago River, about July 14, 1834. During the previous February the river was flooded which cut a deep channel in the bar entrance to Lake Michigan 80 feet wide and 8 feet deep. By July, work had progressed on the harbor to the point that the *Illinois* sailed into the river amidst the plaudits of the community.

However, another source states the schooner could neither land nor enter the harbor as there was no harbor, but instead a formidable bar across the mouth of the river. There were no docks, no lights, no tugs, no anything but mud.

The passengers and light goods were put ashore by means of the ship's yawl, the heavier goods going by raft as the weather permitted. The only hotel in town was full and the passengers housed themselves as best they could. Some found shelter in a two-room log cabin called a tavern on the west side. Later, Captain Pickering succeeded in securing a small house from a Mr. McKinzie, a government Indian agent.

After the cargo of the little schooner had been discharged, the people of the village told Pickering that, as he had been gallant enough to name his vessel after their state, they wished to acknowledge the compliment. They proposed to take his schooner over the bar (which showed but four feet of water), if practical, so that it could be said the vessel had actually been the first in their "harbor."

Captain  
Augustus  
Pickering



Anchors were carried out, and a purchase of rope was rove to the windlass. The schooner rolled and pitched and the ropes strained. After much effort, the *Illinois* floated proudly into the port of Chicago. This vessel is said to have been lost on Lake Erie in 1851.

#### The *Columbia*

We next hear of Captain Pickering building the schooner *Columbia* at Sackets Harbor in 1844. "Pickering was a terrible man," Walter B. Camp recalled, "embued with a spirit of adventure and enterprise that charged his whole nature. His next vessel was much larger than the *Illinois*. This he built with a rounding stern, to better fit the locks (on the Welland Canal). She, too, was loaded with passengers for the West.

"When his vessel reached the Welland canal, he discovered that the locks would not receive her, she being about one inch too wide amidships. He agreed with his brother-in-law, Winslow, that it was feasible to take that much from her sides, and began the work. Neither rest nor sleep came with the mortification of this event, till death came by his own choice, and before his vessel made her successful exit from the canal."

At the time, the minimum size of the first Welland Canal lock was 110 by 22 feet, with a draft of 8 feet. Although work began on the second canal in 1844, it was not completed until 1846 when the dimensions were increased to 150 feet in length and 27½ feet in width. Dimensions varied however, and at Lock 2 (finished March 19, 1846) it was to be 200 feet by 45 feet with an 11-foot lift. Old Locks 1 and 2 (Port Dalhousie) due to the non-completion of new Lock 1 there, were widened to 26 feet, 6 inches to admit vessels between 138 and 141 feet long.

According to the enrollment of the *Columbia* in Cleveland on April 5, 1845, the two-masted schooner was 97 feet, 9 inches long, 20 feet, 6 inches wide at main deck level, and 9 feet deep, measuring 165 tons.

At the time the owners were the estate of Captain Pickering, and Alonzo Sprague.

Authenticating the death of Pickering was a problem until Mrs. Wilson of the St. Catharines Library found the following article in the *St. Catharines Journal* of Friday, June 7, 1844:

*Suicide. — An Inquest was held upon this place, on Monday last, before A. S. St. John, Esq., on the body of Augustus A. Pickering, master and owner of the schooner Columbia, of Sacket's Harbor, who had cut his throat early in the morning. The vessel was on its first trip up, having on board about 130 passengers; and being a trifle too large for the present locks, experienced great delay and difficulty in getting through — which no doubt tended to produce that disturbed state of mind which impelled to so fatal an end. On the morning in question, a passenger went into the bush on Mr. Phelps' farm, on the west side of the canal, when hearing a noise he looked around and saw the Captain on the ground, with his throat bleeding: assistance was called and the man conveyed aboard, where he lingered about two hours. . . . Mr. P. was about forty years of age, and left a wife and six children: his remains were taken down to Sacket's for interment. The mate of this vessel got his leg so dreadfully crushed on Sunday, as to be incapable of proceeding.*

The *Columbia* remained in service for many years, and is noted in the *Cleveland Herald* of September 25, 1879 as having been recently purchased by C. A. Chamberlain and Robert Hutchings of Detroit. According to the article the vessel had endured a checkered career. "*The vessel was built for a canaler, but she was built too large, and when Captain Pickering learned that fact, so great was his disappointment that he cut his throat with a razor and died. Then her tonnage was but 160 tons, old measurement. In 1860 she was cut in two and made her present length. With the exception of the Harriet Ross, the Columbia is the oldest schooner afloat. Concerning the Ross, the story goes that she formed a part of Commodore Perry's fleet on the memorable 10th of September, 1813, though under another name.*"

Sources include P. 603, *History of Jefferson County, New York* by John A. Haddock (Albany, N.Y. 1895); P.616, Vol. I, *History of the Great Lakes* by J.B. Mansfield (Chicago) 1899.; and File 92, Jefferson County Surrogate's Office, Watertown, N.Y.; information furnished by the Pickering-Beach Museum, Sackets Harbor, N.Y.



*The author: Richard F. Palmer, Tully, New York, is staff writer for the Syracuse Herald-Journal, with special interest in Lake Ontario. He is on the board of the Onandaga Historical Association, and is working on a book about Lake Ontario shipwrecks.*

*With this issue Mr. Palmer, published in other marine journals as well as this one, now joins the editorial staff of INLAND SEAS®, adding both editorial and historical strength.*