

*Island Lake
1797-98
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LAKE ONTARIO'S FIRST CHARTMAKER

By RICHARD F. PALMER

Like any captain who has seen splintered hull plank, Capt. Augustus Ford figured that until Ontario waters had been charted for depth, bars and shoals, he's best sail scared. It was an opinion with some salt on it because Ford went to sea at age nine.

At age 45, as a merchant captain, he was suddenly required to sail Ontario on hearsay charts and tavern rumors.

What he did about that became important in the second brush with His Majesty's Navy and to a century of Great Lakes commerce. But the best public thanks he ever got for that may be on these pages – by Richard Palmer.

– The Editors

Prior to the War of 1812, the expanse of Lake Ontario was virtually uncharted. Shipmasters relied on existing navigational instruments and their own knowledge of the Lake to guide them from port to port.

This stunned Capt. Augustus Ford when he arrived in Oswego on July 7, 1797. Born in Providence, Rhode Island on October 12, 1772, he had known the value of accurate charts since boyhood. Entering the U.S. service at age nine he made his first voyage to the French West Indies to provision General Washington's Army.

About the Author: Richard F. Palmer, 41, Tully, New York, staff writer for the Syracuse Herald-Journal, has been absorbed in the maritime heritage of Lake Ontario, writing extensively of it.

"The maritime lore and history of Lake Ontario have been for the most part neglected by historians," says Mr. Palmer who is on the board of the Onandaga Historical Association. Working to change this, Mr. Palmer is currently well along on a book about Lake Ontario shipwrecks.

At 14 he sailed with Captain Eliot on the *Washington*, the first American ship to fly stars and stripes in Chinese waters. On his next voyage his ship was taken by a British cruiser and the crew imprisoned on the Isle of Wight. After a year he was exchanged for British prisoners. He then left the service and engaged with a French trading company at Albany. He took charge of three batteaux, eventually making his way to Oswego which was just being settled. He became one of its first residents. (In 1800 he married Demaris Rice; and in 1811 moved to Sackets Harbor.)

"I was entirely ignorant of the Lake, having no chart or courses or distance from one port to another, and no pilot to be found and a Lake of 200 miles in length and from 40 to 55 miles wide, most all bard (sic) harbors and great many dangerous shoals."

Using his batteaux men while the traders bartered with the Indians with goods he had brought from Albany, Ford commenced a survey of the coastline. In three years he passed around the entire Lake. At the end of 12 years he had completed the coastline chart, having taken soundings with a hand lead in an open boat. He stated when he arrived in Oswego, "I took charge of the first vessel on the American side of the Lake." Records indicate that Captain Ford was master of the schooner *Fair American* of 90 tons, built in Oswego in 1804.¹

During his survey work, Ford said he kept a journal, and took soundings "when there was a chance, and examined all shoals taking the bearings and distances from the main land and courses from one point to another by different angles. I not only sounded all the British side and American but through the middle of the Lake and this in a constant employ for 12 years."

Ordered To The *Oneida*

By 1809 the British and Americans were already rubbing each other the wrong way along the Lakes; and in the fall the Brig *Oneida* of 16 guns was built at Oswego for the Navy. Lt. Melancton T. Woolsey took command of her. On March 10, 1810, Augustus Ford received a warrant from President James Madison ordering him to report for duty aboard the *Oneida* in the capacities as master and pilot.²

The *Oneida* was taken to Sackets Harbor in the fall of 1811, soon after which Lt. H. Wells arrived with a contingent of seamen from New York. The brig was put in commission in April, 1812, and ordered to cruise the Lake.

Two months later, war was declared on Great Britain.

Commodore Isaac Chauncey, commander of U. S. Navy forces on the Lakes, soon arrived at Sackets Harbor with a large number of officers and seamen from New York. Eight sailing vessels needed to be fitted out and

commissioned for immediate duty. But the seamen were at a disadvantage as they had never seen the Lake before.

Ford said: "The commodore sent for me and enquired of me very particularly in regard to my knowledge of the Lake, after I satisfied him on that head, he then made me an offer if I would draw three charts, one for my own use, one to be sent to Washington and one to be retained by him, and should be approved by the most experienced masters of vessels on the lake he would have a plate engraved at a cost of about five hundred dollars, and forty copies struck for my benefit and the copyright secured to me, out of the forty copies each commanding officer was to have one copy of the chart. This offer was made in the presence of Genl. J. Brown and Col. Maccomb."

After the attack on Sackets Harbor by British troops on May 13, 1813, local residents were surprised the English squadron did not come in to cover their landing troops. Ford said: "I was informed by one of the British officers taken at Big Sandy Creek that Sir James Yeo had been told that there was a bar stretching entirely across the bay that would not admit a vessel to cross it with any great draught of water. The day before the attack on Sackets Harbor their fleet laying off and on from noon till night with a steady 4 or 5 knot breeze . . . could have assisted their troops as well as not. They could have chosen any position to attack our weak batteries and silenced them in 20 minutes, but it appears that the before mentioned obstruction prevented the attempt and saved the Harbor."

Ford commenced the chart making project in November 1813 and finished three copies by the middle of May 1814. He then delivered them to Commodore Chauncey, one of which was to be sent to Washington without delay. Several months passed and nothing was heard.

The Commodore Reneges

One night that following November, Ford and another officer, a Captain Smith, were dining with Chauncey . . . "and to my great surprise I found the two charts laying on the after locker in the cabin six months after they were delivered. The Commodore saw or discovered that I saw the charts. He told me that his reason for not having complied with his promise was that he was afraid to trust it in any other way than in charge of an officer as it might fall into improper hands and from them to the enemy."

Ford said this convinced him Chauncey never intended to have the map published. A few days later Ford learned that each vessel in the American fleet had been furnished with courses and distances taken from his original chart. For the moment there was little he could do as a state of war existed.

In November 1814, the American squadron laid up and Commodore Chauncey left a month later for New York. A Captain Jones was left in command of Sackets Harbor. A few days later, Jones sent for Ford to give him some bad news. He said there was little hope of Chauncey getting the chart published.

Subsequently, the officers at Sackets Harbor urged Ford to draw up a subscription paper and about 30 of them signed up for a chart, each officer pledging \$20 per copy. Captain Jones then granted Ford a leave of absence of three months to get the plate engraved. Ford left Sackets Harbor on January 5, 1815.

Ford recalled: "I arrived in Albany and called on Mr. Snyder the Engraver who informed me that he could not finish the plate before June. About this time Commodore Chauncey arrived here (Albany) on his way to Lansingburg to attend on the trial of Gen. Hull. I called on him in the Evening at the Eagle Tavern and informed him of my business in Albany and that the plate could not be engraved in time. He asked me 'what I intended to do.' I said with your permission I should go to New York. He answered me in an angry tone, 'By G-d if you go there they will pour cold water on you. Are you acquainted with the City?' I told him I was not, he remarked that as I was a stranger and had no acquaintance that every advantage would be taken of me, his advice was 'that you return to Sackets Harbor, as I am going to New York in a few days I will get a plate engraved and 50 copies struck off for you.'"

On this promise, Captain Ford returned to Sackets Harbor, followed by Chauncey early in February. Shortly after, news of peace reached Sackets and for all practical purposes the war was over. Not surprised, Ford said he found that Chauncey had done nothing toward getting the chart published. "But he again promised to have the whole business layed before the Secretary of the Navy and the Navy Commissioners."

In April, Chauncey left for Washington, and returned in June. When he returned, he told Ford: "The Secretary of the Navy and the Navy Commissioners were at variance and nothing could be done at present." Chauncey told Ford he would soon return to Washington and see that he was fully rewarded for all his labors. "This was the last news I had from Commodore Chauncey on that head. Here I will remark that all the courses, distances and soundings were drawn from the chart that the Commodore had in his possession and by his orders, to my great damage for it was published by several of the Printers around the Lake."

At the time the impression was strong at Sackets Harbor that Commodore Chauncey had done an injustice and not honorably, in a matter unbecoming a Navy officer and gentleman.

After the war, Ford was given command of the naval station at Sackets Harbor, a post which he held for 20 years. But about his finances he wrote: "I pray something might be done to retrieve me in my advanced time of life. I lack but a few days of being 70 years of age . . . I have had a large family to support, not less than 13 children that has always kept me on a Lee shore and now poor and infirm."

Captain Ford died in Sackets Harbor on August 4, 1855, at age 83 with full military honors, the funeral in charge of General Patrick, U. S. Army, at Madison Barracks.

Between Ford And The Commodore

Long after Captain Ford had passed away, his heirs sought reimbursement from the Federal Government for the use of his charts. The first attempt appears in the records in 1857 in the form of a petition of Asa R. Ford, administrator of the estate of Augustus Ford. A Senate committee invalidated the claim, stating it was a private matter between Ford and Commodore Chauncey.³

Capt. Augustus Ford's name was not soon forgotten, however. At least two schooners were named in his honor. One foundered on Lake Ontario on November 24, 1824. The second vessel (U.S. 1084) built at Dexter in 1853, was 107 feet long, 24 foot beam and 9 foot hold, registered at 183 tons, and was abandoned in 1895. Ford Shoal, a dangerous area west of Oswego, was also named in his memory.

1. Article based on a petition of Augustus Ford to the U. S. Navy for compensation for the use of his chart by the U.S. Fleet during the War of 1812, dated 1842. Also related documents from other sources. Copy of the original petition is in Captain James VanCleve's *Reminiscences of the Early Period of Sailing Vessels and Steamboats on Lake Ontario*, 1877. Also, See: *Oswego Times and Journal*, August 10, 1855; and information furnished by Jessie E. Besaw, Historical Researcher, Sackets Harbor Battlefield Historic Site.
 2. Hough, Franklin B., *History of Jefferson County, N. Y.*, Watertown, 1854, p. 471. On p. 548, Ford said the greatest depth of the lake he measured was 95 fathoms. Greatest width, 59½ miles.
 3. Senate Report 326, January 27, 1857, 34th Congress 3rd Session.
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