

Inland Seas
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OSWEGO: Lumber Trade Capital Of The U.S.

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

By RICHARD F. PALMER

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 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 off-shore 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. The steamboat was invented, and immediately every harbor in the country became a shipyard. Enrollment records testify to this.



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.

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 increasing in huge jumps each decade:

	<i>Board Feet</i>	(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, 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 business magnate DeWitt C. Littlejohn is said to have had a mill there. Russell recalled that Littlejohn was second only to God in this region, and people disliked his using the Salmon River for sending logs down from Redfield, as they created jams and flooded out structures along the river.

Oswego Boom

From the profits came a number of the larger mansions along Oswego's residential streets; the spanking teams of horses and the hand-made 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 clock-work regularity, sailing between the Bay of Quinte and Oswego.

The Rathburns 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.

But most of the lumber received went forward by canal to satisfy the ever-hungry maw of the eastern states. The transfer of cargoes provided employment for hundreds, 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, beneath Fort Ontario.

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

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 day's 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 haystraws 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 companionway, the centreboard 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 ships 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 the Georgian, there grew up 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, and five steamers and 18 schooners cleared. Also, 25 canal boats cleared Oswego.

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 *Gladstone* 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.

However, by this time, lumbering was on the skids, and steadily declined. 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.

Decline was slow but continuous. In 1900 lumber received by water 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 long-shoremen, pulling lumber under a summer sun, with the voices of lumber scalers rising and falling in the cadence and rhythm. Nor could one soon forget the puffing tugs shepherding low-laden canalboats into the wharves, which eventually disintegrated into mounds of stone and rubble, frequented only by fishermen when the perch or pike were running.

*E. W. Rathbun & Co., Oswego's largest forwarder, was established here about 1870 and continued operations until 1912 or 1913.

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The extent of the Grampus Bay Lumber docks on the east side of Oswego Harbor can be seen in this late 19th century view. In background, a tug puffs into the harbor towing a three-masted schooner laden with lumber. At far left, are the Lackawanna Railroad coal docks.