

Carving the Harbor That Built Buffalo

By Katheryne T. Whittemore

THE HARBOR that brought the Erie Canal to Buffalo and started Buffalo on its way to becoming a major port was largely man-made, the work of farsighted, energetic, innovative pioneers.

No adequate natural harbor existed at the eastern end of Lake Erie. The shores of Lake Erie curved smoothly into the Niagara River, shallow bays affording little protection. The prevailing westerlies swept down the lake directly into the open bays and river mouths—steady, strong, and at times reaching gale force. These winds drove the water before them and, in the spring of the year, the ice floes.

The small streams flowing into the lake near its eastern end were clogged by sandbars. Even the largest—Buffalo Creek—was obstructed by deposits of sand that prevented all but the smallest craft from entering and reaching deeper water upstream.

THE UPPER NIAGARA River provided several landing places and the nearest thing to a natural harbor that existed in the area. A protected channel lay between several islands along the east side of the river and the riverbank. A ledge of dark limestone, useful for landing, and the mouth of a creek were other favorable features.

However, conditions for navigation were far from perfect. Passage between the Niagara River and Lake Erie was difficult because of the rapid current of the river and the reefs and shoals near its source. Added to the problem, especially for sailing craft, were the strong westerly winds.

The name Black Rock, which was used to designate this Niagara River harbor and the channel, came from the limestone ledge.

For as long as the main routes of travel followed the waterways, the Niagara Corridor between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie was of major importance. Even in 1800, when Joseph Ellicott was surveying and preparing to sell land for the Holland Land Company, overland travel remained difficult and most of the traffic continued in the north-south pattern along this Corridor

In 1806, the state-controlled mile strip along the Niagara River was opened for private use. At that time the Porter. Barton Company obtained a monopoly on carrying goods over the Niagara portage to Black Rock. Thus, Black Rock became the major transfer point for salt and other goods moving in increasing amounts along the waterway

THE DEVELOPMENT of overland transportation and the increase in population in Western New York made evident the need for better harbor facilities. It became clear, with the talk of a canal from the Hudson to the Great Lakes, that wherever the canal and lake met—Black Rock or Buffalo – there would develop an important trade center.

Those interested in the future of Buffalo were certain that it would be possible to construct a harbor that would not only increase its usefulness for the traffic of that day, but convince the Canal Commissioners that the proposed Erie Canal should have its western terminus at Buffalo.

The first official expression of Buffalo's interest in the development of a harbor was through the sending of the formal "Buffalo Memorial of 1816" to the Canal Commissioners. As a result of this petition, William Peacock was authorized by the Canal Commissioners to make a survey of the mouth of Buffalo Creek in 1818. His report was favorable.

The state loaned \$12,000 for the construction of the harbor. Three Buffalo businessmen—Samuel Wilkeson, Oliver Forward and Charles Townsend – posted personal bonds to secure the loan. According to the agreement, if this venture proved successful, the loan was to be forgiven.

WILKESON, with a pioneer's drive, innovativeness, and determination, was the leader in the actual construction of Buffalo Harbor.

The basic plan was to open an outlet by cutting across the sandspit between the lake and the deeper part of the river. A second part of work entailed the building of a pier out into the lake which would protect the new entrance from a further accumulation of sand.

Work on the harbor began in the early spring of 1820. From then on, the story is one of the most dramatic in Buffalo's history and tells of the struggle of man against nature

By the end of 1820, the work had proceeded far enough to indicate eventual success. In the next year the work was continued with a different method used to deepen the channel.

In 1822, when success seemed assured, the Canal Commissioners announced that the Erie Canal would extend to Buffalo.

But severe storms striking in the spring of 1822 undid the work that had been considered accomplished and refilled the channel that had been opened. This disaster was compounded by the loss of and damage to equipment, including the capsizing of the homemade pile driver, and by the fact that the funds were exhausted.

Adding further to the problem was the fact that in the days when Buffalonians were boasting of their success, they had persuaded an agent of a shipbuilding company to build the successor to "Walk-In-The-Water" in Buffalo Creek and not in the Black Rock harbor as had been planned. A penalty of \$150 a day was agreed upon if the ship were not ready to sail out by the first of May.

THE PEOPLE of Buffalo rallied to the rescue with financial support as well as labor and materials. In his account of the building of the harbor, Samuel Wilkeson conscientiously listed every contribution. Included are:

- ❖ Jabex Goodell, in labor and provisions \$25.00
- ❖ Oliver Coit, one crowbar at \$3.00, cash \$5.00
- ❖ W. W. Chapin, in teamwork \$10.00
- ❖ William Hodge, labor and materials \$25.00
- ❖ William Long, a certain brown cow with a white head to be appraised by Commissioners of Harbor Association

"The means being secured to prosecute the work." Wilkeson records, "the laborers were called together, and the afternoon of Monday was spent in collecting from the wreck, scrapers, capstans, rigging, etc., and preparing to resume the work. The weather was as uncomfortable as it well could be. Indeed, from the commencement of the gale until the middle of April, there were but two days without snow or rain."

With Black Rock and the Village of Buffalo Creek both a part of the City of Buffalo today, it is difficult to imagine the bitter rivalry that once existed between the two villages.

AS THE WORK on the harbor at Buffalo showed promise of success, Porter and the others at Black Rock became alarmed. They also borrowed \$12,000 from the state and immediately went to work on improving their harbor.

The partisanship became more and more intense until it extended well beyond commercial interests and, in the end, almost everyone was involved. Arguments developed in the taverns, bets were laid, and the merits of each plan hotly debated verbally and by letters to the newspapers.

The account of the dramatic struggle to build a harbor at Buffalo and its final success is actually only the first chapter in a still unfinished story of harbor improvement.

Included in the collection of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society is what appears, at first glance, to be merely a chunk of old iron. Unimpressive as it may be, it is one of the treasures of our past—a mortar that was a part of the homemade pile driver used in the early work on the harbor. This mortar remains as a symbol of the perseverance and ingenuity that are a part of our American heritage.

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