

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XII

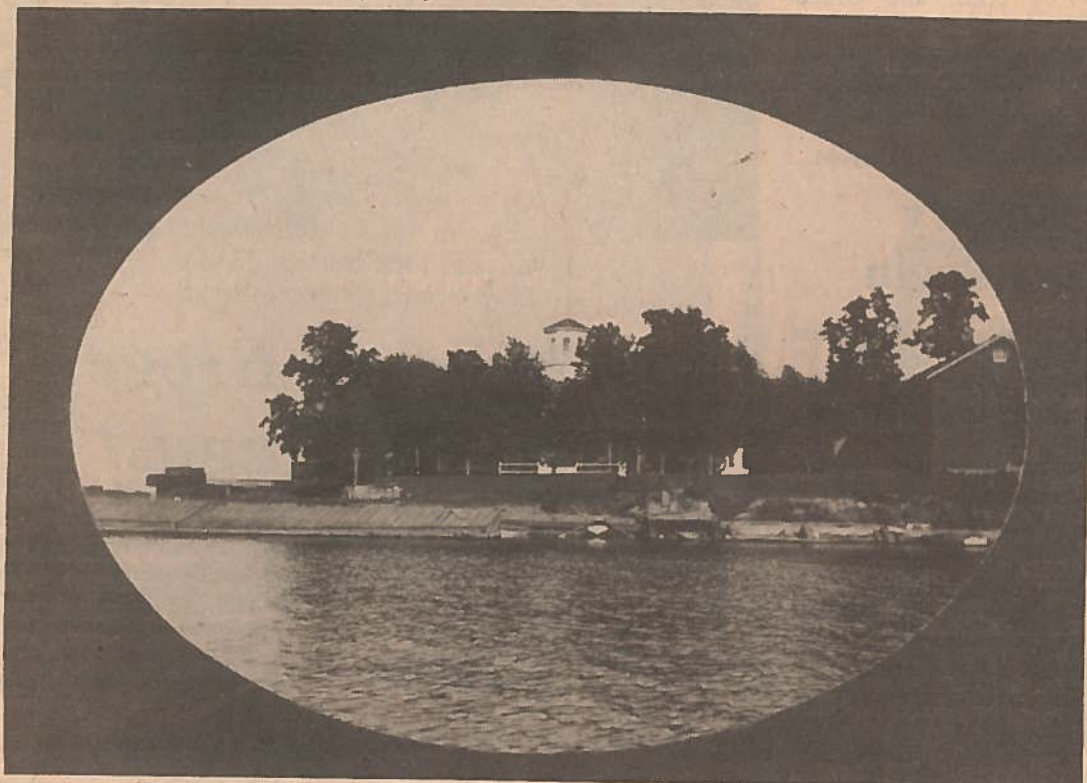
9-25-90

No. 38

Occasionally I share this column space with other historians. A frequent contributor is the Carlton Town Historian who has prepared the following article as "An Historical Overview of Oak Orchard Harbor and Surrounding Communities: Lake Ontario south to The Bridges." The photo shown here depicts the Orleans House and Docks along Oak Orchard River at Point Breeze around 1900.

OVERVIEW OF OAK ORCHARD HARBOR

By Lysabeth A. Hoffman



Orleans House around 1900

Oak Orchard Harbor and surrounding communities are located within the Town of Carlton, Orleans County, in Western New York State. The Town of Carlton was officially organized in 1822 by the name of Oak Orchard. Its name was changed to Carlton in 1825.

Carlton contains no incorporated villages, henceforth all communities are designated as hamlets. These hamlets are served by two postal routes — Kent to the east side of the waterway and Waterport to the west.

The title "Black North" is frequently used. This originated in early times for lands lying north of Ridge Road due to the heavily timbered forests making passage during daylight hours dark as night in these north woods.

Abundance of wild game and fertile soils made this north land ideal for early settlement. Lake Ontario, with its extreme depth, rarely freezes,

ters the Orleans County Marine Park. Just under the south Lake Ontario State Parkway bridge is a mound of land identified by a SUNY Buffalo Archaeological Survey team in 1982 as the Point Breeze Kame. This earthen mound was defined as glacial in origin, rather than cultural.

The hamlet of The Bridges grew up at the junction of Oak Orchard and Marsh Creeks in the times of early settlement. It was named for its bridges, numbering from one to three, at various periods. It had great potential, situated in the mid-portion of Carlton, to being its major village. At one time this hamlet could boast a warehouse, two stores, two churches, two hotels, two blacksmith shops, and a school. Private residences have retained the style of the community with several fine examples of Greek Revival and Italianate homesteads, some of the later still having their cupolas intact.

One of the earliest settlers, the Elisha B.

therefore few killing frosts have been recorded. But, during 1816, it was reported to have snowed every month of the year, and it was so bitter in a winter in the early 1930's many orchards were destroyed and wild animals were to have been seen crossing from Canada.

Lands included in this report were first purchased by a group of investors from Holland who formed the Holland Land Company in 1794. Joseph Ellicott was engaged as their surveyor and principal land agent. Maps from 1795 show Oak Orchard Harbor labeled as "Fishing Bay." This harbor is the largest between the Niagara and Genesee Rivers, hence its possibilities were immediately evident for considerable development.

In his earliest surveys Ellicott laid a plat for a village at the mouth of Oak Orchard, on the east side, and set out his plans for what was to be called Manilla. The streets in Point Breeze follow his original plans. The village of Manilla could still be seen on maps as late as 1852.

Torry Harbor is a term rarely seen in present times in regard to Point Breeze. This refers to the indentation in the shoreline a few yards south of the east side launch ramp and continues almost to where the larger marinas are located. It was once the site of operations for Captain Jonathan Murray's and later the Seilheimer and Beckwith shipbuilding, lumbering, and commercial transportation enterprises. This term, "Village of Torry's Harbor," is still in effect on deeds and abstracts for the area. The name was changed to Point Breeze around 1888 with the opening of a post office there.

First settlers began arriving in 1803. Within a decade most of the lands had been sold and productive life, mostly in the form of farming, was well at hand. The War of 1812 briefly impeded settlement due to numerous raids by British troops. Most of the able-bodied male pioneers belonged to the New York militia and were involved in at least one major foray. Actual records of membership in the local militia were among those lost in the fire in the New York State Library in the early part of this century.

Government funds were appropriated for the improvement of Oak Orchard Harbor less than mid-way into the 19th century keeping the channel at good depth, well protected by the means of two long piers and a lighthouse, and affording ample refuge to vessels in times of storm. Funding was discontinued at later dates, the piers and lighthouse were lost to continuous storms, and in some low water years their underwater remains became boating hazards. The present piers, built in 1975, must about replace the size and length of the earlier structures.

Traveling south from Point Breeze one encoun-

One of the earliest settlers, the Elijah Brown family, took up lands on the west side of the Bridges in 1804. This original farm is still operated by the family, with the addition of "Brown's Berry Patch," some 180 years after the first arrivals in 1804. The lawn of the Berry Patch is the location of an historic marker commemorating the deeds of the first Mrs. Brown, Bathshua, and her masterminding of a plan to send foraging British troops back out Oak Orchard and onto their ship without further plundering of stalwart pioneers and their farms. Her story was documented through later published recollections of Orleans County residents living south of Ridge Road in 1871, and by Widow Brown's own reminiscences handed down in her family lore.

The Berry Patch exhibits a fine display of photographs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries giving visitors an idea of how life once was.

At the junction of Oak Orchard River Road, briefly along Roosevelt Highway (Route #18), and then northward along Archbald Road one is traveling the Indian trail, or Canniangone Road, from prior to earliest written times. Near the north end of Archbald Road can be seen a large white house, originally built as the lighthouse keeper's residence and now a private dwelling.

The Oak Orchard Marine State Park, opened in 1989, is one of the few prehistoric sites in this part of the state with massive volumes of documentation. This area, now capped off safely by the parking lot, can be dated to 1450 A.D. and was one of the most productive summer fishing sites of our Native Americans. Extensive excavation was undertaken in 1986 and thousands of artifacts including potsherds, hunting points, and net-sinkers were unearthed and cataloged from caches dating back to the Paleo period. Archaeologists, under the direction of the Rochester Museum and Science Center, were in charge of this excavation.

The residential community of Oak Orchard-On-The-Lake is located at the north end of Archbald Road. In the late 19th century it was a planned resort, including two hotels. A surveyed plan for a railroad running the length of the waterway to a point miles inland never materialized. Elegant stick-style, gingerbread type, summer cottages, often palatial in size, lined the shore. This area for many years was considered extremely prominent as a lakeside resort.

A subject unable to be accurately covered in this report is that of bootlegging. It is obvious Oak Orchard Harbor would have served as a prime location for such operations and possibly in another few decades more information concerning this activity may be released. The subject has only recently become popular in the North Country counties of New York State, but is still in the form of whispered folklore in Western New York.

Open House
Scheduled At
Towne School