

Bethinking of Old Orleans

C.W.Lattin County Historian

View of Oak Orchard Harbor
from the lighthouse in 1895

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"The Lakes shoreline is dotted with small ports, many with dramatic histories of specialized commerce, shipbuilding, smuggling or warfare. Very often a small port developed a distinctive role such as..."

PORT OF REFUGE

Oak Orchard, New York

by Richard F. Palmer

Occasionally I'd like to share with you some extensive research done on Oak Orchard Harbor by Richard F. Palmer. Mr. Palmer is a news reporter with the Herald-Journal and the Post Standard in Syracuse. The following information appeared in **Inland Seas** Vo. 43 Summer 1987, which is a quarterly journal of the Great Lakes Historical Society.

Part I

It was in 1800 that Joseph Ellicott, agent for the Holland Land Company, and his crew of sur-

vveyors first "discovered" the potential of Oak Orchard (in later years also known as Point Breeze) as a harbor, at the mouth of Oak Orchard Creek.

Ellicott and his party laid out a road from Batavia to Oak Orchard, following closely the Indian trail through a large swamp and a heavily wooded area. He was so impressed with the possibilities of a harbor that he laid out a village called Manilla on both sides of the mouth of the creek. He prophesied that the commerce of the whole Holland Purchase would flow to market through the mouth of Oak Orchard Creek. However, this dream was never fully realized, it being bypassed by the Erie Canal years later.

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In 1834 Gideon Hard, a member of Congress for this district, introduced a bill to appropriate \$5,000 for a survey of Oak Orchard Harbor. It was vetoed by President Andrew Jackson, as was a similar bill a year later. However, an appropriation of \$5,000 was made in 1836, as well as in 1837 and 1838. Two short piers were built

and small appropriations, primarily for maintenance, were made until 1867 when \$87,000 made possible the construction of two long piers and a lighthouse.

Occasionally steamboats stopped here. The creek was navigable for sloops from the lake three miles inland to Stillwater Landing. Here was located a warehouse, two sawmills, a grist mill, carding and cloth dress mill, a tavern and a half-dozen dwellings.

On May 13, 1836, the Medina & Lake Ontario was incorporated to construct a railroad from Medina, on Lake Ontario, to Oak Orchard, approximately 12 miles. This railroad was never constructed. Oak Orchard was destined to be primarily a harbor of refuge, a resort and a small port outlet for agricultural products. It wasn't until the summer of 1871 that the lighthouse at the end of the pier and the keeper's dwelling were completed. The Murray brothers built the Orleans Hotel on the east side of the harbor in 1851, and the following year A.V. Clark built the Lake View House on the west side.

As the Civil War period ended, smuggling became a problem on Lake Ontario, there being little or no enforcement of customs laws. Since Oak Orchard was the only major refuge between Niagara and Rochester, it was decided to establish a customs office here, under the jurisdiction of the Rochester District. The Oak Orchard district was established in June, 1865. On September 2, 1865, Hosea M. Ballou, a local farmer, was appointed Deputy Collector. Later he was succeeded by Oscar Numm. The office was later located in the Post Office at Point Breeze.

Although Oak Orchard was a popular refuge in storms, its importance as a port was insignificant. When he worked, Mr. Ballou was paid \$21 a day for his services. An idea of the amount of commerce here is gleaned from reports of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. For the fiscal year ending June 30, 1871, only 31 vessels entered the harbor and 30 cleared. The total revenue collected was \$1,800 in gold and \$250 in currency. Value of imports was \$10,000. Major exports were lumber, lath, shingles, grain and apples.

For the year ending July 1, 1874, 25 vessels entered and 22 cleared. Another 19 vessels sought refuge from storms. The customs officer collected \$1,726.36 in duties.

As years passed, the commercial activities at Oak Orchard diminished, even though there was 12 feet of water in the harbor. For the year ending Dec. 31, 1889, for instance, only three steamers and 10 sailing vessels used the harbor. In 1893, only four sailing vessels came into Oak Orchard. The customs duty totaled only \$231.20.

The construction of the Lake Ontario Shore Railroad through this vicinity in the 1870's was a major factor in this decline of the port. There were only 52 permanent residents. R.L. Polk's Marine Director for 1884 states that Oak Orchard "is a good refuge for vessels drawing 11 feet of water. It has a fixed white light, visible 1 1/2 miles, on the outer end of the west pier. Width between piers, 175 feet with 11-1/2 feet of water". Vessel owners there that year were E.K. Hart and C.K. Hunt. Dexter J. Murray was listed as a vessel captain.

