

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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PORT OF REFUGE

Oak Orchard, New York

By Richard F. Palmer

The photo included with this week's article was taken in August 1891 on the schooner S.B. Pomeroy. This view shows the Pomeroy in Oak Orchard Harbor after it suffered a fire out on Lake Ontario.

PART III

Lake Ontario Collisions

In the days when commerce was heavy on Lake Ontario, there were occasional collisions, for example that of the steamer "Genesee Chief" with the schooner "Cuba" on May 6, 1847. The schooner, owned by Oswego merchants Henry Fitzhugh, DeWitt C. Littlejohn and James Peck, was bound for Oswego from Sandusky, Ohio, with 5,955 bushels of wheat. The "Genesee Chief", * William L. Pierce, Master, was downbound. It was a clear, star-lit night. The propeller was running light at about 8½ miles per hour while the "Cuba" was close-hauled, making only two miles per hour. According to maritime law, a vessel having the wind free must give way to one close hauled, or be held liable.

The master of the "Cuba" hailed the propeller, but received no answer. He then ordered the helm put down, even though it appeared that a collision was imminent. Both masters later testified that neither vessel was properly lit for night navigation. The propeller swung from her course, as if to pass the schooner to larboard, and while thus swinging out, she ran down and sunk the schooner, with her engine in full operation. The steamer rescued the crew of the schooner. Fitzhugh

brought suit against Pierce and other owners of the "Genesee Chief". The case dragged through the courts several years, Fitzhugh eventually recovering \$15,000.

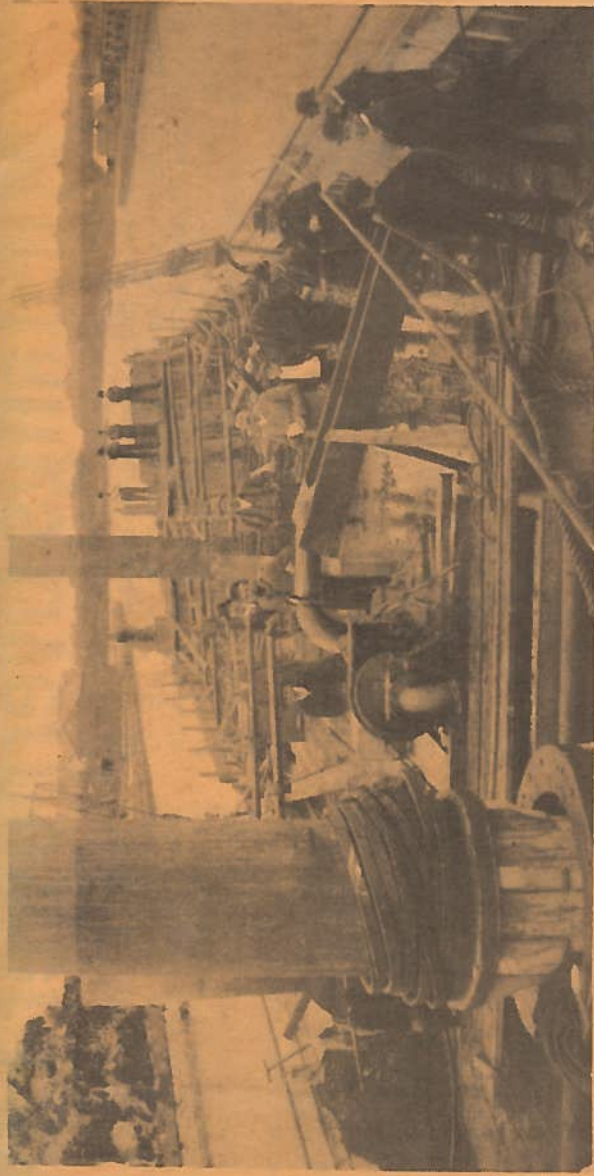
In December, 1855 the schooner "Perseverance" of Niagara, enroute from Oswego to Niagara with a cargo of coal and salt, was caught in a heavy norther'. During a blinding snow storm she broke her main boom and, disabled, went ashore five miles west of Oak Orchard near Johnson's Creek.

Captains Murray and Selheimer, after a considerable struggle, managed to release her and tow her to Oak Orchard.

The small Canadian schooner "Clipper" of Port Union was driven ashore during a heavy storm out of the north in 1860, with a cargo of wood, five miles east of Oak Orchard. Captain Murray again went to the rescue. The rescue vessel being nearly wrecked, it was decided to strip it. The effects of the captain and crew were brought to Oak Orchard free of charge. And so casualties continued through the next 30 years.....vessels lost spars and canvas in storms, often ran ashore or sank. In most cases, however, they were salvaged and sent on their way, thanks to Captain Murray.

Two Northern Transportation Company steamers were lost in this vicinity. On July 28, 1854, the steamer "Boston" collided with the barque "Plymouth" and was lost. On September 2, 1874, the steamer "Young America" of 359 tons, was bound up the lake with a valuable cargo of merchandise. During a severe norther, uncommon this time of year, her engines became disabled. She went ashore near Johnson's Creek, passing over the lower point of the bar and ran down east northeast from Thirty Mile Point, where she became a total wreck.

Four schooners went aground in the vicinity of



Oak Orchard in April, 1866, but were quickly pulled off by large side wheel tugs from Kingston, owned by the Calvin's, a prominent shipbuilding family on Garden Island.

The last major wreck at Oak Orchard was the 700-ton schooner "S.B. Pomeroy". * She was enroute from Charlotte (Rochester) to Port Huron with 700 tons of coal when fire broke out on the morning of August 2, 1891. It was quickly extinguished, but broke out again around noon. Unable to conquer the flames, the crew abandoned ship at 3 p.m. when off Oak Orchard. They were picked up by the tug "Frost". The vessel was towed into Oak Orchard for repairs.

Timbers from lost ships are still occasionally picked up along the shore. For years, the hulk of an old ship lie rotting in Oak Orchard marsh, reminiscent of the days when small schooners came in for cargoes from Simpson Brothers warehouse at Two Bridges, as well as the days when wives could look out their pantry windows and watch their husbands and sons sail off.

After 1900, Oak Orchard made the transition from a commercial coasting port to a water playground for cottages and boaters. In the 1970s, after decades of efforts, suitable break-

waters and jettys were built so Oak Orchard could once again become a harbor of refuge.....not for the schooners of old but the yachts of today, nearly as large.

During the intervening years, however, virtually no funds were earmarked for Oak Orchard. The piers crumbled away and on December 15, 1916, the lighthouse was destroyed by storm.

A renewed bid for recognition as a safety haven was made in 1936 but to no avail. In succeeding years, the harbor was kept navigable by the Oak Orchard Yacht Club and by summer residents.

In the mid 1960s, efforts to improve the harbor were renewed and improvements were finally completed in 1976. The work consisted of a 900-foot west jetty, 670-foot east jetty, plus a 550-foot detached breakwall running east and west beyond the jetties to protect the channel entrance. The channel was dredged to 10 feet outside the harbor and eight feet inside.

Thus, after 150 years, Oak Orchard remains one of the oldest and most popular harbors of refuge on the south shore of Lake Ontario.