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Volume 103, Number 1, Spring 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065479ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065479ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)
2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Larkin, J. (2011). The Oswego Canal: A Connecting Link Between The United States and Canada, 1819-1837. *Ontario History*, 103(1), 23–41.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065479ar>

Article abstract

In this article the author argues that the Oswego Canal (1825-1829) was a vital commercial link in the Great Lakes-Atlantic seaway, but its real worth became evident with the opening of Canada's neighboring Welland Canal in 1829. The newly fashioned Oswego-Welland line offered an alternative route to the much publicized Erie Canal, and brought increased prosperity, settlement, and economic and social opportunities to the Great Lakes region. An important story in its own right, the Oswego Canal, especially in connection with Canada's Welland, was one of North America's more important systems of internal navigation.

The Oswego Canal

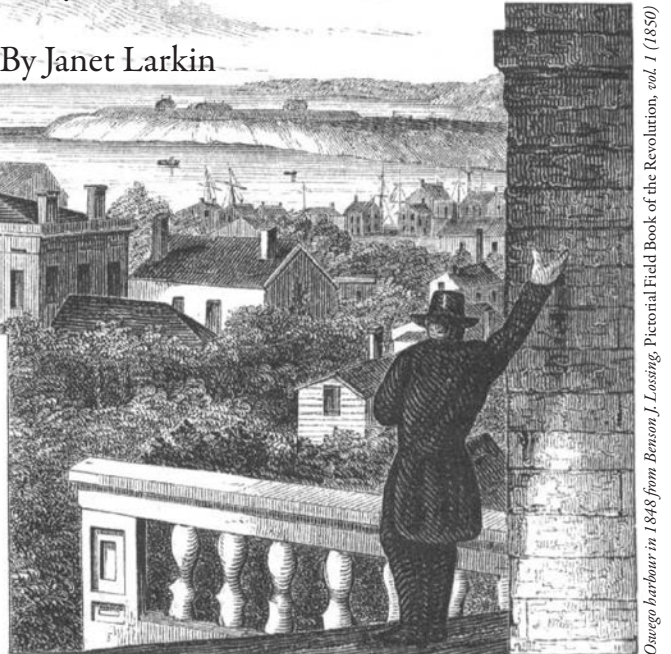
A Connecting Link Between The United States and Canada, 1819-1837*

By Janet Larkin



“The Oswego Canal, whether viewed in reference to the business done on it, or to the facilities it affords for intercommunication with the Canadas, may very justly be regarded as an important and interesting feature in the internal improvements of this state.”

The Western Guidebook and Emigrant’s Directory (1834).¹



Oswego harbour in 1848 from Benson, J. Lasing, Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution, vol. 1 (1850)

The Oswego Canal,” trumpeted the *Kingston Chronicle* in June of 1830 “which has lately been completed joins the great Erie Canal at the village of Syracuse. The completion of the Welland Canal which unites the waters of Lake Erie and Ontario will materially increase the trade of Oswego—it being supposed that a large portion of the produce coming through that channel will enter the Oswego Canal, for the

New York market.”² While Americans were busy celebrating their “Grand Erie Canal,” Upper Canadians were actively monitoring developments on New York’s Oswego Canal that connected Oswego’s bustling port on Lake Ontario with the Erie Canal at Syracuse. Officially opened to traffic in 1829, the Oswego Canal would become Upper Canada’s gateway to New York, unlocking a vital commercial waterway between the United States

* I am grateful to R.Arthur Bowler for reading earlier drafts of this article and Thomas McIlwraith who provided helpful comments and suggestions in addition to the maps. Craig Williams, history curator of the New York State Museum, drew my attention to the unique illustration of the Oswego Canal. Thanks also to the editor and anonymous readers of *Ontario History*.

¹ *The Western Guidebook and Emigrant’s History: Containing General Descriptions of Different Routes Through the State of New York, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan* (Buffalo, 1834).

² From the *Kingston Chronicle*, reprinted in the *Oswego Palladium*, 2 June 1830.

Abstract

In this article the author argues that the Oswego Canal (1825-1829) was a vital commercial link in the Great Lakes-Atlantic seaway, but its real worth became evident with the opening of Canada's neighboring Welland Canal in 1829. The newly fashioned Oswego-Welland line offered an alternative route to the much publicized Erie Canal, and brought increased prosperity, settlement, and economic and social opportunities to the Great Lakes region. An important story in its own right, the Oswego Canal, especially in connection with Canada's Welland, was one of North America's more important systems of internal navigation.

Résumé: *Le canal Oswego (1825-1829) était déjà un lien commercial essentiel dans la voie maritime reliant les Grands Lacs à l'Atlantique, mais sa réelle utilité fut vraiment mise en lumière avec l'ouverture du canal Welland en 1829. La nouvelle route Oswego-Welland non seulement offrait une alternative au canal Erie, mais elle fut aussi à l'origine d'une nouvelle prospérité, de nouveaux établissements comme de nouveaux développements sociaux et économiques dans la région des Grands Lacs. Important en lui-même, le canal Oswego devint alors, en liaison avec le canal Welland au Canada, l'un des plus importants systèmes de navigation intérieure en Amérique du Nord.*

and Canada. Subsequent developments like the opening of the Welland Canal affirmed the Oswego Canal's worth in the Great Lakes-Atlantic water system. Closely skirting Niagara Falls between Lakes Ontario and Erie, the Welland Canal, together with the newly opened Oswego, eliminated more than 150 miles of navigation on the Erie Canal's western end, making it an attractive alternative to inland merchants and shippers.

The newly fashioned Oswego-Welland line brought increased prosperity, settlement, and social and economic opportunities to the Great Lakes region. Though frequently regarded as a mere "extension" or branch of New York's grand Erie Canal, the Oswego Canal, especially in conjunction with Canada's Welland, was one of North America's more important systems of internal navigation.

North America's nineteenth century transportation leaders early looked to the Oswego Canal as a viable avenue of trade. In speaking of the Oswego, famed canal engineer, Benjamin Wright, who provided invaluable service on both the Erie and Welland canals, remarked, "all intelligent men at an early date looked that way as the natural route for improvement."³ America's longest serving Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin,

urged his statesmen to consider a continental-wide vision of transportation, seeing in the Oswego Canal, and an additional canal around Niagara Falls, a more comprehensive system of navigation. Renowned New York engineer and Surveyor General, James Geddes, whose work was as critical on the Welland Canal as it was the Erie, examined the Oswego route in 1808, reporting favourably on both the Oswego Canal and the as yet determined

³ In David Hosack, *Memoir of De Witt Clinton* (New York, 1829), 269.

Erie Canal route between Albany and Buffalo. However, the pleas of the New York City merchants, who feared the Oswego route was too closely linked to Lake Ontario and the Montreal market, alongside future Governor De Witt Clinton, whose sagging political fortunes would be mended by backing the Erie channel, worked in the Erie Canal's favor.⁴ Still, the Oswego improvement was never far from the minds of canal proponents. Having secured his pet project, even De Witt Clinton, now dubbed the "father of the Erie Canal," went on to promote the Oswego improvement. More than once did Clinton acknowledge the Oswego Canal as "an important link in the chain of communications."⁵

Upper Canadians closely followed the internal improvements drive in neighbouring New York. Indeed, some of the keenest supporters of the Oswego Canal were Canada's merchants and entrepreneurs who benefited from the American system. Long before the Erie Canal's celebrated opening in 1825, Oswego's commercial importance as a lake port had been established with contacts principally at Kingston, on Lake Ontario, and Montreal on the St. Lawrence.⁶ While investigating the Oswego route in 1810, De Witt Clinton saw firsthand the

number of salt boats and lumber rafts intended for Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence market. Clinton was impressed by the Canada-United States connection, noting that in 1809 ninety-ton lake vessels filled with teas, East India goods, coffees and other merchandise regularly plied between Oswego and Upper Canada. Oswego's residents faithfully subscribed to the *Upper Canadian Guardian* for commercial news and opportunities in the neighbouring country.⁷ Ironically, the rampant smuggling that occurred in this region during the embargo and War of 1812 awakened borderland merchants to the thriving inland trade. Consequently, when New Yorkers went to build the Oswego Canal, the Canadian market was regarded as essential to the canal's success. These connections would be strengthened with the opening of the Welland Canal that sent trade to Oswego, Kingston and Montreal.

Though countless politicians, engineers, legislatures, and private individuals had encouraged the building of the Oswego Canal for years past, it was not until the second decade of the nineteenth century that improvements to the Oswego River began. An important development in the canal's history came in 1819 with the completion of the mile-long Salina

⁴ Evan Cognac, *The Birth of Empire: DeWitt Clinton and the American Experience, 1769-1828* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 104.

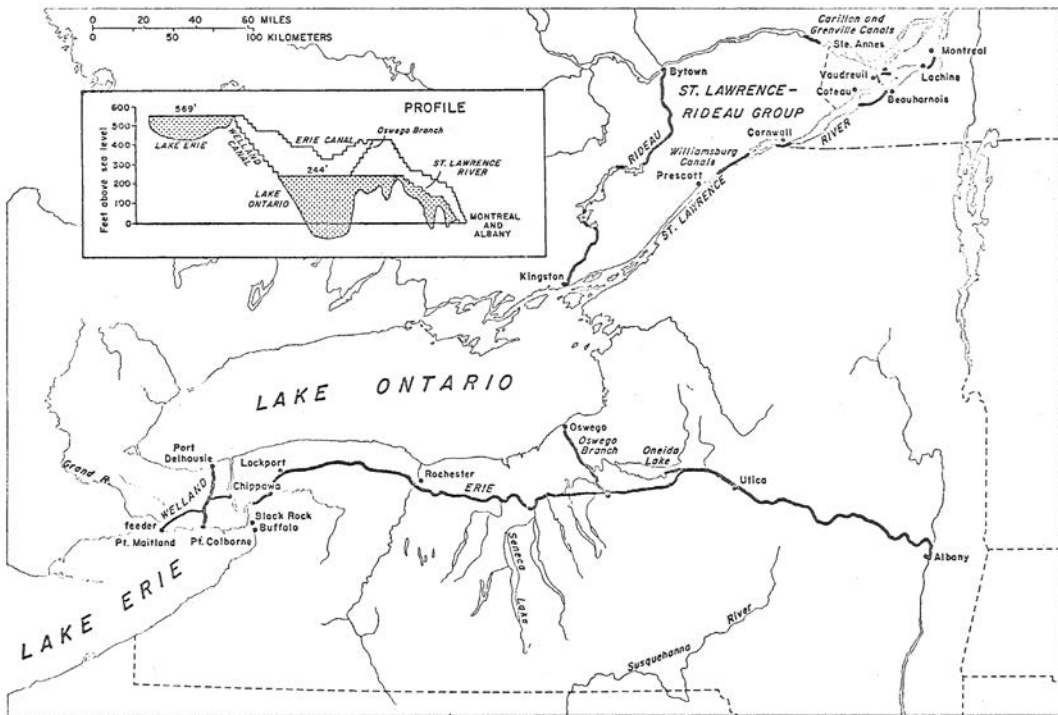
⁵ *Onondaga Register*, 2 November 1825. An earlier speech by Clinton to the Albany legislature gives further praise to the Oswego improvement and can be read in the American newspaper *Niles Weekly Register*, 29 January, 1820; 17, 438. American Periodical Series online, 377. Hereafter cited *APS*.

⁶ Reginald Stuart, *United States Expansionism and British North America, 1775-1871* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 43.

⁷ Clinton's canal journal entries can be read in William W. Campbell, *The Life and Writings of De Witt Clinton* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1849), 51, 72.

side-cut that connected the Erie Canal at Syracuse to the salt mines in Salina. The *Kingston Chronicle* applauded the developments, remarking that the cut to Salina, in connection with the recently finished middle section of the Erie Canal, would be opened to navigation in the course of a month.⁸ Interestingly, it was at Salina that most of the salt intended for the New York and Canadian market was manufactured. Further developments followed in the wake of the Salina side-cut. In 1823, New York State called for a greater examination of the Oswego route and money was appropriated for construction. Anticipating the importance of the canal

to Oswego and the Great Lakes region the *Oswego Palladium* proclaimed: "By the aid of this canal the navigation of the Oswego will be considerably improved." Oswego's residents could look forward to seeing "schooners, sloops, and boats in great numbers, loading and unloading the various products" destined for the Canada or New York market.⁹ Having closely observed the internal improvements drive in neighbouring New York, the *Kingston Chronicle* chimed in that such progress merited "great praise for the enterprise and ability displayed" and was "highly honourable to the growing energies and enterprises of our neighbors



Major Canals in the Lake Ontario Region

⁸ *Kingston Chronicle*, 2 November 1819.

⁹ *Oswego Palladium*, 14 August 1824.

in the United States.”¹⁰

In 1825, New York State made a final push to extend the Oswego improvement all the way from the Oswego harbour on Lake Ontario to the Erie Canal at Syracuse. The corps of engineers and builders employed on the Oswego Canal gained most of their experience on the Erie and Welland canals and other North American projects. In addition to such well-known luminaries as Benjamin Wright, James Geddes, who first surveyed and explored the Oswego route at the State’s request in 1808, worked on the Oswego Canal. Geddes’ work on the

Oswego overlapped with his services in Upper Canada, where he was advising and drawing surveys for the Welland Canal Company, and in Ohio where work was steadily progressing on the Ohio Canal (1825-1832). David Thomas, who served as an engineer on the western section of the Erie Canal, worked simulta-

neously on the Oswego and Welland Canals.¹¹ A highly mobile group, engineers and builders crossed long geographic distances to bid for new jobs, paying little heed to the international boundary line between the United States and Canada.

During the summer of 1827, Oswego’s *Salina Sentinel* noted that “more than 1000 masons, and some 4000 laborers...will find employment” on the Rideau Canal in Canada.¹² The porosity of the Canada-United States borderland meant that labour was in high demand in both countries during the North American canal

age. While a gap in *the Oswego Palladium* for the years 1826 to 1828 limits our understanding of the people who actually dug the canal, like the experiences of labourers on other North American lines, life on the canal was difficult, especially during periods of inclement weather and work stoppages of which the Oswego

Laborers Wanted

800 or 1000 Laborers will find constant employment during the next season at 7 shillings York or 4 1/2 d Halifax currency, daily, upon the public works at Oswego.

J.E. Edwards, agt. canal co.

The Kingston Chronicle and Montreal Gazette are required to publish the above for the next 4 weeks.

Kingston Chronicle, 7 May 1836.

¹⁰ As quoted in Jane Errington, *The Lion, the Eagle and Upper Canada* (Toronto: McGill-Queens University Press, 1987), 123.

¹¹ For a biographical sketch of the engineers see Noble Whitford, *History of the Canal System of the State of New York; Together with Brief Histories of the Canals of the United States and Canada*. 2 vols (1905), esp. vol 2, chapter 3, “Biographies of Engineers.” See also Roberta M. Styran and Robert R. Taylor, *Mr. Merritt’s Ditch* (Erin, Ontario: A Boston Mills Press Book, 1992), 38; Peter Way, *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals, 1780-1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 12-13.

¹² *Salina Sentinel*, 11 April 1827.

had more than its share. Slow-downs and irregular work often spurred canal workers to move to different projects in the hope of finding steady employment or jobs more consistent to their liking.¹³ Demands of farming and agriculture also meant that local labour was often in short supply on the Oswego. Oswego's builders also had to compete with the neighbouring Welland Canal, where an American contractor regularly bombarded New York papers with notices that labourers were needed on the Canadian line and that "housing and free medicine" was available.¹⁴

The Oswego Canal was officially opened to navigation in April of 1829. Some 38 miles in length, approximately half the Oswego Canal utilized the natural river, while the other half consisted of a separately dug channel. A convenient towing path was constructed alongside the canal for oxen, mules and horses to pull the barges, and the canal's dimensions were four feet deep and forty feet wide like that of the Erie. Structures on the Oswego Canal included twenty two bridges, "seven culverts, one aqueduct, two waste-weirs, and eight dams built across the river; thirteen locks of stone masonry, and one of stone and timber, having an aggregate lift of 123 feet, which is the difference of

elevation between the marsh lands at the village of Salina, and the surface of the water on Lake Ontario."¹⁵ Having looked to the Oswego Canal as a model for his own project, Canadian William Hamilton Merritt, who American's now affectionately dubbed a "second De Witt Clinton," predicted that the Oswego, especially in light of the advances on the Welland Canal, promised to bring great commercial opportunities and incentives to both countries.¹⁶ Less than a month after the canal's opening, the American journalist *Niles* enthusiastically reported, "the Oswego Canal is entirely completed, and a large business is doing on it."¹⁷

By 1835, the Oswego Canal was generating so much business that enlargements to the Erie Canal system were proposed. Responding to these developments, the *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette* remarked, "We have much pleasure in copying the following interesting account of the proposed enlargement of this great work." Every "friend of internal improvement" must be forcibly stuck by these extraordinary successes in the neighboring country.¹⁸ Indeed, for much of the decade, Oswego's canal and lake traffic blossomed, and forwarding agents and mercantile businesses on both sides of the international border profited from

¹³ See Peter Way, *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of the North American Canals, 1780-1860* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101.

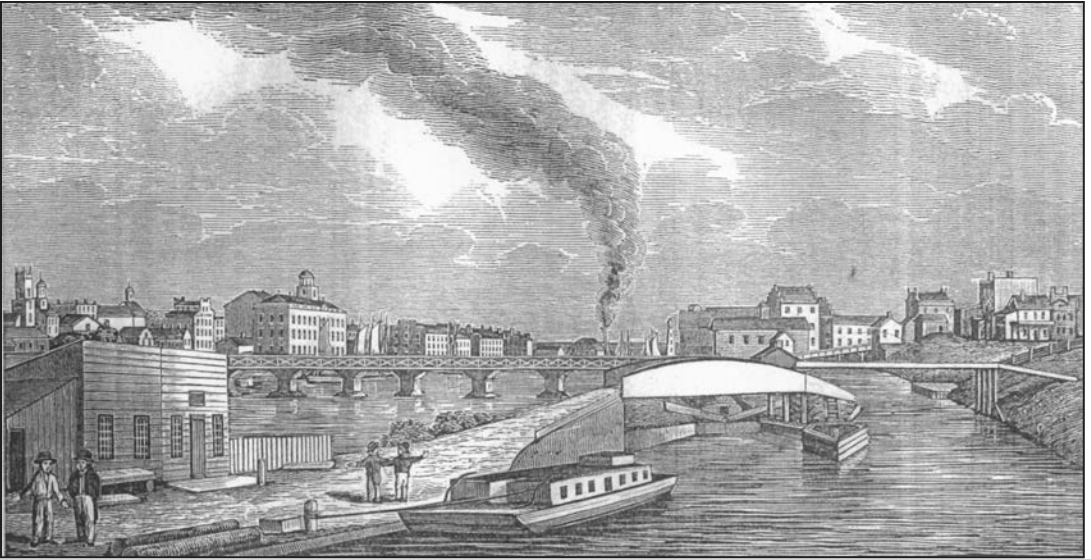
¹⁴ See Janet D. Larkin, "Mr. Merritt's Hobby: New York State Influence in the Building of Canada's First Welland Canal." *New York History* (Spring 2005), 180.

¹⁵ The 1829 report of the Canal Commission can be read in *Assembly Journals*, 1829, 52nd session.

¹⁶ Quote taken from the *Western Recorder*, 17 October 1826; 3, 120. American Periodical Series online, p. 167.

¹⁷ *Niles Weekly Register*, 30 May 1829; 365, 924; *APS*, p. 217

¹⁸ *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*, 7 November 1835.



A rare view of the Oswego Canal during the 1830s. The canal is seen on the right of the engraving; on the left, the Oswego River, with the bridge connecting the two parts of the village. A small portion of Lake Ontario is seen in the extreme distance.

the canal's opening. With the exception of 1832 when the cholera descended upon the region and virtually shut down all commercial traffic on the Great Lakes, the march of improvement was visible over the next several years. In 1833, the *Oswego Palladium* earnestly reported that the navigation on the lakes and canals "is unequalled by any in the U.S." Kingston's *British Whig* provided added coverage of the "march of greatness" in Oswego—"her advantageous situation for the commerce of the lakes, and of Upper Canada" being unequalled.¹⁹

Upper Canadians were astonished by the rapidity of enterprise in neighbouring New York. What was particularly obvious was the flourishing trade on the Great Lakes since the Oswego Canal's

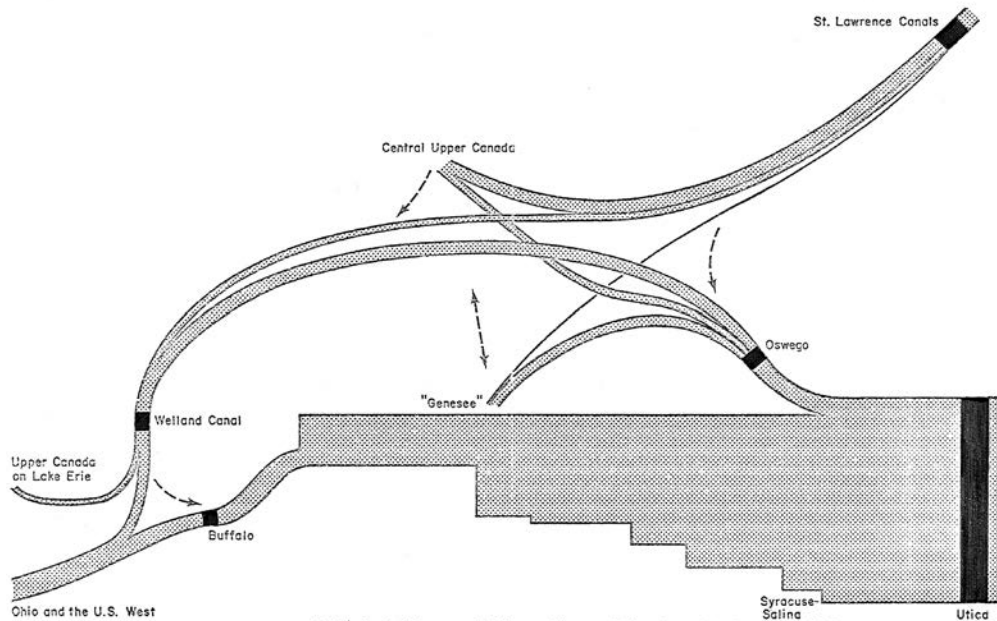
opening. In 1834, the *British Whig* published an American account of business on Lake Ontario:

Several ships belonging to Bronson and Crocker returned from the ports of Chicago and Michigan, where these schooners discharged about 2,400 barrels of Onondaga Salt, returning to Lake Erie...where they took on board cargoes of Ohio wheat for the Oswego mills, destined when floured to the New York market. These voyages...are the commencement of a regular trade between these distant points, a trade destined to grow up in a brief period to a vast amount.

The *Kingston Chronicle* observed that Oswego's merchants, "with a degree of enterprise and judgment...have built and are building a large class of vessels" on their side of the lake.²⁰ Developments in the neighbouring state were, according

¹⁹ From the *Oswego Palladium*, reprinted in the *British Whig*, 1 September 1835.

²⁰ *British Whig*, 2 October 1834; *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*, 5 August 1835.



Principal wheat and flour flows, Lake Ontario Region, 1835

to the *Chronicle*, “frequently discussed in private circles, and especially among our commercial friends” in Upper Canada. Recognizing the advantages of the Oswego Canal to their own province, Upper Canadian merchants noted that they could now “secure the latest fashions” and merchandise from New York sooner than they could through the St. Lawrence and “save a heavy investment of capital.” The *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette* jested, “Jonathan is wide awake when a smart carrying trade is in question.”²¹

Oswego merchants, eager to promote the Canada trade, filled Upper Canadian newspapers with advertisements and commercial information related to their newly opened canal. “The cost of bring-

ing wheat from the remotest shores of Lake Ontario,” according to one Oswego source, “is but 2 to 3 cents per bushel. The wheat is raised into the mills directly from the sloop, and the flour either returned to the sloop for the Montreal market or rolled directly into the canal boat for the New York market.”²² The *Oswego Palladium* flattered their Canadian friends, remarking “We are beginning to know that Upper Canada...possesses a soil of unparalleled fertility, surpassing in the production of wheat any portion of the North American continent.” Upper Canadian lumber was also in high demand at Oswego. Excited by these developments, Kingston actively began to export wheat and lumber to the Oswego port.²³ “We

²¹ *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*, 28 October 1835.

²² *Kingston Chronicle*, 29 May 1830.

²³ Donald Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada

are gratified to observe,” remarked the *Palladium*, “that the state of New York and the province of Upper Canada are beginning to discover the great mutual interests subsisting between them.”²⁴ The *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette* hoped that this lucrative trade would induce both governments to advance more liberal trade policies between the two countries.²⁵ Canadian historian Donald Creighton observed that from the “capacious markets and the higher prices south of the border” emerged “the later idea of reciprocity with the United States.”²⁶ It is worth noting, that the leading proponent of reciprocity in the United States during the next decade was the three-time presidential candidate and foremost American abolitionist, Gerrit Smith, whose fortunes in realty and commerce were derived from the Oswego Canal.²⁷

New York is “the seaport town of Upper Canada” hailed the *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette* in 1835.²⁸ Conveniences of navigation, and the increasing ease of travel on the inland waterways and

lakes, promoted a sense of unity across the Canada-United States border. As a courtesy to its readers, Kingston’s local newspapers began regularly reporting toll rates on the Oswego and Erie Canals, breaks and stoppages on the New York lines, and shipping news like the *Maritime Intelligence* that was chock full of information on Great Lakes commercial traffic. The building of new steamboats and packets on Lake Ontario was also extensive. Freight and passenger business was offered “day and night” on the Oswego and Erie lines, and produce of every description was conveniently forwarded to “either of the British or American ports on Lake Ontario.”²⁹ An 1831 ad in the *Kingston Chronicle* noted that “The Oswego Canal Packet” will run in connection with steamboats on Lake Ontario, regularly touching at Kingston and Oswego.³⁰ By 1834, the fast-sailing *Rattlesnake* promised to run constantly between Oswego and Kingston “making as many trips per week as wind and weather will permit.”³¹ New steamboats



British Whig,
5 August 1834

Limited, 1956), 252.

²⁴ From the *Oswego Palladium* reprinted in the *Kingston Chronicle*, 14 November 1835.

²⁵ *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*, 20 April 1836.

²⁶ Creighton, *The Empire*, 252.

²⁷ Smith was one of the largest realty holders in Oswego, having purchased much of the land bordering the Oswego Canal. On 11 August 1830, the *Oswego Palladium* wrote that Smith’s “large investments in capital, and magnificent expenditure in the improvement of our village, creates a deep interest in everything affecting the fortunes of this village.”

²⁸ *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*, 28 October 1835.

²⁹ *Onondaga Register and Syracuse Gazette*, 20 October 1830.

³⁰ *Kingston Chronicle*, 23 July 1831

³¹ *British Whig*, 14 November 1834.

1836.
LAKE ONTARIO.
THE NEW STEAM BOAT
AMERICA.
Capt. P. BOWEN,
WILL, on the 23rd of July, commence her trips between Ogdensburgh and Niagara, as follows:

Leaves Ogdensburgh, Tuesday, at	9 A. M.
" Kingston, Wednesday	6 A. M.
" Sacket's Harbor, Wednesday	12 M.
" Oswego, do	9 P. M.
" Sodus, Thursday	1 A. M.
" Rochester, do	3 A. M.
" Toronto, (late York) Thursday	9 P. M.

COMMENCEMENT.
Leaves Lewiston, Friday 4 P. M.
" Rochester, Saturday 8 A. M.
" Sodus, do 2 P. M.
" Oswego, do 7 A. M.
" S. Harbor, Sunday 2 P. M.
" Kingston, do 8 P. M.

Touching at French Creek, Alexandria and Brockville, on her way up and down.
June 30th, 1834. 45

THE STEAM BOAT
UNITED STATES.
(Propelled by two powerful Impellers Engine,
Capt. H. A. VAN DERWATER.)
LEAVES LEWISTON AT 7 P. M.
July 22. 27. August 1. 6. 11. 16. 21. 26. 31.
September 5. 10.
Passengers go from Ogdensburgh to Montreal in
from 16 to 18 hours.
LEAVES OGDENSBURGH FOR NIAGARA AT 8 A. M.
July 23. 25. 30. August 4. 9. 14. 19. 24. 29.
September 3. 8.
Touching at Toronto (late York,) on her upward
trip in the evening of the second day, and stops half
ways at Youngstown, Niagara, Rochester, Oswego,
Sacket's Harbor, Kingston, U. C. French Creek,
Brookville and Monticello.
She will be at Oswego, bound upward, on the
morning of the second day, and downward in the
afternoon of the second day. Passengers from the
South will find Oswego, as well as Rochester, a con-
venient point of embarkation for Niagara Falls, or
any port on Lake Ontario or the St. Lawrence
River.

Two ads in the British Whig dated 5 August 1834.

like Canada's luxurious *Great Britain* added greatly to the conveniences and advantages of lake navigation, "and must eventually be the spring of profit as well as ease of pleasure" remarked the *Oswego Palladium*. In recognition of the *Great Britain's* first appearance in the Oswego harbour in 1831, the spirited people of New York "gave the Captain of the *Great Britain* an invitation to a public dinner" as an expression of kindness and good will between the two countries.³²

Newspaper advertisements illustrate a thriving borderland economy in the wake of the Oswego Canal's opening. Oswego's merchants offered to sell and transport to Upper Canada everything from salt to dry goods, crockery, glass-

ware, tobacco, cigars, and beer. One Oswego merchant informed his Kingston patrons that a new cotton factory on the west bank of the Oswego Canal was being erected and in addition "there is also now erecting...a very large flouring mill and a large building for the construction of machinery."³³ Some Upper Canadians imitated the American model, it being noted by one Kingston merchant that he had for sale castings for saw mills and flour mills furnished "with patterns of the Oswego and Rochester plans."³⁴ Oswego's internal improvements projects offered Upper Canadians additional employment opportunities. In 1836, for example, the *Kingston Chronicle* announced that "800 to 1000 labourers" would find constant employment during the next season" on public works projects at Oswego.³⁵ Meanwhile, land sales in the region benefited from developments in inland navigation. In 1829, an American farmer advertised his house and land for sale on the St. Lawrence, noting that it was close to the newly opened Oswego Canal, with its direct water communication to Albany and New York, and only 130 miles from the Montreal market. Another farmer advertised that he had land for sale on the Oswego Canal that he enthusiastically described as "one of the great traveling and commercial thoroughfares."³⁶

A spirit of friendship and convivial-

³² From the *Oswego Palladium*, reprinted in the *Kingston Chronicle*, 11 June 1831.

³³ *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*, 1 August 1835.

³⁴ *British Whig*, 5 May 1835.

³⁵ *Kingston Chronicle*, 7 May 1836.

³⁶ From the *New York Albion*, 24 January 1829; *New York Farmer*, 30 July 1837.

ity spanned the Canada-United States border. In 1830, the *Kingston Chronicle* amusingly noted that “a canal boat from Oswego...having on board several live animals” is “well worth the attention of those fond of viewing natural curiosities.” For people willing to pay cash, it was possible to board the novel craft and observe a variety of bizarre specimens including an extremely big ox, a cow, a bull, and a “Ram with four large horns.”³⁷ In 1834, the *Kingston Chronicle* announced that a “Mammoth Race between the Splendid Steamboats *Great Britain* and the *United States* from Toronto to Niagara Falls” had recently taken place. At 145 feet long, and two 60 horse power engines, the *United States* was considered the fastest American steamer on Lake Ontario. In this instance, however, the *United States* was not fast enough. In the wake of the *Great Britain’s* victory, the *Chronicle* heartily cheered “Hurrah, Hurrah” for the *Great Britain*—“We guess Mr. Jonathan will hardly challenge Mr. Bull in a hurry!” Ironically, the *Great Britain* had been constructed by an American ship-builder from New York, and was piloted by an American captain.³⁸ But the greatest indication of the converging borderland was an 1835 advertisement placed in the *Kingston Chronicle* by the captain of the steamboat *Oswego* who informed his Canadian friends that he was planning a “4th of July Excursion” in recognition of American independence. For those wishing to partake in the splendid

outing a boat would leave Kingston in the morning “for Sackett’s Harbor and the islands,” where passengers later in the day could connect with the steamboat *America* and return to Kingston “the same evening.” The captain assured his Canadian guests that a “band of music” and other entertainments would be provided for the celebratory occasion.³⁹

While Oswego’s citizenry could not have been happier with their canal’s progress, social and cultural changes unleashed by the larger transportation revolution inevitably impacted those living along the canal or near Lake Ontario. On the heels of the canal’s opening, Oswego’s more pious residents began to worry about the spiritual and moral well-being of workers who laboured day and night on the canal and connecting waterways. Despite its commercial promises, the Oswego Canal threatened to promote moral and social decay among those operating the canal’s towpaths, wharves, and boats. From the perspective of reformers and philanthropists, canals let loose a “flood of iniquity,” bringing vice, corruption, intemperance and gambling to those working and living on the waterways. Temperance reformers in Upper Canada joined forces with their American brethren to bring reform to boatmen and their families on the inland lakes and seaway.

The location of the Oswego Canal made it ripe for reform. Situated between the bustling port of Lake Ontario and the Erie Canal, the Oswego Canal was regu-

³⁷ *Kingston Chronicle*, 4 December 1830.

³⁸ This information was derived from the earlier *Kingston Chronicle*, 2 July 1831.

³⁹ *British Whig*, 23 June 1835.

larly visited upon by hundreds of canal workers and watermen who made possible the day-to-day operations of this major international thoroughfare. Oswego was an obvious area of concern for preachers and reformers who hoped to bring morality and civilization to the *wayward* boatmen. Several organizations were formed to address questions of Sabbath-breaking and other ill-behaviours among canallers and boatmen. The American Seamen's Friend Society, founded for the purpose of addressing immorality among America's men at sea and those employed on the navigable rivers, lakes and canals, fought against Sabbath breaking and intemperance. Religious reformers were invited to give sermons to canal workers and crew, creating what one preacher called "an awakening" on the Oswego Canal.⁴⁰ Other organizations like the American Boatmen's Friend Society and the Western Seamen's Friend

"We are indebted for the following circular to a friend in Oswego, to which we beg leave to draw the attention of our readers...."

It is proposed that a meeting of seamen, and their friends, be held on the 18th of August next, in as many ports bordering on Lake Ontario and the River St. Lawrence as possible, to take into consideration the expediency of forming a

**Lake Ontario Seamen's
Friend Society,**

and, if desired expedient, to appoint a delegate from each port to meet at Oswego..."

Kingston Gazette, 31 July 1830; joint efforts of Canadians and Americans to promote moral and spiritual reform of canal and boatmen on the inland lakes and river.

Society promoted reform and religious observance in New York and the western territories. Out of these organizations, Bethel operations, founded to bring religion to boatmen, were commenced at Oswego and other major ports on the Great Lakes.

Upper Canada's temperance leaders allied with the Seamen's Friend Society in Oswego to bring reform to boatmen on Lake Ontario. In 1830, the *Kingston Chronicle* wrote that it was "indebted for the following circular from a friend in Oswego" deeming it "expedient to ap-

point a delegate from each port to meet at Oswego to organize a Lake Ontario Seamen's Friend society." The organization would raise funds for bringing tracts and bibles to seamen living on or near the lake ports in the United States and Canada. The *Chronicle* was emphatic "that the efforts of the friends in both the British and American ports be united" to eliminate temperance and crime on the inland

⁴⁰ The Seamen's Friend Society meeting at Oswego is advertised in the *Oswego Palladium*, 25 August 1830. Also, for preaching on the Oswego Canal, see *The Trumpet and Universalist Magazine*, 19 September 1829, 2, 12; *APS*, p. 47.

waterways.⁴¹

In 1830, the American Bethel Society sent Reverend Gordon Winslow to spread the gospel along the Oswego, Erie, and recently opened Welland Canal. The story is told that at Oswego “on a beautiful autumnal Sabbath morn,” Winslow held a Bethel service onboard the *Winnebago* and Captain Bill ceremoniously hoisted the blue and white Bethel flag before the crowd.⁴² Impressed by their strides, the Oswego Bethel committee reported that “many captains and seamen, with their families, have been led to religion, and a happy and wonderful transformation seems to be going on...”⁴³ By 1833, a preacher was regularly employed at Oswego “and the happy fruits of his labor are visible in all the ports of Lake Ontario.”⁴⁴ Bethel operations also worked alongside the Boatmen’s Friend Society delivering tracts and bibles and hymn books to the “friendless wanderers.” Local reading rooms and libraries were opened to promote “the intellectual, social, moral, and spiritual condition” of boatmen.⁴⁵ Despite some positive gains toward reform, the *British Whig* of Kingston was disturbed to learn of “a boatman on the Oswego Canal at Syracuse who died of wounds inflicted upon him while in a state of intoxication.”⁴⁶

The revival’s evangelic flames spread to neighbouring Canada through the efforts of reformers on both sides of the border. Like the Oswego, the Welland Canal had its share of Sabbath-breaking and moral decay. A publication of the Seamen’s Friend Society reported that “Energetic measures were also adopted on Lake Ontario, and the Bethel flag was hoisted at Oswego, and carried through the Welland Canal to Lake Erie.” “These decisive moments,” clamoured the Bethel agents, “taken in connection with the wonderful revivals that are in progress on the great thoroughfares, call loudly upon us...in raising up such a barrier against the flood of iniquity, which we feared they would be the instruments of bringing in upon us.”⁴⁷ Apparently their work was not in vain, for it was reported by the Oswego Seamen Friend’s Society in 1834 that their efforts were felt “not only on the thirty and forty ports of the beautiful Ontario, but down the St. Lawrence River and up through the Welland Canal, upon the shores of Lake Erie.”⁴⁸ Oliver Phelps, an American contractor who, after working on the Lockport Locks moved to Canada to oversee the entire Welland Canal’s construction, welcomed the revival from south of the border by opening the first Presbyterian

⁴¹ *Kingston Chronicle*, 31 July 1830.

⁴² From the *Sailor’s Magazine*, reprinted in the *Religious Intelligencer*, 4 December 1830; 15, 27; *APS*, p. 422.

⁴³ *Episcopal Recorder*, 26 May 1832; 10, 8; *APS*, p. 31.

⁴⁴ Quoted in the *Christian Secretary*, 11 May 1833; 12, 17; *APS*, p. 65.

⁴⁵ Report of the American Tract Society in the *New York Evangelist*; 16 Jan. 1836; 7, 3; *APS*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ *British Whig*, 22 May 1835.

⁴⁷ Quoted in the *Quarterly Christian Spectator*, 1 June 1831, 2; *APS*, p. 253.

⁴⁸ Quoted in the *Christian Secretary*, 10 May 1834; 13, 17; *APS*, p. 66.

Church in 1831 in St. Catharines, the home of the Welland Canal. The revivals, that had so influenced people on the Oswego and Erie Canals, found their way to Upper Canada through the Welland Canal, providing a worthy example of how the interlocking water systems unified Canadians and Americans along the borderland.

As the revival made its way through upstate New York and neighbouring Canada, new annoyances and disturbances plagued the interlocking waterways. In the early summer of 1832, cholera was reported on Canada's Welland and almost immediately the New York canal system was struck with the dreaded disease. News of the approaching scourge caused alarm among Oswego's community leaders. Physicians were appointed to inspect all vessels arriving at the port and passengers were warned that overcrowded packets were harbingers of the insidious disease. Reports of canal workers throughout parts of the northeast falling victim to the noxious disease so alarmed Oswego's leaders that they requested more hospitals be erected "for persons who may be taken by the cholera."⁴⁹ Deaths also mounted across the lake in Upper Canada. Boats entering the port of Kingston, for example, "with a sick or dead person on board" were "liable to be fined to the amount of forty shillings."⁵⁰

However, compared to bordering communities that fell victim to the blight, Oswego, and Kingston, was relatively spared.⁵¹ But sickness and death were a constant part of life, especially on canals and waterways that invariably served as conveyors of infectious disease.

Progress invariably had its cost but from a commercial perspective, the Oswego Canal, especially in conjunction with the newly opened Welland, generated untold opportunities and benefits. Connecting Lakes Erie and Ontario by ship navigation around the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, the Welland Canal stimulated much excitement and attention at Oswego. By utilizing the Oswego-Welland line, merchants avoided more than 150 miles in tolls on the stretch of the Erie Canal between Syracuse and Buffalo, while eliminating some of the frustrations and delays experienced on the interior channel.⁵² Large lake vessels could now sail from Detroit and Cleveland by way of Lake Erie, the Welland, Lake Ontario, and the Oswego instead of through Buffalo and the long western section of the Erie Canal. Schooners on the lakes had larger carrying capacities, and promised to be both faster and cheaper than barges on the Erie. Merchants also learned that if tolls got too high on the Erie Canal, they could use the Oswego-Welland line and force rates down. It

⁴⁹ *Records of the Village of Oswego From 1828-1848* (Oswego, New York, 1874), 99-100.

⁵⁰ *Kingston Chronicle*, 23 June 1832.

⁵¹ See for example, Way, "Common Labour," 156-158; Ronald Shaw, *Erie Water West: A History of the Erie Canal, 1792-1854* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1966), 223-24.

⁵² "Much delay and vexation have resulted from the multiple breaches in the canal, [Erie] since it was opened this spring. Up to last Saturday, at noon, only an occasional boat has reached us from Albany." In *Farmer's Journal and Welland Canal Intelligencer*, 19 May 1830.

was with some concern that a New York City newspaper wrote that high tolls on the Erie only served to drive produce through the Welland and Oswego Canals.⁵³ But the Upper Canadian *Niagara Gleaner* more generously conceded: “Competition is necessary to ensure everything be done on reasonable terms--the Directors of the Erie Canal have lowered the freight, on purpose to compete with a company at Oswego, who have entered into a combination to carry merchandise through the western territories to the United States, through the Welland Canal—for less than they have carried by the route of the canal.” The editor applauded their actions, noting, “all these competitions are a benefit to the public.”⁵⁴

Oswego’s residents followed developments on the Welland Canal as keenly as they did their own. News of the Welland’s progress, along with engineering reports and the day-to-day activities on the Canadian channel were regularly published in Oswego’s local rags. The anticipated benefits of this newly opened water route to Oswego’s commercial interests were promulgated. In March of 1830, a letter

WELLAND CANAL.—By the following it will be perceived that the Welland Canal will be in readiness for navigation day after to-morrow. Several vessels have already cleared from this port for Ohio, via this canal, and others are taking in their cargoes for the same destination.

CIRCULAR.

Welland Canal Office, St. Catharines, May 4, 1833. }

Gentlemen,—I am instructed to inform you that the Welland Canal will be perfected and open for navigation, via Gravelly-Bay and Niagara River, on the 10th inst.

I am respectfully your ob’t serv’t,

JOHN CLARK, Sec. W. C. Co.
Messrs. BRONSON, CROCKER, & Co.

An ad in the Oswego Palladium highlighting American interest in the Welland Canal.

was printed in the *Free Oswego Press* announcing the feasibility of transporting goods on the Welland—Oswego line:

This route will afford facilities for the transportation of property to Michigan, Ohio,

etc., which a few years ago, would have been deemed impossible. From calculations made last summer, it is ascertained that on a ton of produce transported from Detroit to New York via the Welland Canal and Oswego, a saving of \$4 50 would be made over the route via Buffalo and the Erie Canal.

In the same paper, a letter applauded the recently opened Oswego and Welland Canals: “All travellers and immigrants with their goods and baggage” destined for Upper Canada “would come to New York, pass up our canals, and take the lake at Oswego.” Considerable quantities of “the produce of Upper Canada might be landed at Oswego, taken to New York, and there reshipped” for markets abroad. “The advantages are numerous and important, and too easily understood to require comment.”⁵⁵

In the summer of 1830, the *Kingston Chronicle* offered its readers “a bird’s eye

⁵³ From the *Commercial Advertiser* as quoted in the *Onondaga Register and Syracuse Gazette*, 7 April 1830.

⁵⁴ *Niagara Gleaner*, 6 July 1833.

⁵⁵ *Free Oswego Press*, reprinted in the *Oswego Palladium*, 31 March 1830.

view of the village of Oswego.” Struck by the spirit of improvement there, the article detailed not only the impact of the Oswego Canal in promoting prosperity and growth, but the centrality of Canada’s Welland in that development:

The village is situated on the southern banks of Lake Ontario—and at the mouth of the Oswego River—a rapid and powerful stream well adapted to hydraulic purposes. An extensive and substantial *Pier* has recently been constructed,... by which means a safe and commodious harbor is formed. Several large flour mills are in constant operation and extensive forwarding store houses are erected along the wharves. The Oswego Canal which has lately been completed joins the great Erie Canal at the village of Syracuse. The completion of the Welland Canal which unites the waters of Lake Erie and Ontario will materially increase the trade of Oswego—it being supposed that a large portion of the produce coming through that channel will enter the Oswego Canal, for the New York market.⁵⁶

The same article pointed out that the “principal tavern” at Oswego was a large brick building called the “Welland House,” so named in honor of the recently opened Canadian canal.⁵⁷

August 4, 1830 was a day of jubilation. On that day, Oswego’s residents had the satisfaction of witnessing at their port the arrival of the schooner *Erie* from Cleveland, heralding the opening of navigation on the Welland Canal. The arrival of the *Erie* “was greeted by the ringing of bells, by a national salute of twenty four

guns, by a display of all the flags in the village and harbor, and by the cheers and congratulations” of the people. The national salute was fired at precisely 12 p.m., “the American and British ensigns” were hoisted, and all the captains of vessels in the harbour were requested to raise their national flag at the same time.⁵⁸ Next to their own canal, the Welland’s opening was deemed a most monumental event in the history of Oswego’s village:

Thus this great event, ... has at length taken place, and with exulting hearts, we hail the harbinger of the commerce of Erie. Another triumph of human ingenuity and wisdom is achieved. The hitherto insurmountable barrier of the Niagara is overcome, and the waters of Erie may now mingle with those of Ontario, bearing upon their bosoms the bounties of civilization, and the gifts of the arts. If there be a spot on the western waters, which, more than any other, is to reap the commercial harvest of which the Welland Canal is to be the parent, that spot is Oswego....To the 600 miles of coast to which we had access, 1000 more are now added, comprising the most western counties of New York, the county of Erie, in Pennsylvania, the shores of Ohio, Michigan and Upper Canada....It is needless to speculate, for imagination cannot compass the extent of that commerce which will inhabit the bosom of the northern lakes, when the regions of the west shall yield their spoils.⁵⁹

Later that day, the celebrants gathered for a public dinner at Oswego’s Welland House to pay tribute to the *Erie*. Toasts were made first to “The Welland Ca-

⁵⁶ From the *Kingston Chronicle* reprinted in the *Oswego Palladium*, 2 June 1830.

⁵⁷ Chrisfield Johnson, *History of Oswego County, New York* (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts and Company, 1877), 149.

⁵⁸ *Oswego Village Records*, 60.

⁵⁹ *Oswego Palladium*, 8 August 1830.

nal—the second link in the great chain of northern commerce,” and its projector “William Hamilton Merritt—

Such MERIT can never be forgotten.” The guests also celebrated the anticipated benefits of the “Oswego and Welland Canals—Nothing but state interference can disappoint the expectations of their friends.” Of particular note was a toast given by Gerrit Smith, America’s leading financial supporter of the Oswego Canal who recognized “The Welland Canal” as “A Stream of Wealth into the lap of Oswego.”⁶⁰ John B. Yates of Chittenango, New York, a financial patron of canals on both sides of the international border, was also recognized for his “magnificent subscription to the Welland Canal” which the celebrants deemed as “proof of his patriotism and foresight.” Other projects like the “Rideau Canal” and the Pennsylvania and Ohio canals were toasted—“may the results of their enterprise, prove the wisdom of their councils.” The celebrants were confident that the sister Erie Canal would prove a “generous competitor” and not “a jealous rival.” By the evening’s close, the spirit of “Internal Improvements” was saluted in general: “may they prove a connecting link between us and our Canadian neighbors.”⁶¹

The actual benefits of the Welland Canal did not disappoint the expectations of the Oswego promoters. A month or so following the Welland House celebra-

tion, the *Oswego Palladium* announced that “the Schr. *Winnebago*, Captain Bill from Oswego, N.Y., bound for Cleveland, Ohio, laden with merchandize and salt, passed up the Welland canal, with perfect ease and safety, on Monday last. This vessel was the first to attempt passage through the Welland Canal “with a full freight, bound from one U.S. port to another.” Owned by Bronson and Company of Oswego, the *Winnebago* drew 7 1/2 feet of water, and passed through the canal with ease. Having broken ground for other large lake vessels to pass, “an extensive trade, through this channel, principally in salt up, and wheat down, will,” hailed the *Oswego Palladium*, “be the consequence, in a very short space of time.”⁶²

The passage of the *Winnebago* was celebrated at the home of the Welland Canal in St. Catharines, Upper Canada. An editorial in the *Welland Canal Intelligencer* illustrated the immense importance of this occasion to the province, and indeed the whole country bordering on both sides of the lakes:

Last week we noticed the passage of the *Winnebago*; and now are enabled to add that of the schr. *Victory*, Capt. Hollowood, which arrived here on Monday last, from Oswego, laden with salt, consigned to a merchant of this village. This vessel belongs on Lake Erie; she passed down the Welland Canal about two weeks ago, with a full cargo, drawing about seven feet of water, continued her voy-

⁶⁰ An editorial in the *Oswego Palladium* was pleased to note Smith’s presence who “was then, fortunately, on a visit to this place, and whose large investments in capital, and munificent expenditure in the improvement of our village, creates a deep interest in everything affecting the fortunes of this village.” 11 August 1830.

⁶¹ *Free Oswego Press*, 11 August 1830.

⁶² *Oswego Palladium*, 20 October 1830.

age on lake Ontario to her place of destination, and is now on her return home.

According to Captain Hollowood “several other vessels were fitting out at Oswego, when he left, to follow in the same track.”⁶³

The hopes and wishes expressed at Oswego’s Welland House in 1830 were finally coming to fruition. Following the symbolic passage of Oswego’s *Winnebago* through the Welland Canal that year, the *Palladium* wrote: “The merchants in Cleveland, and all the other ports on Lake Erie, if they are alive to their own interests, must soon observe the superior advantages this route holds out for the transportation of all their goods up from the seacoast, and their produce down to market.” Upward and downward traffic on the Oswego and Welland Canals during the 1830s signified the importance of this new commercial route. Transshipment of salt from the Syracuse salt mines increasingly found its way through the Oswego-Welland line in transit to Cleveland at a more reasonable rate than that afforded by the Erie Canal. Speaking of this business, the *Cleveland Herald* wrote in 1833 that “Two hundred sail of vessels from this place alone, passed through the Welland Canal, during the last season; and the probability is that the amount of business, during the ensuing, will be greatly augmented.” Nearly all of this

number was destined for Oswego.⁶⁴ The sharp rise in wheat and flour made this an even more viable trade route. When in 1834 the Welland Canal carried 40,634 bushels of wheat to the Montreal market, it also transported 224,285 bushels to the American market via Oswego. Over the next few years, wheat shipments from Cleveland via the Welland-Oswego channel continued to rise.⁶⁵ Oswego’s merchants and businessmen responded by erecting more flouring mills and forwarding storehouses, while lake commerce, population, and settlement flourished.

Meanwhile, Oswego’s shipbuilding industry found new fortunes in constructing lake vessels designed solely for the Welland Canal. Ironically, one of the first schooners launched at Oswego in 1830 and specifically built for trade on the Welland Canal was called the *De Witt Clinton*. Another schooner, the *Ohio*, owned by Walton and Willet of Oswego, “was launched from the shipyard yesterday morning. She is rated at 120 tons, and is designed for the Welland Canal trade.”⁶⁶ In 1837, just before the Panic curtailed canal traffic throughout North America and froze the availability of capital for public works, the *St. Catharines Journal* boasted, “Some new schooners have been added to the Oswego fleet, which is nearly 100 first-rate vessels carrying from 80-150 tons.”⁶⁷ The Panic did

⁶³ Reprinted in the *Oswego Palladium*, 20 October 1830

⁶⁴ As quoted in the *Oswego Palladium*, 3 April 1833.

⁶⁵ Thomas McIlwraith, “The Logistical Geography of the Great Lakes Grain Trade, 1820-1850.” (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1973), 190.

⁶⁶ *Oswego Palladium*, 23 May 1832.

⁶⁷ *St. Catharines Journal*, 1 June 1837. Taken from the Oswego Library, Special Collections file on Oswego Canal.

not deter Oswego's Alvin Bronson and several local businessmen from investing in the *Vandalia*, a 138-ton sailing craft driven by propellers and intended for the lucrative Welland Canal. Amidst great fanfare and interest, the *Vandalia* made its first successful voyage through the Welland in November of 1841. Covering a distance of about 6 miles per hour, and designed for heavy merchandise and passengers, the *Vandalia* was faster and more efficient than the old side-wheel steamers still in use on the Great Lakes. Picking up on this momentous occasion, the *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette* boasted that the *Vandalia* had already made several stops at Kingston and Hamilton, providing evidence "of this great improvement in our commercial facilities."⁶⁸ The *Oswego Palladium* agreed, writing, "We are firmly persuaded that this enterprise marks an epoch in the progress of western trade." The *Vandalia*, chimed in the *St. Catharines Journal*, forms "a new era in the history of navigation," and cor-

dially wished her owners every success.⁶⁹ More than any spot on the Great Lakes, Oswego's shipbuilding and mercantile community reaped the commercial benefits of the Welland Canal.

Students of the canal era should not so easily dismiss the Oswego Canal as simply a lateral extension or branch of New York State's "Grand Erie Canal." A major trade artery in the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence water system, the Oswego Canal transported merchandise and passengers between the tidewater and the Midwest during the canal's heyday, bringing commercial prosperity and growth in its wake. Further developments in transportation, like the notable Welland Canal, strengthened cross border ties as Canadians and Americans looked to one another for economic opportunities, markets, friendship, and even religious sustenance. A great story in its own right, the Oswego Canal was one of North America's more important systems of internal navigation.

⁶⁸ The *Kingston Chronicle and Gazette*, 4 December 1841.

⁶⁹ *Oswego Palladium*, 1 December 1841; *St. Catharines Journal*, 21 April 1842.