

Great Lakes Sea Captains Sail from Western Reserve Lake Ports

As soon as British bans on American shipping were lifted after the Revolutionary War, Yankee traders began building large ships and sailing them profitably around the world. Connecticut had no deepwater harbor the size of Boston, Salem or New York but many a brig sailed from New London to South America, Nootka Sound, Hong Kong and Marseilles. Most cargoes clearing New London were headed for other U.S. ports along the Atlantic coast or for the West Indies trade.

Connecticut sailing folk bemoaned her geographical position - calling her a keg drained at both ends by Boston and New York - but by 1820, merchant traders and shipbuilders from the Nutmeg State had "captured" the port of New York, outnumbering native Yorkers employed in maritime trades and vastly outweighing New York in tonnage and shipbuilding.

Many Connecticut merchants were also early investors in frontier Vermont, Western New York, Muskingum and Marietta, Ohio. Especially attractive to those with maritime interests was the Ohio Western Reserve with its access to the Great Lakes. Because their homes had been burned by the British, many New Londoners received free land in the Firelands and pioneered the lake ports of Vermillion and Sandusky. Many others invested directly in Connecticut Land Company shares or joined with other Southeastern Connecticut investors in a subsidiary group called The Erie Company, which founded the capitol city of New Connecticut - Cleveland.

Although no systematic study has been done on the transfer of maritime culture from "The Sound" to "The Lakes," there is much anecdotal evidence that ties did exist. Samuel Livingston Mather, Jr. of Middletown, Connecticut; John Walworth of Groton; William Austin of New London went to the Western Reserve and had successful careers. Not all who started shipping enterprises prospered. In 1818, after a long and exciting career on the high seas, New London sea captain James Day "determined to quit the sea had twenty thousand dollars, went to the State of Ohio made some purchases built a schooner and began to lose money."

The Firelands:



During the Revolutionary War, the British soldiers burned the towns of New London, Groton, Norwalk, Greenwich, New Haven, Ridgefield, Fairfield and Danbury, Connecticut. The state of Connecticut gave lands of the Western Reserve

to pay the people whose property was destroyed in these seven towns. Those people whose homes or stores were burned were called the "fire sufferers." The land they were given was called the "fire sufferers' land" or the "*Firelands*."

The Firelands is the part of Ohio that today is Huron and Erie counties as well as Danbury Township in Ottawa County and Ruggles Township in Ashland County. There are half a million acres in the Firelands.

Vermillion, Ohio - One Hundred Fifty Years Ago.

Imagine yourself sitting under a tree on the front lawn of the Museum. It's a pleasant spring day. You hear the clear ring of calking mallets, the "wurr" of saws and you smell the tangy aroma of tar and oakum and paint and fresh-cut timber. And as you look down the slope of the Museum lawn toward the Vermilion River you see workmen scurrying about a busy shipyard.

That's the way it was in Vermilion one hundred fifty years ago. Of course, there was no museum then. The shipyard is long since gone. But the village and the river and some of the old houses are still there and much the same.

For nearly seventy five years, Vermilion produced wooden ships for the Great Lakes trade. By present standards, they were small - ranging in everything from 40-foot tugs to 130-foot schooners and steamers. Even so they were large for then and among the finest built anywhere.

The largest ship to be built in the village was the schooner *Negaunee* in 1867. She was 640 gross tons, 193 feet long, 34 feet in beam and 13 feet deep.

So, though it is only a coincidence, it is significant and fitting that the museum is where it is today - within a stone's throw of an early Great Lakes shipyard. It stirs the imagination a little bit to look, for example, at the museum's model of the schooner *Sophia Minch*. The original ship was built in 1873, only a few hundred yards away.

-Alexander B. Cook