

**Toronto Telegram, May 7, 1953**  
**Schooner Days MCIIV (1104)**  
**By C.H.J. Snider**

## **Happier Bride's Diary – Salt Made A Lake Fleet**

“Onondaga Salt,” wrote Captain James Van Cleve in his memoirs, seventy years after the prevalence of that commodity in Oswego in 1805, “formed an important item in the commercial business of Oswego from the earliest times.” In fact it might be credited with creating the American sailing fleet of the lakes.

The first American vessel which Oswego has recorded was called the *Flat Bottom*, for so she was built. Archibald Fairfield, forwarder, owned her. She was of 100 barrels (salt) capacity, and daringly ran the rapids of the river from near the Onondaga licks, with a cargo. Being of course unable to come back up the river, she was fitted with masts in Oswego and employed in the slender lake trade. This was in 1802. She was Oswego's first schooner under the Stars and Stripes. She was only 15 tons measurement and was under 40 feet in length. The *Jemima* of Genesee appears to have been on Lake Ontario by 1797.

Matthew McNair came to Oswego in April 1802 and began his storage and forwarding business, first employing scows and open boats rowed and polled on the river. In 1803 he bought the schooner *Jane of Genesee*, just built by Scott and Vaughan. He renamed her *Peggy*, after his daughter, and ventured into the lake trade. This was the *Oswego Peggy*. She brought Mrs. Anne MacDonnell, whose diary we are interrupting, from York on her way to Long Island in 1805.

Thanks to the salt trade and commerce in other provisions and commodities, Oswego's fleet of two small schooners had grown to 15 vessels by 1810. These were not all built there, not owned there, but they all traded there.

### **18,000 Barrels**

Ogdensburg sixty miles down the St. Lawrence river, acquired an early schooner fleet too. In 1810 D.M. Lewis wrote to David Parrish of Philadelphia, owner of the Ogdensburg Packet Line, that 18,000 barrels of salt came down from Oswego, and British vessels came for it “previous to the trammeling of commerce” – referring to the U.S. Embargo Act of 1807, and Non-Intercourse Acts.

“The *Experiment*,” continued Mr. Lewis, referring to the most recent Ogdensburg craft – was a centreboard being experimented with – “will make 18 trips yearly from Ogdensburg to Niagara if she can have loads.” This meant fortnightly round trip voyages, as navigation would not be open for more than eight months. “Earlier vessels were making 4 trips with salt and 7 with pork and flour, or a maximum of 14 persons.”

Lewis gave a list of the Ogdensburg traffickers, with their tonnage and salt carrying capacity:

	Barrels Salt	Tons
Diana, Oswego	420	78
Fair American, Oswego	400	75
Ontario, Oswego	500	80
New schooner at Lewiston	350	60
Mary, Oswego	250	40
Lark, Pultneyville	170	30
Sophia, Oswego	150	27
Eagle, Oswego	175	28
British Queen	150	25
Island Packet, Sodus	170	27
Experiment, Ogdensburg	250	51
Collector, Ogdensburg	266	50
Three Brothers	180	28
Sloop (Democrat?)	300	40
Schooner (Penelope?)	350	49

Total salt capacity                      4, 081 barrels

There were, in 1810, other schooners owned in Oswego, and elsewhere, and a few more in Leeds, York, Kingston and Niagara in Upper Canada. The *British Queen* mentioned came to Oswego in 1807 by purchase by Captain McDonald.

The *Genesee Packet*, *Experiment* and *Collector*, wrote Capt. Van Cleve, became a packet line in 1811 from Lewiston to Ogdensburg. The rates from Lewiston, Niagara, or any lake port that far west to Ogdensburg were: Flour, 75 cents a barrel; Pork, 87 1/2 cents; Whiskey, 87 1/2 cents; ashes, \$1.50 per cwt., – but not more than 4 cwt. at a time, because of the danger of wetting such cargo. In scows, which were rowed or polled, rates before and after July 1 to Oct. 1 were: Flour, \$1 to \$1.12 1/2; Pork, \$1.50 to \$1.75, and the same for Whiskey. Ashes, \$2.50 to \$2.75 per cwt.; in barrels in scows, after Oct. 1st, more. He did not quote the salt rate.

Van Cleve wrote:

“The first vessels built in Ogdensburg were the *Experiment*, launched July 4, 1809, Christian Holmes, master, which became the U.S. schooner *Growler* in the War of 1812, and 3 months later the *Collector*, Obed Mayo, Sam Dixon, masters, which became the U.S. schooner *Pert*. These 50 ton schooners were built by Jonathan Brown of New York for the account of David Parrish, cost \$5,000 each, and were launched from the site of the Red Store of Amos Bacon.”

Having thus got the salt out of our system we shall go on with Anne MacDonnell’s much-delayed diary next week.

The commerce in salt is great between Oswego and the Falls [now Fulton] P. 77. The salt trade seems to be the chief business of this place. [Oswego] There was a brig on the stocks. [U.S. Navy brig *Oneida*] There belong here eleven vessels, from eighty-two to fifteen tons, the whole tonnage amounting to 413. To Genesee River, one of twenty-two tons; to Niagara, two –

one of fifty, and one of eighty-five, making 135 tons; to Oswegatchie, two, of fifty tons each; to Kingston, in Upper Canada, eight, from ninety to twenty-eight tons; and to York, two, of forty tons each, all engaged in the Lake trade.

In 1807, 17,078 barrels of salt were shipped from this place. In 1808, upwards of 19,000, and 3,000 were not carried away for want of vessels. In 1809, 28,840 barrels were sent directly to Canada, and this year it will exceed 30,000. Salt now sells at Kingston, at \$4.50 per barrel, and at Pittsburgh at from \$8.50 to \$9.

A barrel of salt at Oswego costs \$2.50 in cash; and at Salina \$2, probably \$1.50. By a law of the State salt cannot be sold by the State lessees for more than 62 cents per bushel.

The conveyance of a barrel of salt from Salina to the Upper Falls of Oswego is, in time of good water, two shillings -- in low water, three shillings. The same price is asked from the Lower Falls to Oswego.

The distance from Oswego to Niagara is 160 miles. It takes a fortnight to go up and return. The vessels carry from 170 to 440 casks, and the conveyance of a cask costs fifty cents. The lake can be navigated six and a half months in the year. The wages of a common sailor are \$20 per month. If the inland navigation was perfected, salt could be conveyed to Albany for three shillings per bushel. Two-thirds of the salt that is exported from Oswego, is consumed in Ohio.

Two men of the name of Alvord, in partnership, manufacture 4,000 barrels of salt at Salina, annually, which have been sold at Pittsburgh for \$10 per barrel, until recently. The Collector says that the value of property exported from Oswego in 1808, amounted to nearly \$536,000. In the time of the embargo, the value of property carried out of a district was known. None of this went directly to Canada. In 1807, it was \$167,000 more. Upper Canada is supplied with teas and East India goods through this place. The press of business is in spring and fall. In winter this is a place of no business, and all the stores are shut up. Now two of their merchants intend to carry on trade in the winter. There is no fur trade. The value of the carrying trade from Oswego Falls here, last year, amounted to \$40,000.

*\*From: The Life and Writings of DeWitt Clinton by William W. Campbell, Baker and Scribner, New York, 1849*