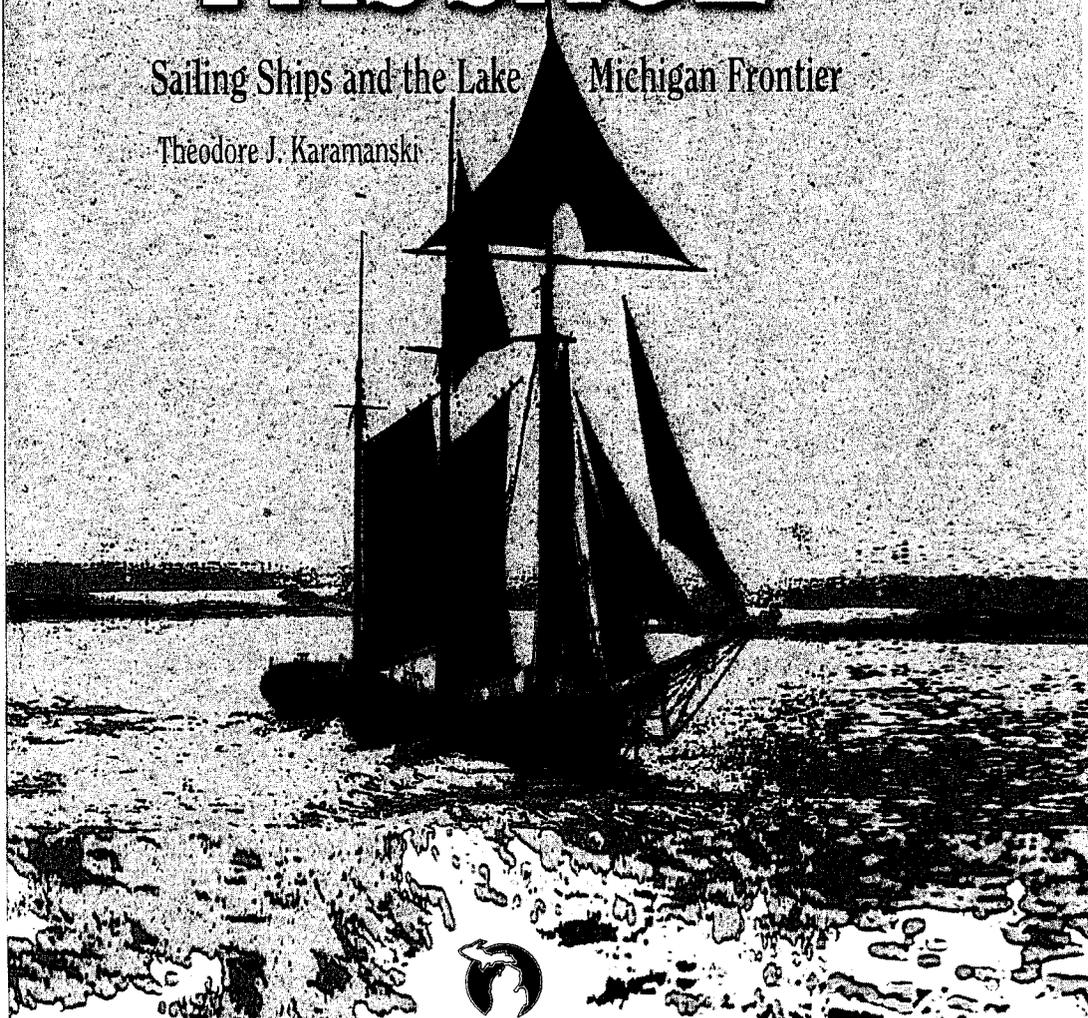


# SCHOONER PASSAGE

Sailing Ships and the Lake Michigan Frontier

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facilities. Milwaukee's business community went from celebrating their appropriation to immediately wrangling with the army engineer, who was described as "not over friendly to Milwaukee," over how the funds should be spent. Even more heated clashes between the engineers and the citizenry took place at Kenosha. There were two rival settlements in the Kenosha area: Southport, at the mouth of Pike Creek, and Pike River. When Captain Cram's initial survey of Wisconsin's southeastern shore seemed to indicate that neither of the Kenosha locations was as favorable for a harbor as Racine, located ten miles to the north, the citizens of the rival Kenosha settlements banded together and accused Cram of having "conspired against the interests of both Pike River and Southport." Cram's report was condemned as unfair, "mischievous," and the result of the fact that he owned property in Racine. The unified front of the Kenosha property owners vanished in 1844 when a \$12,500 appropriation was granted. Then both Kenosha-area communities tried to ingratiate themselves to the army engineers. When it appeared that Pike River was going to be chosen for the harbor, property values plummeted in Southport and the citizens, in dread of the future, stopped all improvements. Then, at the last moment, Southport was chosen for the harbor works and rival Pike River sank into obscurity.<sup>19</sup>

While funds for harbor improvements were long in coming and short on substance, the federal government did a better job establishing lighthouses on the shores of Lake Michigan. These navigational beacons were a critical element in the safety of mariners, particularly on the Great Lakes where most ships were guided by dead reckoning. The first lighthouses on the lake, at Chicago and St. Joseph, were both completed in 1832, and by 1840 there were eleven lighthouse on the lake. As ship traffic grew on the lake, so did the number of lighthouses, and by 1852 there were twenty-seven beacons on Lake Michigan, the most of any of the Great Lakes.<sup>20</sup>

### Internal Improvements and Urban Rivalries

Although in retrospect Chicago's rise to its status as the greatest city on Lake Michigan seems the preordained result of its favorable position astride a continental divide separating the Great

Lakes from the Mississippi valley, politics played a large role in the city's emergence over rivals such as Milwaukee and Green Bay. Originally Chicago was in the Wisconsin Territory. It was only when Illinois was ready to enter the Union as a new state in 1818 that its boundary was pushed north, at the Wisconsin Territory's expense, to include the lower end of Lake Michigan. Congress went along with the land grab because Illinois, as a new state, had political clout, while Wisconsin, still a territory, was locked in a subservient status. The boundary shift made it possible for the entire length of a canal uniting the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basin to be in the state of Illinois. The building of that waterway, the Illinois and Michigan Canal, between 1836 and 1848 played a large role in Chicago's development as the lake's dominant port. By the time Michigan became a state in 1837 and Wisconsin in 1848, Chicago had already benefited from the state of Illinois's extensive internal improvement program, and its port had secured the bulk of harbor funds expended on Lake Michigan.

In the 1820s it seemed that Green Bay was more likely to emerge as the major port on Lake Michigan. It was the oldest permanent settlement on the west shore of Lake Michigan, and like Chicago, it had the benefit of a major federal military installation, Fort Howard, which attracted population and commerce to the area. Also like Chicago, Green Bay was positioned astride a natural link between the Great Lakes and Mississippi waterways. Only a short portage was required to follow the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers to the Mississippi valley. In 1822 Green Bay loaded lake schooners with lead from the Fever River mining district of western Wisconsin and Illinois. With no waterway connection to this fast-growing part of the frontier, Chicago benefited little from the mining boom, while the Fox River waterway gave Green Bay a thriving connection to the developing interior. Green Bay had another natural advantage: unlike all the other river-harbors on Lake Michigan, the mouth of the Fox River was deep enough for sailing ships to enter. When the Erie Canal opened in 1825 it was a shipment of Green Bay lumber, potash, and furs that constituted the first Lake Michigan cargo to reach New York City. Captain Samuel Ward's little schooner, *St. Clair*, made the entire journey—under sail from Green Bay to Buffalo, then relieved of her sails and rigging under tow to Albany, and then once more under sail down the Hudson River to the Empire City. Not surprisingly, one of the first sailing ships built on

Lake Michigan, the *Wisconsin*, was launched at Green Bay in 1832, three years before shipbuilding was inaugurated in Chicago.<sup>21</sup>

Business leaders in both Green Bay and Milwaukee understood the importance of enhancing their hinterland communications. In the summer of 1836, when the state of Illinois began building the Illinois and Michigan Canal, Green Bay's newspaper, the *Wisconsin Democrat*, agitated for the territorial legislature to take up the improvement of the Fox-Wisconsin waterway. But other communities derided the plan as the "Green Bay Hobby." The town of Milwaukee had its own rival scheme for encouraging commercial development. The "Milwaukee Hobby," as it was called, was to build a canal between that city and the Rock River. Torn between rival proposals and limited by the capabilities of a frontier territorial government, Wisconsin's leading lake ports could not match Chicago's transportation infrastructure.<sup>22</sup>

There was a measure of bootstrapping as well as boosterism in the development of Lake Michigan ports. Although they fought vigorously for federal aid, most towns never would have developed as ports without the civic will to fund some of the costs themselves. Chicago and Milwaukee frequently undertook independent harbor improvements. In 1854, sand accumulation at the mouth of the Chicago River all but blocked the harbor. Four ships sank trying to cross the bar, and seven lives were lost. Army engineers had neither the funds nor the authority to respond to the emergency. The Chicago Board of Trade petitioned Secretary of War Jefferson Davis to allow Chicago to borrow the army's steam dredge, with the promise to return it in good condition. When Davis refused, disgusted Chicagoans seized control of the machinery and cleared the bar themselves. In 1851 Congress approved \$15,000 for work at Milwaukee, while the city raised an additional \$50,000 to see that the work was done right. Racine went even further in its determination to build a maritime future and purchased its own steam dredge. Through taxes, the sale of town lands, and even private donations, this town of only six thousand, was able to spend \$43,000 on harbor improvements between 1843 and 1851. Kenosha also went into debt to maintain its harbor, and in 1851 citizens voted a \$10,000 tax levy. All along the lake, local merchants, unwilling to wait for federal action, invested in piers that would at least allow vessels to load and unload in fair weather.<sup>23</sup>

Schooners retained their niche in Lake Michigan commerce due, in part, to the improvised nature of most harbors and the great num-

ber of commercial piers reaching out from the sandy shores. Because of the inconsistent appropriations, Lake Michigan mariners during the period before the Civil War never had an assurance of the depth of any harbor. Schooners were the vessels that tied up most frequently at commercial piers. At places like Sheboygan, Port Washington, Two Rivers, and Manitowoc—all of which would eventually receive federal aid for genuine harbors—commercial piers were a temporary means to accommodate schooner traffic. Unlike harbors, however, the piers were not open to the use of all comers. Paid for by individual investors and run as a profit-making business, commercial piers often charged exorbitant use fees. The use of Sheboygan as a port by local farmers was discouraged by the high rates charged by owners of the town's two main commercial piers. At a time when the cost to transport wheat from Wisconsin to Buffalo by schooner was four cents per bushel, the piers levied a matching rate just to use their facilities. Commercial piers offered their customers use of warehouse facilities at the foot of the pier and the ability to drive heavy wagons alongside the waiting schooners. Piers were also built at locations that never had the potential to be developed as commercial harbors. Plumerville, Michigan, near Saugatuck, was one such place. Its pier was built by a joint stock company composed of the owners of a sawmill and a tannery located at the mouth of a creek. The two companies were the principal users of the pier, which was too weak to support horsecars and barely extended out enough to allow scow schooners to dock. Such rickety piers were common. During the 1850s and 1860s there were five piers built for farmers to ship their cordwood to Chicago along the forty miles of shore between Saugatuck and South Haven.<sup>24</sup>

### The Golden Stream: The Lake Michigan Grain Trade

The schooners and steamers that brought settlers to the unimproved ports of Chicago, St. Joseph, Racine, and Milwaukee during the 1820s and 1830s planted the seeds from which sprang, in the early 1840s, the Lake Michigan grain trade. The days when schooners returned from Chicago with holds ballasted by sand ended