

Manhattan

Waterfront History

By Norman J. Brouwer

The growth of the Port of New York was one of the major American success stories of the industrial age. After almost two centuries of fairly equal status with the ports of Boston, Philadelphia and Charleston, New York rose in the second quarter of the 19th century to where it was handling more trade than all of these ports combined. It would remain the busiest port in North America until 1989. Around 1912 New York became the busiest port in the world, a position it held for over half a century.

The East River side of Manhattan was favored during the sailing ship era because of its shelter from prevailing westerly winds, and from ice coming down the Hudson. From 1715 to 1815 this shoreline was steadily moved out into the River through landfill, allowing the laying out of a succession of waterfront streets, first Water Street, then Front Street, and finally, South Street. In the process, the slips indenting the shore were filled in. The locations of two of them are still indicated by the wide streets near the South Street Historic District, which still bear the names Peck Slip and Burling Slip.

One of New York's unique advantages as a seaport was its access to the interior of the continent, which served as an ever-expanding hinterland supplying commodities for export and providing a growing market for imports. The Hudson River, navigable for almost 150 miles, passes through the Appalachian Mountains in the highlands around West Point. In the mid-1820s this avenue for commerce was linked, by construction of the Erie Canal, not only with the rich farmlands of central New York State but, through the Great Lakes, with much of the interior of the continent.

In 1846 New York saw the launching of the *Rainbow*, the world's first clipper ship, at the Smith & Dimon Shipyard on the east side of Manhattan. High profits to be made in the Chinese tea trade were the initial stimulus, but the discovery of gold in California just two years later created an even greater demand for these ships. The clippers were the largest sailing vessels of the period, and were designed to be the fastest. Their sharp, graceful hulls and towering rigs made them the most beautiful sailing ships the world had ever

seen. The clipper ship era was brief. Sailing vessels, built for carrying capacity rather than speed, would continue to be seen at piers along South Street well into the early years of the 20th century, but the center of activity in the Port was now shifting to the west side of Manhattan.

In 1807, Robert Fulton inaugurated the first steamboat service on the Hudson with his *North River*. It was not until the 1830s that steam engines became sufficiently economical in their use of fuel to be practical for coastwise and transoceanic trade. The earliest ocean steamships were wooden-hulled side-wheelers, the majority produced by East River shipyards, until iron construction came into favor in the early 1870s. New York shipbuilding remained very active through the Civil War, during which a Greenpoint builder produced the revolutionary warship *USS Monitor*, designed by John Ericsson, with engines produced by the Delamater Iron Works located on the west side of Manhattan. After the war New York shipyards went into decline.

The first major pier on the Hudson River side of Manhattan was built at the foot of Albany St. in 1797. After regular transatlantic service was established in 1838, the lower west side developed rapidly to become New York's



View from the Battery

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steamship waterfront. By the 1850s, the Collins Line, the most successful American flag transatlantic company prior to the Civil War, was operating out of a pier at the foot of Canal St. Steamship companies favored covered piers with better protection for cargo from the weather and theft. During the 1890s construction had begun on a series of large piers with two-storey sheds, south of West 23rd St. The “Chelsea Piers” and the Ambrose Channel dredged at the entrance to the Port during the same years, made it possible for New York to accommodate the first giant liners of the 20th century, such as the White Star Line’s *Olympic*, and Cunard Line’s *Lusitania* and *Mauritania*. The *Olympic*’s sistership *Titanic* was bound for one of these piers when she was lost in 1912.

In the early 1930s, even larger piers were built between West 48th St. and West 52nd St., to accommodate the liners *Normandie*, *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*. These were the piers modernized in the 1970s to create the current Passenger Ship Terminal. Most west side piers were built with “head houses” at the street that extended to meet their neighbors on either side, effectively blocking any view of the River from inland.

In the second half of the 20th century, new systems for the transportation of goods brought dramatic changes to the Port. Containerization of cargo was introduced around 1960, utilizing standardized forty-foot units easily transferred between road, rail, water and even air transportation systems. Once it came into general use, the old Port facilities consisting of covered piers and warehouses, by then in need of major rebuilding, had become obsolete. Terminals designed to handle containers were built in Staten Island, Brooklyn, south New Jersey, and on adjoining Newark Bay at Elizabethport. These facilities kept the Port of New York one of the most active in the Country, though this activity is not apparent in the historic heart of the Port, Manhattan Island, where most of the old piers and ferry terminals have now either been converted to modern uses or replaced by shoreline promenades and parks.§

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