

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Erie's Cascade Docks: *An Unimaginable Transition*

By David Frew

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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.

The typical public reaction to waterfront docks and sailors was historically negative. Beyond bad. No self-respecting resident wanted to be near, visit, or have anything to do with commercial docks and their dirty piles of coal, iron ore, and sailors. Docks were filthy, dangerous, rat-infested, disease ridden places. And that was exactly why they were so much fun for us kids.

Rows of railroad cars waiting, behemoth unloading machines, enormous piles of coal (both soft and hard), and enticing mountains of beautiful soft sand. They beckoned to us. There were also mysterious ships coming and going, giant liquid storage tanks to be climbed, and fascinating wildlife species, including rats the size of small dogs. That was the 1950s word for the Cascade Docks. Was.

During Erie's early waterfront years, Rufus and Charles Reed maintained a monopoly hold on the local docks and shipping. After beginning on the east end of the harbor, the Reeds shifted west to the site of today's Bayfront Convention Center after the city extended State Street north in 1833, creating the east and west basins. During those days, the dock that was (and is) just west of State Street was called "the Reed Dock." Rufus Reed, the driving force in the family business at the time, was obsessed with building a canal from the West Slip, or Canal Basin as it was called in those days, to Pittsburgh. But his son, Charles, who was destined to take over the family business in a

few years, was not convinced. As the 1840s progressed, Charles Reed became increasingly convinced that railroads were destined to become the most powerful force in American transportation and that the economic success of Erie's docks would be driven by railroad connections.

Charles Reed's business philosophies involved strategic partnerships and cooperative relationships. He had demonstrated the power of partnering earlier when he worked with his wife's family to create a railroad between Erie and Buffalo, where his wife's family lived. That joint venture, which seemed on the surface to be competing with the Reeds' shipping empire, was designed to parallel Lake Erie, carrying freight that would complement the freight runs that Charles Reed was making with his fleet of steamships. From Buffalo, the railroad connections continued to New York City. In Reed's view, having family and friends run similar or even competing enterprises helped protect his interests. And that is why he encouraged his protégé, William L. Scott, to develop Erie's new "western dock complex," the Cascade Docks. Scott was a railroad man by training and instinct and he had expanded his investments in the new transportation technology by increasing his holdings in several railroads.

When the Erie Extension Canal (from Erie to Pittsburgh) went out of business in 1871, Scott purchased it at a sheriff's sale, realizing how easy it would be to convert it from a canal to new railway: the Erie and Pittsburgh Railroad. There was great potential for hauling business in both coal and iron ore and, after filling the ditch that had held the canal water, Scott used the pre-engineered and surveyed right-of-way to create a direct route from Pittsburgh to Erie, via Girard and Fairview.

Early Years

Scott used railroad connections to develop all three of the Cascade Docks between 1864 and 1870. The "middle dock" was built first. It was designed to handle soft coal and was serviced by the original railroad tracks that entered Erie from the east. For unknown reasons, it was (and is) the only one of the three docks that was oriented north and south. The "western dock" was built next. It was built in 1868 and began its tenure as a replacement soft-coal dock so that the middle dock (east of it) could be converted to handling iron ore. The middle dock already had a Brown Electric Dock Hoist that was being used for coal but it was determined that the modern new loading technology was much more important for iron ore so the electric hoist continued at that dock and several more were added. The third dock, the "east dock," was completed in 1871 and joined the middle dock in servicing the iron ore business. Locals called the eastern dock the Carnegie Dock, since most of its commerce was being sent to Andrew Carnegie's Pittsburgh steel mills.



A Brown Electric Hoist unloading in Buffalo

Roadway access to the new docks was via Cascade Street, which extended north to the waterfront. As the docks were being developed in the 1800s, streetcar tracks were run on Fourth Street between State and Cascade streets, so that workers could travel back and forth. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Cascade Street became a commercial and population center with stores, taverns, and other service businesses. Perhaps the most important support business was the Bayview Tavern, which is still at the northeast corner of Fourth and Cascade streets. Even today, the old power of Cascade Street as a primary north-south artery can be seen in the form of once popular stores and other businesses as well at St. Mathew Lutheran Church (Seventh and Cascade streets). St. Andrew Roman Catholic Church was built just a block west at Seventh and Raspberry streets.

Railroad access to all three docks was significantly improved in the early 1870s when Scott's new Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad tracks that followed the former Extension Canal right-of-way into town were completed and entered the dock area from the west. The Erie & Pittsburgh Railroad, which eventually was leased to the Pennsylvania Railroad, operated all three of the Cascade Docks.



The eastern (Carnegie) dock is shown in the foreground with the middle dock in the background. Note the row of Brown hoists.

The most astonishing aspect in the development of the western dock was the relocation of Cascade Creek. The second largest of Erie's creeks (Mill Creek was the largest), Cascade Creek emptied into the bay just west of the first (middle) dock, where its flow had created a deep water basin. That was the place where the U.S. Brig Niagara, U.S. Brig Lawrence and schooner Ariel were built for the War of 1812. To take advantage of the deep-water access provided by the pool west of today's middle dock and eliminate the danger of creek silting that might threaten to fill it in later, railroad engineers made the decision to move the mouth of the creek to the west side of the new dock. As a result, the new west dock was able to share the deep-water slip with the original middle dock. An environmental incursion like this would not be permitted these days.

A pesky human problem presented itself as the western Cascade Dock was being developed. A shanty town of squatters had gradually developed along the shoreline west of Cascade Creek. Annoyed that they had to deal with this community, the Pennsylvania Railroad demanded that the people move out and attempted to strong arm residents, forcing them out of their homes. A long, expensive court case ensued, during which the shantytowners won the right to stay on the land that they had been using for decades. As a result of the litigation, the residents were allowed to continue at their homes, providing that they were in continuous use. As individual shantytown residents passed away or ceased to use their properties, the land was to revert to railroad ownership.



This image of the middle and eastern Cascade Docks, with the Cascade Club in the foreground shows the Cascade Street access road. The Brown hoists are gone and the docks are transitioning to sand and gravel with the Erie Sand & Gravel ships tied up. Note the oil tanker cars on the tracks leading to the western dock (just out of view on the left).

The new railroad access that entered town from the south and west (roughly following the path of today's Bayfront Parkway) dramatically increased the iron ore transport business to Pittsburgh. The new east dock was lengthened from 800 to 1,300 feet and more Brown Hoists were added to the two iron ore docks (middle and east). By 1898, there were 12 Brown Electric Hoists operating on the iron ore docks. Brown hoists moved on their own rails, allowing them to change position with respect to both the ships they were unloading (or loading) and the railroad cars that were being filled.

They could be used for either coal or iron ore, and saved the hundreds of man-hours that had previously been required to manually shovel materials into wheelbarrows. For as efficient as they were during their time, however, a new technology suddenly rendered them outdated. George Hewlett from Conneaut, Ohio invented an automatic unloader in 1899 that worked much more efficiently than the Brown Hoists and, by the early 1900s, the previously modern and efficient Cascade Docks had become passé. Dock workers struggled to make the outdated technology work but, by the end of World War I, ships were going to ports with new Hewletts and the Cascade Docks were out of business.

World War II Years

The second life of the three Cascade Docks began during the runup to World War II. The two iron ore docks gradually became home to dredging and aggregate companies. Piles of sand and gravel appeared on the middle and eastern docks and a series of concrete companies began to operate from there. The western dock became home of Perry Shipbuilding, which received a war contract to build Yard Ferry Class (YF) Torpedo Boats for the United States Navy. After the war, Perry stayed in place, shifting its business to winter repair and layup work. It was Perry Shipbuilding that was responsible for the rows of anchored lake freighters positioned near the Cascade Docks during the late 1940s and early 1950s as they waited for winter repair work. United Oil ran pipelines from the western dock up to its oil storage fields south of the docks. The Erie company (not Warren's United Oil Refinery) hosted tanker ships at the western Cascade Dock through the early 1960s, pumping crude up the hill and into storage tanks (on the site of today's Niagara Pointe and Bluffs Condominiums).



Two views of the Whaleback Meteor show the unloading of oil at the western dock in about 1955. The left image was taken from the center dock. The right image shows the deck facing the oil storage fields and tanks

With their property rights secured, several residents of the old shantytown at the base of the western dock improved and expanded their properties. A few offered commercial services to the crowds of bucket fishermen who began frequenting the western pier when the coal deliveries ended. Eventually there was a bait shop, a fishing tackle & repair shop, and a place that sold soft drinks and sandwiches.

During the mid-1950s, the Cascade Street access to the docks was closed at West Second Street and replaced by a new access road at the foot of Cranberry Street, two blocks west. This shift created increased yard space for railroad cars and eventually helped the subsequent construction of the new Bayfront Parkway with a spur at Cranberry Street.

The Modern Bayfront

The third and current dock iteration began with the creation of the Bayfront Parkway. The new access road was constructed in sections between 1991 and 2005, beginning with a segment that stretched from just east of Greengarden Avenue to State Street. The new roadway provided access to portions of Erie's waterfront that had never been seen by residents and made it possible for commercial ventures to open on or near the water. In one brilliant strategic shift, Erie's former ugly, industrial wasteland began its transformation to a beautiful waterfront paradise. The bayfront became "the place to be" as more people began to see long-term potential. A strip of luxury condominiums appeared on the western Cascade Dock, prompting more modern changes. Marinas, a yacht club, and restaurants followed along the Bayfront Parkway, punctuated later by a concert venue, park, and playground. Suddenly, the venerable old Erie Water Pumping Station at Chestnut Street began to look like the architectural masterpiece that it had always been, and a convention center and new hotels were developed.

By the time it was completed, the Bayfront Parkway had efficiently linked Interstate 79 in a sweeping semicircle that extended east to Interstate 90 and Penn State Behrend. As Erie began to appreciate and celebrate its waterfront, the three Cascade Docks were renamed: (1) The western dock became Niagara Pier, (2) The Middle Dock was Lawrence Pier, and (3) the old eastern Carnegie Dock was called Liberty Park.

One of the most stunning bayfront transformations took place at the United Oil storage fields that had occupied land between West Third Street and Presque Isle Bay. The Bluffs Condominiums were built on a beautifully landscaped area on the south side of the Parkway, and Niagara Pointe, a high-end, gated residential development featuring grand homes that look out over Presque Isle Bay, was built on the north side. And as all of this was happening, Lake Erie Arboretum at Frontier (L.E.A.F.) was established, Cascade Creek was rehabilitated with the assistance of the SONS of Lake Erie, and a walking-biking path was built linking L.E.A.F. with the Arboretum at Penn State Behrend.

A Field Trip

Suit up. You will need long pants, socks, wading shoes, long sleeves, and a generous coating of insect repellent. Drive the Bayfront Parkway to the Niagara Pier exit (Bickford). Park in the lot next to Cascade Creek and follow the pathway over the wooden suspension bridge. Cross the bridge and follow the path west. Make a right turn after the creek and continue along the pathway that parallels the water. You will see birds, a beaver lodge, and other great critters including mink. If you persist in following the disorganized pathways that parallel Cascade Creek you will eventually pop out at the bay and be treated to a wonderful water vista. This is not the natural outflow of Cascade Creek since it was moved 100 years ago, but the waterway has formed a new connection to Presque Isle Bay. The building compound immediately to the west is Dave Bierig's sail-making operation, which is anchored by his grandfather-father's boathouse.

Photos:

Brown Hoist photo is from the Buffalo Historical Society and Library of Congress. All others were provided by Gordi Gebhard from United Oil.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.

