

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Salina: *Old Salt Schooner Helped Win Battle of Lake Erie*

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.



There are no photographs of Salina, but she would have looked like and been rigged like the two-masted Great Lakes schooner shown above.

With Judah Colt's encouragement, 20-year-old Daniel Dobbins walked to Erie from Lewistown, Pennsylvania, in 1796. Dobbins was a bold young man who had spent time hanging around the docks in Philadelphia, which was the busiest American port at the time. Colt dreamed of building a shipping business in Erie and he recruited Dobbins to supervise construction of his first schooner, the Lady Washington, and to captain it. Colt purchased three plots of land east of Erie. Two were at the mouths of Four Mile Creek in Harborcreek and Sixteen Mile Creek at Freeport in today's North East Township where he hoped to create shipping ports. The third was at the highest point of land on the edge of the Appalachian Escarpment Ridge above Lake Erie at Colt Station, where today's Routes 89 and 430 intersect.

Colt's business plan was brilliant but flawed. He passed over the opportunity to buy land inside the shelter of Presque Isle at the new town of Erie since he didn't think schooner captains would be willing to struggle upwind through an unimproved channel and into the bay. Instead he planned to attract commercial sailing ships to the creeks east of Erie, unload cargo and send it up to the top of the ridge. From that vantage point, overlooking Lake Erie he was going to use the headwaters of French Creek to ship Lake Erie goods to Pittsburgh and vice versa.

By 1808, Colt could see that he had made a few miscalculations. French Creek was only navigable to his upper station for a few months of the year and, while he had been building his trading post, the Reeds had taken over the Erie location that he ignored. As the Reeds' influence grew, they worked to improve the channel. Colt abandoned his two lower station creek ports, sold his schooner, and changed the business to a land-based trading post at the top of the ridge (his Upper Station).

Dobbins left Colt's employ and moved to Erie, where he was welcomed by the Reeds. Rufus Reed offered him part-ownership in his own ship, the Salina, a 45-foot, two-masted schooner. Salina went to work in 1809, hauling salt from Syracuse (picked up in Buffalo) into the northern lakes, where he traded for whiskey and furs. Between 1809 and 1812, Dobbins and Reed made a small fortune. One cargo of furs, returned to Erie in 1811 from Georgian Bay, for example, was valued at \$200,000. By the 1812 shipping season, Dobbins was reputed to be the most knowledgeable sailing master on the upper lakes (above Niagara Falls).

In July 1812, Dobbins and Reed were both aboard Salina returning from a successful trip into Georgian Bay. Salina was running downwind on Lake Huron at about six knots when a British military ship from Amhurstburg, the General Hunter, intercepted them. Dobbins had been boarded and released by British military ships several times before but each time the British commander had warned Dobbins to keep his ship out of British (Canadian) waters. Dobbins had always successfully argued that courses up or down the lakes required tacking, which made it impossible to completely avoid crossing into British territory.

As the General Hunter approached that day, Dobbins assured Reed, who did not normally make many voyages on his own ships, that there would be a warning after which Salina would be released. Dobbins had little choice but to submit. There was nowhere to run. A turn upwind, in which he would have had inferior pointing ability, would have placed him into contrary currents and made Salina a “sitting duck” if the British had decided to fire their guns.

The British put a squad of sailors aboard Salina, then forced Dobbins and Reed to raise their sails and follow them to port. As the naval kidnapping continued, Dobbins repeatedly assured Rufus Reed that they would be searched, chastised, and then released. Instead, however, the British commander explained to Dobbins and Reed that their ship had been reported in British waters several times and, for that violation, Salina was going to be seized. A few hours later, Dobbins, Reed, and the rest of Salina’s crew were being ferried to Detroit without their boat or its valuable cargo. Furious over the loss of their schooner and furs, Reed and Dobbins returned to Erie.

According to Navy Admiral Denys W. Knoll’s 1979 book, “Battle of Lake Erie: Building the Fleet in the Wilderness,” Dobbins in his ship Salina was delivering salt at Fort Mackinac in the northwestern part of Lake Huron in July 1812 when the fort was captured without warning by the British. The U.S. officer in charge at the fort had not been notified that the U.S. was at war. “Dobbins negotiated his release and proceeded to Detroit. Detroit fell to the British and Dobbins was again detained by the British,” Knoll wrote. “Again he was able to gain his freedom to proceed to Cleveland, and ultimately to his home in Erie. His arrival in Erie on August 24, 1812, brought the first news of the capture of Detroit and Fort Mackinac to the Erie area. There was great alarm that Erie would soon share a similar fate.”

Dobbins reported the conditions to General David Meade, who commanded the State Militia in northwest Pennsylvania. Wrote Knoll: “Meade agreed with Dobbins that the American shore of Lake Erie was defenseless, and requested Dobbins to proceed immediately to Washington and make a full report to President James Madison and his Cabinet. Dobbins promptly departed for Washington on August 25 or 26, 1812. ... Dobbins, at age 36, arrived in Washington on September 2 or 3, 1812. For the next ten days there were long and heated discussions with President Madison and his Cabinet concerning the defenseless nature of the American side of Lake Erie.”

Ultimately, Madison authorized construction of four gunboats at Erie – three were built at the foot of Lee’s Run at the Canal Basin entrance, the Scorpion, Porcupine, and Tigress – and a fourth, the pilot boat Ariel, was built at the foot of Cascade Creek. Later, Madison and Navy Secretary Paul Hamilton authorized construction of the two largest ships, the U.S. Brigs Lawrence and Niagara, at Cascade Creek.

At first, Madison, Hamilton, and other U.S. leaders were reluctant to grant permission and funding to build the new naval fleet in Erie, but Dobbins presented a compelling case for his plan. He argued that news of the construction of a large fleet of ships would

quickly find its way across Lake Erie to the British and that spies would be watching every move that American builders made. If the fleet were to be built in a more established seaport, British ships would wait until construction was almost finished and then attack. In the closed seaport of Erie, because of its shallow, unimproved channel, British ships would not be able to sail within cannon range of the new fleet and blast it into splinters before it was launched. President Madison and Secretary Hamilton also determined that Pittsburgh, a city of 6,000, was an ideal base of supply for building ships at Erie, with an established means of communications for the movement of supplies to Erie. By contrast, Erie's population was about 450, and Buffalo just 500, though it was home to the Black Rock Naval Base.

The absolute brilliance of Dobbins' plan was that Erie had just enough water in its channel to float finished but unloaded (with cannons and supplies) ships out into the open lake (with the help of "camels" to float the vessels over the sandbars), but not enough depth to allow fully armed British ships to sail in. As a bonus, frontier Erie boasted massive hardwood and softwood forests growing almost to the water's edge. Lumber needed to build the ships was readily available. Construction began during the winter of 1812 and, as Dobbins had suggested, British spies made regular tours of Erie, noting progress. At first it seemed that the task of building six naval ships from scratch in one season would be impossible, but as Dobbins and his men carried on, it became apparent that their mission might actually be accomplished. Dobbins, and later fleet Commander Oliver Hazard Perry, was on schedule to complete the fleet by August. There was one construction problem, however, and it was a significant one. Pine-pitch (tar) needed to impregnate the running rigging took more than a year to cure and Dobbins had not anticipated the amount that would be needed to treat the lines on all of the ships. With spring approaching, shipwrights informed Dobbins that it would be impossible to properly treat the running rigging on the Brig Lawrence and Brig Niagara. This was a huge problem, so serious that when word of the construction supply issue reached Commander Robert H. Barclay at British headquarters, he joked that the American fleet would probably be frozen in for another winter while Dobbins cooked new tar.

Dobbins probably would not have let that happen. If required, he would have launched the new ships with untreated running rigging, a weakness that may have caused mast and sail failures especially during the heat of battle. But then everything about the construction of the American fleet had been rushed. Green wood, design shortcuts, and a host of other problems were tolerated in favor of expediency. How else could the fleet be built in less than a year? And besides, few people expected the new fleet to last for more than a year or so. Its only purpose was to engage the British during the late summer of 1813.

Meanwhile, back at Amhurstburg on the Detroit River, Salina had been transformed by the British into a work boat. She was used to move supplies and make troop transport deliveries. Late in the fall of 1812, Dobbins' old ship was used to sail to Ohio to retrieve the bodies of troops who had been killed during a land battle. Winter ice was closing in

as Salina was approaching today's Toledo and before he realized what was happening, the British commander had sailed into pack ice and run hard onto a snow-covered drift. The crew worked for days trying to free Salina from the icy grip that held it less than a mile from shore, but the weather worsened and they finally abandoned her. By mid-January, Salina was frozen solid, her hull crushed by the force of shifting ice. The rig had fallen and the British had given up on the old salt trade schooner.

The winter of 1812-13 was bitter. Lake Erie was frozen over by early January and iced solid through March. The cold temperatures did not impede the construction of the fleet in Erie. Under Dobbins' supervision, and before Perry took command on March 26, 1813, the new ships were framed up and well underway. If anything, the frozen ground helped in the two shipyards as workers slid heavy timbers around and worked them into place. When Lake Erie's western ice flows began to break up and make their annual easterly pilgrimage toward the Niagara River, Dobbins' men were carefully watching water conditions along Presque Isle's shores. Their primary interest was in the water level that year, since they realized that without at least six or seven feet of draft in the channel, there would be no way to move the new fleet out into the open lake.

One day in late March, Dobbins' scouts returned to the Cascade Street shipyard from their Presque Isle lookout with a stunning report. They had spotted what looked like an old schooner, frozen into pack ice and drifted onto a beach just west of Erie. Dobbins was across the bay ice, onto the beaches at the base of Presque Isle, and hiking west with a party of six men moments after hearing the report.

"Could it be?" he wondered aloud.

The moment he spotted the derelict ship he knew that it was the Salina. The ice flow that held his beloved old schooner had broken free and drifted onto a beach amid a mass of pack ice. It was less than a half-mile from shore, crushed and splintered, but otherwise intact. Using anchors that were still aboard his old ship, Dobbins and his crew kedged the broken schooner as close to shore as they could. Then they plodded through mushy ice to harvest her sails, metal work and running rigging.

The salvage contained all the tar needed to complete work on the Lawrence and Niagara. When they had finished removing anything that could be boiled down into new tar, Dobbins released the anchor lines, gave the ice flow that held the Salina a gentle push, and sent her off to sink. Reports the next day suggested that the ice that had carried Salina back to her owner and delivered the gift that helped rig the Lawrence and Niagara, slipped below the surface of Lake Erie just east of town. It was one more uncharted wreck for the Lake Erie Quadrangle.

Photo from <https://www.shipwreckworld.com/articles/152-year-old-schooner-discovered-in-lake-ontario>

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.

