

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Who Moved Our Creek? *A Bay Rat History Mystery*

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 this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.



Beat up, faded, and neglected, this stone memorial to the construction of the U.S. Brig Niagara and the U.S. Brig Lawrence (they forgot to include the schooner Ariel) still graces the corner of West Second and Cascade streets.

You know you live in an important historical district if there are at least two official markers celebrating a past event. And Bay Rat land in Erie, Pennsylvania

obviously qualified. Not only did we have a highly visible marker commemorating the building of the ships for the War of 1812 at the prominent corner of West Sixth and Cascade streets and in front of the preeminent neighborhood beer distributor, but there was a second monument at Second and Cascade. That was the one that we mostly could associate with since it was at the sacred crossroads where we generally disappeared from “civilization” on the way to bayfront adventures. From that stone marker, we headed north into Second Field and the system of pathways that led to the bluffs. From there we could see the entire panorama of the Cascade Docks and Presque Isle Bay.

The West Sixth Street marker had even more important educational ramifications. Regardless of our choice of neighborhood schools, Emerson or St. Andrew, we passed the West Sixth Street memorial twice a day, helping to emphasize the fact that our neighborhood played an important role in history. When the confusing topic of the War of 1812 finally appeared in classroom studies, we became “local experts,” helping explain the actual lay of the land to the teachers who always approach the topic from a theoretical perspective. They could answer gnarly questions such as why Canada was really England in the old days, or how the town of Erie, Pennsylvania had become involved in a naval war. But what was happening on the bayfront near our beloved Cascade Docks fell within the day-to-day expertise of Bay Rats.

When we “learned” that the American fleet was constructed in two different locations, we asked why. But the answer made no sense to us. We learned that the downtown shipyard was used for building shallow-draft vessels like gunboats, while the Cascade Creek yard was needed for the large ships like the 20-gun Brig Lawrence and 20-gun Brig Niagara, whose deep keels required eight feet of water or more. According to our teacher, the once fast-running Cascade Creek had created a deep pool in the bay at the place where the Lawrence and Niagara (and the three-gun schooner Ariel) were built. When we objected, saying that we had spent countless summer hours at the outflow of Cascade Creek where the water was so shallow that we could wade out into the bay for at least 100 yards without getting our shirts wet, our teacher said that we had to be wrong. We may not have memorized all of the presidents or learned the times tables beyond “the fives” but we knew the bayfront. And Cascade Creek definitely did not lead to a deep pool!



This plaque has been at the corner of West Sixth and Cascade streets for decades.



This aerial view of the western Cascade Dock in about 1954 clearly shows Cascade Creek as it empties into the bay west (right) of the old pier.

The mystery of Cascade Creek was eventually revealed, decades later, in newspaper archives. Our teacher was historically correct about the creek having created a deep pool in the bay following “cascading” waterfalls. But the creek had been moved to its current location. When the first of the Cascade Docks, the center pier, was built in 1864, Cascade Creek was still emptying into the bay as it had in 1813 when Perry’s fleet was built. The deep pool of water that had been created by the force of the old creek, was immediately west of the center dock. It was the deep pool next to the pier that created a viable basin for ships that were arriving to unload (soft) coal. Four years later when the western pier was built, however, engineers who were designing the new dock began to be concerned that the reduced flow of the creek, in combination with natural changes in the basin, which was to service both docks (central and western piers), would quickly lead to it silting in.

To solve this potential problem and ensure the future viability of both docks, a decision was made to re-route Cascade Creek. Thus, in 1868, Cascade Creek was moved from its original position that would have been between the two docks, to the west side of the West Dock, where it continues to flow. A new turn in the creek was engineered and still exists at the base of the dock. At the time there was a vocal group of squatters who had taken up residence on the north side of the creek in a shanty town built of scrap materials. The shanties spanned the bayfront west of the original Center Cascade Dock. Shantytown squatters created quite a legal problem for the Pennsylvania Railroad, which was building the new dock, and, as a result of their objections, a series of concessions had to be made to ensure that their dwellings would be protected. One of these concessions was a new footbridge built so that the squatters would be able to continue to travel back and forth to their shanties. A replacement bridge still stands at the engineered turn of the creek, although the shantytown has long disappeared.

When the western pier was completed, soft coal deliveries that had been coming to the central pier were moved there and the central pier was reengineered to handle iron ore. Later, in 1891, as the iron ore business increased on Lake Erie, the third, eastern pier was added. Called the Carnegie Dock by locals, it was designed as another iron ore dock and intended to feed the steel mills of Pittsburgh. During the early 1990s all three docks morphed into modern waterfront facilities with a marina appearing at the center dock and beautiful, high-end condos on the western pier.



This contemporary aerial view shows the western and center docks as well as the new outflow of Cascade Creek.



Do the modern residents of the Western Cascade Dock appreciate the history of the neighborhood?

Field Trip: Park in the public lot in front of Bickford, cross the bridge that is to the west, and hike along Cascade Creek to the place where it flows into the bay. You may have to ignore a “Do Not Cross the Bridge” sign. Ignoring warning signs is a time-honored Bay Rat tradition. There is a beaver lodge on the way. When you emerge at the bay, you will see the Dave Bierig sailmaking compound. Take bug spray.

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*

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with

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JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY PUBLICATION

The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at 301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505 will also handle sales *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, 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.



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