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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

The Other Niagara: Green Boats by the Bay

By David Frew
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The 266-foot, steel-hulled dredge, Niagara, was an Erie ship for years.

There were two ships named Niagara on the Erie bayfront during the 1950s. The first was a broken-down tall ship that had been planted on a concrete cradle at the foot of State Street, where it was left to slowly deteriorate. The second was a bright green, steel vessel tied to a pier just a few blocks away.

History aside and lacking a clear vision of the remarkable sailing brig that was destined to rise from rotting boards on State Street to become a glorious gift to the community, our favorite was the steel vessel that we watched steaming back and forth through the channel.

Long before the birth of Erie's Bayfront Convention Center, the space between Chestnut Pool and the Reed Dock (the Sassafras Street Pier upon which the Convention Center rests) was an overgrown wilderness that served as the easternmost Bay Rat territory. There were a number of "prohibited" operations on that tract of land, but Bay Rats were impervious to fences, barbed wire and no trespassing signs.

The precise "barriers" to our exploration included a private boat club launch, GAF Corporation (a roofing manufacturer), and Erie Sand & Gravel, an aggregate business that operated from the Sassafras Street Pier and also maintained a fleet of ships. While GAF actively discouraged the public from trespassing on its property, Erie Sand & Gravel allowed people to drive the length of its dock and fish on the north end of its property. So, once we reached Erie Sand & Gravel on the east side of GAF, we were relieved. There were giant piles of sand to climb and lots of shipping activities to watch.

The most exciting event at the Sassafras Street Dock was the arrival of a sand dredge. Dredges came several times per day and included both Erie Sand & Gravel's company "sand-suckers" as well as ships from other companies. The M.V. Niagara was a regular visitor, but it was not purchased by Erie Sand & Gravel until 1959. The company-owned dredge during the early 1950s was a ship named "Scobell."

A loaded ship would pull up to the dock, tie off and then use its on-board machinery and deck-crane to empty newly acquired sand, placing it in a pile on the dock. This operation represented an amazing opportunity for curious kids like us to get up close and watch how unloading worked. From time to time a kindly crew member would show us exactly how things worked and on a few rare occasions we were allowed to climb aboard and inspect. Naturally, any of the niceties that were showered upon us curious kids would be way off-limits these days. But we were persistent and once in a while a crew member would shift into the role of teacher-mentor, explaining how the ship, the dredging operations and the unloading operation worked. It was an awesome, self-directed field trip. On one occasion we were given a tour of a wheelhouse. Big excitement!



The former GAF property after the company closed and the building was torn down in 2010

The green company ships that we were watching at the Sassafra Street (the former Reed) Dock were owned by Erie Sand & Gravel and they were Erie's last fleet of local ships. Company owner Sidney Smith was known for "horse trading." During a span of several decades, he managed to acquire a series of veteran Great Lakes ships, many of which had been converted to sand dredges. Eventually our favorite was the Niagara, an 1897 lake freighter that had been built in Michigan and was originally equipped with a steam engine. Its original length was 281 feet but by the mid-1920s it was undersized and no longer economically viable as a freighter. It was purchased by a Buffalo firm in 1926, shortened to 266 feet and converted to a sand dredge. An Erie dredging company purchased it and brought it to town but eventually decided that it was obsolete and announced it was going to be sold for scrap.



The old Erie Sand & Gravel operation was just west of GAF on the Sassafra Street Dock – now the site of the Bayfront Convention Center.

Erie Sand & Gravel took a risk and purchased Niagara in 1957 to replace its own company dredge, the Scobell, which was undersized. Doing the rework themselves, the workers installed a diesel engine as well as a Bucyrus Erie crane

with unloading equipment, making it one of the most efficient dredges on the Great Lakes. And true to company tradition, they painted the hull green.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the M.V. Niagara was that its hull was covered with a layer of wood so that the ship's bottom would be impervious to the shallow-water groundings common among dredges that were making deliveries to small aggregate operations on the Niagara River as well as the Buffalo Harbor, where there was not always enough water for deep-draft ships. Sid Smith's ships sailed under the flag of his own subsidiary company, Erie Sand Steamship. Each of his ships could be distinguished by its unique orange smokestack colors.



Denise Robison Mullen

Eventually the economies of the aggregate business, in combination with the aging of the M.V. Niagara, rendered the old ship obsolete and in 1982 Erie Sand & Gravel decided it needs to be retired. Recognizing the historic nature of his ship, which had been awarded a citation for being the oldest registered ship on the Great Lakes in 1980, Smith began to explore ways to preserve his beloved ship. There was an interest in converting it to a museum ship in Michigan, where it had been built, and Smith offered to move the ship to the proposed new home. But the Michigan plan failed and, even though Smith continued to look for opportunities to save Niagara, prospects did not materialize. In 1983, the veteran ship was sent across Lake Erie to Port Maitland, Ontario to be scrapped.



Erie Sand Steamship's distinctive orange smokestack colors

That was when Denise Robison, local political leader and community activist, became involved. Concerned that Erie was needlessly giving up an important part of its history, she organized an ad-hoc committee to save Niagara and went to work. The first challenge was to rescue Niagara from its imminent fate at the scrapyards. Denise and her group raised the funds needed to buy it back (an amount that included the prospective scrapyards profit) and had it towed back to Erie. The ship was repainted in its distinctive Erie Sand Steamship green and tied to the north end of the Sassafras Street Pier, where it sat waiting.

There were two alternative preservation proposals. First was to lift it onto dry land near the waterfront and convert it to a museum. At the time there were two successful examples of old ships that had been made into museums by “planting” them in concrete close to the water’s edge: the Whaleback Meteor in Superior, Wisconsin, and Chicago’s German U-Boat. There was hope that Niagara could be preserved in a similar way, close to the water’s edge and somewhere near the defunct GAF plant, where it could become a part of Erie’s tourist economy. A second possibility was connected to the rebuilding of the Brig Niagara and creation of a maritime museum. Why not include the M.V. Niagara in the museum compound that was to house the brig?

Sadly, there was so much pressure to move Niagara so that work on the Bayfront Convention Center could proceed, that time became limited. The obviously more important plan to develop the convention center, which was destined to be linked with modern, high-end hotels and Erie’s tourism future, was a logical priority. There was not enough money, time was expiring, and local interest in preserving the second Niagara was not sufficient. In 1997, M.V. Niagara was sold to Erie’s Lincoln Iron & Metal, which disassembled the venerable old ship and scrapped it, piece by piece, at its berth on the waterfront.

Local maritime enthusiasts shed tears as an important component of Erie history, was literally consumed. The saddest of all was Denise Robison, who had become the ship's champion.



Salvage began at the end of the Sassafras Street Pier, but Niagara was still recognizable.



Almost gone

While it is appropriate to celebrate waterfront successes, such obvious monuments to Erie's past as the Bicentennial Tower, Maritime Museum, and Brig Niagara, we should be just as grateful for the work of people like Denise Robison Mullen, whose intentions were noble but outcomes less-than-hoped-for. M.V. Niagara may be gone but thanks to the valiant efforts to preserve it, its stories will live forever. And while it may seem that efforts to save that one old ship were in vain, they were not. Lessons learned from that community project were used to help fuel the waterfront development that has benefited Erie over the decades

since M.V. Niagara was lost. Denise Robison Mullen and her colleagues who worked to save an old, green-hulled steel ship should be celebrated.

Denise Robison Mullen currently serves as a Jefferson Educational Society board member. Her earlier public service contributions to Erie included serving two terms as an elected Republican member of Erie City Council, as well as an appointment as deputy director of Pennsylvania's Department of Aging. Her time in politics helped Denise Robison Mullen successfully save the other Niagara. Today's beautifully restored Brig Niagara and its home at the Maritime Museum are in large part due to her efforts.



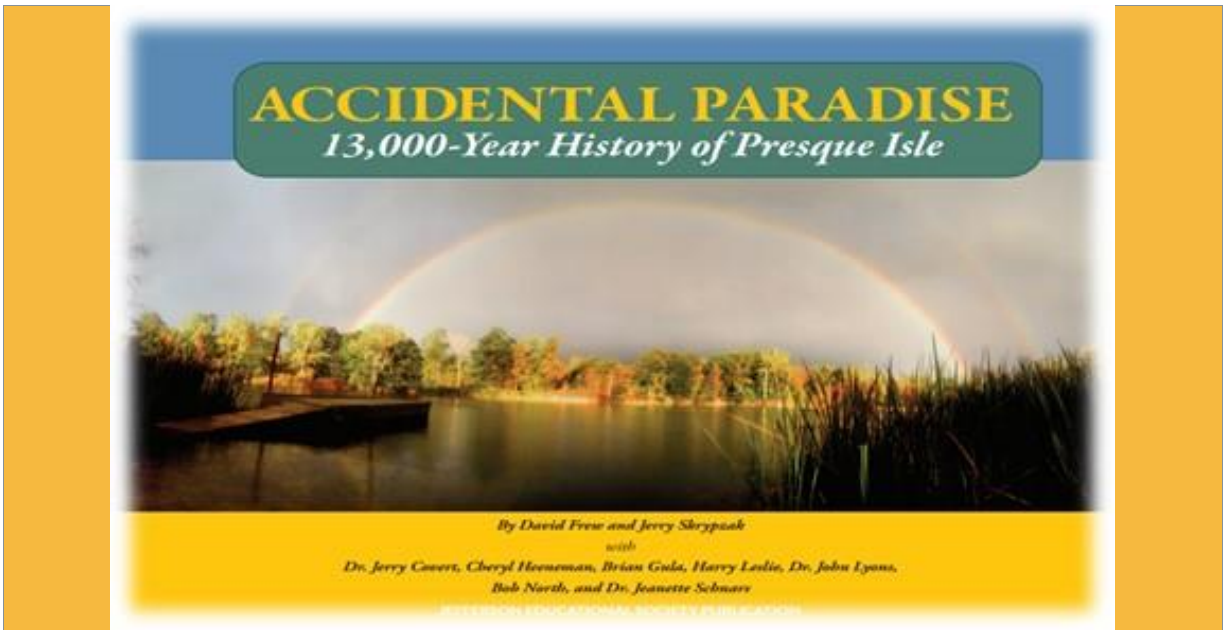
Here is an architectural rendering of the GAF/Erie Sand & Gravel property as it may look in the future. The Bayfront Convention Center and new hotels are depicted along with the possible uses of the former GAF site.

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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