

Festive Tall Ships® recall original era of sailing vessels

The Tall Ships® Duluth celebration in summer 2010 was an overwhelming validation of the Port's maritime heritage. From the earliest indications that this natural harbor could become one of North America's most successful ports, Duluth-Superior has embraced its waterborne culture.

In the Port's formative years, sailing vessels provided almost exclusive contact with the outside world, both economically and socially. It's unclear when the first sailing vessels arrived at the Head of the Lakes, but they were quite likely involved in the North American fur trade.



The Port's Past
Patrick Lapinski



As early as the 1830s and '40s, small schooners of the American Fur Company, like the *Brewster* and *Siskawit*, were known to bring coffee, tobacco and hard goods for the handful of traders, trappers and natives that inhabited the wooded shore rimming the western end of Lake Superior. The ships would depart with furs and fish.

Early settlement occurred along Minnesota Point near the mouth of the St. Louis River and just inland at Superior, established in the 1850s along the present day East End of the city. The meandering mouth of the river as it crossed the shifting sands of the point prevented vessels of any substance from entering

the protected waters of the bay, initially making it necessary to transfer goods inland from the lake.

A trading post operated on the bay side of the Point by pioneer George Stuntz, and the more established Nettleton slip across the bay at Superior, became the established destinations for goods arriving for sale and trade. The earliest recorded vessel to call at the Head of the Lakes was the schooner *Algonquin*.

Steady growth following the opening of the region for settlement led to increased commerce on both sides of the harbor. Among the settlement frontrunners was Oneota, located roughly around today's West End in Duluth. Goods transferred along the Point were taken inland by watercraft on the seven-mile trip up the river to Oneota.

From the perspective of sailing craft, the development of Oneota is important because it led to the construction of the first sailing vessel built at Duluth. The 49-ton scow schooner *Chaska* was built by Alfred Merritt and Henry Ely to carry lumber from Henry Wheeler's sawmill on the St. Louis River. Another scow schooner, the *Neptune* was also known to be engaged in hauling lumber from the Oneota mill and the adjacent Milford sawmill to stops on the Keweenaw Peninsula and at Marquette.

In 1865, R.G. Coburn of Superior, along with several others, purchased the schooner *Pierpont*, at Oswego, N.Y., bringing it here for use in the lumber trade. During this same time period several other sailing vessels were also working in the area, among them the schooner

Maple Leaf and the *George W. Ford* from Ontonagon.

It is important to recognize that development at Duluth, because of its location at the western end of the Lakes, came late in relation to the Great Lakes as a whole, and as a result sailing vessels shared the harbor during a transitional time with steam powered side-wheelers, tugs, and hybrid sail and steam combinations.

Generally speaking, between the 1840s and well into the 1880s, wooden sailing vessels dominated the waters of the Great Lakes. Prevalent among these was the iconic schooner, considered by many to be the pinnacle of inland wooden shipbuilding.

The lakes' schooners were modified to make the most of their environment, which consisted of canals (Welland and Sault), shallow harbors and small rivers. Many of these confined waterways lacked any sustained wind.

To accommodate these conditions, the ships were built with relatively flat bottoms that enabled them to sail in shallow water. To counteract their flattened bottoms when sailing in deep water, some schooners deployed a weighted, retractable centerboard to add stability.

Most schooners ranged from 75 to 200 feet in length and were fitted with two or three masts. To catch the most wind possible, schooner masts were anywhere from 100 to 200 feet high, taller than typical deep water schooners where *too much* wind was usually the problem. Tri-sails were mounted fore

and aft on each mast, making these craft ideal for sailing close to the wind, and they were easily handled by a small crew of five or six working the lines from the deck.

Like many of today's blunt-bow and square-stern vessels, schooners were designed to fit snugly in the locks and canals of the day. Their sides were steep, made nearly vertical to make the most of cargo storage capacity. If you were to take away their sails, they would look much like a barge. In fact, scow schooners, towed in tandem by steam tugs, became a common site on the lakes in the waning days of sail.

Before the digging of the Duluth ship canal, vessels trading at the Head of the Lakes were berthed at piers on the lake side of the harbor, such as the Citizen's Wharf and Howard's Dock, north of the present day canal.

Duluth's first grain elevator was located at about present day Fifth Avenue East, adjacent to the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad wharf.

Freight arriving by ship was packed in barrels and bags for easy stowage. When the railroads entered the market in the 1870s, much of that trade went inland, leaving waterborne commerce to handle bulk cargoes such as grain and lumber, later adding iron ore, stone and coal to the list. Vessels of note in the lumber trade were the schooners *J.B. Newland* and the 227 gross-ton *Lucia A. Simpson*.

The advent of steel shipbuilding brought about the end of the sail-

ing era on the Great Lakes. Steel-hulled vessels soon jumped in size to over 500 feet, more than double the reasonable structural length for wooden vessels.

The cost of upkeep on the sail-

proportionately high insurance rates in the spring and fall, made it increasingly difficult for sailing vessels to compete. Within a span of a decade an era was over.

When the festive Tall Ships®



The wooden bulk freighter *Superior* and her consort *Sandusky* tied up at Elevator A in the mid-1870s. Sailing for the Western Transportation and Coal Company of Detroit, the duo hauled grain down from the Twin Ports and coal up from Lake Erie. Photo by Gaylord Photo. Lake Superior Marine Museum Archives, Lake Superior Maritime Collection at University of Wisconsin-Superior



The *Pride of Baltimore II* was co-sponsored by Ceres and the Duluth Seaway Port Authority for Tall Ships® Duluth 2010.

Robert Welton

sailed into Duluth this past summer, they arrived with clean sails, splinter-free decks, freshly painted hulls and more than enough hands on deck to make an old sea captain smile.

Now many generations removed from their rough-edged ancestors, these finely dressed, stately ships called to mind the era of wooden boats and iron men from which we as a port community descend. For a brief moment we were transported back to an age when destiny of the city arrived in sheets of canvas and hulls of wood.

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ing ships far exceeded that of the new steel ships and, coupled with