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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Daniel Dobbins' Three Favorite Ships: Lady Washington, Salina, and Ohio

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Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. It was first published in December 2020.

One of our most important Bay Rat expeditions in Erie, Pennsylvania took place in 1954. After swimming at Chestnut Pool, we decided to hike east along the railroad tracks to see what we might find. Mindful that we were invading territory controlled by Russian kids, we proceeded with great caution. We had seen enough World War II movies and newsreels to understand Russians.

At the GAF property on the bayfront, we detoured north into sand piles and other dockside stuff until we were finally kicked out. Then we wandered through several marinas that bounded the south edge of the West Canal Basin. Before we knew it, we had almost reached Erie's east-west divide at State Street. Not wanting to push our luck with the scary Russian kids, we headed south.

Masters of the urban shortcut, we climbed up the bluff toward State Street, which was where we encountered something amazing: a short stretch of street made of

rounded stones with a marker that said Dobbins Lane. Dobbins? We knew about Perry, but who was Dobbins and what did he have to do with the waterfront?



Dobbins Lane, which has been restored, was built of cobblestones.

That hike, which took place almost 70 years ago, launched a long-term obsession with Daniel Dobbins. He turned out to be my kind of historical hero – a character who was almost the opposite of the more famous Oliver Hazard Perry. Perry, the apparent local hero of the War of 1812, was an East Coast, blue blood with barely hidden political aspirations. Dobbins, on the other hand, was a “westerner” and a frontiersman, quite like the cowboy heroes of my youth. During his time here, Erie *was* the Western Frontier, and sailors were the cowboys (parallels between sailors and cowboys have been noted in historical literature). Cowboys had horses and sailors had ships. They both used ropes and knots.

As I was to learn later, Dobbins was one of the most important figures in regional history. He was the original builder of the U.S. Navy’s fleet that defeated the British on Lake Erie. He was the most influential person in Erie’s maritime evolution. In 1845, when he was almost 70 years old and near the end of a fabled career, locals who were interested in documenting Erie’s maritime history asked him to recall the ships that had been built here or sailed from the town’s docks. Remarkably, he was able to list most of them and name their captains, all of whom he knew well. Dobbins recalled details of ship sizes and sailing rigs, as well as the trade routes they worked. Most of all, he recalled his personally favorite ships,

which were not the motor vessels that he commanded later. They were War of 1812-era sailing ships (1) Lady Washington, (2) Salina, and (3) Ohio.

Dobbins (changed from Dobbin) grew up on Central Pennsylvania's Juniata River during the 1880s. As a boy he helped his father, who was a river boat captain. He married at age 17 and moved from Lewistown with his wife, Mary, to Sugar Creek near today's Franklin, Pennsylvania. Dobbins chose that location because it was the water intersection of French Creek and the Allegheny River, and it was on the established "roadway" that connected Philadelphia with Erie.

There wasn't much work in Sugar Creek, but Dobbins learned of opportunities in the new town of Presque Isle (Erie) and moved there in 1792, thinking that the lakeshore location would provide opportunities in shipping. He went to work for the Pennsylvania Population Company, the land company from Philadelphia that was developing the new Erie Triangle. Dobbins was doing surveying and other work when Judah Colt arrived from Connecticut in 1795.

Colt was an easterner with money who came to Erie to acquire land and build a business empire. He was introduced to Dobbins and was immediately impressed with his work ethic. Colt tried to purchase several huge plots of land on the lakeshore, but was rebuffed by the local land agent, Thomas Rees, so he traveled to Philadelphia to attempt to buy the property directly from the Pennsylvania Population (land) Company. As it turned out, the company was dissatisfied with its Erie agent and hired Colt to replace him. When Colt returned as the new land agent, the first thing he did was to sell himself the land that he had tried to purchase earlier.

Colt's most important early holdings were at the outflows of Four Mile and Sixteen Mile Creeks, east of Erie, as well as a plot at the top of the escarpment ridge south of the lake (today's Colt Station). Colt's preliminary analysis was that the inlet (not really a channel) to Presque Isle Bay was not navigable and that ship captains coming from the east on sailing vessels would not want to fight their way into Erie's sheltered harbor.

His plan was to launch his own fleet of sailing ships, establish commercial harbors at the two creeks (he called them Lower Stations), and haul cargo up the hill to his Upper Station trading post (Colt's Station at the intersection of today's Route 89 and Route 430). Colt's trading post was on the roadway from Philadelphia, where he would be able to sell supplies to anyone moving north. The core of the business, however, was to be hauling barrels of salt (from his and other vessels) up to his trading post from the creekside docks. From there, he planned to float it down French Creek and the Allegheny River to Pittsburgh. A barrel of salt could be purchased near Syracuse, New York for 60 cents and sold in Pittsburgh for \$13. But he needed sailing ships and sailors to make the plan work.

Colt hired Dobbins to build and sail his ships. Aware that his new employee was an experienced sailor but had little experience in shipbuilding, Colt hired a Connecticut shipbuilder to oversee construction. His new shipwright, Eliphalet Beebe, came from a shipbuilding family and brought Atlantic Coast experience with him. Colt assigned Beebe and Dobbins the task of designing and building the region's first merchant sailing ship. Dobbins' "deal" with Colt included the purchase of two large plots of land in Erie and he added an additional two acres as a "signing bonus."

One of the advantages of adding Beebe to the building crew was that he was a champion bare-knuckle fighter, and Dobbins did not exactly shirk from conflict himself. While there was difficulty dealing with squatters who argued that they actually owned the lakefront properties at Four and Sixteen Mile Creeks, Colt had confidence that Beebe and Dobbins would be able to "persuade" the squatters to let them complete and launch their new ship.

Eventually, the Lady Washington was launched from Four Mile Creek. She sailed for three years, running regularly between Colt's docks and various ports on the eastern end of Lake Erie. Dobbins and Beebe took turns mastering the ship, but, according to Colt, Dobbins was the superior skipper.

Lady Washington was a financial success for Colt, but only because he had written off most of the building expenses, charging them to the Pennsylvania Population Company. For the company, however, Colt's sailing enterprise was a losing proposition, and they were annoyed. In 1800, against Colt's wishes, the company put the ship up for sale and, in 1801, they attracted a buyer from Ontario who sailed Lady Washington to Chippewa, Ontario, lifted it from the water, and towed it around Niagara Falls to Queenston with a team of oxen. The road used to bypass Niagara Falls was essentially the same as today's Portage Avenue.

The new Canadian owners changed the name to Washington and sailed it until 1803 when it was lost with all hands in a Lake Ontario gale. Colt had been lobbying the company for permission to build another ship, but instead he was told that the Pennsylvania Population Company was done funding his sailing ships. This decision left both Dobbins and Beebe without work. Beebe found new backers and built another ship, the Harlequin, which was launched from Erie in late 1800.

Dobbins and Beebe disagreed on the optimum sailing rig for a merchant ship, with Dobbins arguing that more, smaller individual sails, as used on a schooner rig, were better for negotiating Lake Erie's choppy conditions. But Beebe preferred the sloop rig, which was easier to build, and his new Harlequin was so rigged. Sadly, Harlequin was lost during her first season, taking all hands with it. That tragedy effectively ended Beebe's local shipbuilding career, and he moved back to Connecticut.

In 1804, with his ship gone, Colt gave up on the three locations east of town and moved into Erie. By that time, Colt's attempts to ship cargo south from his upper station had failed and he could see that the future of regional commerce as well as shipping would almost certainly be inside Presque Isle harbor. Meanwhile, Dobbins went back to work for the Pennsylvania Population Company and continued to live with his family at the home he had built in Erie on property near today's French Street that he had purchased in 1797.

The Reeds (dad Seth, son Rufus, and others), who had made the decision to settle in Erie, were trying to enter the shipping business and, recognizing Dobbins' experience and skill, they hired him. In 1809, they purchased a merchant sailing ship called the Catherine, renamed her Salina, and offered Dobbins an ownership share if he would be the captain. Salina was approximately 60-feet long with a capacity of 80 tons, making it about twice as large as Lady Washington. Dobbins loved sailing it, especially since it was schooner rigged.

By 1811, Dobbins had made dozens of profitable trading voyages to western Lake Erie, Lake Huron, and the Georgian Bay, usually taking salt west and returning with valuable furs. Dobbins loved Salina, reporting that she was fast and responsive. She could sail upwind better than any of the British patrol ships that he encountered while tacking upwind and up current in Lake Erie. Both Dobbins and Rufus Reed made fortunes with Salina. But in early 1812, while stopping at Mackinac on a regular trade run, Dobbins suddenly learned that the British had taken over the critical trading post. Shortly after he entered the harbor and tied Salina up, British soldiers commandeered his ship.

Dobbins returned to Erie and traveled to Washington with Rufus Reed to argue for the creation of a naval base here, where he offered to oversee building a fleet to challenge and defeat the British Navy on Lake Erie. Even though naval custom would have argued that the fleet should have been built at Black Rock (at Buffalo), Dobbins' arguments were so persuasive that he gained the support of President James Madison, was awarded the rank of sailing master (the rough equivalent of master sergeant), and given funds to start building a Lake Erie fleet. In the runup to the Battle of Lake Erie in September 1813, Dobbins was the driving force in the creation and operations of two local shipyards; one at the foot of Myrtle Street and the other at the foot of Cascade. In a remarkably short period of time, he managed to acquire supplies and supervise the construction of a fleet. With the help of Perry and his staff, who took command, the ships were ready to be launched by the spring of the following year, but there was one critical shortage: the tar needed to coat the running rigging on the U.S. Brig Lawrence and U.S. Brig Niagara, which were built at the Cascade dock. And that was when a small miracle happened.

One of Dobbins' Cascade Street builders reported that an abandoned sailing ship had been sighted in pack ice a few hundred yards off the beaches of Presque Isle.

Hoping that it might be Salina, Dobbins rushed across the frozen bay, crossed Presque Isle and spotted it. Somehow his beloved schooner had escaped British custody and floated down the lake to Erie. Dobbins pushed a small boat through the pack ice to his old schooner and stripped it of everything that could be burned to make the tar that was needed to complete work on the Lawrence and Niagara. Before he left Salina, Dobbins poured whale oil into the old ship, set it aflame and pushed it away from the ice. The last he saw of Salina, it was floating east toward the end of Presque Isle with flames and smoke rising from the hull. Even if the British recovered it, Salina would do them no good.

As Perry was organizing the fleet prior to the Battle of Lake Erie, he put Dobbins in charge of the Ohio. Dobbins' new ship was a 48-foot, 62-ton schooner converted from a merchant ship in anticipation of the war. Dobbins fell in love with his new ship and went to work tweaking the rig to make it faster and better upwind. In head-to-head sailing, Dobbins said that his Ohio was faster than any of the other gunboats. Sadly for Dobbins, he and the Ohio were sent on a resupplying mission and missed the big battle, a disappointment that haunted him for the rest of his life. Even worse was the eventual fate of his schooner.

In 1814, the year after the Battle of Lake Erie, while Dobbins was assigned to repairing captured British ships, the Ohio departed Erie with the Porcupine and Sommers to patrol eastern Lake Erie. The three ships were anchored near Fort Erie when a raid by a rag-tag British squadron, including row boats, attacked and eventually captured two of the American ships. Only the Porcupine, skippered by William Senet, managed to escape and return to Erie. Dobbins was furious over the incompetence of the Ohio's captain, who went to sleep without setting a watch and allowed the ship to be captured. The British changed the name of the Ohio to HMS Huron and sailed it until 1817, after which it was converted to a yard barge and disappeared. .



Daniel Dobbins and his wife Mary lived in this home, which was originally at the corner of Third and State streets, facing Presque Isle Bay. After his wife died, the home was turned 90 degrees so that it faced State Street and was converted to a duplex.

During his later years, Dobbins rarely completed a retrospective conversation without cursing the losses of the Lady Washington (which he had planned to re-rig), Salina, and Ohio. He passed away at his home in 1856, sickened by tragedies that had befallen his family, including the death of two daughters while he was away during the war and a favorite son, Decatur, who had committed suicide after experiencing a lifetime of problems. Dobbins' one shining happiness was his son, David, who had become an officer in the Lifesaving service (thanks to the influence of Dobbins), where he designed an improved lifeboat while he oversaw the station at Buffalo.



David Porter Dobbins (1817 to 1892)



Salina, at the bottom of Lake Ontario

But Dobbins' favorite ships were not done with him yet. In 2016, exactly 160 years after Erie's "Frontier Mariner" (the title of Robert Illisevich's outstanding book about Daniel Dobbins) had passed away, three wreck hunters were "side-scanning" the bottom of Lake Ontario near Oswego, New York when they spotted something. In 250 feet of water, lying upright on its keel as if it had simply come to rest there and was waiting to be discovered, there was an old schooner with its mast still standing. Jim Kennard, Roger Pawlowski, and Roland Stephens returned to the site when the light was just right and sent an ROV down for a closer look. They were able to land the remote vehicle on the deck of the schooner and take precise measurements, finding a ship that was 53 feet long on deck with a 16.5-foot beam and a draft of 9 feet, essentially the same size that had been reported by Dobbins. It had to be the Salina! Since Dobbins and Beebe were more interested in launching Salina than making measurements, they had never reported the exact details.

There is no plan to salvage the Salina since it is well-preserved in the cold depths of Lake Ontario. Like Dobbins Lane, it is one more monument to the life of Erie's Daniel Dobbins.



*The meticulous survey of the wreck of Salina allowed salver Roland Stephens to create this watercolor, the only accurate image of Daniel Dobbins' ship.***

*Daniel Dobbins, for whom the Public Dock at the foot of State Street was renamed in his honor, was a man of few words, making it more than difficult to learn about him. Important testimonials to him were made by others, including Judah Colt, Oliver Perry, and Jesse Elliott. Colt left meticulous business records that detail the work of Dobbins. These have been preserved at the Crawford County Library. The most comprehensive records, however, were collected by Dobbins' son, David Porter Dobbins. David Dobbins, who fully understood the contributions of his understated father, collected family papers, correspondence, and associated documents, and placed them in the care of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. Dobbins is also the subject of an excellent biography written by Robert D. Ilisevich ("Daniel Dobbins, Frontier Mariner") that was published by the Erie County Historical Society in 1993 and reprinted by the Jefferson Educational Society as part of the Perry 200 Commemoration in 2013. Copies remain available at the Jefferson.

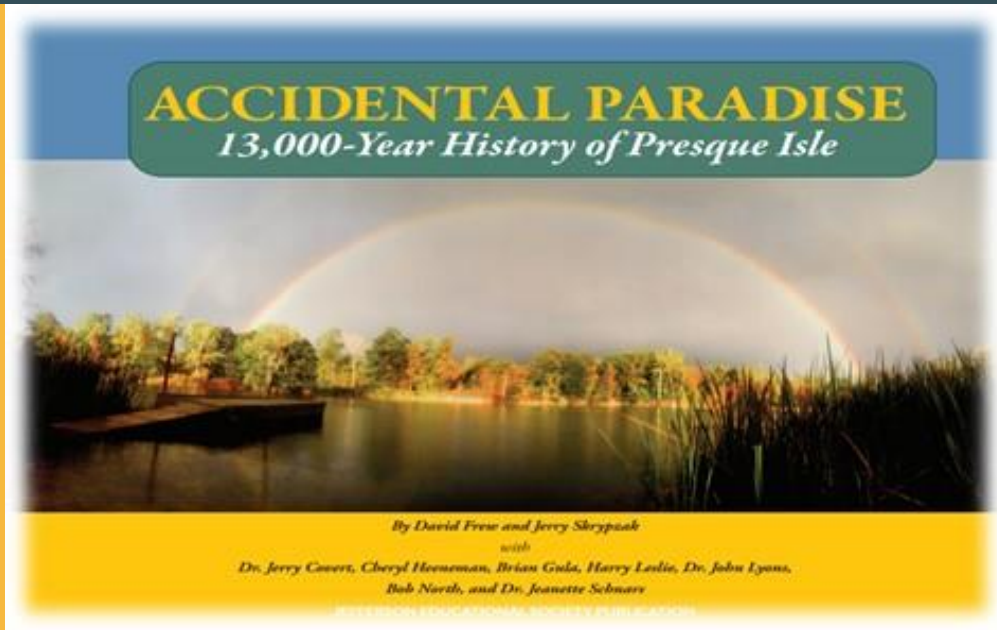
**Roland Stephens is a noted Rochester watercolor artist whose works include the Salina.

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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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