

United States and Canada began to trickle eastward to feed the people of eastern North America when the Erie Canal was completed in 1825. The incredible rise of this grain trade is marked by the entry of the Great Lakes into the world grain market. By the early 20th century the outflow of grain had become a flood with the potential to have an impact far beyond North American markets.²

Buffalo was the essential link in the Midwestern grain trade. Buffalo's position at the terminus of the upper Great Lakes (eastern Lake Erie at the beginning of the Niagara River), the west end of the Erie Canal, and multiple railroads made it the hub of major activity. Hundreds of cargoes of grain from the west and Midwest were loaded in Chicago, Milwaukee, Duluth, and other upper lakes ports and shipped to Buffalo for milling or transfer by rail to reach national and world markets.³ Cargoes delivered during the summer flowed into Buffalo elevators with amazing speed and efficiency, feeding a seeming insatiable need. But ice closed the lakes to navigation in the winter – roughly December to March, and sometimes later depending upon icing conditions and the willingness of insurers to issue marine policies – which brought disruption to the flow of grain.

The common practice at the time was to load lake bulk carriers with their last cargo in an upper lakes port during November or December before sailing to Buffalo to be laid up for the winter. They therefore served as temporary storage until the elevators needed their cargoes to maintain a steady stream of commodities. They were anchored out, nearly side to side between the shore and the breakwaters, moored against the weather with holds full to await unloading when the stocks of grain in the elevators ashore dwindled. Hence, the steady flow of grain was assured and this part of the economic engine powered by Great Lakes commerce was maintained. Toledo, Erie, Cleveland, and other lower lake ports also sheltered vessels in winter layup with grain cargoes, but Buffalo was dominant by a considerable margin.⁴

Buffalo was a challenging winter lay-up port. The harbor was not a natural, deep water embayment with good shelter for vessels of all sizes. Instead it was a minor bay on the east side of the Niagara River at the outflow of Lake Erie. The shelter it provided was man-made, composed of a series of riprap breakwaters set in a rough line three-and-a-half miles long that divided the anchorage from the open waters of the lake. The breakwater system – funded largely by the United States government, built primarily by private contractors, and maintained by the United States Army Corps of Engineers – provided 1,800-2,000 feet of space between the lake and the shoreline, including the 800 foot wide navigational channel. Unlike dockage along the river and canals of Buffalo, mooring out in the harbor was free and thus attractive to shipping companies. Under

² Jay C. Martin, "Sailing the Freshwater Seas: A Social History of Life Aboard the Commercial Sailing Vessels of the United States and Canada on the Great Lakes, 1815-1930" (PhD Dissertation, Bowling Green State University, 1995), 22-25.

³ John G. Clark, *The Grain Trade in the Old Northwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966), 102-123.

⁴ "Shaughnessy Gets Late Trip Record," *Detroit Free Press*, 22 December 1921; "Soo is Waiting Last Grain Boat," *Detroit Free Press*, 23 December 1921.