

The Port of Washburn

Washburn was an important Great Lakes port from 1883, when the Omaha Railroad constructed its large coal and commercial dock, through the pre-Great War years. The major import was coal, the first cargo of which arrived in October 1883. Thousands of tons were unloaded each week at the coal dock for distribution along the Omaha Railroad line through Wisconsin, Minnesota, and into Iowa. In 1889, 52 thousand tons of coal were transshipped through the Washburn dock, increasing to a peak of 226 thousand tons in 1909. After the DuPont explosives plant began operation in 1905, iron pyrite, or iron sulfide, from Spain, and soda, or sodium nitrate, from Chili, were important imports. Cargoes of these ores, packed in burlap bags, were unloaded at the commercial dock and transported by rail to the DuPont plant, west of Washburn. In 1908, over one thousand tons of iron pyrite and eight thousand tons of soda were received at the commercial dock. Large cargoes of salt in barrels were also unloaded at the commercial dock for distribution by rail.

The major export was lumber, shipped from the mills west of the Omaha dock. In 1894, 95 million board feet were shipped, declining to 31 million feet in 1913. Millions of feet of lumber were also shipped by rail. With the construction of the grain elevator in 1886, grain, brought by rail from the vast wheat fields of Minnesota and Iowa, became an important export cargo. In 1894, 2.3 million bushels were shipped, increasing to five million bushels in 1906, but declining to two million bushels in 1907, the last year the elevator was in operation.

Among the first vessels to call at Washburn was the M.M. Drake, in October 1883, with a cargo of 1,300 tons of coal. Propeller driven, with a 200 foot wooden hull, the Drake was typical of the vessels that brought coal cargoes to Washburn in the early

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years. Known as steam barges, they had a large cargo hold accessible through hatches between bow and stern superstructures. They usually carried masts for sails in event their unreliable steam engines failed. Two such vessels could easily tie up along the 575 foot length of the coal dock. Just three decades later, the D.M. Philbin arrived with 10,000 tons of coal. At 500 feet, the Philbin's steel hull was over twice as long as the Drakes, and its coal cargo several times larger, but it retained the same overall configuration of the Drake, which had become standard for bulk carriers on the lakes. There was barely enough room for the Philbin to dock, and after it had been partly unloaded it had to be turned around so that unloading could be completed.

Occasionally, an unusual vessel would arrive in port, creating considerable excitement in the village. In July 1888, an odd looking barge towed by the steamer, Hiawatha, delivered 1,100 tons of coal. Named simply

101, at 178 feet, it was smaller than many of the other vessels that frequented the port. Its design was revolutionary, however, the first of a unique class of vessels with an almost cylindrical steel hull and snout-like bow and stern. When fully loaded these ships lay low in the water and with waves washing cleanly off their rounded sides they somewhat resembled surfaced whales, so were called whalebacks. The last surviving whaleback, the S.S. Meteor, is on display at the maritime museum in Superior, where it was built. Another vessel that attracted the attention of villagers was the gunboat, S.S. Michigan, which visited Washburn in July 1897 while conducting lake surveys. Built in 1844 as the Navy's first ship with an iron hull, it was powered by side paddle wheels.

Many foreign vessels arrived at Washburn, in some years amounting to almost ten percent of all clearances. In fact, the volume of foreign commerce was so large that Washburn was declared a port

of entry, with a revenue flag proudly flown from the town hall flag staff. These vessels came up the

St. Lawrence River into Lake Ontario, then transited the Welland Canal into Lake Erie. The canal locks were narrow and shallow, severely restricting the size and number of foreign vessels that could enter the Great Lakes. A deep waterway connecting the Great Lakes with the St. Lawrence River, thereby opening the lakes to unlimited foreign commerce, was a long-time dream of the lake ports. People in Washburn were convinced that this waterway would transform their port into an international shipping center, sending enthusiastic delegations to annual U.S.-Canadian waterway conferences. But the deep waterway dream was not realized until the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959, and not one American or foreign vessel that had transited the seaway ever called at Washburn or Ashland.