

Our Lake Erie: Madison, Fairport, Sailing History and Lexicon

Lake Erie is and remains our county's greatest resource. Its name is derived from the Iroquoian word 'eriehonan' which means long tail. Containing 26 islands, the fourth largest of the five Great Lakes by surface volume and has a length of 241 miles and width of 57 miles. Its average depth is a mere 62' with a maximum depth of but 210' on its far corners. Four states touch Lake Erie. They are Ohio, Michigan, New York & Pennsylvania. Nearly 11 million people get their drinking water from our Great Lake; and our fishing industry is on par or surpasses all competitors.

Discovered in 1669, nearly 30 years before the visit by the French explorer [Louis Joliet](#), commerce was to become a key mainstay in the future.

The early history of sailing on Lake Erie references 'Walk-in-the



Water' in 1818 and even the steamer [Frontenac and Ontario](#), but it is the opening of the [Erie Canal](#) in 1825 that establishes our place in Ohio history. Early sailing vessels venturing from Buffalo could safely reach Madison's Dock Road or Fairport's harbor. Both villages were leading hubs in the commerce of the era. Over 52 sailing vessels, mostly schooners were built in Fairport and vicinity.** At Dock Road in 1830, the [Caroline S. Bailey](#) was built. 1835 saw the [Helens](#), a 75-ton vessel constructed and in 1847 the 200-ton [Flying Dutchman](#) was launched. The last ship built by the Bailey Brothers occurred in 1863.

In Fairport it was the 1819 arrival of the



[Rachel](#) under Captain Robert Eaton that signaled the village's maritime future. The [Superior](#) arrived in May 1823 and the steamboat [Pioneer](#) came in 1825. Fairport's first vessel constructed was the 1826 schooner [United States](#). In 1831 Fairport became the first federally sponsored port. Fairport thrived as a Great Lakes port well into 1867. Fairport's most famous build was the 1845 schooner [Madeline](#), a cargo vessel destined for the



Great Lakes and Traverse City. An exact replica is still in service today as part of the [Tall Ships](#) visits. The original vessel was also famous in Michigan lore as serving as a school during a harsh winter in the mid-1800s. The captain and five-member crew taught the local children, each of whom went on to important careers in the years to follow. As 1870 dawned, the commercial era of Lake Erie schooners was at its end. Sailing vessels remained important, and from a historical perspective the role played by more than 2000 ships in transportation in travel, trade and war is astonishing.

Lexicon

Through that time, sailors' slang and terminology became part of our English lexicon. These sailing terms are still in use 150 years later and are still commonplace to landlubbers alike. Let's see what sailing terms you know:

'A clean bill of health' - attesting to the presentation of a certificate of good hygiene and absence of infectious diseases. Required at entry to any port.

'Feeling blue' - crews flew blue flags and painted the hull blue if they lost their captain during a trek.

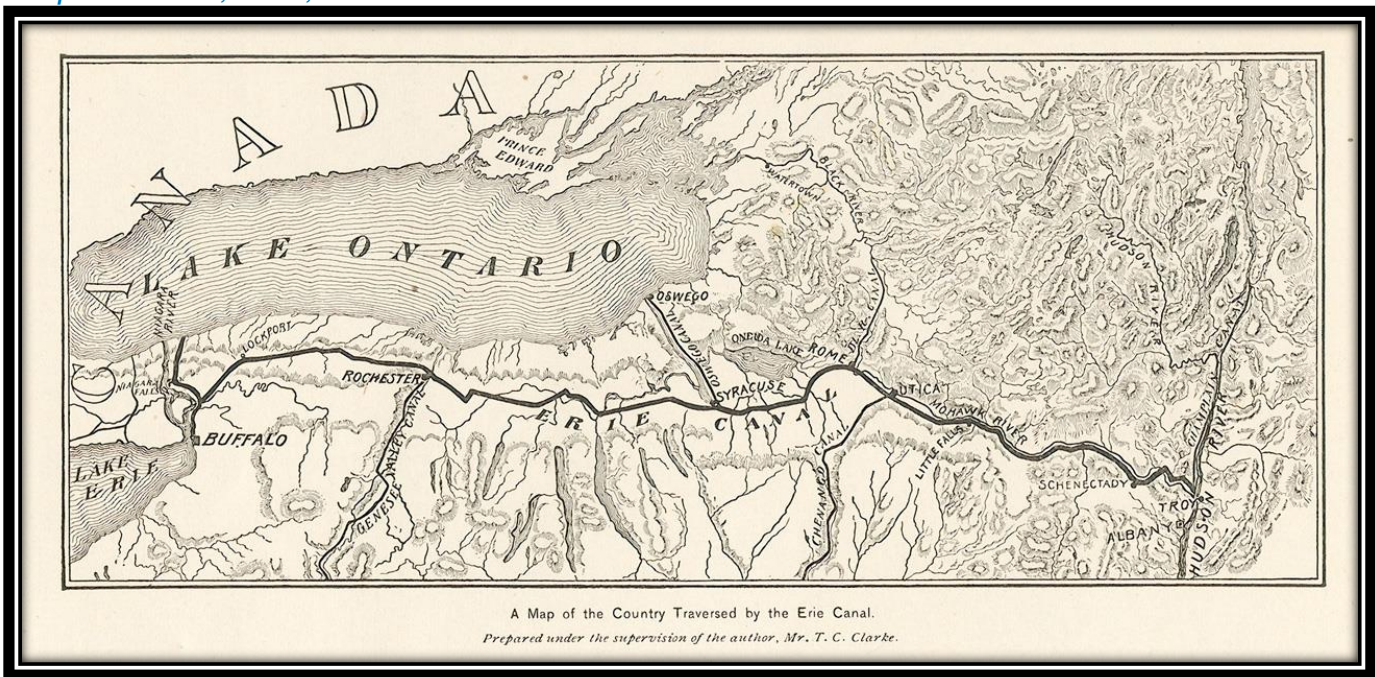
'Pipe down' - The bosun's pipe signal that indicated lights-out, quiet down, go to bed!

'Square meal' - meal plates on ship were wooden and square. Sailors wanted 3 squares a day!

'Hand over fist' - no not the money line, this meant tugging the lines in as fast as one could.

Other common terms include ['By and Large'](#), ['Loose Cannon'](#), ['Son of a Gun'](#), ['Over a Barrel'](#) and ['Toe the Line'](#).

** A list of all known vessels built in Madison or Fairport may be found on page 45 of the book [Fairport Harbor, Ohio, 1976](#)



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