

Albany's Waterfront: From Pier to Port

The City of Albany, New York began serving as a port as early as the 17th century when, in 1614, the Dutch first set up a trading post near the South End. In 1624, the Dutch built Fort Orange where goods such as rum, sugar and lumber were brought

over from Europe and the West Indies. As trade increased, so did settlement. The population grew to include not only farmers and fur traders but merchants and entrepreneurs engaged in the transport of goods and other activities. Ferry service began in 1642, developing the area for commerce on both sides of the Hudson River.

After the British conquest in 1664, trade continued to flourish, including the fur trade.



Figure 1. 01-04997. Dongan Charter, 1686. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

In 1686, the Dongan Charter established Albany as a separate municipal entity; helping to cement the City's identity as an urban center of commercial activity.

In 1766, in an attempt to accommodate more ship traffic, the Albany Common Council provided funding for the construction of three stone docks. In 1825, a 4,000 foot long and 80 foot wide pier was built, located approximately 250 feet from Albany's

shoreline where the Erie Canal and Hudson River met. Known as the Albany Basin, it provided moorings for many sloops, steamboats and canal boats.

The Albany Basin contained an area of thirty-two acres with a pier stretching from Lawrence Street (near the Erie Canal entrance) to Hamilton Street, slightly over eight acres. In addition to the basin, nearby private slips and wharves were erected and in 1870 construction began on the Maiden Lane Bridge, a railroad bridge that would connect Albany to Rensselaer. Traffic on the Hudson River would increase exponentially after the Albany Basin and Erie Canal were built in 1825.

The Hudson River was a tidal estuary up to the City of Troy. In the 18th and 19th centuries, conventional sea vessels grew increasingly larger and could not sail through the shallow

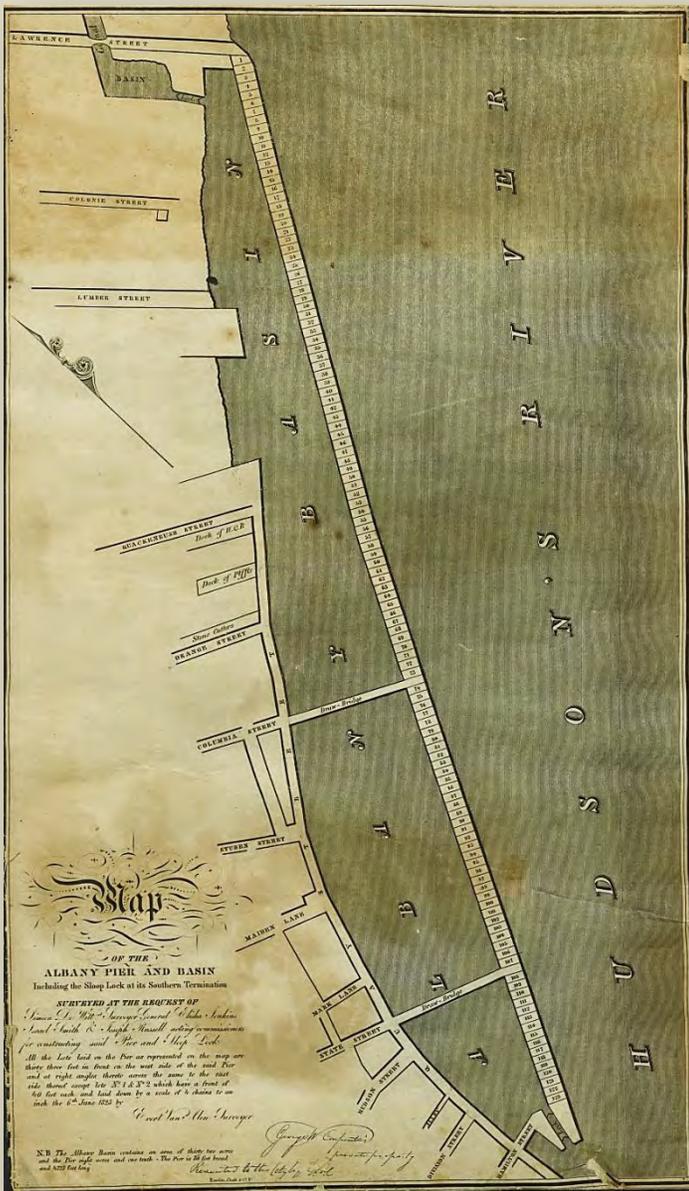
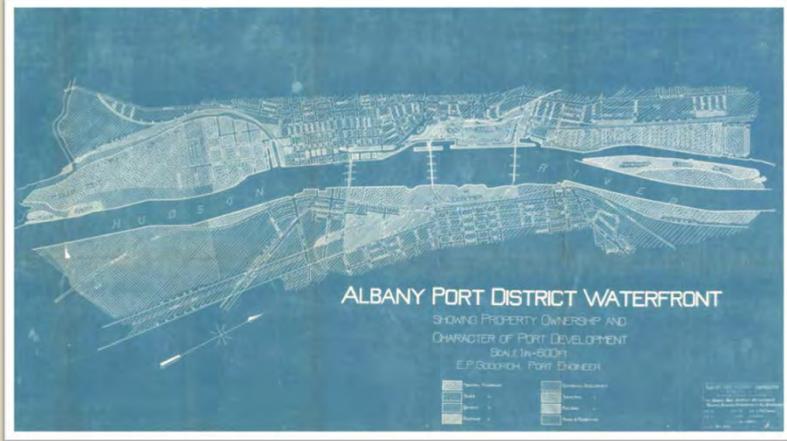


Figure 2. 85-04122. Albany Pier and Basin Map, 1925. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

In 1915, a survey looking into the possibility of deepening the Hudson River was proposed to Congress. By 1924, plans to dredge up a deep channel were



approved. In 1927, work on the \$11 million dollar dredging of a 30 mile long, 27 feet deep channel up the Hudson River, began. Channel dredging was completed in June of 1931.

Figure 3. 06-04097. Proposed Albany Port District Waterfront Development blueprints, 1925. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

In 1925, New York Governor Al Smith created the Albany Port District Commission (APDC) which directed the construction of the port that still stands today. The APDC is a public benefit corporation created by New York State to develop and manage port facilities in the cities of Albany and Rensselaer. The commission has five members, four of which are nominated by the Mayor of Albany and one is nominated by the Mayor of Rensselaer. The Governor of New York then appoints them to three-year terms.

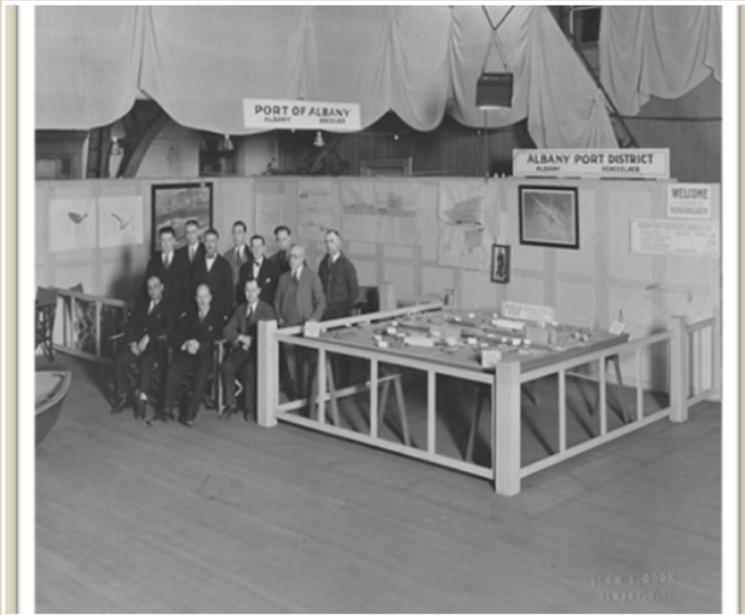


Figure 4. 85-02945. Albany Port District Commission, 1932. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

Albany and Rensselaer spent \$10 million dollars transforming hundreds of acres of land into docksides, building wharves and sheds on both sides of the Hudson River. The entire landsite was raised nearly 18 feet in order to accommodate major ocean freighters to load and discharge cargoes from around the world.

Port construction was rapid, with construction completed in less than two years. During this time, the Cargill Grain Elevator, the largest single unit grain elevator in the world, was built. Today, it is the largest grain elevator in the United States, east of the Mississippi River with silos that are 100 feet high!



Figure 5. 15-01541. Cargill Grain Elevator, 1932. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

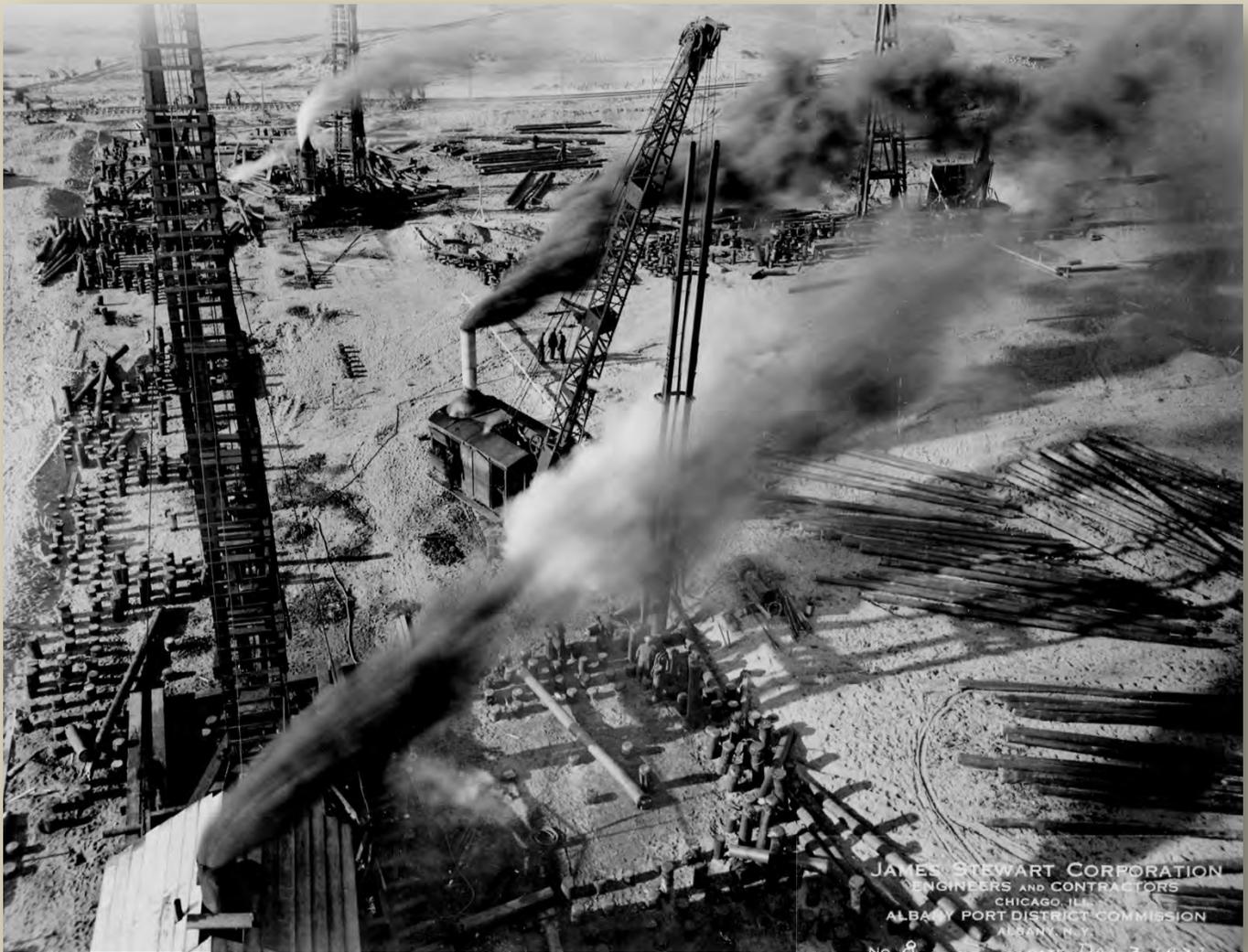


Figure 6. 15-01541. Port construction using steam shovels, 1931. Courtesy of the Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

On June 6 and 7, 1932 the Port of Albany officially opened. Dedication ceremonies involved much fanfare including opening remarks from New York Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt and speeches by other dignitaries, a great parade and the

"Wedding of the Waters." The waters of 100 American and foreign ports were mingled with those of the Hudson River, symbolizing the new meeting point of water-borne trade at the tidewater head of the Hudson.

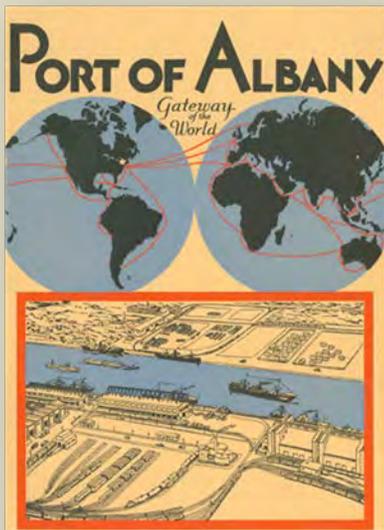


Figure 7. 15-01541. Dedication ceremonies with Port Princess and waters of the seven oceans, 1932. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.



Figure 8. 85-02945. Opening Day parade, June 6, 1932. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

At the time it was built, the Port of Albany connected shipping from the Hudson River at Albany, NY to six main railroad lines, a 14,000 mile highway system and to the 525 mile New York State Barge Canal – The “Gateway to the World” was the signature theme for the 1932 opening ceremonies.



Figures 9 and 10. 15-01541. Graphics from dedication ceremonies, 1932. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.



Figure 11. 15-01542. Unloading wood pulp, ca. 1935. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

In the early years of the Port, the majority of the business conducted, centered on the importing of wood products (e.g. wood pulp) and automobiles and the export of various paper products. When the United States entered World War II in 1941, the Port served primarily as a military supply depot. After the war ended, normal port activities resumed and in 1952, the Hudson River was dredged for a second time, to 32 feet deep, allowing for larger ships to make their way



Figure 12. 15-01542. The SS Polzella (Penzance) docked at the port with lumber. The SS Polzella was a British cargo ship; it sank on January 17, 1940 after being torpedoed by submarine U-25; killing all 36 crew members.

Though wood and grain dominated operations at the Port in its earlier years, the importing and exporting of automobiles, fruit and other cargo grew. The D&H and New York Central Railroads laid 25 miles of track to develop the Port. By 1935, six major railroads converged at the Port of Albany which had miles of track of its own.



Figure 13. 15-01542. Unloading automobiles onto port docks ca. 1935. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

Pennsylvania.

Molasses is a key import residing at the Port of Albany since 1948. Stored in large tanks, it is used as a supplement in animal feed. Molasses was delivered by train (now tank trucks) to farming locations throughout New York State, New England and



Figure 14. 15-01542. Molasses tanker in the rail yards ca. 1948. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

In 2011, 800 feet of wooden wharf on the Albany side was rehabbed and a new rail line was built, allowing cargo to be directly transported between ship and train. In October 2014, the Rensselaer Wharf Reconstruction Project was completed. Due to deterioration, only a small portion of the wharf on the Rensselaer side was usable and this project allowed for the expansion of waterfront activity. Today, many tenants call the Port of Albany home and in addition to grain and forest products, customers around the globe depend on the Port's specialty handling of cocoa beans, salt, molasses, scrap iron, steel, wind energy products and more. The Port of Albany has been and continues to be a "Gateway to the World."



Figure 15. 15-01542. View of Port of Albany with Empire Plaza in the background ca. 1982. Courtesy of Albany County Hall of Records Archival Collection.

The Archives of the Albany County Hall of Records preserves 45 cubic feet of Port of Albany Records. The Port records are available in the Search Room, Monday-Friday, 8:30AM-4:30PM.