



## The City of Buffalo - 1840 to 1850

### *"The Lake City"*

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In 1840 Buffalo was a city of over 18,000 souls. Erie County residents numbered over 62,000. The brief slowdown in population growth due to the epidemics and economic slump of the 30's was over. As trade through the port city of Buffalo swelled so did the population.

Buffalo continued its rapid growth in the 1840's. Canal and lake shipping still dominated the area's commerce, but a newcomer, the railroads, had a foothold in the area and would begin to flex their transportation muscles.

The 1840's brought many new facets to the city. Buffalo gained its first railroad through route to the east, first university, first hospital, first automated grain elevator, first Roman Catholic Bishop, first influx of immigrants not of German or Irish descent and it's first mayoral election.

Sheldon Thompson became mayor in 1840, winning the first election by a slim margin of 10 votes. Most believe the narrow margin of victory was due to the fact that Mayor Thompson had once lived in Black Rock, Buffalo's initial rival for the honor of being the Erie Canal's western terminus. Some look upon the close race as an indicator of remaining hard feelings towards Black Rock and others see it as a softening of hard feelings. Regardless, Black Rock was fast becoming a part of the Buffalo community.

The dawning of the 1840's saw Buffalo Harbor at its limits of capacity. By 1841 there were 140 lake vessels occupying the cramped lower harbor. A lack of harbor facilities and no means of unloading vessels save for manual labor was the reason for the overcrowding. A push for more substantial mooring space and unloading methods was on. In 1844 another large storm sent a cascade of water over the harbor front, killing hundreds, ruining the new sea wall and further exacerbating the congestion problem. Joseph Dart made the first leap toward automation with his steam powered grain elevator which greatly reduced the time taken in unloading ships. In 1847 the city leadership voted to increase the size of Buffalo Harbor and build a new City Ship Canal. In the next year the Buffalo Board of Trade was formed by waterfront merchants to help spearhead future harbor improvements. This group was to become The Merchant's Exchange and Chamber of Commerce.

The transfer of goods from east to west and west to east was not the only function of canal and lake shipping. Passenger traffic was to near its peak at the end of the decade. Using canal boats, lake steamers and lake schooners as a means of travel was much faster and more economical than using overland methods such as horse powered wagons and coaches.

In 1841 the latest technological advance was a screw propeller driven steamer. Until this time only paddle-wheels had been used. The launching of the *Vandalia* at Oswego that year ushered in an era of newer, bigger, faster and more elegant steamers. The early 40's were still a period of recession. Passenger travel slumped resulting in an excess of capacity on the luxury steamers. Many boats sat idle and most independent steamer owners threw in their lot to create passenger lines between Buffalo, Chicago and Detroit. As passenger fares dropped as low as \$6.00 the rate wars erased potential profits. To gain market share the lines started competing on the basis of speed. The fastest and most luxurious ships garnered the lion's share of the passenger traffic in the early 40's.

By 1845 the economy had recovered and the steamers were once again profiting from the increases in passenger trade. Steamship lines carried over 93,000 passengers that year, most of them on the daily runs to Detroit, Lake Erie and Lake Michigan ports. Travel to Chicago was frequent and usually took three to four days. For the well to do who could afford a \$10 ticket, it was a very pleasant experience in the best grand hotel tradition. Fine dining and ballroom dancing along with luxurious relaxation made a trip on one of these floating palaces a holiday in itself. In 1847 one could take a train from New York City to Buffalo and then board the elegant *Hendrik Hudson* for passage to Chicago. Only five days after leaving the Atlantic seaboard you could be in Chicago.

The great steamers of the era included the *Vandalia*, the *Great Western*, the *Western World*, the *United States*, the *Plymouth*, the *Queen of the West*, the *Empire* and the *Hendrik Hudson*. These were but a handful of the great lake steamers.

This decade marked the beginning of Buffalo's railroad boom. Within 10 years the railroads would woo passengers away from the canal and lake boats in numbers great enough to start the decline of water borne passenger traffic through Buffalo.

The Attica & Buffalo RR had been incorporated on May 3, 1836. Due to the Panic of 1837 construction had been halted for several years. Finally on September 2, 1842 service was begun between Seneca St, in Buffalo to Darien in Genesee County. Through service to Attica was started two months later on November 2. Initially Buffalo's Common Council blocked the railroad from establishing a station at Exchange Street and Michigan Avenue. The state legislature came to the rescue and overruled the city in 1843 and by 1848 a small brick depot, Buffalo's first dedicated railroad structure, was built at that location. There was now a network of seven railroads connecting Buffalo and Albany and from there Cornelius Vanderbilt's Hudson River Railroad carried passengers to and from New York City. The fastest packet boats of the day took 6 days to travel from Albany to Buffalo, the railroads made the trip in 25 hours. It was painfully obvious what the preferred method of travel would be for the foreseeable future.

The Attica and Buffalo RR reported a net income of \$26,748 in 1843, it's first full year of operation. By 1847 this figure had risen to \$74,810, an almost threefold increase. Their operating expenses were kept between 39% and 42% of revenue during these years,

quite a profitable venture indeed. This feat was not lost to the speculators of the time and soon a mad rush to link communities from all points of the compass via iron rails would begin. In approximately 1845 a group of Buffalonians, along with citizens of Livingston and Wyoming Counties, obtained a charter for the Attica & Hornellsville (later Hornell) to connect the New York & Erie Rail-road with Buffalo, thus securing a second all rail route to New York City. This 60 mile line was to link the New York & Erie at Hornellsville (when the NY&E reached there) with the Attica & Buffalo at Attica. The A&H was unsuccessful in raising enough capital to build the line and in 1849 obtained a deadline extension from the legislature for completion. During this time several of the Buffalonian supporters of the A&H were enticed into an alternate project to connect with the Erie 40 miles further east at Corning. After bouncing back and forth the original A&H route was under construction and the Buffalo & Cohocton route eventually became part of an Erie RR connection to Rochester when it was eventually built.

Originally it was thought that the only traffic carried by the railroads would be passengers, but by the early 1840's freight was becoming a worthwhile source of traffic for them. The state legislature had imposed strict regulation on the transportation of freight by the railroads in an effort to protect the future of their precious canal. In addition to restricting through freight hauling by train to the months when canal navigation was impossible because of frozen water, the railroads were forced to pay "canal tolls" to the Canal Commissioners. This gouging would continue into the next decade.

Between 1847 and 1849 the railroad embarked on an improvement project to replace the wooden rail covered by strap iron with solid iron rail. On many occasions passengers had been maimed or wounded when the strapping had become loose at one end of the rail to the point where it would leap over the wheel of the passenger coach, pierce the wooden floor of the coach and become a become a ribbon of death as it sliced its way unimpeded through the interior of the passenger coach. The advancement of ironworking in the United States put an end to this menace, much to the relief of both passengers and railroad employees alike. While initially expensive to procure, the iron rail helped to eliminate the maintenance headache of constantly sending track workers out to maintain the fragile wood and strap iron rails. While the relatively light weight locomotives and railroad cars we're terribly hard to rerail, schedules frequently suffered due to derailments.

The fledgling Buffalo & Black Rock RR had now become the Buffalo & Niagara Falls. Niagara Falls was a village of less than 1,300 people in 1840. It was not a focal point for trade as it was basically at the northwest corner of the state with no sizable artery of transportation aside from the portage around the falls. Although Niagara Falls had abundant water power, many saw and grist mills and the spectacular falls itself, the Erie Canal traffic bypassed the village, heading directly southwest to Buffalo from Lockport. The extension of the Buffalo & Black Rock to Niagara Falls was the true beginning of the tourist boom which flourishes to this day. Two other railroads were constructed to tap the burgeoning tourist trade and encourage area growth, the Rochester, Lockport & Niagara Falls and the Lockport and Niagara Falls Rail Road. In 1841 the legislature authorized the Lockport and Niagara Falls to increase capitalization to extend their railroad to Rochester. The fact that the road's western endpoint was a virtual dead

end meant that most of the east-west traffic would travel via the Attica & Buffalo to Buffalo. The new stock offering of the L&NF was not very successful.

The stage had been set for Buffalo and the Niagara Frontier to become a force to be reckoned with in the national railroad scene.

May 11, 1846 was the birth of the University of Buffalo, another Buffalo first. In February 1847 the first lecture was held at the corner of Washington and Seneca streets in a Baptist church. Millard Fillmore was appointed chancellor and served in that capacity until his death in 1874. More honorary than anything, his most taxing duty was apparently to hand out diplomas. The University was soon moved to a more permanent site at Main and Virginia streets.

Also in 1846 the Buffalo Savings Bank was first opened for business.

In 1847 the Pope created the Diocese of Buffalo and shortly thereafter the "Right Reverend" John Timon became the first bishop of the Diocese of Buffalo. The first services under the new diocese were held at St. Louis Church, the first Catholic church in Buffalo.

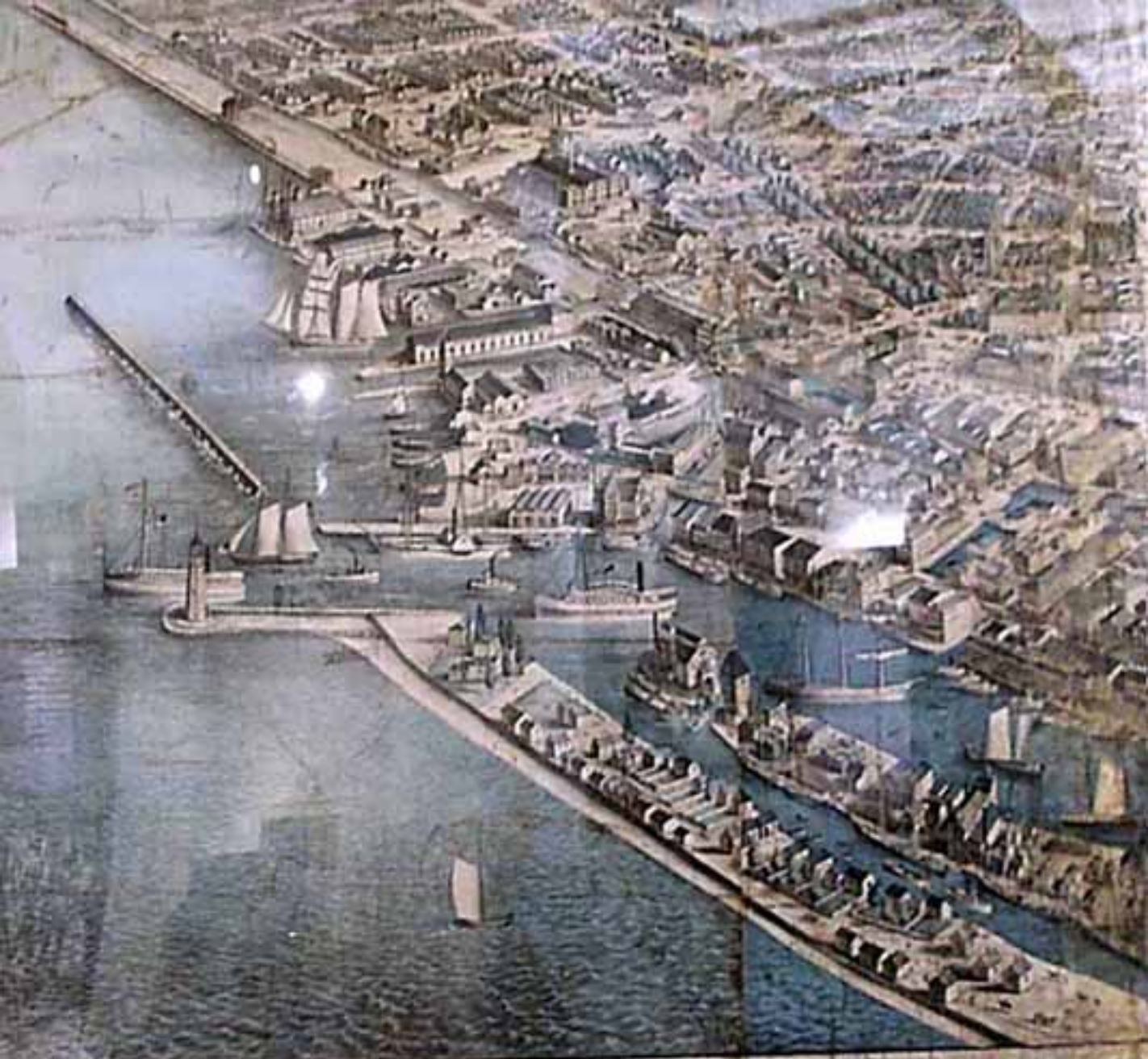
In 1848 Sisters Hospital, Buffalo's first permanent hospital, was opened by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. They would be put to the test a short year later.

Millard Fillmore, a prominent Buffalo lawyer, was nominated to be Zachary Taylor's Vice President on the Whig party ticket in 1848. Two years later President Taylor passed away and Millard Fillmore became president. He was the first of four presidents to share a prominent part in Buffalo's history.

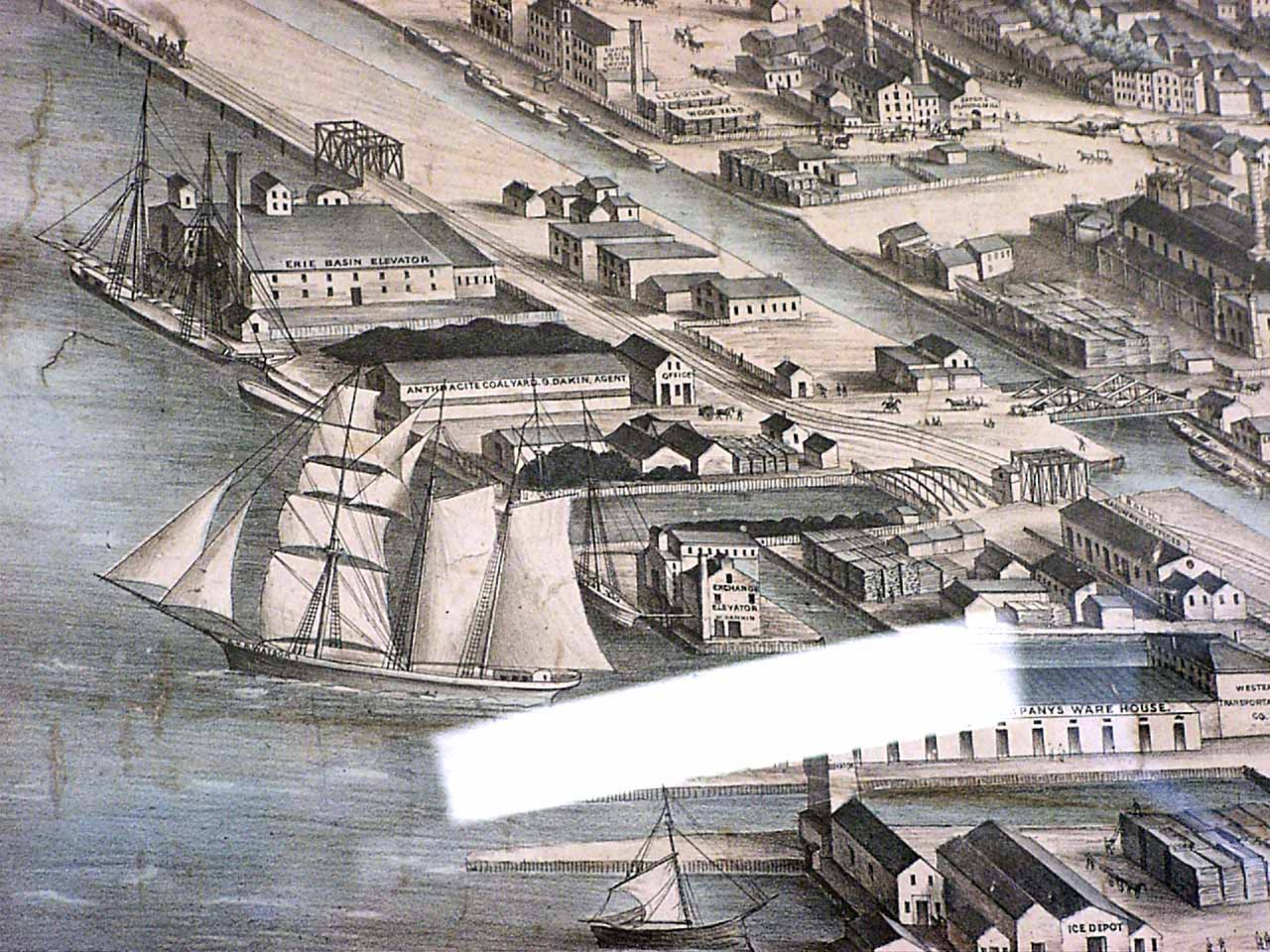
Marring the spectacular growth of the 1840's was another outbreak of cholera in 1849. Buffalo's "Fabulous Forties" would close on a somber note.

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From: *Buffalonet* – Buffalo and Western New York's Internet Historical Resource  
(<http://history.buffalonet.org/1840-50.html>)



AIR'S REVIEW OF THE



ERIE BASIN ELEVATOR

ANTHRACITE COALYARD, G. DAKIN, AGENT

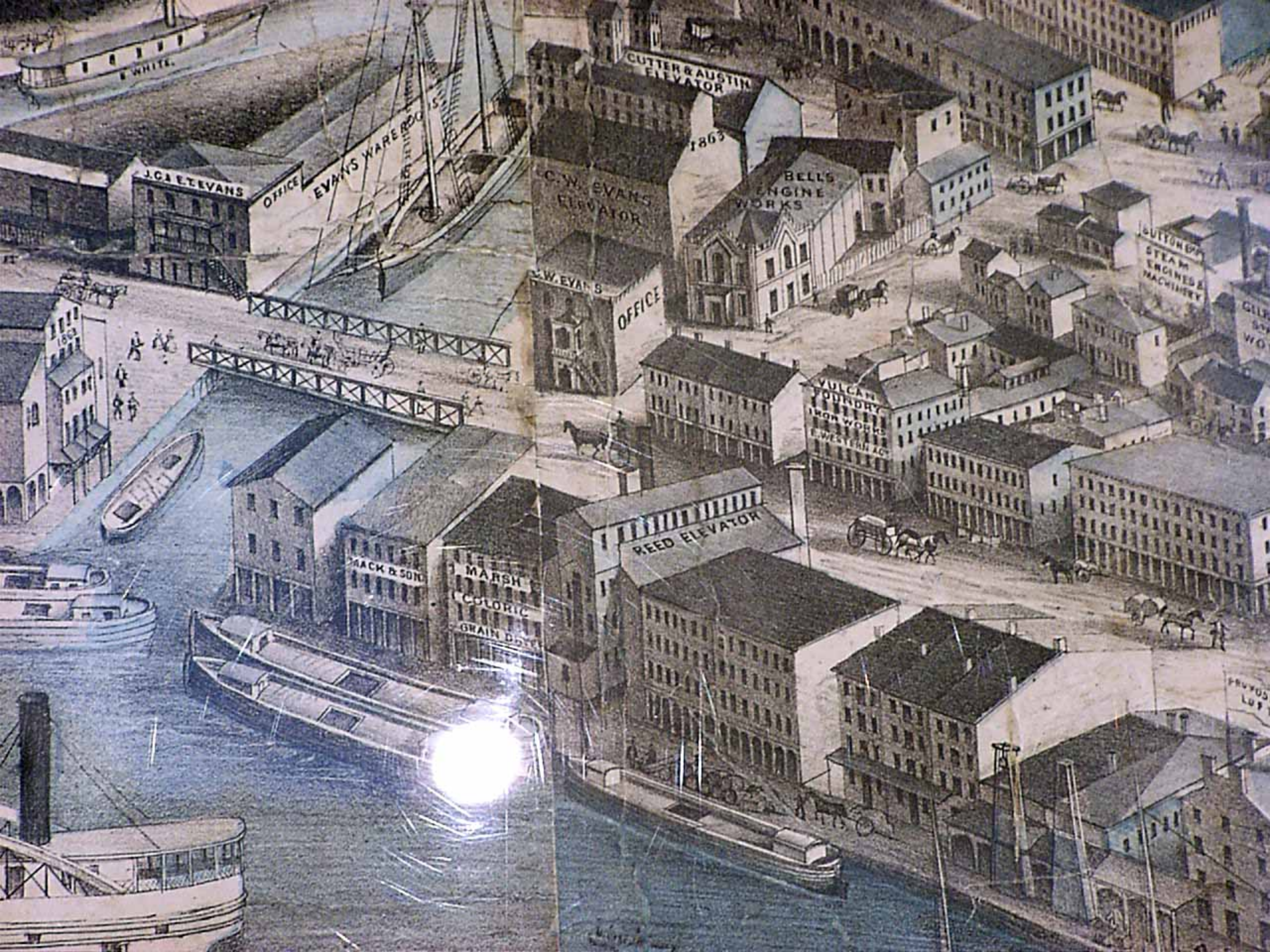
OFFICE

EXCHANGE  
ELEVATOR  
OF DAKIN

COMPANYS WARE HOUSE.

ICE DEPOT

WESTERN  
TRANSPORTA  
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E. WHITE

J. G. E. EVANS

OFFICE

EVANS WARE ROOMS

CUTTER & AUSTIN  
ELEVATOR

1863

C. W. EVANS  
ELEVATOR

BELL'S  
ENGINE  
WORKS

C. W. EVANS  
OFFICE

GUTHRIE'S  
STEAM  
ENGINES &  
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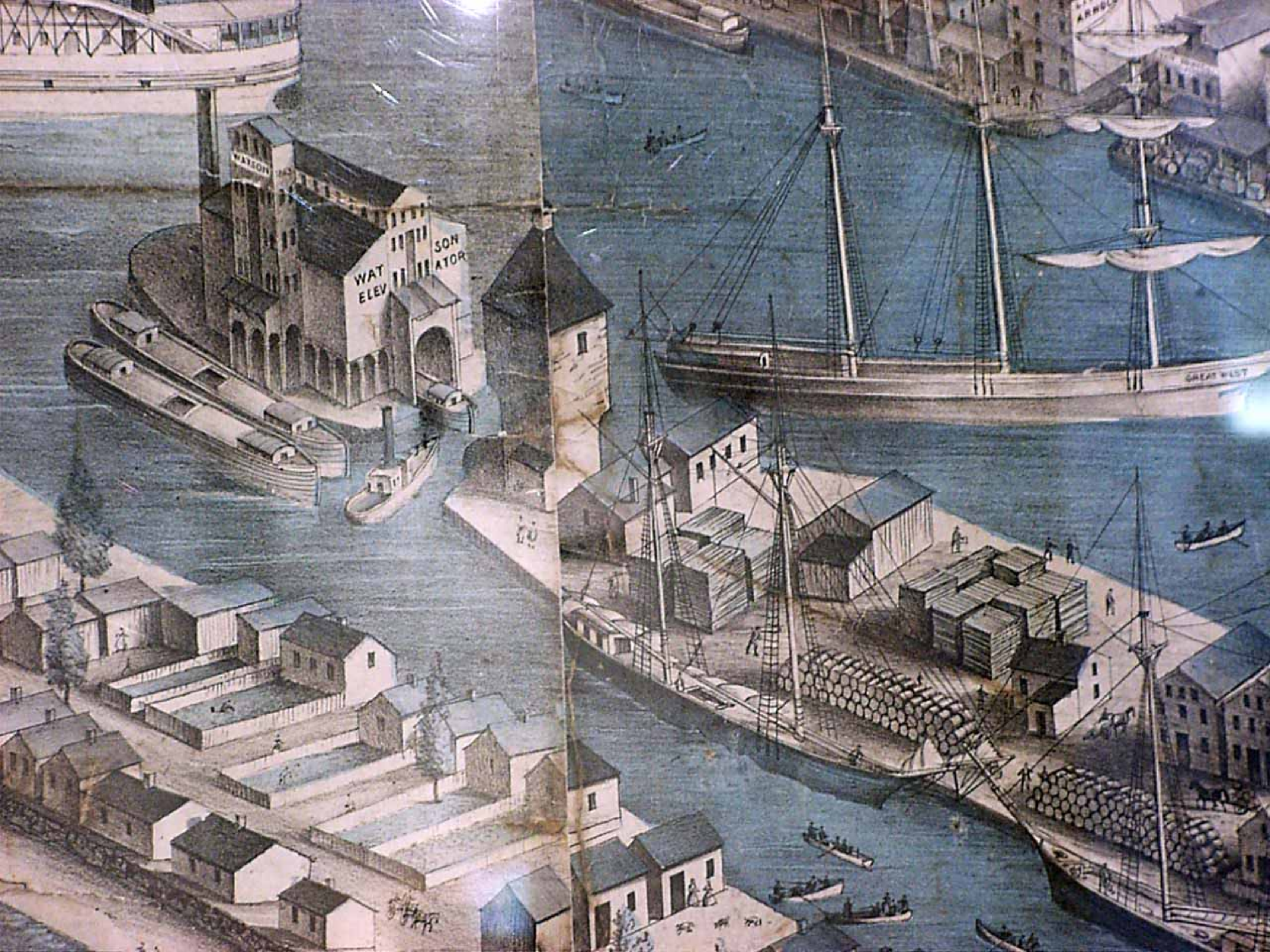
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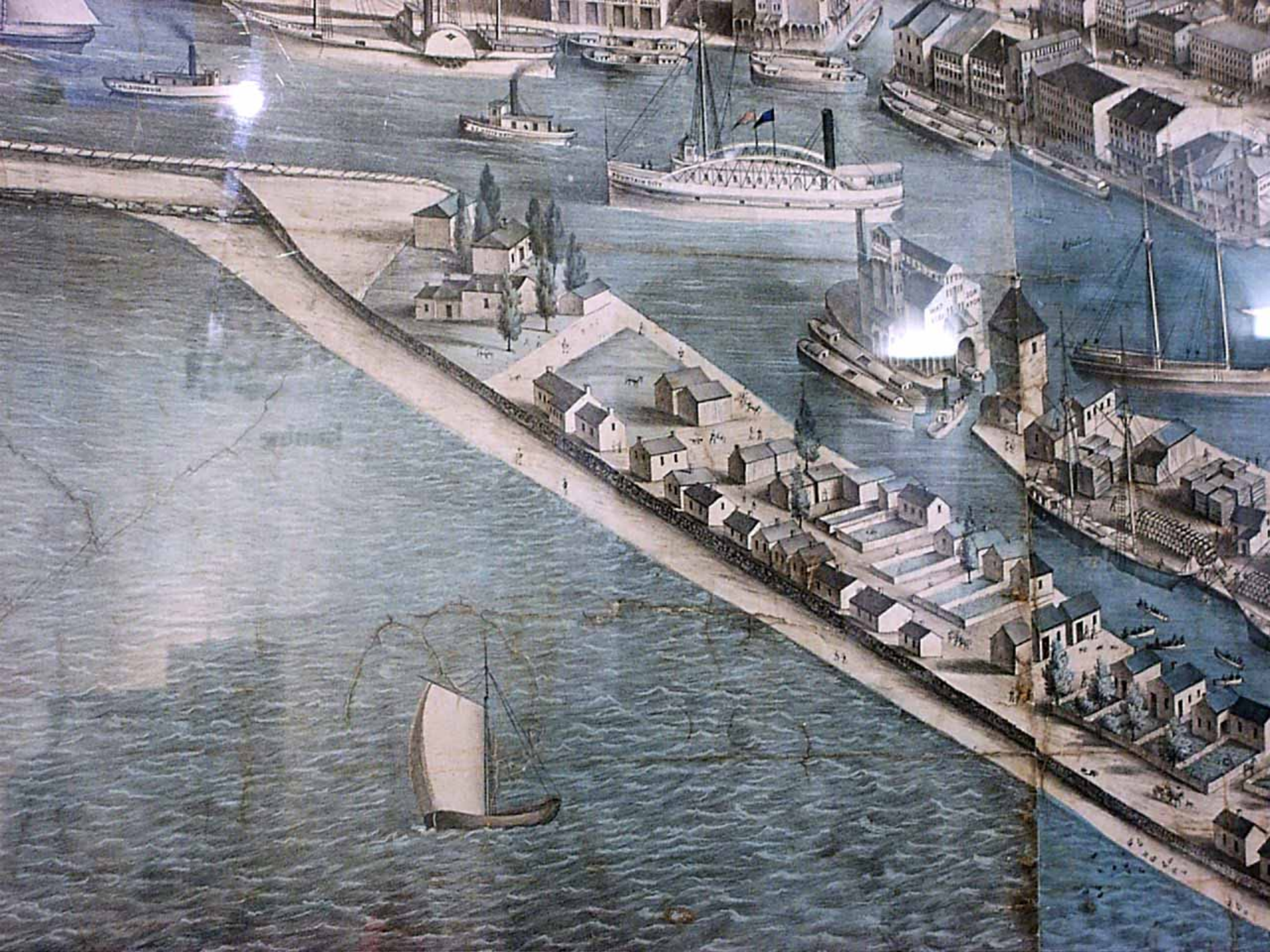
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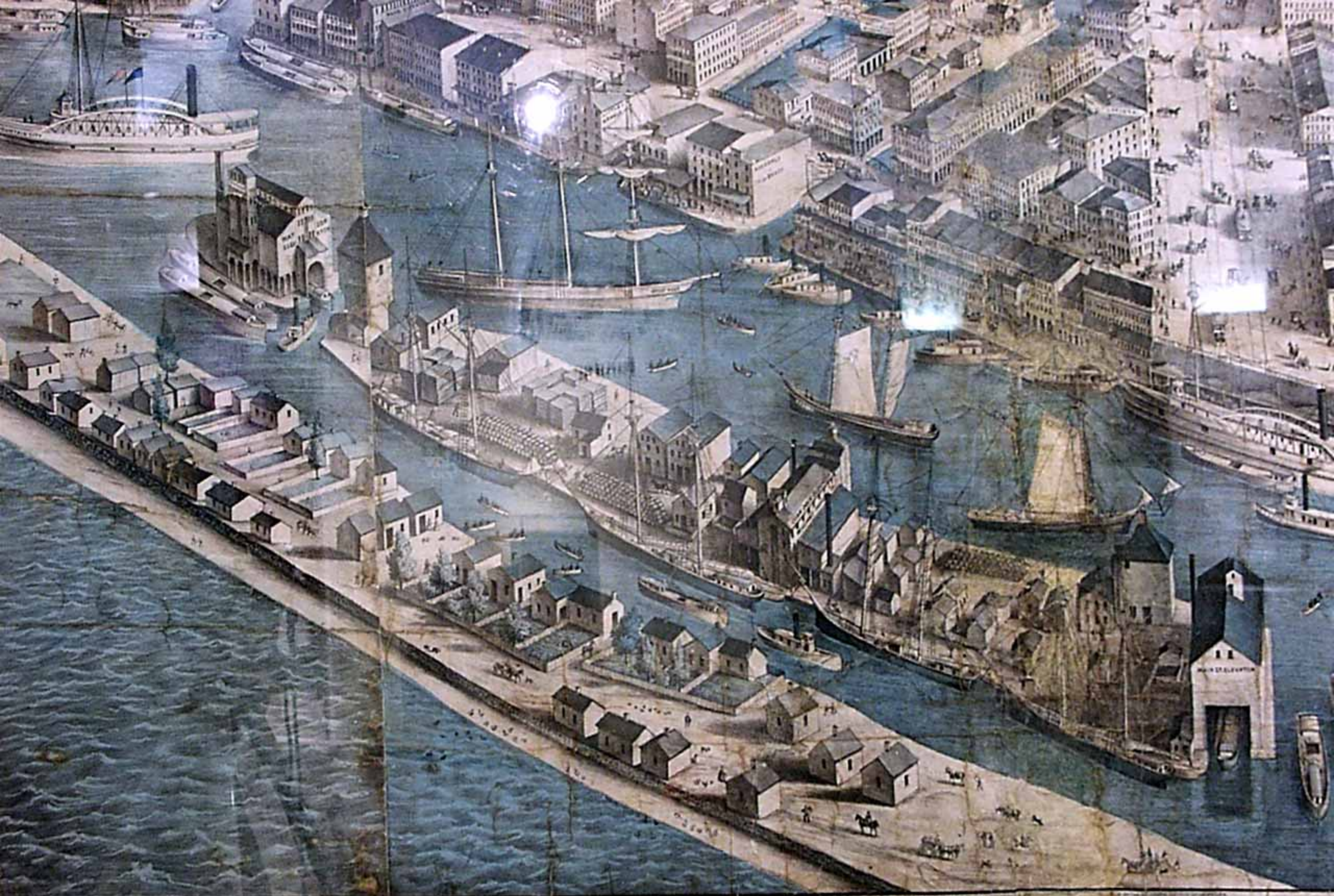
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