

# Town Was Distributing Center for Middle West

## Opening of Peace Bridge expected to revive commercial importance of one of early settlements of Upper Canada

(by J. George Johnston in The Financial Post)

Fort Erie, Upper Canada, prior to 1825, was of greater commercial importance than Buffalo, N. Y. The village, which grew in population hardly at all for a century, was the shopping community for Buffalo and the distributing point for manufactured goods and imported articles for the western end of New York state, the rude settlements along the Upper Lakes, the Ohio valley and a great part of that portion of Upper Canada lying further west.

Fort Erie was on the water route. There was a series of long portages between Albany and Buffalo, while the only portages between Montreal and Fort Erie were around the St. Lawrence Rapids and between Queenston and Chippawa around Niagara Falls. Trade follows along the line of least resistance; transportation expense is the principal resistence to the flow of trade.

### Erie Canal Is Hurtful

Commercial importance of Fort Erie waned with the opening of the Erie Canal. Buffalo and what was then western wilderness settlements of the United States, began to get their goods from New York and the Hudson. Fort Erie, along with the prosperous settlements of Chippawa and Queenston, sustained another blow when the first Welland Canal obviated the steep fifteen-mile portage over the escarpment of Niagara.

Advent of the railroads gave the old town of Fort Erie a new lease of life. The Huron and Erie railroad, from Goderich to Fort Erie, established a car ferry from the shadow of the fort to the foot of Porter avenue, Buffalo and the Erie & Niagara railway obviated the use of river craft by building a line from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Waterloo, which was the name of the civil settlement two miles south of the military establishment. The Huron & Erie railway had connections with, and later became a part of, the Grand Trunk system, and the Erie & Niagara became a branch of the Canada Southern, now the Michigan Central line of the New York Central.

### Is Railway Terminal

With two important railways operating car ferries, Fort Erie again took on the semblance of the commercial importance of the pre-canal days. But it was not for long. The Grand Trunk in 1872 opened its railway bridge a mile down the river from the nearest ferry. The car ferries were moved to Windsor. The only road traffic was local. The only business for passenger and vehicle ferry was local. Buffalo became a metropolis; Fort Erie remained a village.

This year the Peace Bridge, a vehicle bridge, will be opened to traffic. The automobile has restored much commerce and travel to the highway. The supersession of the ferry by the bridge will, it is expected, restore to the old town of Fort Erie much of its former economic glory.

### Old Books Are Diverting

The stranger visiting Fort Erie in the early years of the present century might have doubted if Fort Erie ever could have been anything but a border community born of military activity and continuing to exist merely through inertia and because some of its people got work on the railroads crossing the river at Buffalo and others in the factories and offices of the city across the river.

In the confirmation of the fact that Fort Erie was once highly important commercial centre — a fact which the compilers of history have almost completely ignored — are a bale of century-old account books recently found in the attic of the old Lewis home, which was also hotel, post office, jobbers' establishment, and retail emporium from a few years after the War of 1812, until a generation ago. These cash books and ledgers not only attest that their owners did business in a large way, not deterred by distance of those days, but also are diverting in their suggestions of ways and means, methods and prices, compared with conditions of the present.

An account book sans cover which recently has come to light shows that on January 1, 1822, one Solomon Traffick, a Fort Erie merchant, was fairly well off in the goods of this world. The following is quoted verbatim:

"Inventory of the money, goods and debts, belonging to me, Solomon Traffick, taken this day, viz:

	£	s.
"In ready money -----	5,000	
"7 pipes red port at £25, 10s. per pipe -----	178	10
"10 hhds. tobacco, at £12 per hhd. -----	120	
"6 pieces Colchester baize at £7 12s. per piece --	45	12
"pieces broadcloth at		

"To John Hatfield ----- 400  
"To Thomas Griffiths ---- 120

### Working Capital Large

Thus the merchant had a working capital of £6,339 plus two shillings. His larger operations in the following few months are recorded in the same slim volume.

On January 7th he borrowed £500 of Samuel Mason at 4 per cent. — perhaps Mason had it for loaning purposes — and on the 9th he paid John Turner the £100 due on note. On the 27th Peter Morton paid him, with interest of £7 10s., the £500 due. On February 8th, Mason gave him £500 back with one month's interest.

tions show the extent of the trade carried on by this early merchant. The first item of interest in this regard is as follows:

"Shipped on board the Sailwell, Captain John Bridges, consigned to factor Peter Allen at Amsterdam, to sell for my account the following, marked and numbered as per margin, viz:

"10 hhds. tobacco at £12 per hhd., £120.

"Paid charges, &c. £5 7/6—£125 7s. 6d."

That was on February 25, 1822. On March 5th, the ship evidently having not sailed, Traffick "lent John Bridges of the Sailwell, bound for Havana, £100 upon bottom of the said ship to be paid upon her safe return £120." Under date of March 6th, Traffick had insured his interest in the Sailwell for £120 and paid "at the office" £9 12s. premium.

On April 3rd, the tobacco shipped to Amsterdam at a total cost of £15 7s. 6d had been sold at a net price to Traffick of £170 10s.

On April 9th, it is recorded that "Ship Sailwell, on which I had insured £120, is cast away in her voyage home. I have, therefore, received at the office on that account: £120."

It would almost seem that the merchant had foreseen that this vessel would be lost after, and not before, it had carried his cargo of tobacco to its destination where it was sold at a profit.

Solomon Traffick had a fairly good bookkeeper, whom he paid £25 every three months. But a merchant doing business on the scale of this frontier business man, needed his accounts kept straight, and anyone who examines the books now can be grateful that they were kept legibly.

Otherwise it probably would not be known that the detail of transactions with merchants in Bristol, Lisbon, Amsterdam and Leghorn, between January 1 1822, and March 7, the same year, netted Traffick something like £1,200 increase in working capital, although his cash on hand was £70 less than on the preceding January 1st.

It is not known if his venture in "South Sea stock" which cost him £730 after he had forfeited £2 10s. for an earlier option, was successful. Salesmen were persistent even in those days. Neither is it known how his investment of £800 for a third interest in the ship Neptune resulted and it should be recorded that his improved position was partly due to his receipt of a gift of £500 from "my uncle Payne."

### Gift From His Uncle

Solomon Traffick may have been the overastute business man indicated by his insuring a vessel at a profit when aforementioned vessel was likely to be cast away, but as evidenced by his receipt of £500 from "my uncle Payne" he was not cold-blooded in his relations with others. Not many modern books would contain items of this purport:

"Jonas Careful, refusing payment of Jonathan Dubois's bill on him for £200, I paid it for the honor of the drawer, with charges of protesting: £200 7s. 6d." And another item is: "Gave Joseph Bennet, as an acknowledgement of his fidelity, a bank note valued: £20."

The other account books which have come to light are mostly cash books. From these it may be inferred that the business, of which John