

Amityville, A Port of Call **by Bill Lauder, Village Historian, Village of Amityville**

Little is known that the new Village Marine Park at the southeast corner of Merrick Road and Ocean Avenue is a local historic site. That is because a long time ago, Amityville was a bustling South Shore Long Island seaport. Having been settled in 1653, by the mid 1800's it was an old established community with a sizable population of successful farmers and fisherman. In addition, it was one of the important Great South Bay doorways to the Atlantic Ocean and thereby a business center for all those people in the immediate hinterland to the north. Their collective wants which could not be grown, made or produced on site, had to be brought in from the great beyond. Further they also wished to trade the fruits of their hard labor with the outside world. These two needs could be partially accommodated by using horse and wagon for transport over the muddy, rutted dirt roads, which sometimes were totally impassable. In addition there were limitations on moving items of great size, volume, bulk and weight. Thus early on, they found it more practical and economical to move these items by ship to and from the city and other points far away. The particular ships used were called "coastal schooners" or "coasters." (They were not Packet Ships since they did not run on a regular schedule or as a rule carry passengers.) Not all of these ships were actually "schooners," that is a ship with two or more masts and several jib sails. Some were smaller vessels called sloops having only one mast and one jib sail. However both ships are "fore and aft" rigged, that is, the forward part of the sail is attached to the mast and it has a gaff or spar at the top and boom or spar at the bottom. They were not square rigged, that is with a more or less square sail hung from the mast with the an equal part on each side of the mast. Up until 1867 when the railroad finally got to town, these Coasters were the best available means for necessary heavy bulky transport. In fact, even after the arrival of the railroad, they were not immediately redundant and continued to play their trade into the 1920s, which pretty well marked the end of all cargo sailing ships.

Locally, coastal shipping, mostly to New York City and up the Hudson River, was in great demand because all the south shore and interior hamlets had the same need of importing and exporting. Although not an official Port of Entry, as was Patchogue to our east, Amityville was different, but hasn't it always been? Unlike others, Amityville was happily situated halfway between Jones and Fire Island Inlets. Either of these convenient inlets provided quick and easy access to or from the ocean. At high tide especially, a ship could navigate the natural "gutters" and channels in the bay which wound through the marshes and flats to or from the mouth of Amityville River. Of course, in those days it was called the "Krick," then later the "Creek" and now more fashionably, the "River" but we will call it the Creek. It was then a short sail or hail between the bay and the head of the creek at Main Street (Merrick Road) which was in the original heart of the village.

Several of these Coasters claimed Amityville, as Home Port and the following five are best known. The 67 foot two masted schooner *J. Clark Curtin*, Queen of the fleet, was owned and captained by E. Ruckman ("Ruck or Rut") Wicks brother of Capt. Frank Wicks and deserves its own separate story. Then there was the *Amity*, owned by mill operator Samuel Ireland. I have been told that it was rigged as a sloop and was the very ship after which Amityville itself was named in a stormy 1846 community meeting. There is an apocryphal story that during the Civil War, it carried a load of ice, into which guns were accidentally frozen, to ports south of the Mason Dixon Line, but there is no hard evidence of this. The familiar 61 foot two masted schooner *J. and C. Heinley* was built, owned and captained by John K. Heinley a legend in his own time. It is said he started building the ship by driving a stake for the stem in the mud and proceeded from there. After a time it was lengthened and a gasoline engine was installed. Lengthening a ship in those days was not uncommon. It was simply sawn in half, the keel was spliced and more ribs and planking added. The 37 foot sloop *Elizabeth A. Bedell* was purchased by Heinley in 1902 from George

W. Baldwin, another well-to-do Amityville resident. And finally, the large 52 foot sloop *Bay Queen* that docked near Main Street.

The freight they carried included among things. coal, lumber, cordwood, bricks, ice, dry goods, corn, wheat, hay, flour, potatoes, watermelons and much else. Although they all were in the same business, their cargo differed according to their size, capacity and the owner's preferences. The *Curtain* carried general freight and merchandise for one and all as well as special shipments for the Irelands, but not coal. The *J. and C. Heinley* carried mostly coal to the Heinley family coal hopper, although on occasion it did transport lumber, gravel and bricks. The *Amity* served the particular needs of the Ireland Grist mill, saw mill and ice house on the north side of Main Street opposite the head of the creek. The others were general carriers, but not of coal. In particular my late father told of seeing the *Bay Queen* fully loaded with nothing but watermelons.

Another local and picturesque craft not to be forgotten was Heinley sloop rigged coal barge or scow of about 45 feet and roughly built, and having a square or garvey bow. I do not recall ever hearing the name of it. It was used on those not infrequent times when the *J. and C.* overloaded with coal, would run aground on the flats. Enough coal would be offloaded onto the barge to refloat the *J. and C.*

From time to time, these ships docked at various spots on either side of the Amityville Creek which is fed by what is known as Ireland's Mill Pond and stream. The mill pond, used to harvest ice in winter, was shallow and covered about four or five times the area of the now deep Avon Lake created in the 1920s by dredging the pond. The Heinley craft were to be found at the Heinley coal dock on the west side where a five storied, high peaked roof, square, dark ugly wooden coal hopper was located. The hopper is gone and the site is now part of the "Yacht Services" boat yard which also includes the old Frank Wicks boat yard that was just to the north of Heinley, the combined sites are now owned by Steve Brice. Still further to the north on the east side where the Amityville Yacht Club now holds forth some of these ships, as well as others, tied up temporarily. This was also the dock later used by side wheel ferry *Adel*.

Then on the west side at the head of creek where a wooden bridge carried Main Street (Merrick Road) across the Ireland Stream, the *Amity*, *Curtain*, *Bay Queen* and later the ferry boats *Atlantic* and *Columbia* docked. The location was also the site of the Ireland warehouses where cargo could be temporarily stored. There was also a sail marker in the loft on the second floor of the building. Part was of the old warehouse is still there. There was also a small fire house just to the west of the warehouse which in the 1850s had been a shoe shop. The entire historic site is now that of the new Village Marine Park, and rightly so. When standing on the wooden bridge looking down the creek, it must have been a very picturesque view when all the ships were in port at the same time.

Times change and it is said that all good things must come to an end. The 1922 official listing of Merchant Vessels of the U.S. lists the *Curtain* as "abandoned." Sadly it ended up rotting away tied to the west bank of what is now called "Wilbur's Island." The Lauder Museum is fortunate to have on display its Capstan, donated by Rufus Ireland, Jr. The other final vestiges of the ship were removed in the 1960s. The *J. and C.* met similar fate, rotting away on the ways at the Heinley dock. The other ships just faded away. General water front commerce and activity did continue along the creek in the form of Wicks' and other boat yards and of course, scheduled ferry service over to the ocean beaches. Also in the 1920s during the era or error? known as Prohibition, the Amityville waterfront, not necessarily any of the sites herein mentioned, helped serve the active trade known as "bootlegging." That was the illegal importing of wine and liquors, then call "booze." This occupation, frowned upon by some, was nevertheless definitely a part of our former commerce and is a tale for another time.

Thus when all is considered it may be said that Amityville was indeed a busy waterfront, but progress in the form of the railroad, better roads, large trucks, Repeal, changes in lifestyle and oil and gas supplanting coal, all put an end to the colorful era of our days as a commercial seaport.