

## Bear Creek Harbor

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The town of Ontario has one public access to Lake Ontario. Bear Creek Harbor is the only safe harbor on Lake Ontario between Pultneyville and Irondequoit Bay. Through the years, this little harbor has been an important port for shipping, commercial fishing, industry and recreation.

Bear Creek Harbor saw its heyday during the iron ore mining days in Ontario in the mid-to-late 1800s. A rich vein of iron ore was discovered to run most of the width of the Town of Ontario just south of Kenyon Road (once called Ore Bed Road.) The area was strip mined and the ore was transported to Bear Creek Harbor and loaded on barges and shipped to the blast furnace in Charlotte. During that period, two large piers ran out into the lake at Bear Creek Harbor. One of the piers was wide enough for a team of horses to turn around.

In 1870 the Ontario Iron Company was formed and a blast furnace was constructed on 17 acres on Bear Creek about two miles from Lake Ontario

In the 1873 "Report of the Secretary of War to Congress," a description of Bear Creek Harbor was submitted by John M. Wilson, Maj. Engineer.

*Bear Creek is a small stream emptying into Lake Ontario about 20 miles east of the Genesee River. The harbor at present is very limited in extent, the width between the piers at the*

*entrance being only about 60 feet, and is used almost exclusively by the Wayne County Mining Company and the Ontario Furnace Company.*

*During the year ending June 1872, the number of vessels entering and clearing during the year was 159 as follows: 75 schooners, 81 canal boats, 2 steam barges, and 1 bark.*

*The imports were 10,865 tons of coal; 2,820 tons of limestone; 2,529 tons of iron-ore; 130 barrels of salt; 9,000 feet board measure of lumber. The value of imports was \$95,798.*

*The exports were 16,340 tons of iron-ore; 6,000 tons of iron, 100 barrels of apples. The value of exports was \$289,170.*

A second description of the area around Bear Creek Harbor was included in the Report by James S. Lawrence, Assistant Engineer.

*There are at the Harbor one store, one grist mill and eleven houses; and at the furnace, two miles south, one store, two blacksmith shops and one hundred houses.*

When the railroad came through Ontario in 1874, spurs ran directly from the railroad to the mines and the blast furnace and some of the ore was then shipped by rail.

As the iron ore industry began to wind down in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bear Creek Harbor continued to receive shipments of other commercial goods such as wooden fence posts, shingles, ice, etc. Ross Gates, an early Ontario resident, remembers as a child “watching the big three-masted sailboats bringing in fence posts from Canada and tying up at the pier at Bear Creek Harbor.”

From 1900 until about 1930, commercial fishing out of Bear Creek Harbor was an important industry in Ontario. During that period, ten men – including Willis Woodruff, Edgar Woodworth, John Krager, Charles Webster, William Grace, Daniel Delalys, John Verdow and Ward, George, and Samuel Arney – listed their occupation as fisherman. Commercial fishing was done by nets. Ross Gates remembers seeing the nets wound on large reels to dry. Monro Cass, another Ontario resident, said that “the fishermen would not use a buoy to locate their nets for fear that the catch would be stolen. Instead they lined up the nets with landmarks on shore. That way only the fishermen knew where their nets lay.”

Whitefish and sturgeon were the premier species for the commercial fishermen. Jim Albright who lived near the harbor as a boy said “my mother dragged me out of bed early to go down to the harbor and get some whitefish.” Other species caught were pike, trout, reddsides, greenbacks and ling. Most of these fish were sold locally – some of the fisherman delivering around town in their fish wagons. Earle Huxley remembered “That was back in the horse-and-buggy days. Arney had a regular fish wagon. He’d come around twice a week. He had a fish horn, and when he got to your house, he’d blow his horn and if you wanted fish you’d come out and get it.” The sturgeon, however, which weighed 90-100 pounds, were usually too expensive for the local customers. These fish, valued for their tasty meat and caviar, were packed in ice and sent to New York City by rail.

The lake gradually became more polluted and overfished and the commercial fishing industry gradually came to an end. The Harbor was neglected and the entrance began to fill in with sand. The land around Bear Creek was purchased by Fay Thompson, former superintendent at the blast furnace, in the 1920s and later divided into building lots for summer cottages.

In 1960 Fay Thompson and his family donated their land on the north side of the Harbor to the Town of Ontario to be used as a public boat launch and park. The property is known as Thompson Park in their honor.

In preparation for the opening of the Ginna Nuclear Power Plant, in 1967 Westinghouse Electric Company made many improvements to the Harbor including widening of the channel to provide docking facilities for the barges bringing in a steam generator and a nuclear reactor. More improvements were made in 1993 to accommodate the delivery of a new generator.

Bear Creek Harbor is now primarily used for recreational purposes. The Town of Ontario issues boat launch permits. Many residents fish by boat and along the banks of the creek and also enjoy the large grassy area of Thompson Park which is suitable for picnics or just enjoying the view of Lake Ontario. Bear Creek Harbor is also home to Memorial Point, a memorial dedicated to all who perished while serving their country in the United States of America Armed Forces.