

Island Coal Dock Recalls Harbor's Hard-Working Past



In the background one can see the Bennett (formerly Dousman) Dock, with two long sheds on it. The center dock is the present Arnold Transit (formerly Hurlbert) Dock, which was built in 1852. The dock in the foreground was the government dock serving the fort. At the head of that dock is the federal customs house. This picture is prior to 1870. (Photograph courtesy of Tom Pfeiffelmann)

Although the pile of coal that once sprawled across it disappeared more than 30 years ago, most Islanders still call the finger just west of the Arnold Line Dock the Coal Dock. This summer, the old Coal Dock is undergoing extensive renovation. Still an essential part of Mackinac Island life, the dock now serves as the site of the Island's hardware store.

Although the Coal Dock has been owned by the Arnold Line system for more than 100 years, it was built separately from the Arnold Dock and competed with the larger pier through the 1800s. During the years after the Civil War, the Coal Dock was owned by Captain James Bennett and was known as Bennett's Wharf. (The Arnold Dock was then called Hoban's Wharf.)

In 1876 and 1877, the cargo schooner *La Petite* sailed to ports all over the upper Great Lakes in search of job cargoes. Her captain, Oscar B. Smith, kept a log in which he described his three calls at the Coal Dock during these two summers. Let's climb on board *La Petite* as she carries a cargo of coal to Mackinac Island.

Nineteenth-century schooners did not have auxiliary engines, and had to hire a tugboat or wait for the wind conditions to be right when entering or leaving a harbor. As our feet begin to feel the swell of Lake Erie rocking the schooner, we notice that she is riding a bit low in the water, loaded with 334

tons of Ohio soft coal consigned to James Bennett. The sails come down at the mouth of the Detroit River as we help attach the towline. A hard-working steam tug will pull our schooner up past the small, thriving city of Detroit, through the often-becalmed waters of tiny Lake St. Clair, and help us buck the current of the St. Clair River up past Port Huron.

In Lake Huron, a favorable southwest breeze catches hold of our mainsail and jib, but the

breeze brings an ugly smell with it. An aged deckhand doubles over in a fit of phlegmatic coughing as an ashen odor envelops the lake. It is the 1870s, the decade of forest fires on the Upper Lakes. "Could not see anything; there is so much smoke," Captain Smith writes in his log. "The timber is all afire in all parts of the pine country."

As the *La Petite* approaches the dangerous Straits of Mackinac, it is night and the haze thickens. Sighting the



A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

Coal Dock

small lighthouse on the northern shore of Bois Blanc, Captain Smith gives the order to 'heave to.' The *La Petite* will have to wait until well past sunrise in order to thread her way into Mackinac Island's harbor. The Round Island lighthouse and lighted buoys of the harbor channel are still many decades in the future.

As the *La Petite* lands at Bennett's Coal Dock about noon

the next day, a messenger hands the captain a telegram. The message was flashed to a cablehead in lower Michigan and then carried by steamboat to Mackinac Island. Although the wire contains good news – a commission from Ohio asking Captain Smith to stop at a sawmill in Cheboygan and buy a cargo of "mill culls" for a customer on

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