

Municipal Wharves: City of Savannah, GA

Within ten years of the foundation of Savannah the first municipal wharf had been established to accommodate all import-export business passing through the port. The development of the port of Savannah was shaped both by enterprising businessmen who speculatively built their own wharves and by the municipal government which sought to create a city that was open and accessible for trade. Municipal wharves were an integral part of this, making trade not just something for well established companies that could afford their own private wharves, but available for a small fee to any who sought to trade in the city. Over time this policy of publicly maintained wharves encouraged a wide variety of business ventures to boost the maritime economy, making Savannah one of the largest exporters of cotton with a revenue of over \$20 million per year in the year 1855.

Despite the setback of the Civil War the ports of Savannah reinvented themselves during Reconstruction by becoming the leading exporter of naval stores, including lumber, resin, and distilled turpentine. As naval contracts were government contracts many of these deliveries departed from municipal docks. These docks were singular institutions within the city, open to everyone yet still meticulously maintained and constructed. Historical records show that between 8 and 12 municipal or city docks existed between roughly 1790 and the year 1900. The exact locations of these is not always known, mainly because of a caveat to the law regarding municipal wharves. The mayor and aldermen of Savannah had not only the ability to purchase land and construct municipal wharves but also the

ability to lease and sell wharves to make revenue for the city. Many municipal wharves become too difficult to trace as a result because they frequently change hands as the lease is passed from individual to individual, with the names on the wharves also changing as a result.

The city laws concerning municipal wharves were reassessed in 1874, which remain to the present. These laws state that while the leases may be extended to any number of municipal wharves it is required that three, the wharves at the foot of Abercorn, Drayton, and Whitaker streets, must remain the property of the city, so that maritime visitors to the port of Savannah would always have the option of a berth at a municipal dock. The other wharves, located at West Broad, Barnard, two at the foot of Bull Street, two at Habersham, and possibly two at East Broad Street, also called Gashouse Hill. Until the turn of the century, and beyond though it is outside the scope of this research, these wharves served the city of Savannah effectively and helped to establish it as one of the most thriving seaports in America.

The Municipal Archives of the City of Savannah hold a number of records directly relating to the history of municipal wharves in the city which are enumerated below:

City of Savannah, Research Library & Municipal Archives
Prepared by Elizabeth Clappin (M.F.A. Candidate in Architectural History) for ARLH
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COLLECTION NAME: City Council Meeting Papers

COLLECTION DATES: 1859-1941

RECORD SERIES: 0115-001

GROUP NAME: Committee on Harbor & Wharves

GROUP DATES: 1860-1932

GROUP SIZE: 3 Hollinger Boxes (legal)

23 Folders (legal)

RECORD SERIES BOX #: 0115-001-A142 through 0115-001-A144

Folder 1 1860-1866 (some documents dating to as 1859)

November 26, 1860- E.J. Harden, Esq. petitions the city on behalf of George J. Kollack for upkeep of a city wharf

November 15, 1865- Octavius Cohen, Esq. grants the city the use of the wharf at the foot of Drayton Street (leased?)

January 8, 1866- public petition for municipal wharf repair

Folder 2 1867-1868

September 5, 1868-Unsuccessful public petition arguing against the exclusive use by individuals of municipal wharves

Folder 3 1869-1870

January 20, 1869- Creation of the position of Deputy Harbor Master, municipal wharves and their maintenance is listed in the applicable duties

September 2, 1869- Argument that \$75 per month was too high a pay for inspectors of city wharves.

April 23, 1870- John Stoddard, Chairman of the Committee of Pilotage requests \$3500 for significant repairs to be made to municipal wharves

Undated notice (presumably between the 23rd and 29th of April, 1870)
 Notice from the Finance Committee acknowledging the
 recommendations of John Stoddard, Chairman of the Commission of
 Pilotage

April 29, 1870 \$3500 allotted for wharf repair by W.H. Gison,
 Chairman of the Finance Committee

May 16, 1870- Complaint about the condition of the Williamson and
 Johnson Wharves (leased from the city) by John Stoddard, Chairman
 of the Commission of Pilotage. This complaint is also repeated in an
 undated, but almost identical notice.

June 3, 1870- Complaint that the Whitaker Street

June 20, 1870- request for repairs on the municipal wharf between W.
 Broad and Canal Streets, caused by improper drainage on Canal and
 the outflow of sewage on W. Broad.

November 8, 1870- Lease on the city wharf at the foot of Gashouse Hill
 (E. Broad Street)

Folder 5: 1872

Undated- H.J. Dickerson petitions against the encroachment of the
 Lincoln Street municipal dock onto his property

February 28, 1872- Mayor acknowledges the surveyors assessment of
 dock value

August 14, 1872- Received official maps of the city wharves from the
 city surveyor

Folder 6: 1873

July 30, 1873- B. Werst and Co. complain that the rent on the Whitaker
 Street wharf is too high and they will break their lease unless the price
 is lowered

August 13, 1873- E.L. Cullen requests to transfer his lease on the
 wharf at W. Broad to F. L. Mace.

Folder 8: 1875

July 25, 1875- Clapham Cunningham requests permission to place bumpers on his leased Bull Street dock

August 12, 1875- request that prior to any repairs being made on municipal wharves, they must first be surveyed

Folder 9: 1876

May 9, 1876- petition to repair City Wharf 4 (east of Bull Street) including the installation of offender piles similar to those on wharves 7,8, and 9 by GWJ DeRenne

Folder 11: 1878

August 6, 1878- assessment of the quality of repair work done on a public wharf by W.H. Hoffman

Folder 14: 1886

January 21, 1880- Request for repairs on an unspecified city wharf by Naymoore Gage

August 6, 1886 request to repair by Robert Mercer

Folder 15: 1890's

November 20, 1894- request for an in depth report prior to seeking out estimates to repair city wharves

City Contracts, Deeds and Miscellaneous Index

City Contracts

271-Repair Contract, the municipal wharf between Habersham and Lincoln
386- Wharf Lease agreement, October 8, 1899, 5 year lease on the wharf at the foot of Drayton Street to Jacob Paulsen at \$100 per year, with the city not being responsible for upkeep.

443- Repair contract for P. Killorin to repair the Barnard Street Wharf and Steps for a fee of \$21 per 1000 ft.

369- Wharf Lease Agreement for Charly Carroll, renewing his currently held lease.

City Deeds

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129	150
130	151
140	153
143	154
144	158

Miscellaneous

34	322
184	323
284	332
293	365
320	376
321	538

Bibliography:

Greene, Carleton. *Wharves and Piers: Their Design, Construction, and Equipment*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1917.

Mostly period photographs, but the Greenwich water front served the entire East Coast so is a useful point of reference for Savannah's wharves.

Jewell, Karen. *A History of the Greenwich Waterfront*. Stamford: Armchair Sailor Books, 2008.

Text and photographs used side by side with the artist's creations show a depth of research into a number of very active ports.

Krupinski, Loretta. *Looking Astern: An Artist's View of Maine's Historic Waterfronts*. Rockport: Down East Books, 2010.

Well researched with a great deal of good information about what was once a thriving port gives particularly good insight into how shipping centers and their infrastructure evolve over time.

Kyriakodis, H.G. *A History of Philadelphia's Lost Waterfront*. Mount Pleasant: The History Press, 2011.

New Bedford is still a port community, near where I grew up, though certainly not as vibrant as it once was. This book looks at what it was like in its heyday, and specifically where preservation was most needed in comparison.

McCabe, Marsha. *Not Just Anywhere: The Story of WHALE and the Rescue of New Bedford's Historic Waterfront*. New Bedford: Spinner Publishing, Inc., 1995.

McDonough, J.P. *Municipal Report for the City of Savannah, 1891*. Savannah: Morning News Print, 1892, pp. 85, 208.

McDonough, J.P. *Municipal Report for the City of Savannah, 1893*. Savannah: Morning News Print, 1894, pp. 19-21, 75, 228-229.

The two most useful were the municipal reports for 1896 and 1903, though all such report offer a basic look at expenditures on wharves; some years there is a great deal spent and detailed descriptions are offered, others only the bare essentials. There are also occasional mentions of laws enacted controlling the waterfront that deal with wharves. The biggest issue with these reports is separating the harbor master's reports, which only occasionally mention wharves from the non-topical ones.

McKinnon, John. *Wharf Lots Survey* [map and annotations]. (1824).

This map created in 1824, was to handle a lot boundary dispute between Andrew Low and Scott Balfour's wharves between Lincoln and Habersham Streets. It is very detailed giving precise measurements and the grade of the land. An excellent resource to understanding how early 19th century wharves were allotted.

Meldrim, P.W. *Municipal Report for the City of Savannah, 1898*. Savannah: Morning News Print, 1899, pp. 150-152.

Meldrim, P.W. *Municipal Report for the City of Savannah, 1899*. Savannah: Morning News Print, 1900, pp. 36, 189-190.

Moore Family Papers, (unpublished manuscripts, 1802-1830).

This unorganized collection contains a mixture of legal documents, correspondence, and financial reports for the Moore family who owned city wharves. They are isolated mentions and while they offer some insight, without a consistent collection or more information they would be hard to apply in terms of research.

Myers, Herman. *Municipal Report for the City of Savannah, 1894*. Savannah: Morning News Print, 1895, p. 72

Myers, Herman. *Municipal Report for the City of Savannah, 1895*. Savannah: Morning News Print, 1896, pp. 241-247, 273-274.

Myers, Herman. *Municipal Report for the City of Savannah, 1896*. Savannah: Morning News Print, 1897, pp. 183, 187-190, 357-358.

Myers, Herman. *Municipal Report for the City of Savannah, 1897*. Savannah: Morning News Print, 1898, pp. 160-161, 178-180.

Myers, Herman. *Municipal Report for the City of Savannah, 1903*. Savannah: Morning News Print, 1904, pp.141, 217, 249-250, 337-340.

Rhodes, Edwin. *Diary*, (unpublished manuscript, 1865).

A direct account from an eyewitness to the occupation of Savannah by Sherman. His descriptions of the closing of wharves and the cotton being stored on them is of particular importance, particularly at looking how shipping as an economic factor in Savannah changed in the post-Civil War era.

Thomas & Hutton, engineers. *Port Facilities under the control of the Savannah District Authority*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Corps of Civil Engineers, 1950.

While after the era in question, this map does feature dotted lines showing previous wharf allotments that no longer exist, unsure why.

Yuhl, Stephanie E. *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

A really exceptional resource that discusses the waterfront and economy of Savannah in conjunction with Charleston, particularly describing why shipping was possible given the layout and situation of the Savannah River and its wharves.