

# RYC ROOTS

A Historical Perspective of the Racine Yacht Club Through Time.

Chapter 4 • July 2015

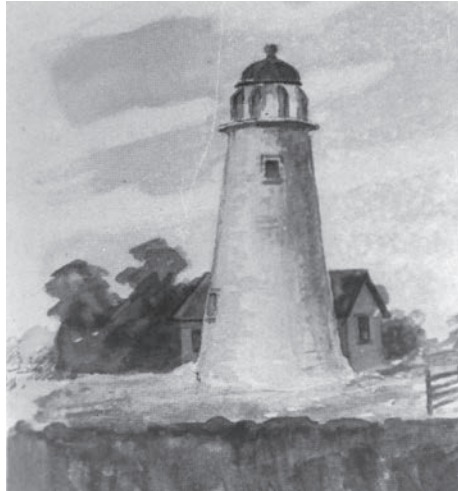
## Racine's Waterfront

What would a yacht club be without a waterfront? What we see around us began as a port and evolved in stages over many years, beginning almost as soon as Racine was settled.

Racine grew up around a river, the Root River, which emptied into Lake Michigan. Gilbert Knapp, a sea captain, built a cabin near the river's mouth in 1834. Immigrants began arriving in the area and the town Knapp founded started to grow. Settlers didn't much like the name Knapp had given it, "Port Gilbert," and they changed it to "Racine," a word of French origin possibly applied by Jesuit missionaries who visited the area in the Seventeenth Century. They used the word "Racine" to describe the river that was filled with tangled roots. Local Indians had various names for the river that flowed through the new village too, many of which were also variations on "root."

Commerce in those days was almost exclusively by water and by 1836 residents had begun the first of a long series of improvements that led to our present harbor. The river mouth, then about where the Racine Public Library is today, was mostly blocked by a sand bar that was cut through to give better access to the channel; storms occasionally reestablished the bar and when that happened, the work had to be redone.

1839 brought the first lighthouse to Racine. The Old Government Lighthouse was built on the bluff overlooking the river mouth. "Bridge piers" (or catwalks), essentially elevated platforms set on pilings, were built out into the lake a year later to allow vessels to tie up and load or unload cargo.



The Old Government Lighthouse, decommissioned in 1865. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*

In 1843, after a government appropriation for the construction of a harbor at Racine had been switched to Chicago instead, Racine residents, angry at the decision, decided to build their own. A new cut through the sand bar about a half-mile north of the original river mouth was made and the river was dredged; a large limestone rock near the new entrance



The river's mouth was moved from its original location near the lower right of this drawing and piers extending out into the lake were added, forming a harbor. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*

was removed, and north and south piers extending out into the lake from the river's mouth were added. Those piers formed Racine's first harbor. A lighthouse, one of a series, was placed on the north pier head in 1849.



Over time a number of lights were installed on the river's piers. This one was on the north pier. The date of the photo is uncertain. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*

By 1847 Racine was the fifth busiest port on the Great Lakes, behind only Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago. More upgrades were needed. A dredge was purchased in 1851 to keep the channel open and the city, in 1855, required property owners on the river below Second Street to add sheet piling to further protect it. The new harbor was a busy place as can be seen in this view from about 1850 (see image at top of page 2).

In 1866 the government lengthened the harbor's piers to 1,000 feet and dredged the channel to 10 feet. The original pier head light stood until 1859 when it was carried away by the schooner *Newman* which struck the pier in a storm; a red beacon on a wooden tower was placed on the end of the new north pier head;

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The harbor at the lower end of the Root River, ca. 1850. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*

it was later replaced with a rectangular steel tower that was 53 feet tall. 1866 also saw the construction of the Racine Harbor Lighthouse on shore near the western end of the north pier.



The Racine Harbor Lighthouse. Note the catwalk to the end of the pier. It gave the lighthouse keepers access to the light tower that can be seen at the end of the pier. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*

Although the light tower has been capped, the building still exists and is now part of the old Coast Guard lifesaving station.

1880 saw the construction of the 111-foot tall Wind Point lighthouse (photo in next column). The original light was fueled by kerosene; the lens was a third order Fresnel lens built in France (photo at right). The lighthouse originally had two lights; the second, at 102 feet, was installed behind a slot just below the lantern room. It had a narrow viewing angle and was only visible to mariners near the Racine Reef. It was discontinued in 1907 after the Racine Reef Light went into service.

In 1888 the harbor was dredged to 17 feet and the river was deepened to 20 feet up to the State Street Bridge. Even though shipping in and out of the port had begun to decline the Root River was still a very busy place, as is evident in this view of the river looking northeast from about Marquette Street (facing page). In the photo, the river is lined with schooners, at least some of which were probably built in one of the several shipyards in Racine which, by



The Wind Point Lighthouse. At 111 feet tall, it replaced a lone cottonwood tree that was the point's only visual identifier. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*



The 3rd order Fresnel lens from the Wind Point Light. The lens itself stands 4 feet 8 inches tall and its diameter is 39 1/2 inches. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*

1901 when the photo was taken, had closed. The Racine Boat Manufacturing Company's main building shed can be seen on the far side of the river; it was located in the same spot as the present-day Azarian and Sons Marina.

The Racine Reef is a limestone formation about 1 1/4 miles long and 3/4 mile wide located roughly east of the harbor. It was (and still is) a major hazard to navigation and warnings were placed on the eastern end as early as the 1850's. In 1899 a permanent lighted beacon on a steel tower was erected there. The Racine



The first permanent Racine Reef Beacon. Tanks for the Pintsch gas used to fuel it can be seen at the bottom of the tower. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*

Reef Beacon cost some \$40,000 and was lit by a material called "Pintsch gas," a pressurized fuel made from distilled naphtha. The light, known in those days as "the Pintsch Light," was not satisfactory due to difficulties in refueling it in the winter and it was replaced by the Racine Reef Lighthouse in 1906 (facing page). That structure, which was manned, was automated in 1954 and finally demolished in 1961. It was replaced with a steel skeleton light tower, the same one presently in use. The western end of the reef is marked today by an electrically lighted buoy. Pintsch gas in tanks was also used on floating buoys and was probably the original fuel for the light but there is no information available on the buoy's



The Root River looking northeast from Marquette Street. *Courtesy of the Oak Clearing Farm and Museum.*



The yacht basin created by the north and south breakwaters. Note the Root River winding toward the bottom of the photo. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*

initial configuration or when it was first placed. Even now it is popularly called "the Pintsch Light."

1900 saw the construction of a rock filled timber crib, almost 800 feet long, in the lake northeast of the river mouth; it protected the river and its harbor from northeast storms and would form the beginning of the north breakwater, which was authorized by the government in 1910. Both the north and south breakwaters were completed in stages which began in 1912 and continued through the early 1920s. Both structures were comprised mainly of concrete caissons that were towed

in place, sunk, filled with stone, and later capped with concrete. With the new, outer harbor complete the south pier extending out from the river mouth was removed. The pier on the north side of the river was shortened at about this time too, to near the Racine Harbor Lighthouse; its catwalk was removed and the light tower that had been on its end was moved to the end of the new north breakwater. Painted red, it was operational until 1987; a new skeleton tower at the end of a rip-rap extension of the north breakwater replaced it but the old red tower, now unlit, remains. It is a symbol of our maritime heritage. The end of the south breakwater was marked (and still is) by a steel tower that originally showed a white light.

With the exception of periodic dredging by the U. S. Government, things remained essentially the same for many years. Shipping by rail and truck gradually supplanted water-borne traffic, the city's coal yards closed in the late 1960s, and commercial use of Racine's harbor,

which had been a vital part of the city's industrial base for over a century, came to an end. Planning for a major improvement began in the early 1970s. Led by James R (Jim) Rooney, it was aimed at revitalizing Racine's downtown core and waterfront by creating a modern marina and park area and further protecting the existing yacht basin. Some 21 million dollars of county and city funding went into the project, which began in 1983. Half a million tons of rock rip-rap were placed next to the north and south breakwaters and both were lengthened with more stone; rather than using barges, the stone was trucked in over

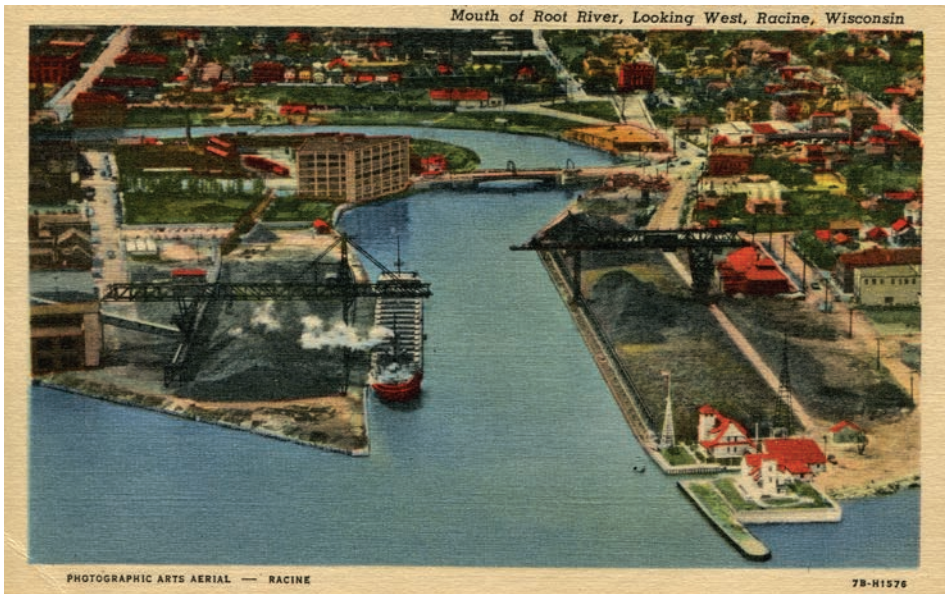
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The old Reef Lighthouse. The light was 72 feet above the water. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*



The North Breakwater Light. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*



Coal yards once extended from the mouth of the river to State Street. *Postcard image*



The completed harbor project. *Courtesy of the Racine Heritage Museum.*



North Beach as it was in the 1920s. Where the photographer is standing is now dry land. Barker Street climbs up the hill. *Courtesy of Jim Rooney.*

the breakwater decks and dumped in place. A confinement structure was built inside of the south breakwater and the harbor was dredged; the dredging spoil, some 350,000 cubic yards of it, was pumped into the confinement structure and created 21 acres of new land for park and marina facilities. 921 slips were built and the project, which only took two years, was complete. The harbor was de-certified by the government for commercial use in 1985; any dredging or other improvements are now the responsibility of the city and county of Racine. The Root River, once devoted to commerce and industry, slowly converted to recreational use too. Marinas appeared, some well upstream of State Street, and the slips they brought upped the total number available in Racine to about 1,600.

Racine's North Beach, which has been a magnet for residents and tourists alike for many, many years, has also changed. As water levels fluctuated over the years and storms imported sand against the north breakwater, the beach has grown until the shoreline is now about even with today's Racine Yacht Club. Years ago there was much deep water in the same spot and sailboats were launched from the yacht club derrick there; that derrick was removed to make way for the trucks that carried stone out on the breakwater during the harbor upgrade.

The venue we enjoy is among the best on the lakes. It is the result of more than 150 years of work by an untold number of people who had a vision and who made it happen.



*A publication of the RYC Historical Committee, a volunteer group dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of RYC's rich history. Written by Steve Wheeler with recollections and information from Jim Rooney and source material from G. Schemel's book "Belle City Beacons."*