

# American Great Lakes Maritime Documents of the U. S. Customs Service 1799 - 1868

Presented at a Research Round Table by

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# Maritime Documents of the American Great Lakes Custom Houses, 1799-1868

- What is the purpose and genesis of the regulations that generated vessel documents?
- What kinds of documents got generated?
- How did these documents get generated and archived?
- Where can you find these documents?
- What is the accuracy and integrity of these documents?
- Interesting Tidbits

# Key Laws Affecting U. S. Vessel Records

- 1789, July 31 - Creation of Customs Service (protect, secure and defend the revenue)
- 1792, Dec. 31 – An Act for Registry of Vessels
- 1793, Feb. 20 – An Act for Enrolling and Licensing Vessels
- 1799, Mar. 2 – An Act for Admeasurement of Tonnage (B.O.M.)
- 1831, Mar. 2 – An Act to Regulate the Foreign and Coasting Trade on the Northern, Northeastern and Northwestern Frontier of the U. S.
- 1838, July 7 – An Act to Regulate the Safety of Steam Vessels (Amended 1852)
- 1850, July 29 – An Act to Provide for the Recording of the Conveyances of Vessels
- 1864, May 6 – An Act for the Admeasurement of Tonnage (Moorsom)
- 1866, July 28 – An Act to Provide for the Official Numbering of Vessels.

N. B. – The first Great Lakes Customs Houses were created on March 2, 1799 at Oswego, Lewiston, Presque Isle, Sandusky Bay, Detroit and Mackinac.

# Important American Maritime Documents, 1799 - 1868

- Registers (Foreign Trade)
- Enrollments (Coasting Trade and Fisheries)
- Licenses (Coasting Trade and Fisheries - for 1 Year)
- Master Carpenter Certificate (Builder's Certificate)
- Certificate of Admeasurement (Surveyor's Certificate)
- Bill of Sale (also Mortgages and other Conveyances)
- Owner's Oath (Sworn Statement that he will Comply with the Law Relative to his Register/Enrollment/License)
- Register/Enrollment Bond (\$ Guarantee from Owner that he will Comply with the Law Related to his Document)
- Bottomry Bond (repair vessel out of home port - high interest)
- Clearance Certificates (Vessel Entered and Cleared According to Law - Required Foreign, Optional Coasting)
- Manifests (Required Foreign and Coasting)
- Steamboat Regulatory Documents, 1854 Onward (Inspector's Certificate/Hull and Boiler Certificate, Engineer's Certificate)
- Bill of Health (Foreign Trade - Clean, Suspected, Foul)

# Information on an Enrollment/Register

- Certificate number. After 1866, the vessel's official number
- Names and addresses of owners (usually by city and state). After 1850, each owner's fraction of ownership is included.
- Name of vessel and home port.
- Name of master of vessel on the date of issue.
- Date and place of construction.
- Name of builder (often on the first certificate issued for a vessel).
- Number, place, and date of issue of the previous certificate.
- Number of decks and masts.
- Dimensions and tonnage (capacity). The capacity formula was changed in 1864.
- Type of stern, gallery (seldom after 1865), and figurehead.
- Type of rig.
- Place and date of issue of certificate.
- Name of the Collector or Deputy Collector
- On the reverse side of the certificate, an endorsement giving the place, date, and reason for surrender of certificate. Sometimes, endorsements of changes of master, renewal of license, or other information.

# Process for Generating the First Register or Enrollment/License of a Vessel

- Owner or Builder procures a **Certificate of Admeasurement** from the Custom House Surveyor which provides a legal physical description of the vessel including dimensions and tonnage.
- Ship builder procures a **Master Carpenter's Certificate** from the Customs House certifying when and where built, by whom, for whom and the physical description of the vessel.
- Owner fills out a Custom House **Bill of Sale** certifying ownership (Bill of Sale usually includes the above information plus register/enrollment information).
- Owner completes an **Oath of Compliance** for a register or an enrollment and license stating he will comply with the legal requirements of the documents.
- Owner procures a Custom House **Bond** that financially binds him to the **Oath** above.
- Collector of Customs issues a **Register/Enrollment** (3 copies) and **License** (2 copies).

# Process for Archiving of Documents Issued

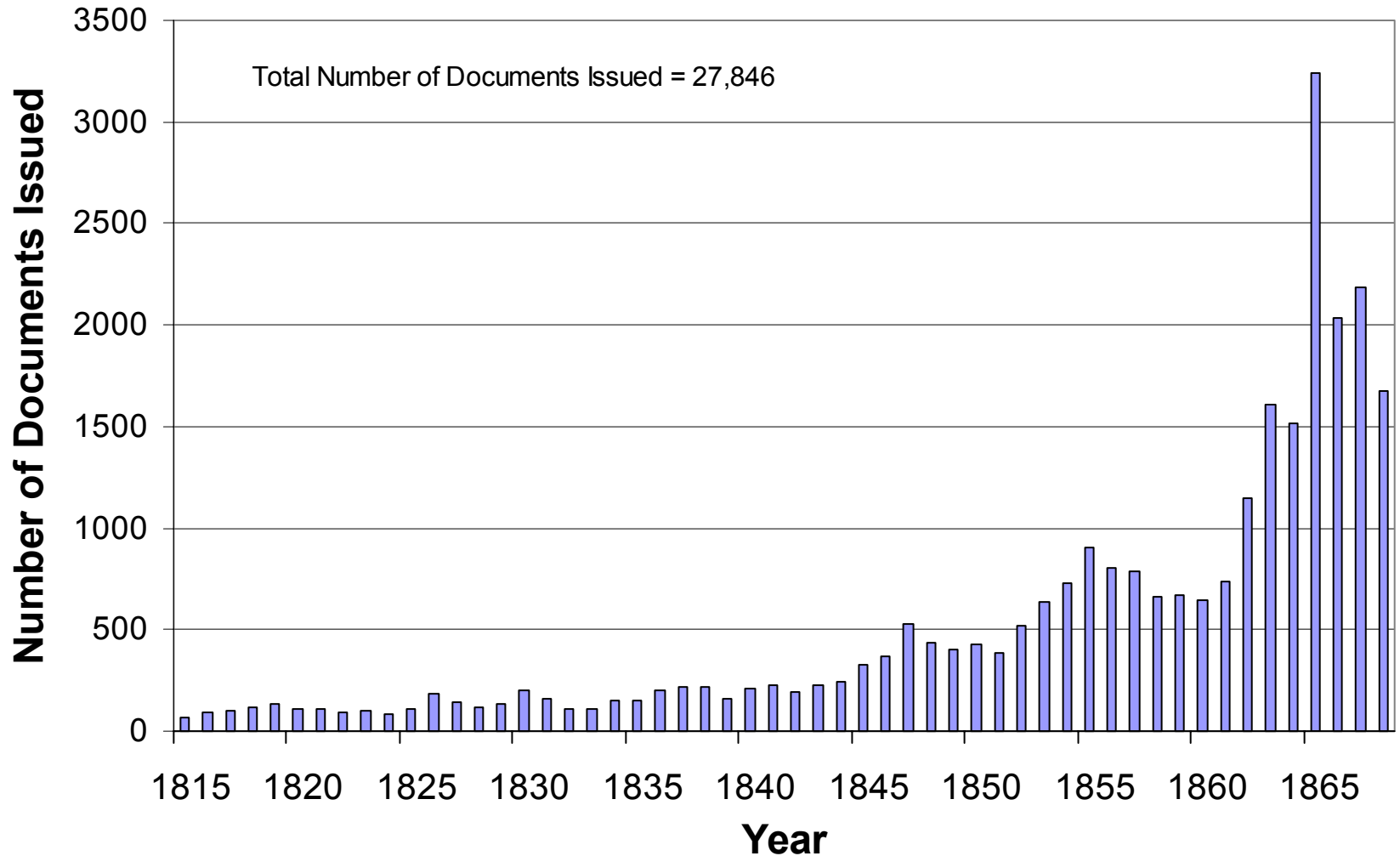
- Three copies of a Register or enrollment are produced
  - 1 copy for the Master (usually very ornate) to keep on the vessel
  - 1 copy is recorded in a bound volume in the Custom House
  - 1 copy is sent to the Register of the Treasury in Washington, D.C.
- Two copies of a License are produced (3 after 1865)
  - 1 copy for the Master to keep on the vessel
  - 1 copy is recorded in a bound volume in the Custom House
- Certificates of Admeasurement, Master Carpenter Certificates, Bill of Sale, Oaths and Bonds
  - Up until 1850, 1 copy kept by Custom House and 1 copy for the owner
  - 1850 and onward a third copy was generated and required to be sent to the Register of the Treasury

# Process for Re-documenting a Vessel

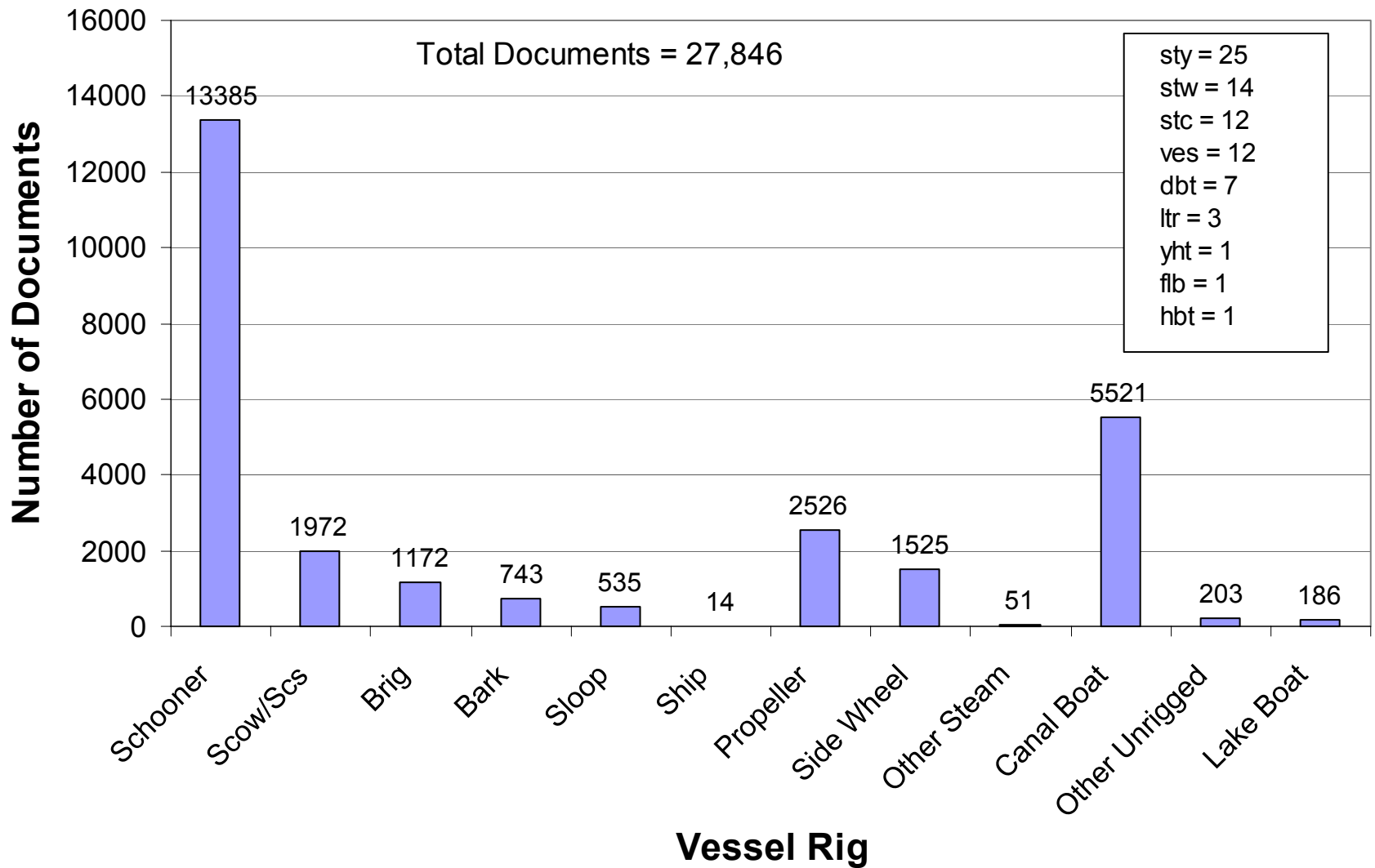
- Any change in change in ownership, measurements, home port, etc. required issuance of a new document
- Old document is surrendered (usually) at home port
- Old document is endorsed on backside noting date, place and cause of surrender (often also includes the vessel name, rig, and date, number and place of issuance of old document)
- Collector also copies endorsement onto his copy
- Collector issues new document with changes
- Collector sends Masters surrendered document to Washington
- On average, a vessel might have 8 to 10 documents in its lifetime



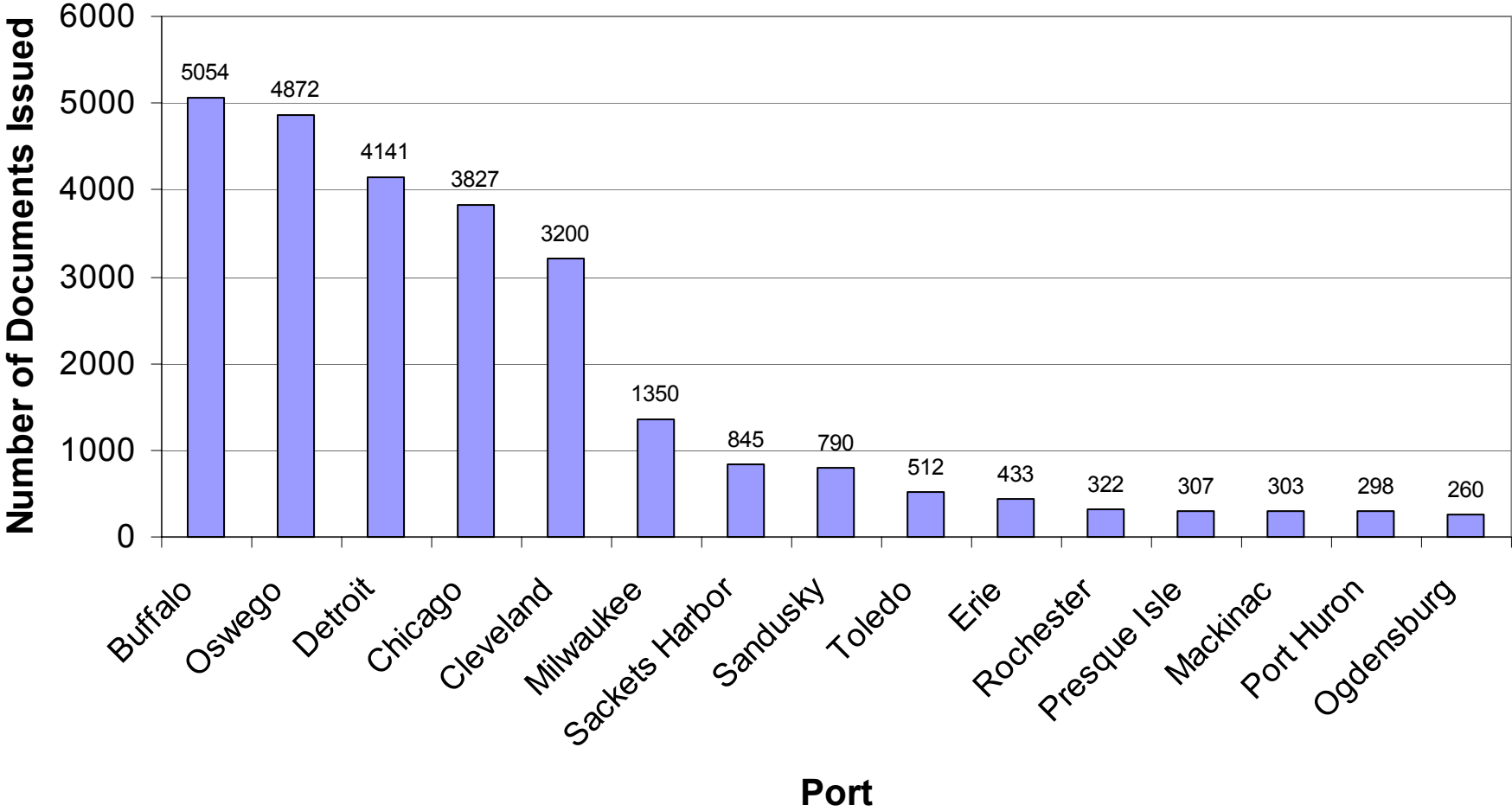
# Number of Vessel Documents Issued per Year (U.S. Great Lakes Merchant Vessels, 1815 - 1868)



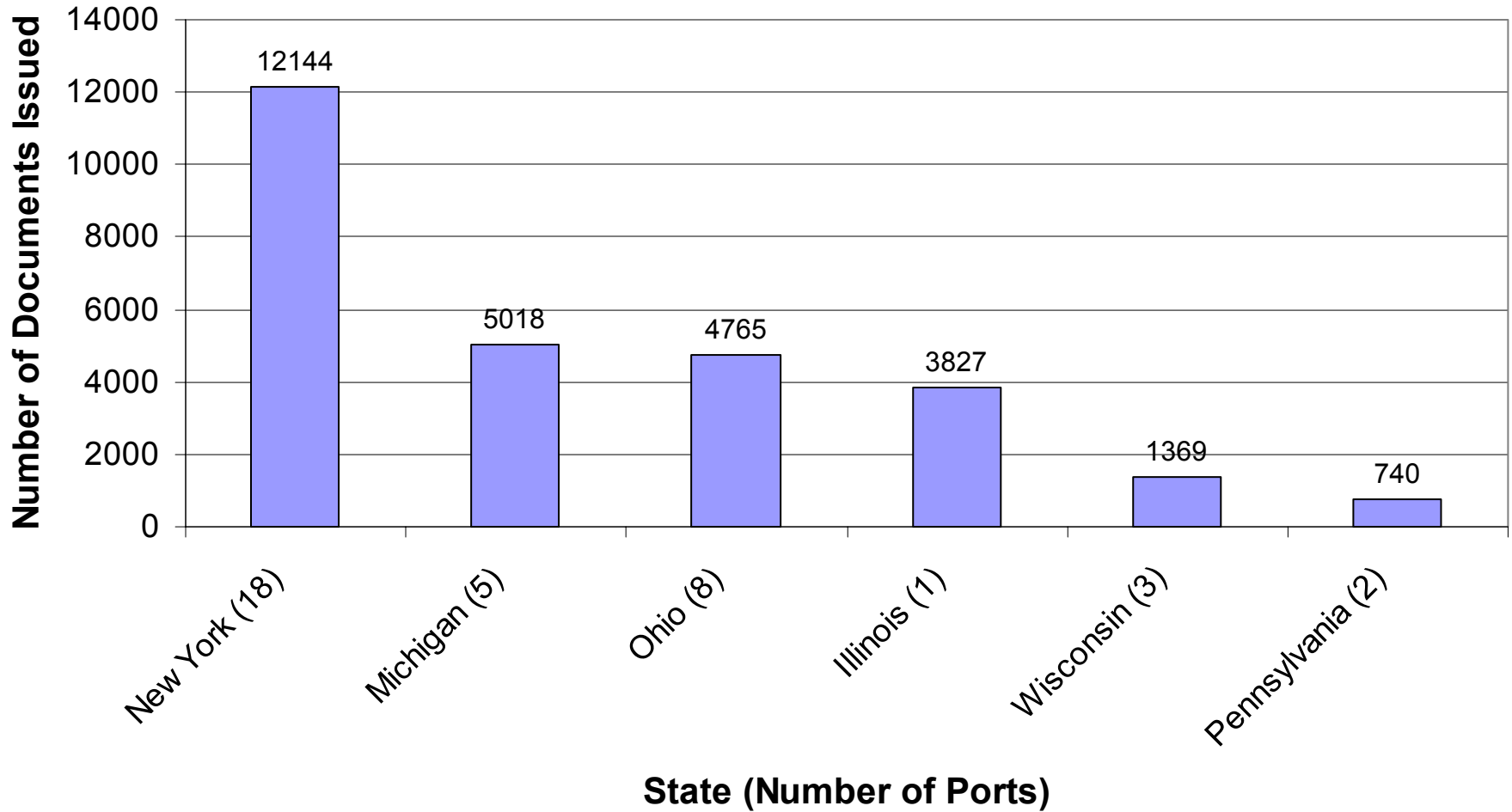
# Distribution of Documents by Rig of Great Lakes Vessels, 1815-1868



# Top Fifteen Great Lakes Ports in Terms of Number of Documents Issued, 1815 - 1868



# Great Lakes Vessel Documents Issued by State 1815 - 1868



# Where to Find U.S. Customs House Records

- National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C.
- NARA Great Lakes Regional Facility in Chicago.
- Milwaukee Public Library, Bowling Green, etc., have enrollment and register collections.
- Several enrollment/register website databases are available (Milwaukee, Walter Lewis, etc.).
- Most of the above material has its genesis in NARA who has the “Washington” copy and the “Masters” surrendered copy of documents.
- Actual “Custom House” copies of documents often have been acquired by individual and institutional collectors and are widely scattered in institutional manuscript collections.

# Documents at NARA/DC

- Types of Documents
  - Enrollments/Licenses/Registers
  - Entrances and Clearances
  - Master Carpenter's Certificates
  - Certificates of Admeasurement
  - Bills of Sale and Mortgages
  - Bonds
  - Oaths
  - Wreck Reports
  - Special Lists
- Size of Collection (U.S. - 465,000 enrollments/registers 1815-1866)
  - Over 1000 volumes (Great Lakes - 1815-68)
  - Several hundred linear feet (Great Lakes - 1815-68)
- Limitations
  - Records before 1815 lost in the 1814 burning of Washington
  - Large number of "Washington" enrollments destroyed in 1912-13 during Bureau of Navigation building move
  - Many 1815-72 "Masters" copies destroyed in 1921 fire

# Example of Scattered “Customs House” Copies of Documents - Mackinac Custom House

- Main body of enrollments/registers at NARA (Washington and Master copies)
- Known Locations of “Customs House” copies of Various Documents
  - Vessel manifests, 1802-75 (Judge John Steere Collection, Bayliss Public Library, Sault Ste. Marie, MI)
  - Enrollments, 1830-38 and 1851-68; Licenses, 1838-69; Bills of Sale and Mortgages, 1850-70 (J. M. Longyear collection, Marquette County Historical Society, Marquette, MI)
  - Impost Book, 1802-58 (Bentley Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI)
  - Clearances, 1838-40 and many other miscellaneous documents (13, 450 pages - Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library)

# Why Question the Accuracy and Integrity of Customs House Documents in Period up to 1868?

- Collectors of Customs were political appointees (by the President).
- All other jobs were handed out as political party patronage.
- Democratic Party believed the Customs House jobs should be used to support writers, poets, etc. (e.g., Nathaniel Hawthorne was a surveyor at Salem, MA from 1846-49; Herman Melville at N.Y. in 1866, etc.).
- Average worker only worked 3 to 4 hours per day (often slept on the job).
- Up through 1860 more than 90% of the revenue of the U.S. came from **cash** collected at the customs houses.
- Much of the income of customs agents came from the collection of fees and commissions on duties paid.
- Almost complete lack of financial accountability led to widespread graft.
- The result of political patronage and corruption made it difficult to maintain any degree of professionalism in the workforce and thus the accuracy and integrity of records suffered.



# Problems with Accuracy and Integrity

- About 5% of either the vessel dimensions or tonnage are incorrect due to measurement errors, arithmetic errors or clerical errors.
- About 1 to 2% of the vessel names are inconsistent due to misspellings, failure to spell out first names or other clerical errors.
- About 1% of the documents are inconsistently numbered
  - Sch. Montezuma, Chicago, 1867, enrollment number 312 and 1/2
  - Duplicate numbers in 1831 due to 1831 Frontier Enrollment
  - Sequential numbering across several years (Rochester 1849-55)
  - Document numbers run from July to July instead of January to December (see Milwaukee, 1861 - 1863)
  - Numerous examples of duplicate numbers in same year
  - Separate sequential numbers in same year by rig (Oswego, 1867)

# Tonnage Errors Resulting from Incorrect Measurement when NEW

Year	Port	No.	Length		Breadth		Depth		Listed Tonnage	Actual Tonnage
			feet	in.	feet	in.	feet	in.		
<b>Sch Humming Bird (b. 1829)</b>										
1829	Detroit	7	45	8	15	8	4	1	22.59	24.42
1830	Detroit	R1	46	0	16	3	4	3	28.93	26.35
<b>Sch M. L. Collins (b. 1854)</b>										
1854	Toledo	10	124	0	25	0	10	6	301.18	301.18
1859	Toledo	7	124	0	24	8	10	0	283.54	283.54
<b>Schooner John Richards (b. 1830)</b>										
1837	Portland	9	57	8	17	8	5	10	43.20	51.06
1842	Detroit	31	57	0	16	6	4	10	39.42	39.54
<b>Schooner Mariner (b. 1838)</b>										
1838	Detroit	31	50	0	15	0	6	0	48.32	38.84
1841	Detroit	7	54	10	16	0	6	2	46.99	46.98
1846	Detroit	12	54	10	16	6	6	2	46.99	48.13

# Tonnage Errors Resulting from Clerical and Arithmetic Errors

Year	Port	No.	Length		Breadth		Depth		Listed Tonnage	Actual Tonnage
			Feet	In.	Feet	In.	Feet	In.		
<b>Sloop Caroline (b. 1837)</b>										
1837	Detroit	40	43	6	14	2	4	10	22.29	25.23
1838	Detroit	37	43	6	14	2	4	10	72.29	25.23
1839	Detroit	8	43	6	14	2	4	10	72.29	25.23
1839	Detroit	13	43	6	14	2	4	10	72.29	25.23
1845	Detroit	79	43	6	14	2	4	10	22.29	25.23
<b>Schooner Aerial (b. 1847)</b>										
1857	Buffalo	125	118	0	24	0	9	6	252.43	248.64
1858	Chicago	1	118	0	24	0	9	6	245.01	248.64
1858	Buffalo	120	118	0	24	0	9	6	254.01	248.64
<b>Sch Hamilton (b. 1847)</b>										
1847	Oswego	48	114	2	20	6	9	4	205.09	205.16
1847	Oswego	59	114	2	20	6	9	4	255.73	205.16
1851	Oswego	8	114	2	20	6	9	4	255.73	205.16
1852	Oswego	16	114	2	20	6	9	4	205.43	205.16

# Tonnage Errors Made During "Moorsom" Readmeasurement

Year	Port	No.	Length	Breadth	Depth	Listed Tonnage	Actual Tonnage	Tonnage of Enclosures	
			feet	feet	feet	Tons	B.O.M. Tons	Above Upper Deck	Between Tonnage and Upper Decks
<b>Sts George H. Parker</b>									
1862	Detroit	85	108.50	18.50	10.00	188.89	189.67		
1865	Detroit	218	109.00	20.80	8.80	96.11		3.68	0.00
1866	Detroit	138	109.00	20.80	8.80	96.11		3.68	0.00
1868	Detroit	100	109.00	20.80	8.90	162.82		0.00	70.39
<b>Sch Aldebaran</b>									
1864	Buffalo	61	121.92	27.33	10.00	303.59	303.59		
1865	Buffalo	38	123.10	28.00	9.55	232.80		0.00	0.00
1866	Buffalo	39	123.10	28.00	9.55	251.35		19.27	0.00
<b>Sts City of Boston</b>									
1863	Cleveland	52	136.00	25.84	11.87	392.15	389.04		
1865	Cleveland	61	136.00	26.30	11.20	297.58		20.91	0.00
1866	Cleveland	38	136.00	26.30	11.20	431.50		0.00	155.31

# Interesting Tidbits

- War of 1812
  - Presque Isle operated throughout the war of 1812. Just prior to the Battle of Lake Erie on Sept. 10, 1813, the last vessel cleared on Sept. 7.
  - Fort Mackinac was captured on July 16, 1812 along with the American sloops Erie and Friend Good Will and schooners Salina and Mary. The Detroit Certificates of clearance, along with manifests for these vessels were turned in at Mackinac between June 27 and July 8 and exist in the Mackinac Custom House records.
- Vessel Size
  - Most people think of sloops as somewhat small vessels. The sloop Empire of Detroit was 1,031 tons!
  - For vessels under 20 tons and over 5 tons, enrollments were optional. Some vessels chose at first to be enrolled then later chose not to (don't mistake last document for vessel as indication of vessel lost, see e.g., sloop Young Rover, Portland, 1837, #8, 19 tons).
  - The schooner Ligure was rebuilt to vastly different dimensions in 1843 yet her tonnage remained almost exactly the same (62.61 vs. 62.65).

# Interesting Tidbits (continued)

- Defacing of Registers as Required by Law
  - Register surrendered at a foreign port was turned into the US consulate and cut in half with consulate half sent to DC and other half turned in by owner at American home port and then sent to DC. See e.g., Sch. Harvest, Cleveland, 1858, R9.
  - Of the 3 copies of a Register that were made, only the Master's copy was ornate and had the Customs House seal on it. When the Master's copy was surrendered, the law required that the seal be cut out of the document. See e.g., Sch. Champion, Detroit, 1816, #R2.
  - Sometimes, instead of cutting out the seal, the Customs House Collector's signature was cut off.
- Unusual Reasons for Document Surrender
  - Lost by tempest
  - Marshals sale
  - Surrendered remains of enrollment #5, 1843, sch Aurora Borealis, "Hiatus valde defendus - the pacs delicta being food for rats"
  - Enrollment forcibly withheld by Master (Detroit, 1839, #37)
  - Surrendered Aug. 31, 1830 and new papers granted. This enrollment worn out, owners same
  - Dead

# Interesting Tidbits (continued)

- Really Cool Vessel Names
  - “Hard Ass Bargain” (sch., 21t, Sacketts Harbor, 1816, #9)
  - “Here’s Your Mule” (sts, 14t, Buffalo, 1866, #152)
  - “What Is It” (sts, 90t, Detroit, 1863, #127)
  - “Whod Av Thot It” (scw, 30t, Sault Ste. Marie, 1863, #21)
  - “Wake Up” (scw, 83t, Cleveland, 1864, #44)

# U.S. Customs Service Maritime Documents

## References of Interest

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