

The West Coast of Vermont

The History and Evolution of the Burlington Waterfront



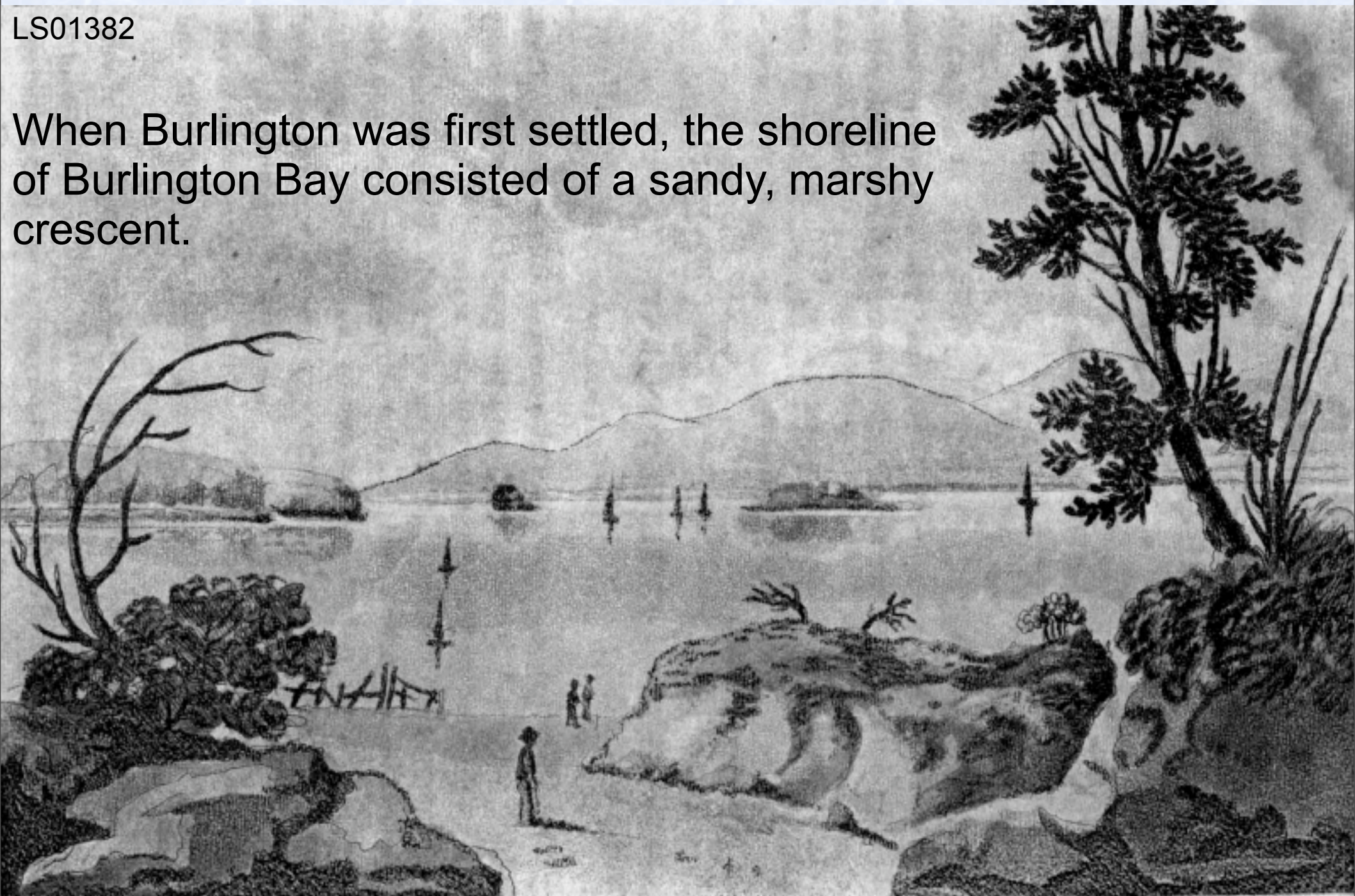
Presentation by Claire Leonard
Images from the Vermont Landscape Change Program
January 2007

The waterfront of Burlington, Vermont, has been utterly transformed by humans several times in the last two centuries.

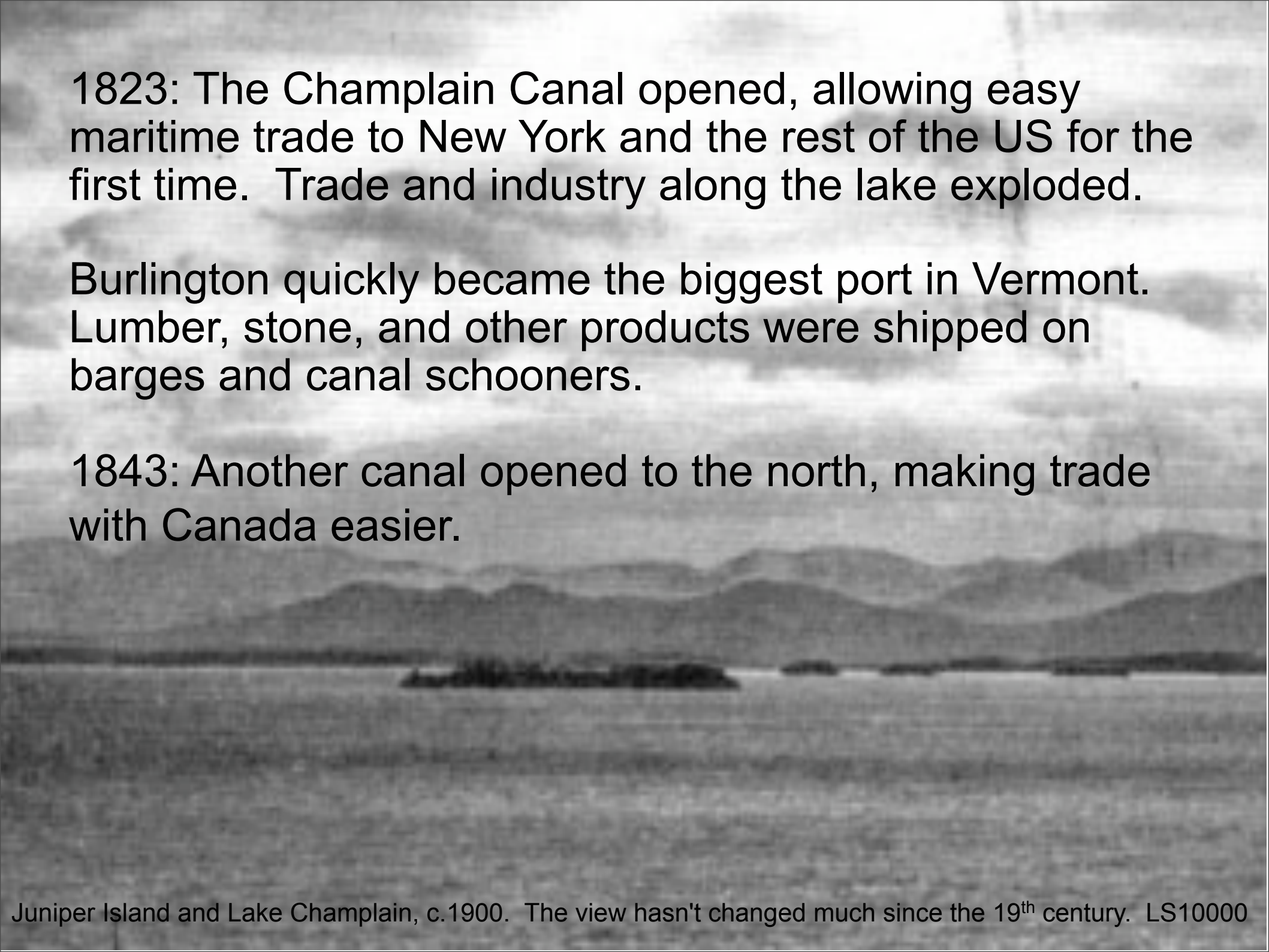
The profile of the waterfront has altered to reflect changes in economics, transportation, technology, and land use philosophy.

LS01382

When Burlington was first settled, the shoreline of Burlington Bay consisted of a sandy, marshy crescent.



An 1811 drawing of Burlington Bay shows rocks and sand.

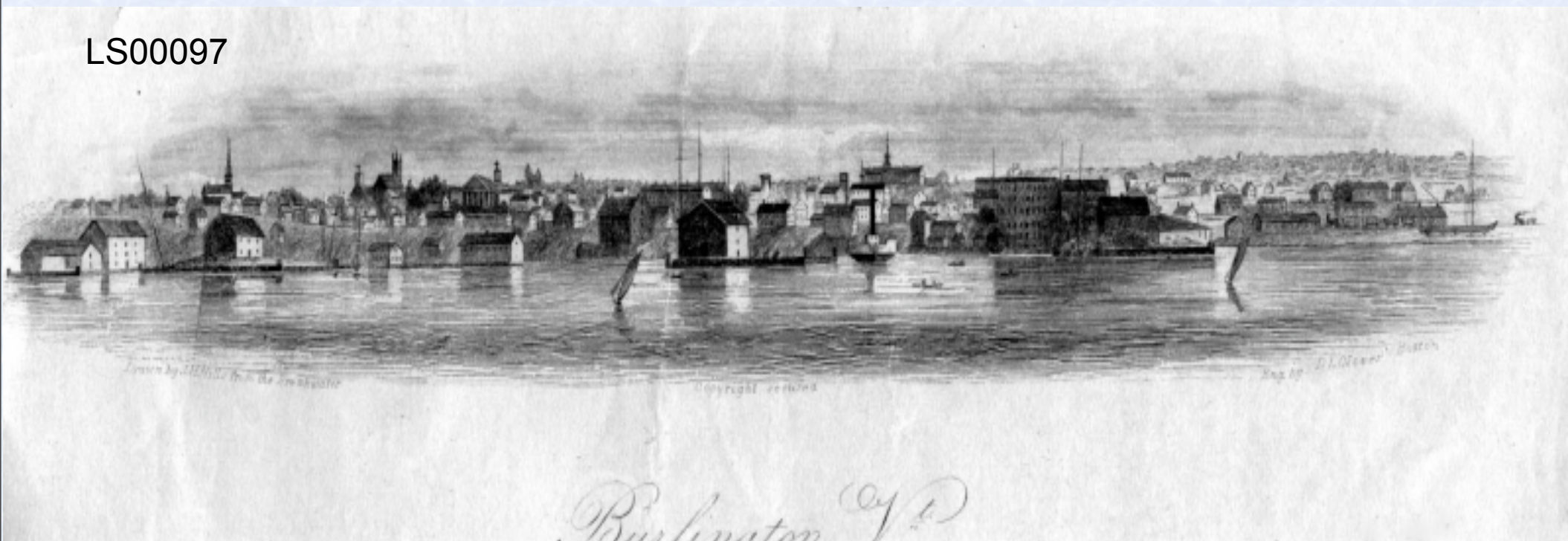
A black and white photograph of Lake Champlain. In the foreground, there is a large, dark, tree-covered island (Juniper Island). The lake extends to the horizon, with several smaller islands visible in the distance. In the background, a range of mountains is visible under a cloudy sky.

1823: The Champlain Canal opened, allowing easy maritime trade to New York and the rest of the US for the first time. Trade and industry along the lake exploded.

Burlington quickly became the biggest port in Vermont. Lumber, stone, and other products were shipped on barges and canal schooners.

1843: Another canal opened to the north, making trade with Canada easier.

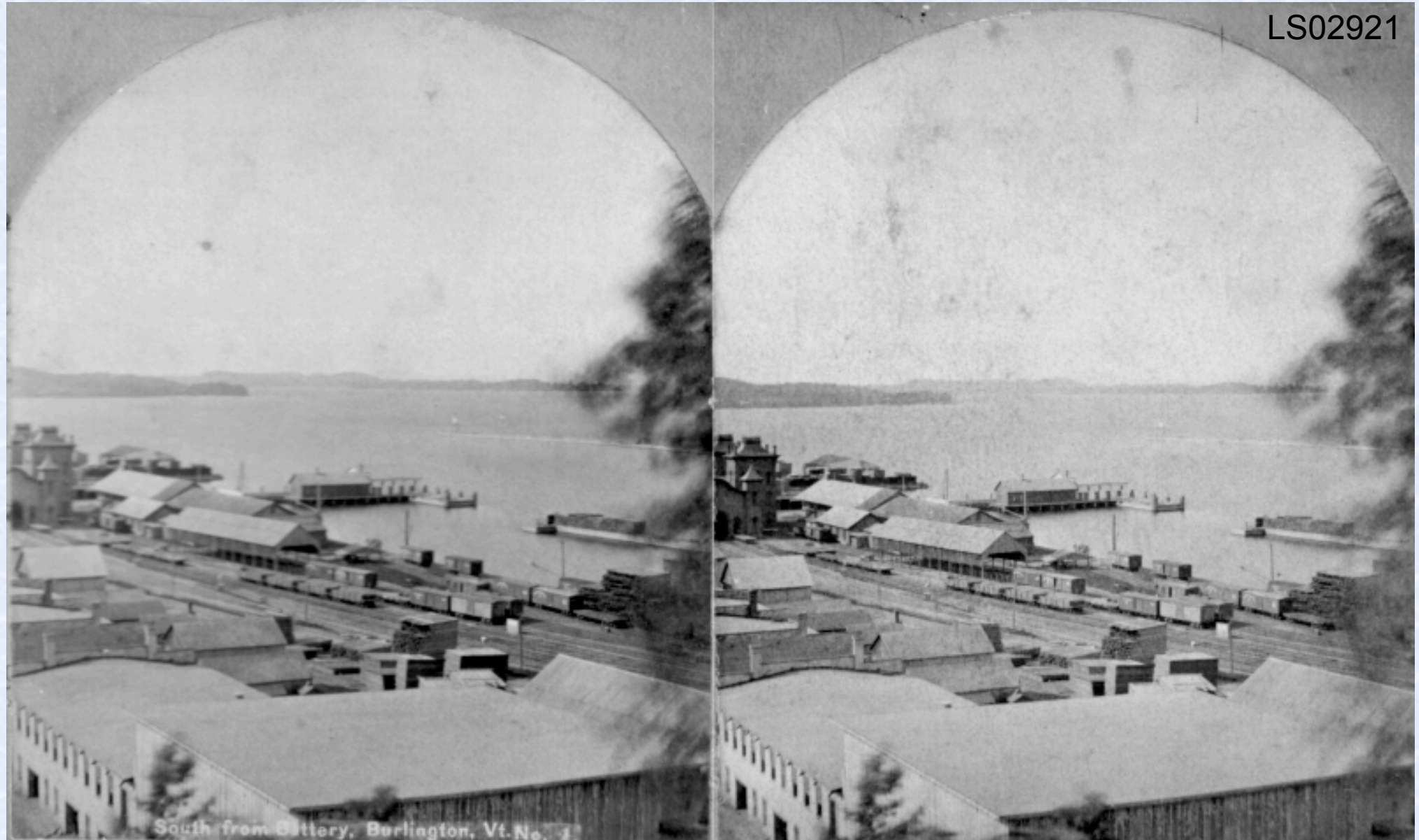
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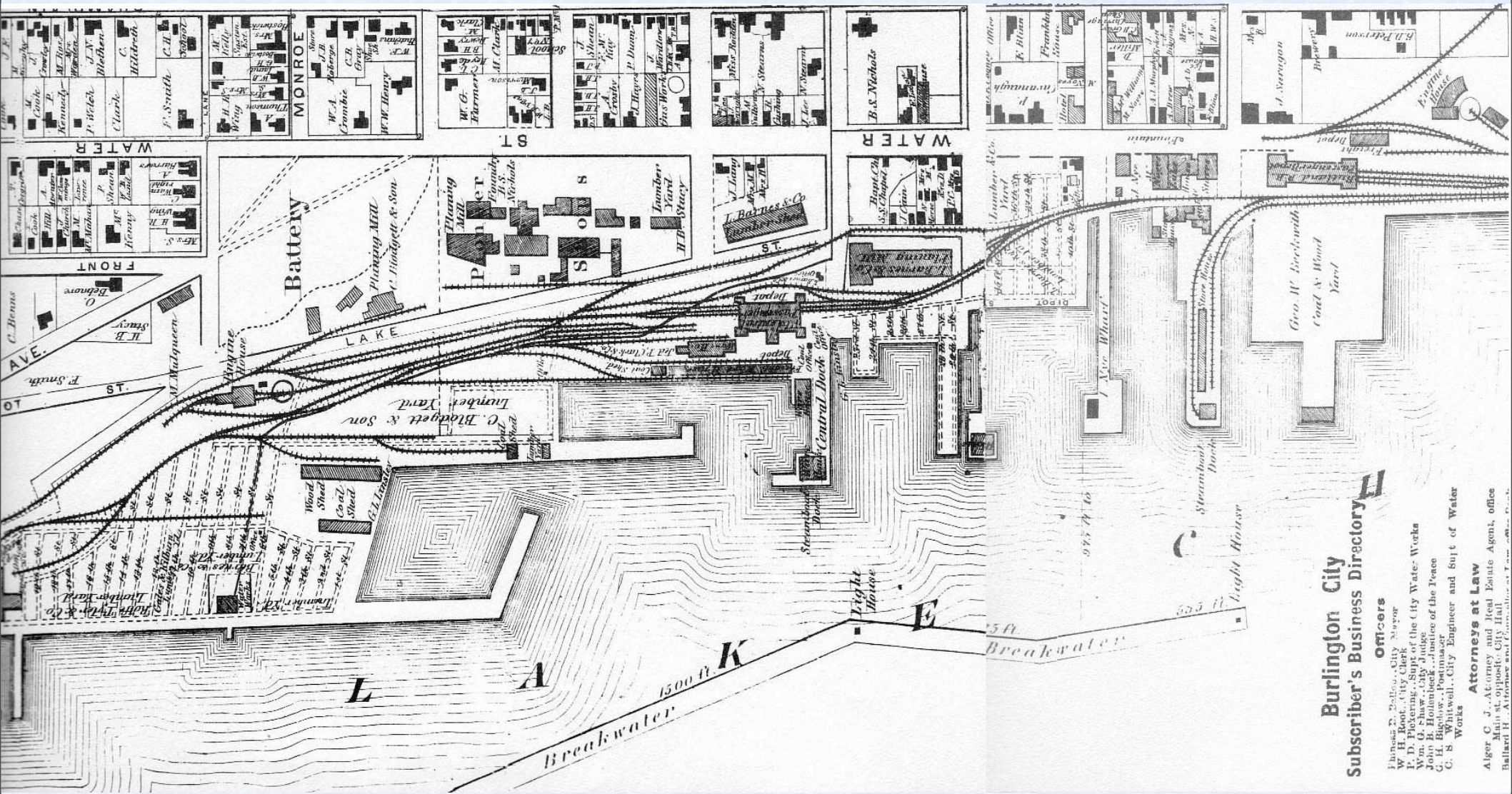
A drawing shows Burlington Harbor in 1841, just after the first breakwater was constructed.

At least twelve wharves were built out into the lake. Most of the boat traffic was sailing ships, but several steamboats were operating on the lake by this time.

1849: A rail line came to the Burlington waterfront. Railroad companies, using sawdust from the lumber operations, filled in much of the lake shore, creating new land for lumberyards and rail yards. As the Vermont forests were depleted, the port shipped mostly lumber imported from Canada.

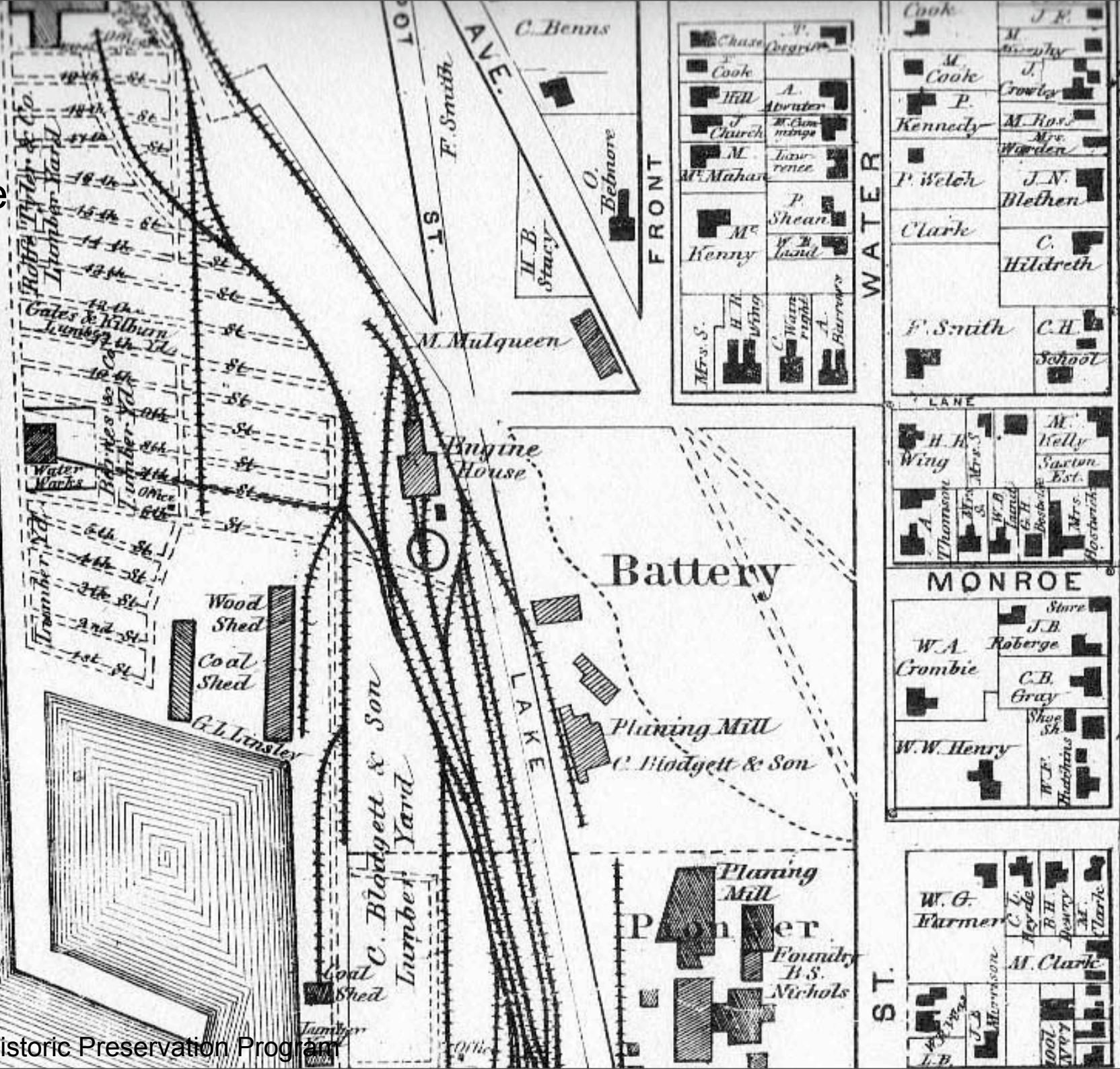


An 1865 stereoview shows industrial buildings and a railyard on filled land.

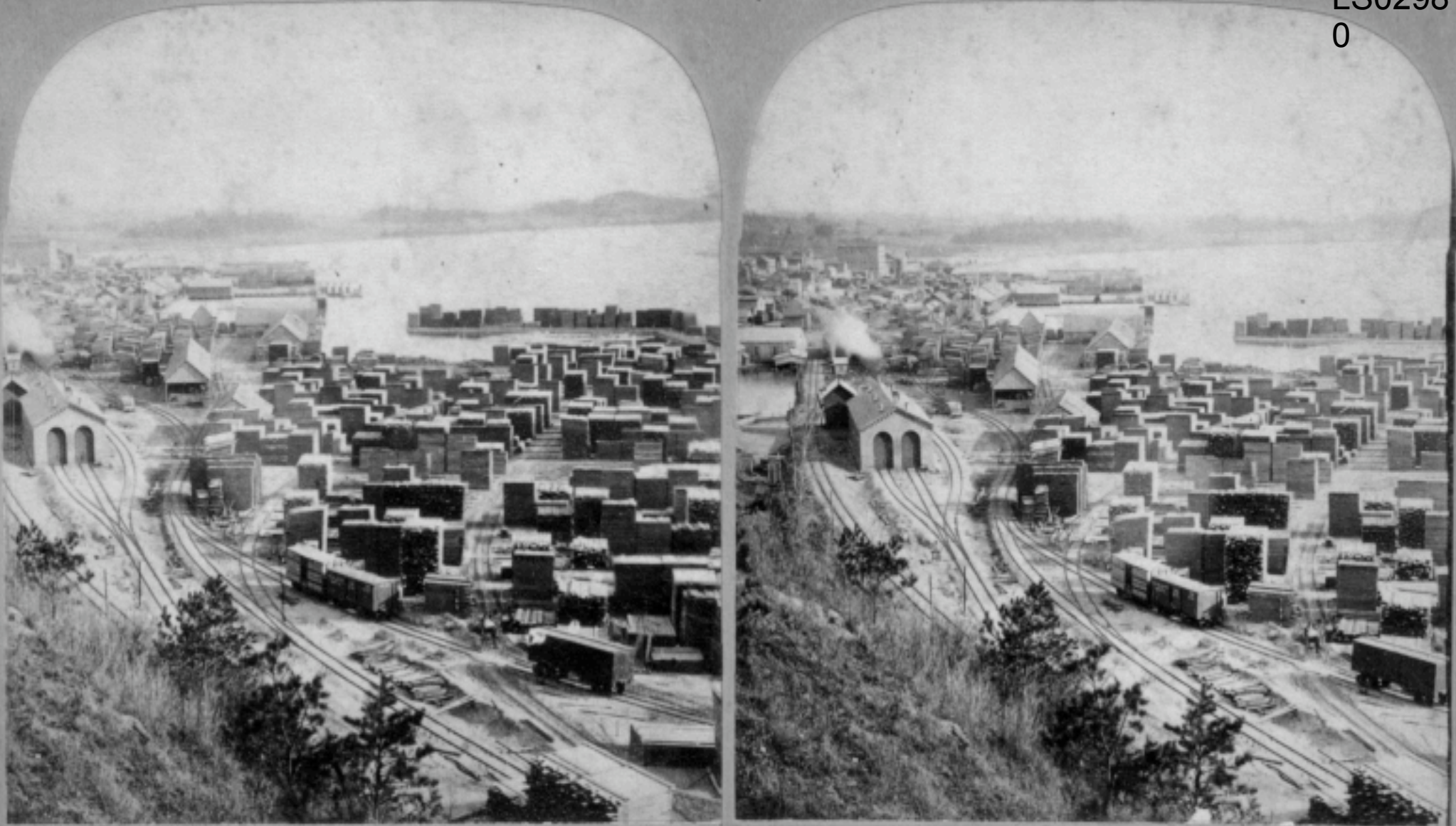


An 1869 map of Burlington shows the land and piers created by the railroad. In some places, they extended the shoreline by 500 feet. Lake Street, on the left side of the map, used to run right along the lake shore, but is now inland. To protect all the new development, the breakwater was extended in 1867.

A detail of the map shows the rail lines and engine house. Storage areas for lumber are visible along the top left. Two planing mills and a foundry can be seen on the lower right.



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179. Down by the Lake, (South, Burlington, Vt.

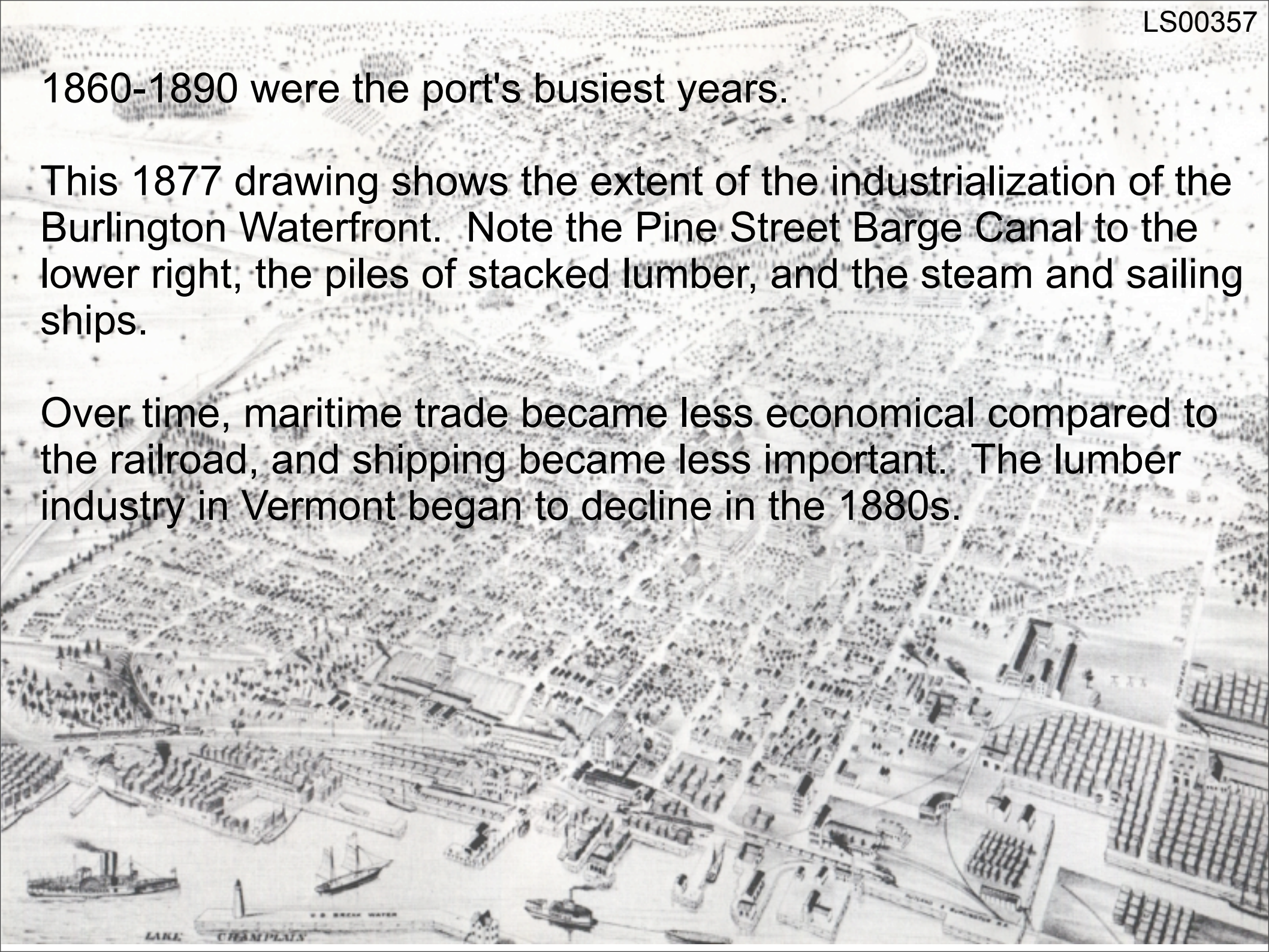
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A c.1870 stereoview shows the lumberyards and train depots. Burlington was the third busiest port in the US at this time. In 1873, 170 million feet of board lumber passed through Burlington.

1860-1890 were the port's busiest years.

This 1877 drawing shows the extent of the industrialization of the Burlington Waterfront. Note the Pine Street Barge Canal to the lower right, the piles of stacked lumber, and the steam and sailing ships.

Over time, maritime trade became less economical compared to the railroad, and shipping became less important. The lumber industry in Vermont began to decline in the 1880s.



LS00081

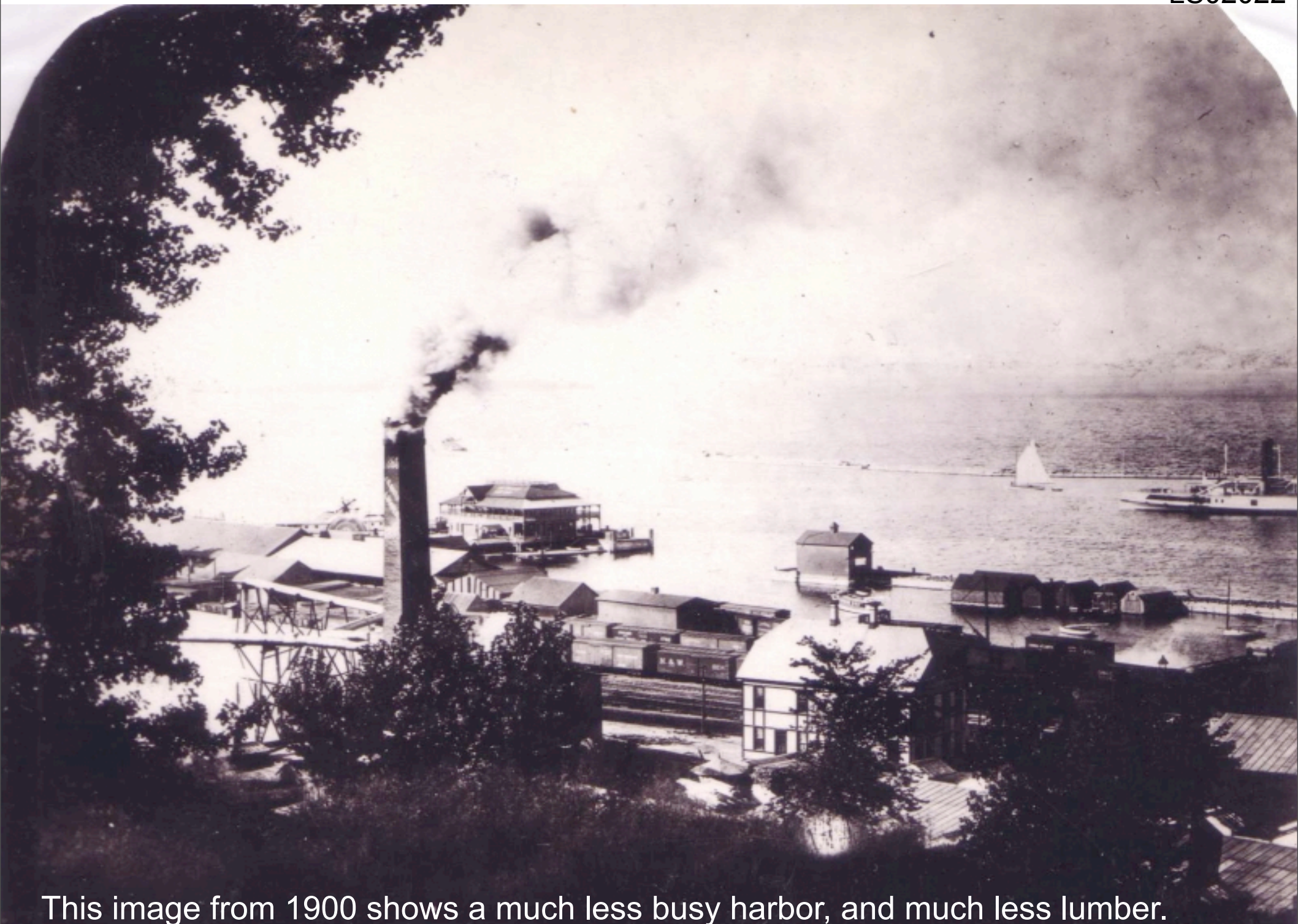


This 1888 image taken from Battery Park shows a fire on the waterfront. Note how there are more buildings and less lumber storage. Also note the yacht club on the far right.

Another 1888 image, taken from the other direction. The fire damage on the left is presumably from the same fire.



LS00072



This image from 1900 shows a much less busy harbor, and much less lumber.

LS00080

By the 1930s, the waterfront was dilapidated and underused. This photo was taken in 1930 from Battery Park, and shows bare grass and a single industrial building where the piles of lumber had been half a century before. Rail traffic at this time was reduced, because road transport had improved dramatically.





This 1935 image shows wrecked boats and a weedy landscape. The yacht club is the only building that seems to be in reasonably good condition.

For much of the 20th century, the waterfront served as a storage area for coal and petroleum products that were imported by barge or rail. The Pine Street Barge Canal (upper right) became polluted in the early 20th century by a gasworks operation. This 1951 image shows the waterfront with petroleum storage tanks and little other development. Plumes of sediment and remnants of earlier structures are also evident.



LS12108 (detail)

The Moran Plant, seen at the lower right, was a coal-fueled electric plant that operated from 1954 until 1986. This image is from 1975, and shows the extent of the rail yards and storage areas.





LS06418

Be glad this never happened! This model, from the 1970s, shows a proposed elevated highway that would have run along the waterfront.

By the 1980s, the city began to look for ways to improve and redevelop the waterfront. Several proposed commercial projects-- including a plan for 18 story condos-- fell through. In 1989, the Supreme Court ruled that all the land the railroad companies had created by fill was a public trust, allowing limited options for development.

An aerial photograph of Burlington, Vermont, showing the waterfront area. The image captures a mix of industrial buildings, residential structures, and open spaces along the water's edge. The water is dark, and the surrounding land is densely packed with buildings and infrastructure. The overall scene depicts a city in the process of revitalization.

The “Burlington Waterfront Revitalization Plan” was developed in 1990. The plan had many goals, including:

- The intention to make the waterfront an area that all the citizens of Burlington could enjoy freely year-round.
- An effort to use existing buildings (like the Moran Plant) to create community resources, such as the ECHO Center, and to preserve elements of the area's industrial past.
- Plans to make the area attractive and accessible for many different forms of recreation, including biking, skating, boating, and fishing.

Recreation:



The revitalization project was focused on developing the area for recreational use. Amidst the industrial history of the waterfront, people have used the area for recreation as well. This 1909 picture shows the Burlington Yacht Club. Three similarly designed buildings have existed at that location since 1887. The first two burned down, but the Burlington Community Boathouse exists there now.

Burlington, Vt., Yacht Club and Harbor. LS11291

Even in its post-industrial ruin, people managed to use the waterfront for recreation. This 1960 picture shows a man fishing, with ruined dock pilings in the distance.



More recreation: Perkins Pier in 1965. As today, it was used as a marina, though the park was not yet present.



LS12057

Transportation:



The Burlington Waterfront also has a long history of transportation and tourism. Lake Champlain has had a tourist industry since the 1840s. This 1886 photograph shows a large passenger steamer docked in Burlington.

LS02864



The Champlain Transportation Company has been running ferries across the lake since the 1840s. Obviously, they've had some troubles along the way. This is the King Street Ferry dock in 1936, after a spring flood washed a number of boats onto the road, probably from the adjacent Perkins Pier marina.



The confluence of transportation, recreation, and tourism. A ferry, the "City of Burlington", sits at dock in front of the yacht club in 1937. In the background is the steamer "Ticonderoga".

The same scene in 2004. The red-roofed Burlington Community Boathouse sits behind a small marina where pleasure craft are moored. Where this photo was taken, petroleum tanks stood in the 1970s. Though some elements of its industrial past remain, much of the Burlington waterfront today is an attractive public park.



Battery Park has historically overlooked a barely-developed lakeshore, a busy port for wooden sailing ships, a vast lumberyard and railyard, a post-industrial wasteland, and finally, Waterfront Park. The Burlington waterfront continues to evolve today, with continued revitalization and careful development. Many acres north of this park are being kept undeveloped, left for the future.



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