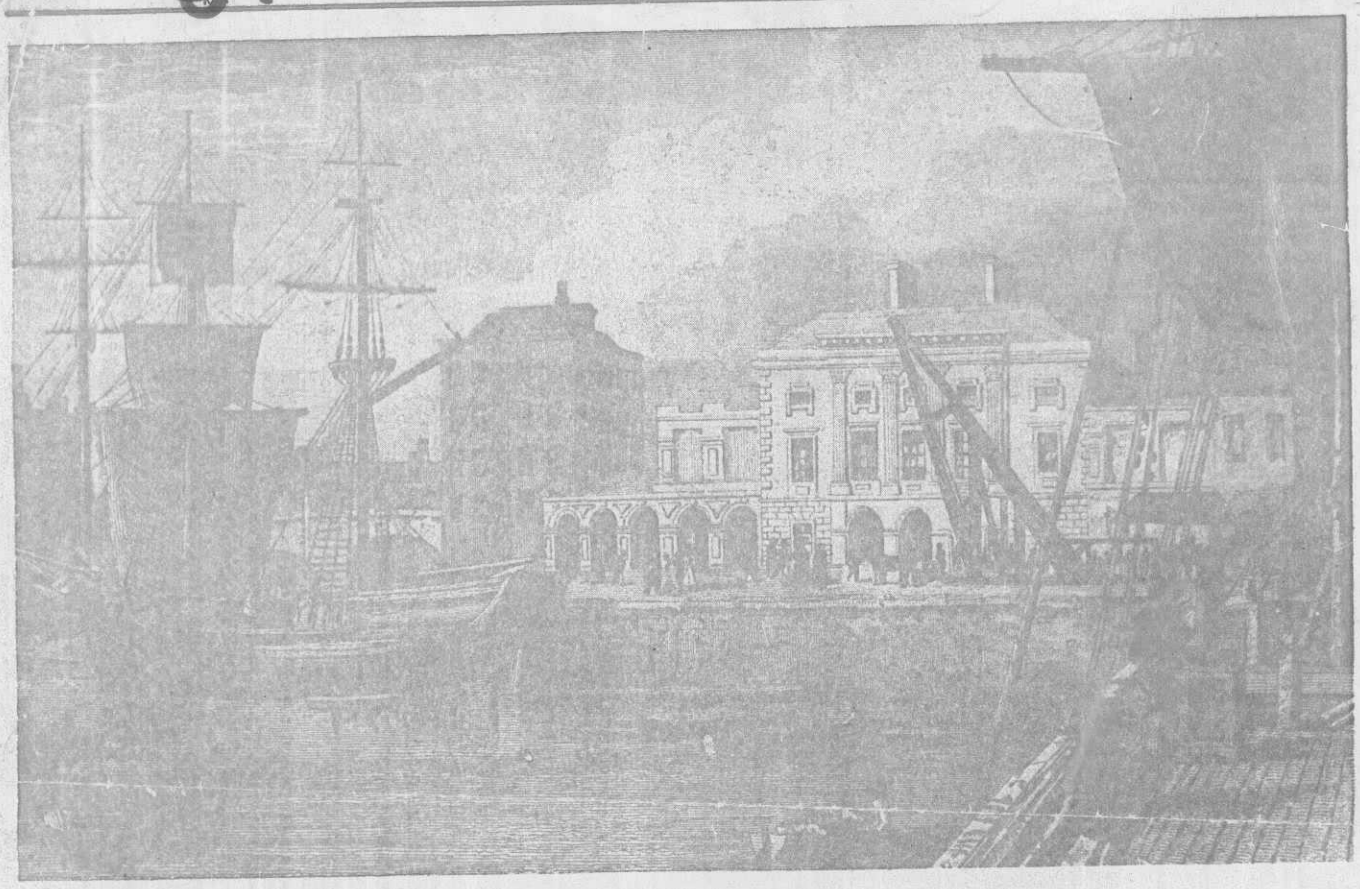


The scene as emigrants ships prepared to leave Custom House Quay in Limerick.

The history of Limerick harbour

by Frank Hamilton

WITHIN THE next year, the Limerick Harbour Commissioners, as we know them today, will be no more. They will be absorbed into a proposed new Authority to administer the Shannon Estuary, which will also have representatives from Kerry and Clare. The move will signal the end of almost 155 years of the Harbour Commissioners.

The port of Limerick was there long before any formal authority was set up to govern it With the coming of the Danes, Limerick became an important fortress and after defeats inflicted by Brian Boru, the invaders settled down to a routine life in the town.

The coming of the Normans in 1169 changed the character of Limerick. The English gained control of the town and ten years later in 1197 by charter of Richard the First of England Limerick became an English town with the power to choose a Mayor and Bailiffs.

Twelve years later King John of England visited the town and ordered that a fortress be built on the Shannon. King John's Castle was finished in 1210 to guard the pass of Thomond, over looking King's Island.

The English built the Walls of Limerick to keep out the native Irish. The city was solidly English. Under laws passed by Charter of Henry VI no Irishman could become Mayor of Limerick.

The native Irish captured Limerick during the Insurrection of 1641. It was theirs after almost four centuries. However eight years later Oliver Cromwell arrived in Ireland and dispatched his son-in-law General Ireton to take Limerick.

The English forces forded the River Shannon and then blockaded the town. By late 1651 the English were again in command. They set about shaping the port of Limerick. The first dock ever formed nestled under the shadow of St. Mary's Cathedral. It was known as the Long Dock (present day Potatoe Market) and it was the only accommodation for shipping.

The town was a fortress and the entrance to the Dock was only one hundred feet wide. The numbers of ships were few, almost invariably brigs and sloops. The Long Dock, as time went on, was considered of great importance because it was defended by two batteries. There was one on each of the pier heads.

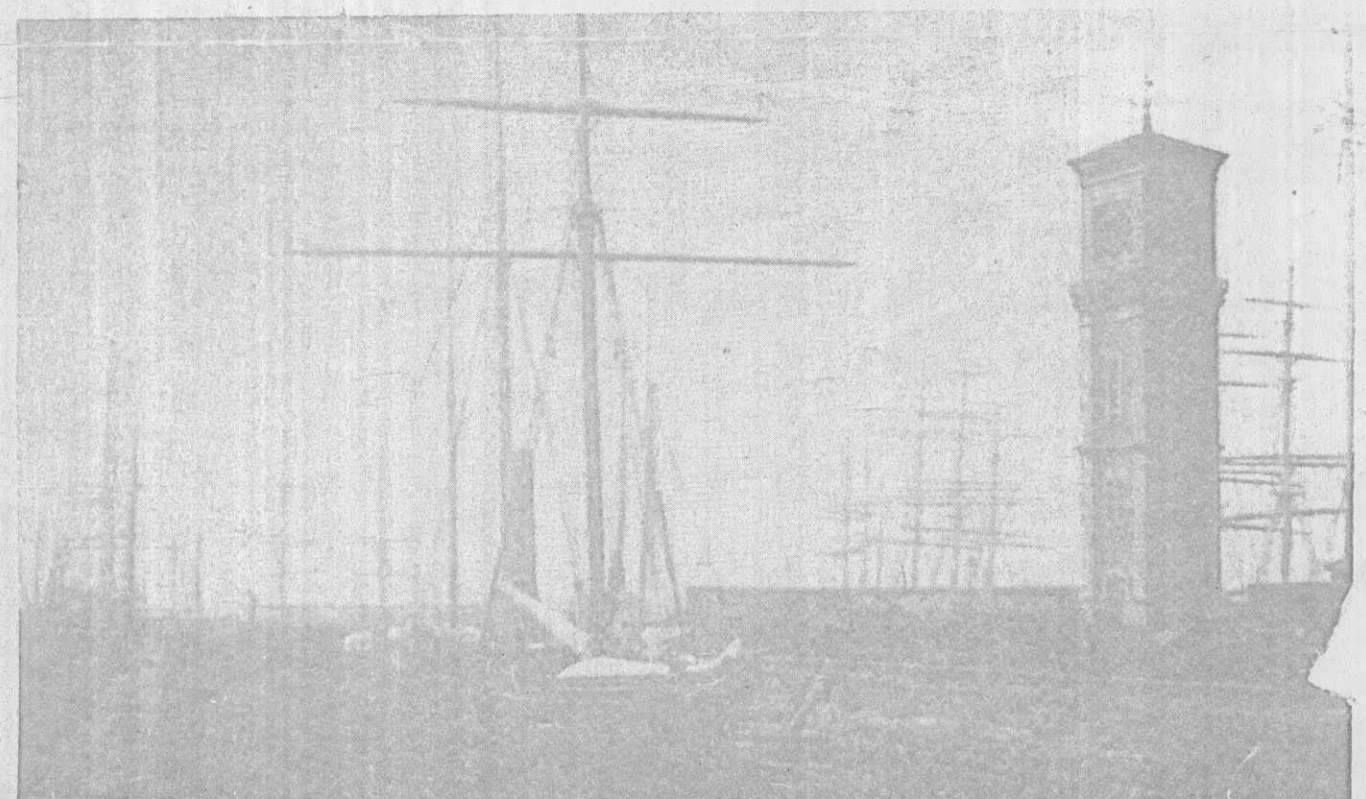
The battery on the South side of the Dock mounted six guns and had an underground passage leading to Quay Lane across the main road to the town.

On the 12th February, 1693 this tower was destroyed by a gun powder explosion. The blast was so powerful that stones were hurled a mile outside the town. Many people were killed and the Governor of the Forts, Col. St. James Simpson had a narrow escape from death.

Death however, in those times, was no stranger to Limerick. The following month word was received that General Patrick Sarsfield, hero of the 1691 Siege, had died in faraway France. Vivid were the memories of the Wild Geese leaving sailing away from the town they loved to serve in the Army of a foreign King.

For seventy years after the heroic siege, Limerick remained a fortress. Sharp eyed sentries patrolled the stone ramparts at night and the silent guns guarded the Dock and the wide river sweeping down to the sea. An uneasy peace had arrived, and Limerick concentrated on building up local trade and industry.

The merchant princes of the town built their own quays along the river and in 1760 a new lease of life came to Limerick when the protective walls were knocked down. The foundations of modern Limerick were laid. Signalling the unity of town and river, the Mayor Edward Villiers Esquire, in 1762 sailed down to the Mouth of the Shannon.

He threw a silver dart into the sea. It marked the limits of his jurisdiction, as under ancient charter he also held the title "Admiral of the Shannon". A mighty warship coming up the Shannon, lowered its colours in salute to the Mayor and Limerick.

NEXT WEEK: Mapping out modern Limerick.