

**The Midland & Beyond**  
**A Series By Richard Palmer**  
**Littlejohn Found Lumber Business More Lucrative Than The Midland**



After giving up on the New York & Oswego Midland Railroad DeWitt C. Littlejohn went on to bigger and more lucrative pursuits in the lumber business. Few have any idea of the magnitude of the enterprise once carried on by DeWitt C. Littlejohn in the eastern part of Oswego county, although frequent mention in the papers may have acquainted them with a few of his operations there.

With a view to running logs to Port Ontario and thence to Oswego for the purpose of manufacturing into lumber, Littlejohn in 1879 purchased an immense tract of land in the northeastern part of Redfield. This tract is commonly known as "The Littlejohn Job."

It consisted of 14,000 acres of wooded lands, with purchases by tax sale increased to 15,000 acres. It was situated in the northern part of township No. 7 of Oswego county, and extended along the banks of the Mad River for four miles, with a varying width of from three to four miles. A heavy growth of spruce, hemlock, birch, maple and cherry covered this purchase and the object of the originators of the enterprise, was to clear the land of this valuable timber, to float the light hemlocks and spruce to Port Ontario and to manufacture the hardwoods into lumber and carry it by teams to the nearest railroad station.

To accomplish the latter object, in 1881 an immense dam was built across the Mad River on the purchase and a large saw mill with a capacity of 15,000 feet of lumber per day was erected. The dam, which was the largest one in the state built for private purposes up to that time, is said to have been an impressive structure of 200 feet. The head was 25 feet and the reservoir thus formed extended back the whole length of the purchase.

The operations of Littlejohn were mostly confined to manufacturing lumber at this mill until the spring of the year of 1882, although a few logs had been run down the river before that time. Before the work of lumbering could be done on an extensive scale, numerous improvements were made to the river itself.

The Salmon is a fast-flowing rapid river and the fall from the Littlejohn job to Port Ontario being over 600 feet. The river then was shallow for the greater part of the year, except during the spring and fall freshets when the stream assumes the proportions of a mad rushing river. Seven or eight dams were built across its bed and the necessity of some outlets over these soon became evident. In 1881, after much opposition a state appropriation of \$5,000 was secured. Then the money was used to build chutes on the dams.

These chutes were 30 feet in width and extend from the top of the dam to the river bed beneath at an angle of 45 degrees. Leading to these Mr. Littlejohn constructed large booms from the shore to guide the logs over the chutes. In the spring of the succeeding year the first extensive running of logs began. During the months of October, November and December, an army of lumbermen began their work of cleaning portion of the timber land.

The logs were placed in the chutes on skids in the winter. The hemlock and spruce were drawn to the shores of the river to await the spring freshet. Eleven million feet of lumber in logs awaited the coming of the spring of 1882, to start on their rapid journey of nearly 40 miles to Port Ontario. The rapid Salmon soon carried off the extra supply of water. But in 15 days the logs made it to the lake. Gangs of men patrolled the banks of the stream to keep the channel clear of logs and help them on their journey. In 1882 but three million feet reached Port Ontario and the remainder lay stranded in the shallow water or on the river banks. In 1883 there were about eight million feet to get down the lake.

The regular spring freshet aided by heavy rains enabled Littlejohn to run nearly all his floating property quickly to the lake. There was but one stopping place for the logs between Mad River and the lake. This was near Stillwater bridge about a mile above the Salmon River falls. A dam at Henderson's mill formed a large reservoir over four miles in length and here the logs of different parties doing lumbering business in the river were sorted. A sorting boom was built across the river opening into two narrow channels running on each side of a stationary crib in the middle of the river.

Two firms did business on the river for several years; Littlejohn, and Post & Henderson Lumber Company of Oswego. Below the crib the latter firm had a side pocket opening into a small pond where their logs were kept until needed at the mill below, while Littlejohn's logs were pushed in the current by men stationed in the crib to continue their downward course. It was said it was an impressive sight on the river in the spring was Salmon River Falls with the huge logs piling over it. It was 110 feet in height and below it lay a small pool.

Down this fall the logs plunged helter skelter and dove with great velocity to the depths. For a moment they would disappear and again appear sometimes high in the air, striking the water below as they continued down stream. When the logs reached Port Ontario, they were caught in a long boom to guide them out of the current of the river into a large pond where they floated about by the action of the wind until rafted. Acres of logs covered the area adjacent to the lake, with acres still on their way. It was estimated that least two million logs at the height of the season from this operation lay below Stillwater.

At Port Ontario the logs were placed in tiers and placed in a cut raft, a structure of booms 250 feet wide towed to Oswego by tug, there they were cut up in the mill owned by Littlejohn. This mill, known as the "old distillery," was equipped with all the improved machinery for processing lumber. It had a capacity of 80,000 feet per day minimum and an annual yield of five million feet.

The reason for bringing the logs to Oswego, instead of cutting them up at Port Ontario was marketing. At Redfield about 700 hundred acres of forest land called the Littlejohn Tract is said to have been capable of providing enough timber to sustain the business for at least 20 years. After being cut off, the land was sold only to settlers for farming. The soil, capable to raise good crops, was deep sandy loam of superior quality with an underlying rock of grey limestone. It was backed by a rolling plateau 800 feet above tide, from which many streams furnished a constant supply of water. Later, much of the area was flooded and purchased for power generating purposes.

Littlejohn was a self-made man, born in the village of Bridgewater, south of Utica, on February 7, 1818. He did not complete college but was engaged in many profitable mercantile pursuits, acting for a time as a forwarder of fresh produce. He was also engaged in manufacturing flour in Oswego. He died in Oswego on October 27, 1892 at the age of 74. During the Civil War he served as a brevet brigadier general in the 110th New York Infantry Regiment. He was mayor of Oswego in 1849-1850, and served in the New York State Assembly as a Democrat between 1853 and 1884. For several years he was speaker of the Assembly and was known for his so-called "backroom politics." He used that influence to help build the Midland Railroad.

Sources:

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Burial: Riverside Cemetery, Oswego, Oswego County, New York, USA  
Plot: Section Q, Lot 3