



Steam Powered: Navigating The St. Lawrence

By The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre

By the dawn of the 19th century, the concept of steam powering machinery was the thought on every naval engineer's mind. Claude-François-Dorothée, marquis de Jouffroy d'Abbans, a French naval engineer, is often credited with constructing the first naval steam engine. Dubbed the "Pyroscaphe," the ship featured a paddle steamer (approx. 45 meters long) propelled by two 15-foot diameter paddle wheels. A successful 15-minute journey up the Saône at Lyon, France, on July 15th, 1773, went on to change naval history.

In the 1800s, several engineers across North America began to create their own version of the "Pyroscaphe". In the United States, inventor John Jacob Astor launched the first steamer from New York in 1807, while in Canada, John Molson's "Accommodation" made its first round-trip to Quebec City from Montreal in 1809.

By the 1820s, several small-scale steamboat lines were operating between the major ports all along Upper and Lower Canada. During this period, Prescott served as a head port for steamers such as the "Charlotte" and "Dalhousie," which operated between Prescott and Kingston, with the "Queenston," the "Alcorpe," and the "Niagara" joining the fleet later in the decade.

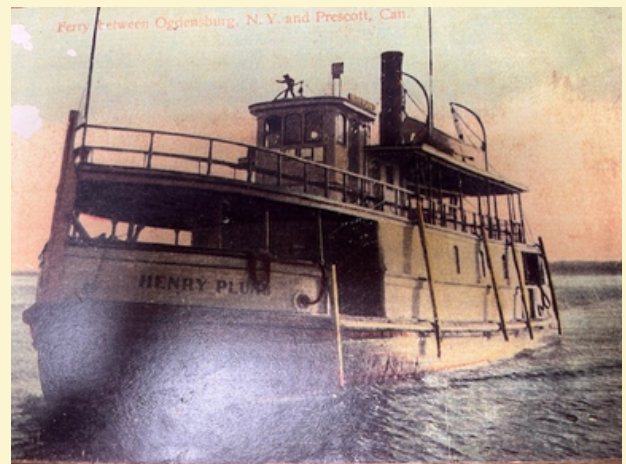
The industry experienced a major industrial boom period in 1832 following the completion of the Rideau Canal, which created the first route between Montreal and Kingston for these steamboats. Although sail and row operated wooden ships such as the Bateaux had been navigating the St. Lawrence between Montreal and Prescott for a century, many believed that these steam powered vessel did not have the power themselves to make it through these waters safely, making the longer journey through the Rideau Canal the safer option for many travelers.

The first to test this theory was the "Iroquois." Built in Gananoque in 1832, the rear-paddle ship made its voyage from Prescott through the rapids on September 24th, 1832, successfully ascending the Plat and Gallop Rapids, down to Dickinson Landing (near present day Cornwall). The return to Prescott in the late hours of the 24th by steam proved the technology could navigate these tough waters.

By the end of the decade, Prescott was home to several steamers. The Upper Canada Line operated larger ships through the rapids from Prescott to Dickinson Landing, while smaller ships, a part of the Richelieu and Ontario Navigation Co. (now the Canadian

Steamship Line), operated from Prescott to Kingston on a regular basis. The town was also home to a small shipbuilding company located south of Sophia Street, which built small steamers such as the "Queenston," the "Alcorpe," the "Niagara," and the "S.S. Great Britain" (known as the Monarch of the Lakes). Its largest ship, the "Ontario," was constructed in 1839 as the successor to the "Iroquois". Built to navigate the entire rapids system, the ship was put to the test in the spring of 1840, becoming the first ship to successfully navigate the entire St. Lawrence rapids system. It would be a couple of years before this route was actively used by passenger vessels. Another small shipbuilding company owned by Prescott forwarders Ferguson and McGibbon began production of several ships in the early 1840s; however, this company specialized in cargo vessels for the forwarding trade. By the end of the decade, the industry would be obsolete, due to the development of iron-sided ships from major ports in Toronto and Montreal.

In this era, the Plumb family (then of Ogdensburg and later of Prescott) purchased the steamer "The Lady of the Lake" in 1843 and began operating daily trips between the two communities. The Plumb family were prominent family of sailors who operated a ferry service between the two communities dating back to the 1790s. Through the company's long history, the Plumb ferry service featured a fleet of steamers that included the "Howard," "New York," "Baptiste," and "Henry Plumb." During the company's storied history, the business was operated by several generations of the Plumb family. First operated by Issac Plumb Sr. from the 1790s until his passing in the 1850s.



"Henry Plumb" Ferry Ship



Ferry Dock At The End of Centre Street

The ferry service was then controlled by his youngest son, Henry Plumb, who, alongside his brother Issac Jr., operated the fleet of steamers prior to Isaac Jr.'s death and Henry's retirement in 1875. The business was then sold to his son, L.R. Plumb, who operated the business until 1888, when his brother Captain Issac Plumb III took over until his death in 1904. The company remained active under the Plumb family estate for several years prior to the company being sold to Ogdensburg businessman and railway ferry operator D.H. Lyon. While Lyon continued to operate a railcar ferry service between Prescott and Ogdensburg, he sold the passenger operations of the business to Joseph Dubrule, whose diesel-powered ferry operated until 1960.

Although at the turn of the 20th century, steam-powered ships began to decline in popularity due to the advancement in diesel-powered technology, some steamship companies remained popular throughout the early half of the 20th century. The Richelieu & Ontario Navigation Co. acquired other smaller steamship companies and became the leading steamship company throughout the St. Lawrence for much of this time. In 1913, the company rebranded, becoming the Canadian Steamship Line (CSL). The CSL, which managed over 50 different vessels across several divisions, alongside its usual passenger service along the St. Lawrence between Quebec City and Niagara Falls, was renowned for its Rapid line of steamships.

THE RICHELIEU & ONTARIO NAVIGATION CO.
 "The All Water Route"
 NIAGARA TO THE SEA.

TIME SCHEDULE, 1909

THROUGH SERVICE from TORONTO and ROCHESTER to 1000 ISLAND POINTS, MONTREAL, QUEBEC, MURRAY BAY, TADOUSSAC and SAQUENAY RIVER.

Eastbound Read down	LANDINGS	Westbound Read up
1:00 p.m.	Toronto	7:00 a.m.
1:15 a.m.	Charlotte	7:15 a.m.
1:30 a.m.	Kingston	7:30 a.m.
1:45 a.m.	Clayton	7:45 a.m.
2:00 a.m.	Frontenac	8:00 a.m.
2:15 a.m.	Thousand Island Park	8:15 a.m.
2:30 a.m.	Alexandria Bay	8:30 a.m.
2:45 a.m.	Prescott	8:45 a.m.
3:00 a.m.	Cornwall	9:00 a.m.

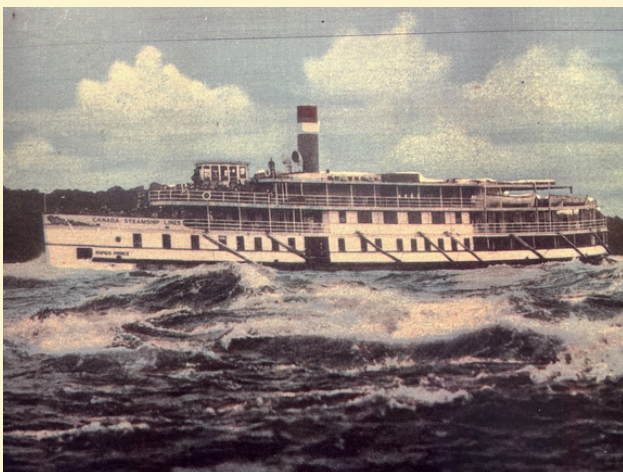
EXPLANATION OF SIGNS.

1. Connecting with N. Y. C. R.R. for all points East and West at Rochester, where connection is also made with Lehigh Valley R.R. and B. & O. P. R.R.
2. Connecting with Grand Trunk R.R. trains at Kingston Wharf.
3. Connecting with N. Y. C. R.R. trains at Clayton Wharf.
4. Reached by connecting steamer from Clayton, Frontenac, or Alexandria Bay.
5. If ship at Brockville cannot be made with safety, the company reserves right to cancel stop.
6. Eastbound passengers change at Prescott from lake steamer to observing steamer to run rapids, and westbound passengers from observation to lake steamer.
7. Connecting with C. P. Ry. to and from Ottawa and with Grand Trunk Ry. express from Montreal.
8. Westminster Park is reached by ferry from Alexandria Bay. Close connection with all steamer.
9. Passengers for Quebec are landed at Victoria Pier, Montreal, alongside Quebec steamer.
10. Passengers westbound from Montreal may also take Grand Trunk train, at 10 a.m. (International Limited), making connection at Prescott with lake steamer, daily, except Monday, during June. Daily from June 15th to September 15th, and thereafter on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays, reaching Rochester and Buffalo the same night, and Toronto the following morning.

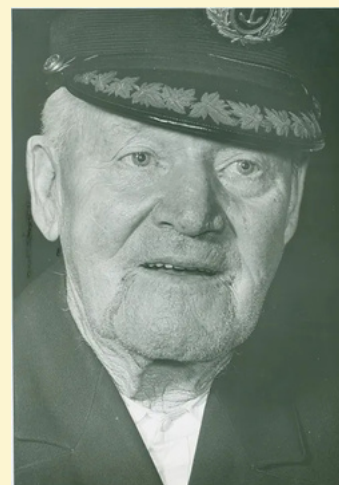
TORONTO-MONTREAL LINE.—Season June to September. Steamers leave Toronto and Montreal from June 1st, daily, except Sunday. From July 1st until September 15th, daily from Toronto (Sundays except from Montreal) westward with no stop, daily except

Timesheet from The Richelieu & Ontario Navigation Co. Circa' 1909

It's line of three state-of-the-art vessels gave tourists a relaxing ride down the rapids between Prescott and Montreal. The most famous of these vessels was the "Rapids Prince." Constructed in 1910, the 210' LOA, 196'6" LBP, 37' beam, 9'8" depth ship had an impressive 5 decks, operated on a coal-fired boiler and triple expansion engines. Often under the helm of Captains James P. Stevenson and Captain Joseph E. Oulette, the Rapid's Prince ran daily between Prescott and Montreal for 4-decades and was one of the top tourist attractions along the St. Lawrence. Barely surviving the economic hardships of the war, the Rapid's line of ships (alongside several other passenger vessels) was all pulled from service following the tragic September 17th, 1949, fire of the "S.S. Noronic," that resulted in the loss of an estimated 120 lives. Although some passenger vessels returned to service in the following years, the Rapids Prince was permanently removed from service and sold to the Hamilton Scrap company to be disassembled in 1951, ending a century's long history of steamship travel on the St. Lawrence between Prescott and Montreal.



The Rapids Prince



Captain James P. Stevenson