

# STEAM TRAVEL ON LAKE CHAMPLAIN

In 1809, about two hundred years after Champlain first viewed the lake that would later bear his name, the steamboat *Vermont* was **launched** for the first time. You may wonder what was so remarkable about that. Surely other boats had sailed on Lake Champlain before. But none like the *Vermont* had ever appeared on its waters. The difference was steam. This new kind of **vessel** was not powered by paddles, oars, wind, or horses. It was the power of steam that moved this large ship around the lake. The *Vermont* was the first steamboat to begin commercial service on any of the world's lakes.

From the 1600s to the mid-1700s dugout canoes,

and flat bottomed rafts served as the only lake transportation. Soon sailing ships appeared in great numbers. However, it was the launching of the *Vermont* which changed the course of lake travel and began what would be almost 150 years of steamboating on Lake Champlain.

Shipbuilding companies sprang up along Champlain's shores. Bigger, faster, and fancier boats were launched. Boats carrying passengers and others carrying freight steamed up and down the lake making stops as far north as Canada. The completion of the Champlain Canal in 1823 further expanded travel to the south. For the first time Lake Champlain was connected to New York City via the Hudson River.

In 1825 the one-way fare between Burlington and Port Kent on the steamer *General Greene* was \$2.00 for a "four wheel pleasure carriage on springs, drawn by two horses, including the driver." An ox, horse, or person traveling alone paid only 50 cents. A ferry ride between the same two cities today costs \$10.00 for a person with a car and \$2.50 if a person is traveling alone. Pets are free, if they are dogs or cats on leashes. "Sorry," said the lady on the phone at the Champlain

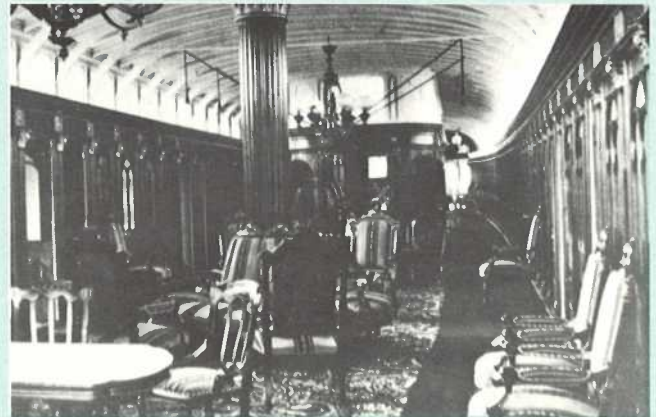
Transportation Company, "we don't allow horses, pigs, and oxen anymore."

The rooms and services differed greatly from ship to ship. Captain Basil Hall was certainly not impressed with his accommodations on an 1827 journey he took:

"The machinery was unusually noisy, the boat weak and **tremulous**, and we stopped, backed, and went again at no fewer than eleven different places, at each of which there was such a racket that it was impossible to get any rest."

Nine years later, in 1836, author Charles Dickens had a much more pleasant trip than Captain Hall's:

"There is one American boat which I praise very highly, but no more than it deserves. . . The steamboat, which is called the *Burlington*, is a perfectly **exquisite** achievement of neatness, elegance, and order."



Interior of Steamer Adirondack

Steamboat travel was not without its share of accidents. On September 5, 1918, in the middle of the night, a fire broke out in the *Phoenix's* pantry. All aboard escaped but six persons. The burning ship sank



off the Colchester Reef. The *Phoenix* was not the only boat to run into problems. “Ran into problems” is exactly what the *Champlain* did. In July of 1875 passengers on the steamer were suddenly awakened. Pilot Eldredge was at the ship’s wheel when the steamer, still traveling at a fast speed, ran right into high rocky land near Westport, New York. Second pilot Rockwell rushed on deck to see what had happened. Eldredge calmly asked him, “Can you account for my being on the mountain?” Rockwell answered, “Yes, Mr. Eldredge, you were asleep.”



Despite occasional **mishaps** resulting from unattended candles left burning in the ships’ pantries or sleeping pilots, people continued to use the steamers in great numbers. It was not until another type of transportation became available that Vermonters began **abandoning** the lake for land travel.

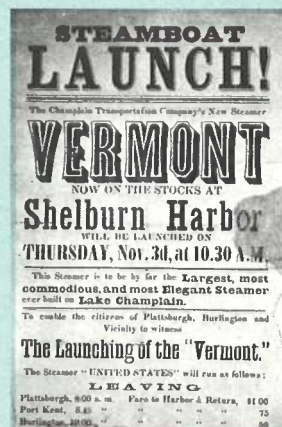


First the train in the mid-1800s and then the automobile or “horseless carriage” in the early 1900s came to Vermont. The steamers tried to accommodate to their new competitors. Some boats even carried train cars across the lake to make connections. But it wasn’t long before the steamboat era came to a close.

In 1906, the **side-wheeler** *Ticonderoga* was completed by the Champlain Transportation Company, the oldest steam company in the world. The *Ti*, as it was called, was the last steamship built for Lake

Champlain travel. The 200-foot ship was very grand indeed. It had a large dining room, elegantly carpeted halls filled with plush chairs, a barber shop, **purser’s** office, lovely promenade deck, and many tidy compartments. The *Ti* held 1,200 people and cruised at 17 miles per hour. It was in service on the lake as a commercial ferry and then as a tourist vessel until 1955 when the Shelburne Museum began the huge job of moving the steamer to its grounds. It took 65 days to move the *Ti* less than two miles from Shelburne Bay to the museum. A large work crew hauled the boat from the bay onto a carriage with railway wheels. Then the *Ti* traveled overland on tracks.

You can visit the newly restored *Ticonderoga* today to get an idea of what lake travel was like in the early 1900s. Call the Shelburne Museum for information regarding hours and admission fees: (802) 985-3344.



## VOCABULARY

**launch** - to put into action

**vessel** - boat (also can be used to mean container)

**tremulous** - vibrating or trembling

**exquisite** - beautifully made or designed

**mishaps** - bad luck

**abandon** - to desert

**side-wheeler** - steamer with a paddle wheel on each side

**purser** - officer in charge of money matters on board ship