

First Steamboat On The Great Lakes

by RICHARD F. PALMER

(The spelling of the Pease Journal is preserved.)

Guns of the War of 1812 had hardly cooled when a group of enterprising businessmen from Sackets Harbor, New York, decided to build what appears to have been the first steamboat on the Great Lakes. Steam navigation had proven itself on the Hudson River and other waters, and it was thought it could be as successful on the Lakes.

In the summer and fall of 1815, articles of agreement were drawn up between Harris Fulton and William Cutting of New York, executors of the estate of Robert Fulton, and Robert Livingston and Edward P. Livingston of Clermont, on the one hand, owners of the rights and privileges of steamboat navigation in New York State (granted by a special act of the New York State Legislature), and Charles Smyth, Joseph C. Yates, Thomas C. Duane and David Boyd on the other hand. This agreement gave the latter persons the sole right to use steam for navigation on Lake Ontario.

The final articles were dated January 16, 1816, and gave the right to use but one boat on any one route until the proceeds should exceed 20 percent. As a result, the Ontario Steamboat Company was formed with a capitalization of \$200,000.

Apparently, the promoters were able to enlist the support of the U.S. Navy in their venture, as on February 28, 1816, the Secretary of the Navy wrote the following to Captain Melancthon T. Woolsey at Sackets Harbor:

"Several Gentlemen of Schenectady having it in contemplation to construct a Steam Boat for the navigation of Lake Ontario. You are hereby authorized to deliver to their agent, who may be appointed by them, upon receiving from him an equitable compensation, timber sufficient for the construction of a vessel of three hundred tons; the valuation to be made on fair principles in such manner as may be agreed upon between you and the person they may designate for that purpose."*

On February 6, 1816, Charles Smyth, David Boyd, Eri Lusher, Abraham Van Santvoord and John J. DeGraff petitioned the New York State Legislature to be allowed to incorporate the company and to be given certain rights by the State. But the petition was not granted. The promoters proceeded anyway as a substantial investment had apparently been made in the venture. In August, 1816, Lusher and Smyth formed a partnership, the Fulton rights having been assigned to them.

*At the time there was a vast quantity of lumber and ship supplies remaining at Sackets Harbor from the War of 1812 shipbuilding period.

Work on the *Ontario* was thus begun. Woolsey reported to H. B. Crowninshield, Secretary of the Navy, on March 28, 1816:

"I have had the honor to receive your letters of the 28th of February and 11th of March. In answer to the former, I have only to state that I have piled and decked all the ship timber except such quantity as I deem will be necessary to build a steam boat of three hundred tons and shall be governed by your instructions as to its valuation..."

Those directly involved in the project now were Woolsey; Lusher, a well-known shipping magnate from Ogdensburg; Major General Jacob Brown, a prominent participant in the War of 1812; Hunter Crane, Samuel Hooker, Elisha Warring, Sackets Harbor merchants and businessmen; Charles Smyth, an Albany merchant; and purser William Sands, of the U.S. Navy. Additional attempts to have the legislature allow the company to incorporate were to no avail. Supposedly, legislators felt there were legal questions over a possible monopoly.

A bit of a financial problem arose when the owners were unable to immediately come up with the money to pay the Navy for the timber. The Navy therefore granted an extension of time early in 1817.

The Propulsion

The steamboat was built after the model of the *Sea Horse* then running on Long Island Sound. It was 110 feet in length, 24 foot beam and 8 foot depth, registered at 237 tons. The ship carpenter was Ashel Roberts.

It was equipped with a low pressure cross-head beam engine built at the J. P. Allair Works in New York City. The boilers were 17 feet in length and three and a half feet in diameter. The engine cylinder was 20 inches in diameter bored and had a three-foot stroke. The paddlewheels were 11 feet, four inches diameter and the engine was rated at 21 horsepower. The rigging consisted of three fore-and-aft gaff sails, schooner-rigged.

Maiden Voyage

According to the original enrollment dated at Sackets Harbor April 11, 1817, Francis Mallaby was Master. By the fall of 1816, the cast hubs for the paddlewheels for the *Ontario* had been ordered. In a letter dated April 14, 1817, John Dod Ward stated from Vergennes, Vermont:

"I left the Harbor on the 2nd of April... the ice in the bay at Sackets Harbor (sic) was 2 feet thick when I left there and the steamboat blockaded but ready to run whenever the ice should break."

A diligent search was made to determine the exact date the *Ontario* made its maiden voyage. This is the critical point that would make or break the long-standing claim that she was indeed the first steamboat to sail on the Great Lakes... at least on Lake Ontario. It was found in the *Ontario Repository*, a newspaper published in Canandaigua, New York, dated May 6, 1817. The

article is in the form of a letter written from Sackets Harbor on April 22, 1817:

"The Steam Boat *Ontario* on Wednesday last (April 16) left this port for the first time, in order to try the force of her machinery. A number of Gentlemen, ambitious to be among the first that ever navigated the waters of Lake Ontario in a Steam Boat, embarked on board.

"She started from the wharf, accompanied by an excellent band of music, greeted by the huzzas from the people on the adjacent shores and the U.S. brig *Jones*.

"The novelty of the spectacle had drawn together a large crowd of spectators, whose curiosity was amply satisfied by the rate of speed exhibited, full equal in the opinion of many, to any of the North River Boats. The accommodations on board are excellent, as no pains or expense has been spared by her owners, in her construction or equipment. The facility with which the lake can now be navigated, will add new inducements to its commerce — that of the river of St. Lawrence: Travellers whose curiosity may lead them to nature's grandest scene, the Falls of Niagara, will be convinced, hereafter pursue the route to Sacket's Harbor and thence proceed in the Steam Boat.

"From New York to Niagara in the steamboats and stages; this route will be performed in five days; a much shorter period than the average passages were formerly made from New York to Albany. Such is the revolution that Steamboats have effected in travelling within a few years. We wish much encouragement and success to the projectors of so useful an undertaking."

The *Upper Canada Gazette of Kingston* reported on April 26, 1817: "A Steam Boat will commence running this spring from Ogdensburg to Niagara and Lewistown, touching Sackets Harbor, Oswego, Pultneyville, and Genesee River."

The *Ontario Repository* of Canandaigua reported on April 19, 1817:

"The Steam-Boat *Ontario* arrived at Genesee River on Friday last, from Sackets Harbor, on her first trip to Niagara. In passing out of the mouth of the river, on Saturday, we are informed, she had one of her wheels broken, being near the point, in a heavy sea."

This incident occurred during the vessel's maiden voyage. Like all previously built steamers, the shaft on which the paddlewheels were mounted rested by its own weight in unsecured boxes. The action of the waves soon lifted the shaft which tore the wheel coverings to pieces and damaged the paddlewheels.

Captain Mallaby then hoisted sail and immediately brought her about to return to Sackets Harbor for repairs. The shaft was then secured by proper bolting of the boxes and bearings under the outer ends. This event was the only one that marred what had been quite an experience for those aboard.

Everywhere the *Ontario* went she was met with fanfare. When she arrived at Oswego, school classes were dismissed, bells pealed and cannon roared. On

the morning of the second day out was when *Ontario* ran into trouble during a nor'easter.

The steamboat attempted to make weekly trips between Ogdensburg and Lewiston. However, she rarely exceeded six knots per hour. On July 1, 1817, the owners advertised in local newspapers that, finding the 600-mile round-trip impossible to accomplish in a week, the voyage would be extended to 10 days. The round trip fare — \$15.

What follows are excerpts from a journal written by Captain Pease, Master of the *Ontario* for a short time in 1818. At the time he was living at Hudson, New York, below Albany. He had had considerable experience as a salt water sailor, as well as having been commander of Navy transports out of Sackets Harbor during the War of 1812. His journals and related papers are at the Syracuse University Archives.

Author Richard Palmer has been at work researching this subject for INLAND SEAS® for several months in addition to his other Great Lakes work.

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Proceeding to the northward with Eri Lusher on board the steamboat *Ontario*, &c. In the spring of 1818 I received a Letter from this man (or rather in the form of man) to take charge of the Steam Boat *Ontario* of which he was the half owner. He would wish to engage me for years, and said he would give me for the first season \$40 per the month, the second, \$90. This I agreed to and in my letter confirmed it for two years only and the appointed time set by him (into one day) arrived at Sackets Harbor where I was ordered, but found him gone to Albany. However he soon returned. Here he stated to me, that as he had advertised to open the season under his command, he would go two or three trips, and then would give me the boat. And wishing to do whatsoever was consistent I agreed to go on board of the boat with him but in no particular capacity. I soon discovered his ignorance in the management of the boat, for in everything respecting the fitting her out, and in particular the pumps, while we were getting in readiness we took up our board at McFarlins who kept the Steamboat Hotel. He observed to me that on the morrow we would take our meals on board. Accordingly, our breakfast was announced, when Lusher called me and we went down into the forward cabin. And behold my astonishment! When beholding him seat himself down at the head of the table and requesting me to be seated near him. However, I made no remarks, as I supposed he had not got arranged properly yet. But the same took place at noon, and at night. Seated at table with carpenters, sailers, firemen, cooks, stewarts, &c. His letter to me stated he wanted the boat conducted in a manner so as to gain respectability. I now took advantage of this his proceedings, and

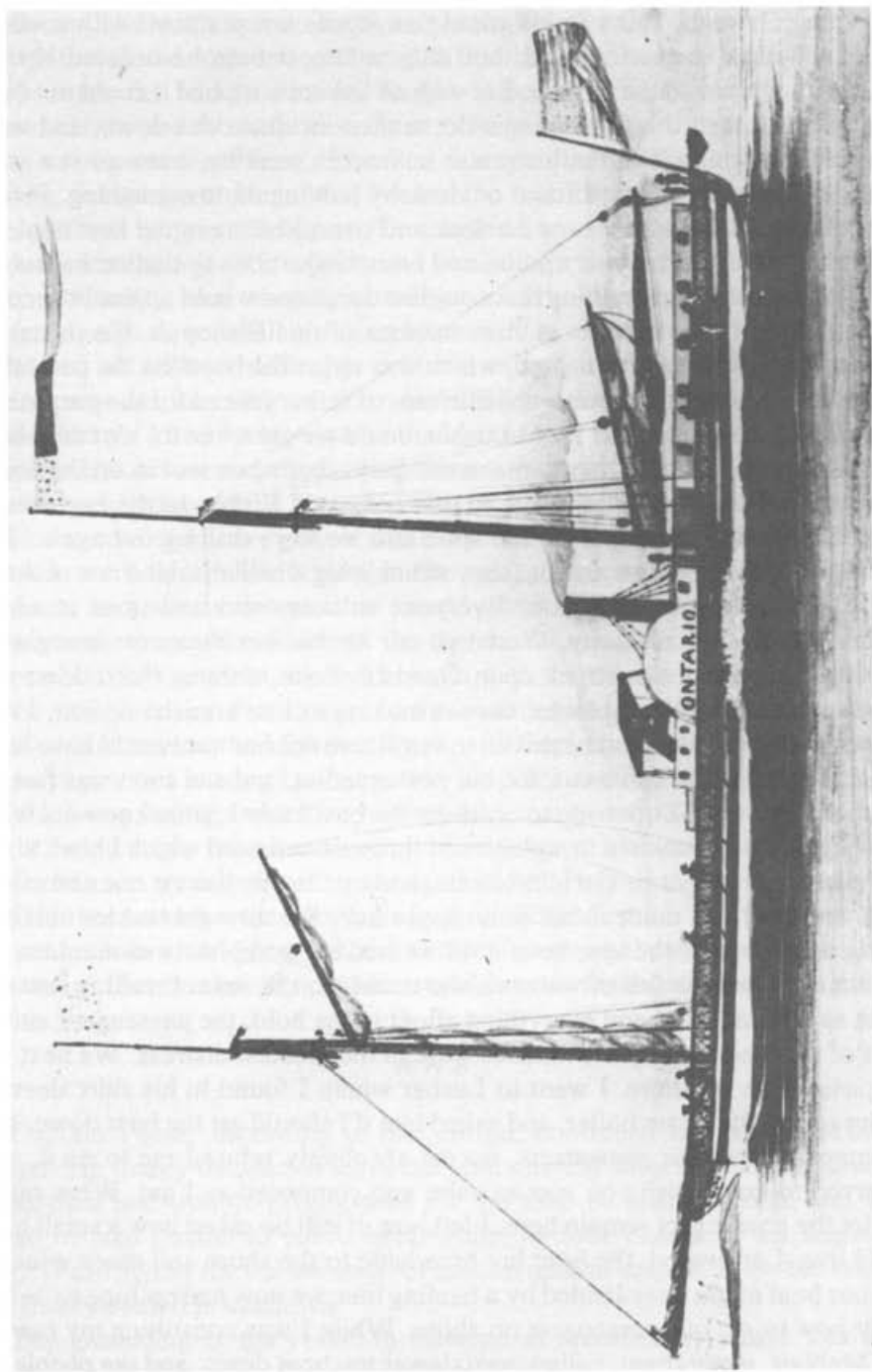
reminded him of his wish (P. 55). When his reply was there should be Liberty and equality administered wherever he had the Management, there had been too much pomposity the season past. (Meaning by Captain Mallabe*, whose shoes Lusher was not fit to wear) that he would now conduct in a manner, that every piece of canvas should be driven off the Lake, as big as his thumb nail, for he had the exclusive right to navigate the waters of the Lake by steam and in three years the freighting would be done by steam boats altogether that he was able, and it should be carried into effect. At length our boat was ready to start, when Comedore Wolsey** came to me and enquired how many seamen were on board. My answer was none, although we had our complement of men. It must be observed while we were shiping a sailor by the name of Clark wanted to ship but Lusher would not give his asking wages which was \$18. Now the proceedings of Lusher was protested against, and I have understood, in consequence of the boat being insured for a certain time by some of the former owners, and her proceeding without the proper complement of able men, would make the last owners, or part of the liabel. Lusher now came to me and wished me to go after this Clark, and engage him at whatever rate I could, saying, as he had told him that he would not give him any more than \$14, must do it for him. At this I actually hired the man at \$18 for Lusher. Our boat being loaded we left for Ogdensburgh, where we arrived safe without any accident, although she steered very bad owing to her trim.

On the day appointed to sail up the Lake we started, and when nearly up with the Thousand Islands, Lusher came to me and asked me if it was not best to set our squaresail as the wind was fair. I told him that night was now coming on, and very dark nights I should not think it best, however, should he think best I would have him sat, to which he answered I never thought anything for the best which he proposed, the squaresail was not sat. The night came on extremely dark, in as much we came near running on to several Islands whilst come up through the Upper Narrows, and although we had, (so called) an excellent pilot, (though I never thought so from my own knowledge of him) although I no charge on my mind by the laws of may I had by the dictates of my welfare, in as much as I never left the deck after finding how near we were running on an island which we avoided by my presence. We went on safe until we got above Carleton Island when we could not see the land or either shore. It was now necessary to have a compass to steer by, and having no binacle, or compass on deck, I left my station which was upon the fore scuttle, and went below, where I put a compass upon the table and gave the pilot his course S.S.W. for Cape Vincent. After getting him steady, I went to my old station and springing on as I supposed, the hatch being taken off by a sailor and left open, I fell to the bottom of the forecabin where some time after I was found senseless and removed to the forward cabin, where it was discovered my left arm was split and broken off above the elbow. While we were here assisting me

* Captain Francis Mallaby, U.S.N., was one of the first pilots.

** Malancton T. Woolsey, Captain, U.S.N., was a part owner of the *Ontario*

the pilot ran on to the shoals between Carleton Island, and Cape Vincent on the east side of the passage. This goes to prove the necessity there was of my being on deck, although it was not expected of me when nothing was wanting to navigate but a good pilot and firemen to keep up the steam in order to propel her in safety. Some time in the forenoon next day we got off by shifting our cables &c. in the stern. We arrived in the afternoon to Sackets where in running into the docks we got foul of a small schooner (which was moored off and on rather improperly) and did her some damage, and done some Damage to our Larboard paddles, which was soon repaired. Here we took in several passengers including immigrants for Genesee. I could do nothing myself but my presence was needed. I attended to the getting in our wood but soon Lusher wanted to. In the name of God if I meant to load the boat I told him not, but as we did not know exactly how much wood we should need, for the first trip it would be necessary to take enough, when he left me but soon coming to the men (in my absence) told them to desist which was obeyed. On my find the men at other labour I enquired the cause which was told as related. The wind was N.E. and a gale although fair. My knowledge of the lakes, together with the sudden shift of wind into the westward, cause me to enquire of Lusher whether he intended to sail as the weather was. He answered in the affirmative, everything was hurried on board, and out we went just at night. When we got out of Sackets and past Horse Island I observed the wind upon the cant northwardly. Soon after Lusher came to me and wanted the squaresail sat. I told him the wind was upon the haul. We soon got on the lake where the sea began to make its appearance, the effects of which all hands on board, Lusher not excepted, felt. All took to the cabin. The wind soon got into the W.N.W. and blew a gale the sea breaking on to us every roll, and any person that has been on a board of a ship dismantled at sea, can realize what it is to be at sea in a steamboat. Here our pump of Lusher's construction failed. All attempts to keep it in order were fruitless, so that we soon had the water floating the passengers' baggage in the hold. Although the passengers and crew, who were able were bailing with buckets the most assistance was rendered by the carpenters, who were on board not having the deck cabin, or lady's cabin finished. Day came on and found by the make of the land we could not fetch Genesee the place of our destination, our boat only going lee bow first making 4 points drift, our wood most consumed. My captain was sea sick in his birth. I went to him and told him our situation and condition the boat and crew were in. He wanted to know whether she could not fetch Sodus. I told him I feared not however we continued on, until it was ascertained we could not. When I reported the same. What then is to be done in this case said he. I answered, that had I the command I should put before the wind, a run back for Sackets where we could arrive in safety. But this he said she should not do, for said he, Mallabe was too much in the habit of running into harbors, and enquired whether we could fetch Oswego. This we can do was my reply, but that at Oswego, at this season of the year, there was a strong current running out



Captain James Van Cleve, artist, depicts the steamboat *Ontario* at Sackets Harbor in 1826. Van Cleve was a well-known Lake Ontario skipper and vessel owner. In later years, he was instrumental in the introduction of the first screw propeller on the Great Lakes, the *Vandalia*.

which would cause heavy sea on the bar, and in all probability would prevent our getting into port, and furthermore, I had enquired of a man at Ogdensburgh respecting Oswego, and was informed that it was not practical with a vessel unless they had a gale of wind, but after a long debate he ordered her for Oswego, and wanted the sail sat. But with all the crew we had it could not have been sat, although the attempt was not made, our mast was down, and went upon a pivot which is difficult to raise in smooth weather, but now it was as much as a man could do to stand on deck by holding on to something. Before we got to the bar, Lusher came on deck and consulted me in the best mode in getting in. We agreed in every point, and I must in justice say that now we were in difficulty. He did everything that could be done, and would no doubt accomplished it had it not been for a circumstance of one Bishop A. Carpenter, it was agreed by Lusher and myself, which was to get the boats on the point that makes the harbor, where was a pile driven, or rather placed for the purpose of mooring the shipping. This I told Lusher, could we get a line to, we could hold on until we could get another to reach the docks, but when we ran on the point, and just as we had got a rope fast to this pile said Bishop to the engineer to back the wheels which tore up the pile and we were drifting out again. The wheels were ordered forward, but they struck a log which disabled one of them, all by this time was confusion. Everyone to command and none to obey. Lusher had lost all authority. We let go our anchor but she never brought up only by jumps until she struck upon Garrison Point, unhung the rudder, and tore away all the counter planks, the sea making a clear breach into us... I was determined not to sink and be driven to sea where not one soul could have been saved. I ordered the cable cut, for our preservation, and she soon was fast on the shore. I now took upon me to order for the best I saw Lusher knew not what to do. I had a line attached to a plank and thrown overboard which I hove to the shore and was caught by the inhabitants, and by this, they drew one end of our cable on shore and made it fast to an apple tree. We now got tackles to it and taking advantage of the sea, hove until we had her completely motionless, all this time she was as full of water as she could be, the seam breaking into the cabin as before stated and everything afloat in the hold, the passengers, or the most of them essentially the females were in the greatest distress. We next got the passengers on shore. I went to Lusher whom I found in his shirt sleeves, laying across the warm boiler, and asked him if I should get the boat down, and endeavor to land our passengers, but he absolutely refused me to do it, and observed to me, I wish you was as calm and composed as I am. What said I and let the passengers remain here. I left him, it will be asked how a small boat could live. I answered, the boat lay broadside to the shore and made a lee so that our boat might have landed by a hauling line, we now had nothing to do but study how to get our passengers on shore. While I was consulting my reason Mr. McNair, a merchant, called me to lower my boat down, and the people on the shore would assist in landing them. I returned for answer that I was not the master, that the master had forbid men being lowered down, with that all

bystanders left the beach except one waving either their hat or hand, in token that they took me for master, since not he might shift for himself I now recollected, the wash woman had a large tub. This I strapped reaving the rope through the — and rove a rope through a thimble sent the end on shore caused it to be made fast to a tree hauled taught on board a line to haul the tub from boat to shore, and from shore to boat. The people began now to collect on shore, seeing we were busy. The first I wanted to go was a large woman, knowing delays were dangerous, I leave the rest for my readers to expound. She could not be prevailed upon. To conclude, we sent the husband on shore and lashed in the tub with a sheet, and hauled him back safe which she seeing done, reluctantly, and weeping aloud got into the tub which she completely filled, although three small girls and boys were sent on shore at a time. In this we landed all without difficulty until we came to Lusher who persisted in staying on board, and with considerable difficulty at length prevailed on him to land in the tub. I had intended to be the last to land, but a man who has shown himself active in assisting the landing the rest requested me to go in and let him have the privilege, which I granted him. It now had go to be in the evening which was cold and heavy gale of wind which continued several days. We now all hands went to a public house (in Oswego) which was kept by one Moses Stephens, as soon as the weather would admit me we commenced making preparations to get the boat off. In the meantime the *Lady of the Lake* (schooner) came to assist us, and brought with them some troops to assist. It will be well to notice that Lusher in the commencement of his sailing, was a common boatman on the Mohawk River, with Captain. When he quit and went on a voyage to sea leaving Lusher to take his place and I think he played it very well for being strong and active he found a great plenty of employment, and freight being high, he soon became able to own a number of boats and employed men to sail or rather navigate them. He most certainly deserves credit for her perserverance, for he is quite an illiterate man. The principal part was to knock down and drag out, as the term is, among the vulgar sort, and it is not strange that he should not understand how to manage in business out of his line.”



Captain Pease, according to his journal, continued to take abuse from Lusher. He finally decided to leave the boat one day after a heated argument. Pease then had trouble getting paid for the time he spent aboard, and was forced to take Lusher to court. Meanwhile, he took charge of the schooner *Lady Washington* for the duration of the navigation season. How the matter was finally settled is unknown.

The grounding of the vessel in Oswego as recorded by Pease was also reported in the *Kingston Gazette* of May 26, 1818:

Sackets Harbor, May 19.

The steamboat *Ontario* which was (in a recent storm), driven on a ledge of flat rock near Oswego, has been got off, and arrived here this morning. We are happy to learn also, that the damage done her is inconsiderable to what has been currently reported. It is expected she will be ready for further operations in a week, or fortnight at the farthest.

In spite of this mishap, operations of the steamboat eventually returned to normal. The *Rochester (N. Y.) Telegraph* of August 11, 1818, reported:

Steam Boat *Ontario*. - This fine boat continues to ply most successfully between Ogdensburg and Lewiston. It is well fitted up, and notwithstanding the unfortunate accident that occurred early in the season and the many prejudicial and unfounded reports propagated, receives very liberal patronage and rides the lake with perfect ease and safety.

The Steam-boat comes within two miles of this village and the passengers generally improve the opportunity to visit it. If an admirer of the works industry and enterprise, what can more completely excite the admiration of the traveller, than to reflect, that but three or four years since a wilderness only could afford him shelter, where now populous villages greet his eyes and offer him welcome. And if a lover of the curiosities of nature, he may here find ample subjects on which to bestow his admiration; - the Falls, three in number, the largest ninety-six feet, and a series of views, alternately of the picturesque and sublime, seldom surpassed, do not fail to excite attention. This route is now rapidly becoming the fashionable one for parties of pleasure to the Falls of Niagara, and no part of our country abounds in grander and more variegated views.

Commercial Operations

An advertisement in the *Telegraph* dated April 6, 1818 gives some interesting details of operation of the *Ontario*. At the time, she was under the command of Eri Lusher. Going up, the vessel left Ogdensburg at 9 a.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday from Sacket's Harbor, and 3 p.m. Monday from Hanford's Landing (port of Rochester). Going down, it departed from Lewiston at 4 p.m. Tuesday, Hanford's Landing at 4 p.m. Wednesday, and from Sacket's Harbor at 4 p.m. Thursday.

The fares were \$5 from port to port, and steerage passengers (without board,) \$2.50. Freight and families moving were carried "as reasonably as in other vessels." Agents were Porter, Barton & Co. at Lewiston, Eri Lusher & Co. at Genesee River, Zeno Allen at Sacket's Harbor, Lusher at Ogdensburg and Charles Smyth at Albany.

Operating in conjunction with the steamboat was the schooner *Kingston Packet* which had shallow enough draught to enter the ports where the steamboat could not tie up, such as Oswego and Pultneyville. The schooner was "provided as a tender" for the *Ontario*, and was labeled a "fast sailing craft."*

The advertisement also states that Lusher, "one of the owners in the Steam-Boat, continues the forwarding business on the St. Lawrence, as usual - at Ogdensburgh, in the name of Eri Lusher - Lusher & Van Sluyck at Prescott, and Lusher & Sexton, at La Chane."

Diary of Thomas Cope

In the library of Haverford College near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania is the diary of Thomas P. Cope, which contains an account of a trip on Lake Ontario aboard the *Ontario* in August, 1820. Mr. Cope was founder of the Black Cross Line of Philadelphia and Liverpool packets. The vignette is of steamboat travel at the time when a voyage in itself was an adventure... long before it became a matter of precise, well-ordered routine.

August 2, 1820. (He recounts how his party left their inn at Buffalo, took a carriage two miles down the Niagara River to Black Rock where they crossed to the Canadian side.)

"The current here is very swift - the wind was strong in the opposite direction - We used a sail, but were nevertheless set considerably down the stream. Some idea of its velocity may be formed from the circumstance that the Erie Steam Boat, which comes here too, has 5 (sic) years in operation, without being able in all that time, to work up the river, by her own power, but in two instances, and then, besides her steam she was assisted by a very strong wind. In common she is drawn up by twelve yoke of oxen, using her steam at the same time."

August 4, 1820.

"After dinner our party left this interesting place (Niagara Falls) and proceeded in a hack for Fort George to be in time for one of the two Steam Boats employed on Lake Ontario." (They passed through Queenston, the port for the British steamboat *Frontenac*) "After dark retired to the Inn to await the coming of the *Ontario* - At 12 her arrival was announced by the discharge of a Swivel and we prepared to go on board. She had come to the opposite shore, not being permitted to transact her concerns on the Canada side without payment of duties. Our Inn was half a mile from the quay, whence we were to be conveyed in boats. There were about 20 passengers."

*It was not until 1847 that a vessel of more than 7½ feet draught could enter Oswego Harbor. Slosek; Anthony M. Oswego: Hamlet Days. Oswego, N.Y. 1980. P.243.

August 5, 1820

"We have toiled all night and caught no fish. The *Ontario* proceeded down the Lake soon after we came on board. The weather proved stormy and the wind so dead ahead that Capt. Vaughan, after several fruitless efforts to weather 30 Mile Point, finding he could not effect the object, put back, and the morning found ourselves safely moored at Young's Stores a mile above Fort Niagara. Having breakfasted, some of us landed and paid a visit to this place of American antiquity.

"Some of our passengers have been out with their guns and brought in a mess of black squirrels and wild pigeons, in fine order for eating.

"Today we made another attempt to get out of the river, and for that purpose dropped down to the Fort, but the waves on the Lake running so high the Captain deemed it prudent, after consulting with his passengers, again to put back.

"The wind having subsided we left Niagara this morning and are now ploughing the blue waves of the Ontario. The two forts at the mouth of the river and the little town of Newark show to advantage from our slowly retiring boat. On our right the land is low and covered principally with forests. Specks of cultivation occasionally coming into view - on our left and before us the horizon and waves meet. We are now about 30 miles from the great falls, and still have a very distinct view of the vapor which hangs over them."

August 7, 1820

"Last night we entered the mouth of Genesee River, 85 miles from Fort Niagara by water. There is a sand bar at the entrance, and this is said to be the case with all the rivers that discharge into Lake Ontario, rendering them impractical to vessels to burden. Captain Vaughan therefore came to an anchor until daylight enabled him to steer his course with safety, when we proceeded to the landing 4 miles higher up. It being necessary to tarry here some hours for supplies, and opportunity was afforded, which we gladly embraced, to examine the adjacent country. Hacks from Rochester were in waiting and these were engaged.

"At 2 p.m. took our departure, Captain Vaughan having repaired his shackling steam engine, which is the very worst I have ever seen, and should be forthwith thrown aside, as unfit for use. Our rate since we left Niagara has been about 4½ miles an hour and this machine is probably not capable of greater speed. The surface of the Lake is smooth today, but when we put back to Niagara it was so rough as to occasion sickness in several of the passengers."

Continued Operations

The *Lewiston Observatory* of August 15, 1822, advertised that the steamboat *Ontario* "will positively leave Lewiston for Genesee River and Sackets Harbor and Ogdensburg on Thursday at 4 o'clock p.m. For choice berths please apply to the subscriber. William King, agent, at Lewiston."

Apparently the *Ontario* was not a profitable venture as its owners intended it to be as it was sold by a decree of Chancery at Sackets Harbor on May 8th, 1824, to Jesse Smith of Smithville, a small rural community near Sackets Harbor. Luther Wright, later a prominent banker in Oswego, was captain and clerk, and Judge Hawkins of Henderson, also near Sackets Harbor, was sailing master.

On May 23, 1824, the *Niagara Sentinel* stated that the *Ontario* arrived at Lewiston the day before from Sackets Harbor and Genesee River, loaded with passengers and merchandise, her first trip of the season. Mr. Smith, the owner, "... is sparing no expense to render her accommodations of the most superior kind."

Round trips to Ogensburg consumed 10 days.

That fall, Smith sold the steamer to Leonard and Samuel Denison of Sackets Harbor, who also owned several other steamers that had been built subsequent to the *Ontario*

However, the *Ontario* still had the distinction of being the first steamboat to be "subjected to a swell on the Great Lakes." Once certain mechanical and structural modifications were made, steamboats proved very adaptable to lake navigation.

In 1826 the *Ontario*, then commanded by Captain Vaughan, grounded on a shoal while passing up the St. Lawrence river, in the Thousand Islands. However, she wasn't going very fast at the time and was gotten off with little difficulty. However, in the process, she lost her anchor.

Since *Ontario* had always plodded along at five or six miles per hour, her owners decided to put a more powerful engine in her. Accordingly, in the winter of 1827-28, the square engine then in the steamboat *Martha Ogden* (owned by the same parties) was installed in the *Ontario* at Hanford's Landing. For some reason, this was not successful.

The career of the *Ontario* continued to be eventful. In 1829, while under the command of a Captain Hitch, an old whaler from New Bedford, she was caught in a storm some 25 miles below Niagara. She was brought to anchor to ride out the storm. After holding most of the day and night, she began to drag anchor. To avoid going ashore, being in four fathoms of water, the cable and anchor were slipped.

In those days of wood-burning steamboats, engineers were in the minority. The few who existed at the time are said to have been temperamental and had to be humored. They sometimes dominated the captain and crew and governed the movements of the vessel.

A "Mister Ramsey" was first engineer of the *Ontario* for many years. Communication between captain and engineer was crude... so crude in fact that even the early system of signal bells had not yet developed. A boy was stationed near the engine to pass verbal orders from the captain to engineer. As the *Ontario* sailed up and down the lake the captain could be heard shouting to the boy, "Stop her Mr. Ramsey" — "Back her, Mr. Ramsey" — "Go ahead, Mr. Ramsey."

Once, when the boat balked at approaching a dock, some wag sang out, "Give her a stroke sideways, Mr. Ramsey!"

The *Ontario* was around for a long time... some 14 years. Many vessels came and went in that period. Also, as improvements were made these pioneer steamboats generally became quickly obsolete. A good schooner could make better time than the slow moving *Ontario*, which was dismantled at Oswego in 1832.

Comparative Specifications of the Steamboats *Frontenac* and *Ontario*

	<i>Frontenac</i>	<i>Ontario</i>
Length of deck	170 feet	140 feet
Length of keel	150 feet	110 feet
Length of tonnage	160 feet	125 feet
Beam	32 feet	24 feet
Depth of hold	13.67 feet	8.5 feet
Draught	8 feet	6 feet
Tonnage*	700 tons	237 tons

*By Monson's Rule (1642) Tonnage = $\frac{\text{Length} \times \text{Breadth} \times \text{Depth}}{100}$

Owners and Masters of the Steamboat *Ontario*

April 11, 1817 – First enrolled at Sackets Harbor. Owners listed as Hunter Crane, Samuel F. Hooker, Elisha Camp, Melancthon T. Woolsey, William M. Sands, Jacob Brown and Charles Smyth. Francis Mallaby, Master.

May 17, 1819 – Eri Lusher, Owner; Peter Sexton, Master.

Aug. 20, 1820 – William Waring, Owner; William Vaughn, Master.

Aug. 19, 1823 – Waring, Owner; Robert Hugunin, Master.

May 2, 1824 – Jesse Smith, Owner; Luther Wright, Master.

June 1, 1825 – Leonard Denison, Owner; William Vaughn, Master.

June 7, 1827 – Denison, Owner; Peter Ingalls, Master.

June 29, 1828 – Denison, Owner; Patrick Wallace, Master.

May 11, 1830 – Denison, Owner; W. R. Miller, Master.

July 14, 1831 – Re-enrolled at Oswego, no name given.

Other sources state her last owners were Enos Stone and Elisha Ely of Rochester.

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