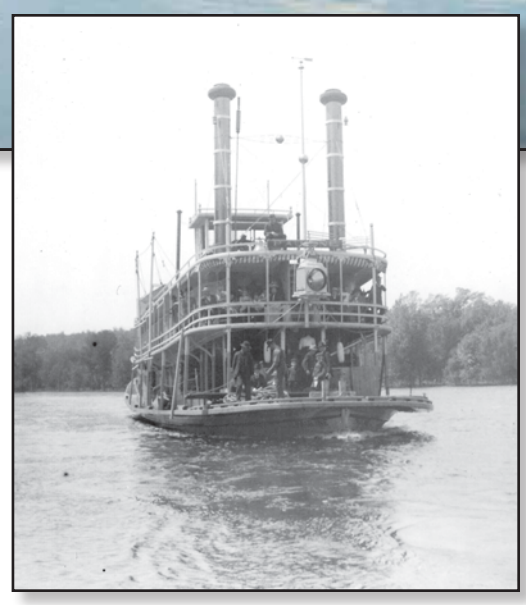


Left photo: Steamboat Gracie Kent (note logs floating in river), Osceola Historical Society

Right photo: St. Croix River view, photographer Bill Neuman

Bottom photo: Steamboat Pauline, Osceola Historical Society

Through its treaty policies and frontier military operations, the federal government stimulated the development of steamboat traffic on rivers. In Minnesota they were helped by operations of the American Fur Company, which maintained regional headquarters at Mendota at the mouth of the Minnesota River. For 25 years following the arrival in 1823 of the steamboat *Virginia* at Fort Snelling, the Fort was a primary destination that drew boats upstream. Starting in 1838 with the *Palmyra*, steamboats played a key role in carrying settlers and individuals with business interests from Fort Snelling, and then Stillwater, to the upper reaches of the St. Croix River. Prior to the arrival of the steamboat *Virginia* all watercraft used in Minnesota waters were moved by wind, water, hand, or horses. Introduction of the steam engine to the region made it possible for the steamboat to shape economic development and settlement along the St. Croix until some time after railroads became established in the valley.

The term steamboat was applied to all manner of craft that plied the St. Croix, but there were differences between packets, freight boats and towboats. Towboats pushed rafts of logs and were fitted with powerful engines. They needed utmost control to maneuver their tows through the bends and currents of the river. Freight boats were the sluggards of the fleet. They didn't require the quality boilers and engines needed by the passenger packets, in which speed was a prime factor in luring customers. Stern-wheelers were the most popular craft on the St. Croix. They could handle low waters and narrow river better than the less effective side-wheelers. Side-wheelers also proved to be much less capable of controlling log rafts in adverse wind or current.

To prepare a boat and get up steam from a cold start usually took two days. Captains of boats making regular runs on the St. Croix simply kept the machinery running when they stopped at levees along the river. Incoming freight hauled by steamboats consisted of almost anything from barrels of mackerel and codfish, beans, whiskey and flour, barrels of apples, and boxes of tobacco, to horses, cows and poultry, which shared the same deck as window glass and china dishes, garden seed and furniture. Return cargo consisted of bundles of wool, hides, skins, eggs, maple sugar, baskets of wild berries and barrels of cranberries, ginseng roots, firkins of butter and of course lumber. A typical packet boat could carry 200 cabin passengers and 100-second class passengers. Net receipts for a typical packet boat averaged over $56,000 a year. This information from Anita Albrecht Buck's *Steamboats On The St. Croix.*

In the book *Midwest Border River,* James Taylor Dunn reveals that "(d)uring the decade of the 1850s some twenty-five steamboats navigated the waters above Stillwater, some on regular passenger schedules and others only once or twice to unload freight at Marine Mills, Osceola or Taylors Falls. . . . Occasionally such boats as the popular stern-wheel packet G B Knapp did the unusual. In May 1867 it transported (undoubtedly during very high water) de Haven's Great Union Circus from Stillwater to Taylors Falls. When the G. B . . . passed Osceola, a delighted crowd followed in the steamer Pioneer to see the Taylors Falls performance. And in mid-July of the same year a large party from that village and Osceola came down . . . on the G B Knapp en route to St. Paul and the scandalous leg show, The Black Crook. . . . Excursions, moonlight rides, and Sunday School picnics on steamboats did not lose their popularity until after the turn of the century." Today, paddleboats hailing from Stillwater and Taylors Falls provide St. Croix leisure cruises that are reminiscent of those cruises the public found so appealing in the 19th century.

In *Midwest Border River* Dunn goes on to say that after the *Palmyra* first reached Taylors Falls in 1838 various steamboats came and went on the St. Croix. In 1852 the first boat to provide anything like regular service on the upper river, a small stern-wheeler with the name *Queen of the Yellow Banks,* made tri-weekly trips from Stillwater to Taylors Falls for one dollar round trip. At 45 feet, the Queen could carry 20 tons and burned one cord of wood every 12 hours. A second steamboat also appeared on the St. Croix later in 1852 as a tri-weekly packet operating between Stillwater and Taylors Falls, but packets running just between Stillwater and Taylors Falls did not meet the public need. "There was a gap of many miles, without regular steamboat service from Stillwater downriver to the levees at Prescott and Point Douglas where freight was often left by St. Paul bound steamers. In December of 1854 the Stillwater's Union called for a boat large enough 'to ply at the several ports between Point Douglas and Taylors Falls and do business on a larger scale than has been done heretofore.'" From publication of the editorial it took three years before the 106-ton sternwheeler *Eolian* was brought in to carry mail and serve the lake trade between Prescott and Stillwater.

Steamboat building had been an important industry in the St. Croix valley for half a century. A large number of the best boats on the Upper Mississippi as well as those that navigated the St. Croix were built in St. Croix valley river towns. Travel by steamboat could be luxurious, dependable and entertaining when taken for pleasure but there are reasons, beyond wearing out a boat, that contributed to the steamboat building industry remaining strong through the 1880s. The average life of a steamboat was 5 years although some lasted much longer. Boats were of light draft, for the river was treacherous. Sandbars, snags and deadheads waited to catch any boat whose hull penetrated too deeply into the water. If a craft drew more than 18 inches unloaded, it was headed for trouble.

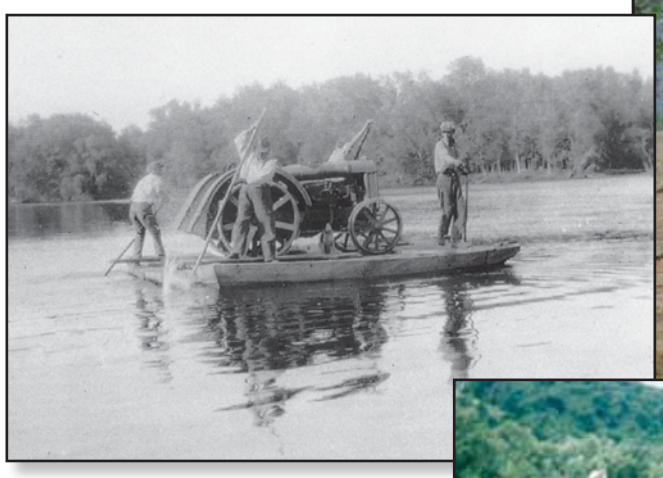
The names of long gone steamboats are recited in Buck's *Steamboats of the St. Croix.* Some still resound along the river because they were named for cities where they were built. The side-wheel *Osceola I*, constructed in 1854 made one trip on the St. Croix but drew too much water, and then ran mostly on the Mississippi where she sank downstream of Rock Island in 1857. The *Osceola II*, built in 1872, was wrecked on the Yellowstone River in a July storm in 1877. The *Arcola* was constructed in the early 1850s but was wrecked in a windstorm on Lake Pepin on May 2, 1857. A second *Arcola* was built at Prescott in 1873; a stern-wheeler packet, the *Delta*, was built in Stillwater in 1857; the Pioneer was built in 1861-62 in Osceola. A number of steamboats were built at Franconia. One, the 130 foot *Viola* made its first trip in June 1861—had cost $15,000 to build—and burned at Rock Island in November 1862. Other Franconia steamboats include the *Fanny Thompson* (1862-63), followed by the *Dexter* and *Jennie Hayes.*

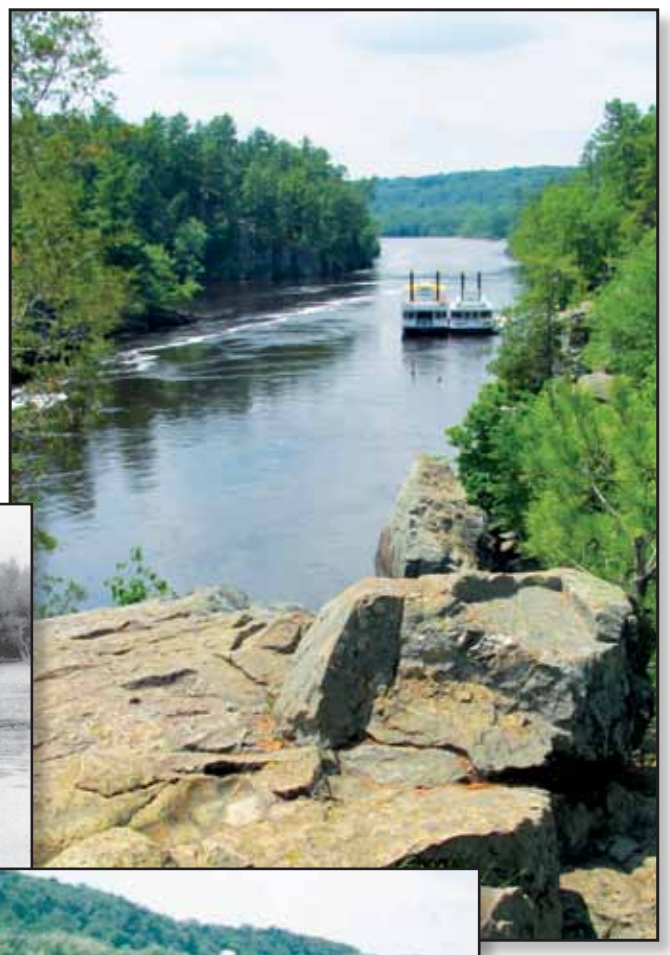
Four new boats were built at Osceola during the winter of 1865-66—the *G. B. Knapp,* the *Minnie Will,* the (second) *Pioneer*, and the *Dalles*. The *G.B. Knapp* was on the St. Croix for more than 20-years—a 105-ton stern-wheeler, 130 feet by 20 feet. The *Minnie Will*, 90 by 16 feet sank in 1877. The *Pioneer* was 130 by 22 feet. The *Dalles*, originally called the *Mayflower,* ran only one year on the St. Croix. When it was wrecked in the 1868-69 season, it was rebuilt and ran on the Mississippi. Five other boats were built at Osceola in the 1870s and 1880s. One, the *Maggie Reaney* was begun in 1875 and completed in 1877. The largest boat constructed at Osceola, she was 130 by 24 feet. The boat was furnished with fine carpets, gorgeous furniture, beautiful chandeliers and staterooms, with furniture as refined as a hotel chamber and costly silverware and dishes. The travel experience aboard the steamboat *Maggie Reaney* must have been grand.

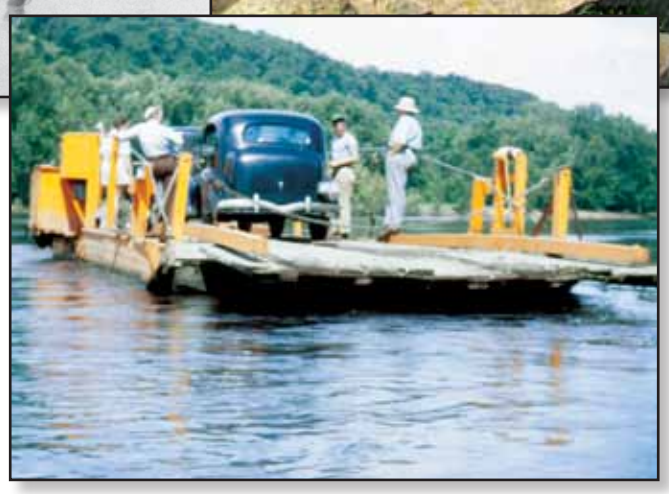
WHC Folsom built the *Wyman X* at Taylors Falls in the winter of 1867-68. In 1877, when owned by lumberman Isaac Staples, the boat sank near Quincy, Illinois. She was scrapped and the machinery used in a new Stillwater built boat, the *David Bronson*, a stern-wheel rafter. Numerous other steamboats were built at Stillwater: the *Pauline, R. G. Wheeler, Kit Carson, Netta Durant, Ed Durant Jr., Gardie Eastman, Robert Dodds, Alert,* and the *Louisville, St. Croix III, Ten Broeck, Burdette, Lora, Dispatch II,* and the *Everett.* Two small propeller boats were built at Stillwater in 1887, the *Alice D* and the *Ellen M.* A 122-foot raft the *Daisy* was built in 1898.

In the spring of 1883, Captain Oscar Knapp started building, the *Cleon*, a stern-wheeler 129 by 21 feet, a 103-ton boat. She was modeled after the *G. B. Knapp.* The Knapp Brothers boat building operation finished the last boat built at Osceola, the *Lynn J*, in June 1887. She was 65 by 14 and 32.7 tons the smallest boat constructed at Osceola. Her novel feature was an electric light that could be seen clearly from a mile and a half away, making night travel possible. As quickly as it had begun, St. Croix River steamboat traffic practically stopped after the Soo Line Bridge was built in 1887.

The reason for decline of steam boating on the St. Croix had been long in coming. River business began falling off when the first iron horse entered the valley in 1870. This is mirrored in the statistics of three steamboats. During 1870 the *Wyman X* alone carried 5,776 paying passengers from Stillwater to Taylors Falls and return. In 1879 on the other hand both the *Mary Barnes* (originally *Nellie Kent*) and the *GB Knapp* together could count but 2,000 passengers up and 1,894 downstream. In 1886 St. Croix River commerce consisted of two regular packets carrying freight and passengers to Taylors Falls. Several hopeful attempts were made after the 1880s to continue regular steamboat trips on the St. Croix, but despite the popularity of excursions of Sunday schools, library associations, singing societies and similar groups it was not enough to support a once profitable steamboat industry into the 20th century. Despite the falloff in steamboat traffic, there were unusual spur-of-the-moment trips and conventions in St. Paul that scheduled trips up the St. Croix. The steamboat *Purchase* carried one such last great excursion of about eight hundred sightseers to Taylors Falls in July 1914; then quietly, with no fanfare, steam boating died on the St. Croix River.







Left photo: Fordson tractor on WIll Sadler Ferry on the St. Croix River, National Park Service

Right photo: River near Taylors Falls, photographer Kay Lambert

Bottom photo: Marine Ferry, 1946, National Park Service

Ferries and Bridges

For most of its length, the St. Croix River is too deep to ford or walk across. As towns and connecting roads were built in the region, ferry locations and licenses to operate were established, making it possible to cross the river. Of the ferries that once existed along the river, many of the sites that did not evolve into bridge locations are, today, canoe landings.

One known location where it was possible to ford the river was in Afton at a large sandbar—still visible when water levels permit, the Catfish Bar was the historical place to ford cattle and horses across the St. Croix River before bridges or even ferryboats. The earliest road from St. Paul passed by way of Bissell's Mounds, a prominent landmark in Afton, to Catfish Bar, where travelers took to the St. Croix River to complete their journey into Wisconsin. With this exception, river towns came to rely on ferries for travel into Wisconsin and back.

One mile south of Afton Village on Lake St. Croix, a rope ferry was built by J.P. Furber in the fall of 1879 at a site that once had a sawmill, elevator, general store, warehouses, and other buildings. The ferry was later operated for a short time by Nels Melander. At least ten more ferries are known to have existed across the St. Croix River between Point Douglas, located at the southern terminus of the St. Croix Scenic Byway, and Markville, located just north and slightly east of St. Croix State Park. Some ferries existed longer, are better known and documented then others, and many were not replaced by bridges, but some were. Over time, simple canoe-ferries were likely used at many additional locations but these are not documented.

The known St. Croix River ferries were pretty basic watercraft, simple rafts actually, with some accommodation for being able to drive-on and off, and cables or ropes connected to the two shores. Through use of pulleys, poling, or sometimes engines, the ferry operator could take people, animals, wagons or cars across the river for a fee. The eleven known St. Croix Scenic Byway ferry locations on the St. Croix River were at: Point Douglas/Prescott, Afton, Stillwater, Marine, Osceola, Franconia, Sunrise, Rush City, Pine City/Soderbeck, Markville/Pansy, and Lower Tamarack/Danbury.

A 2012 article by the Washington County Historical Society reports that "(o)ne of the first ferry crossings noted was at the "battle ground" site at the head of Lake St. Croix (in Stillwater). The Crawford County Commissioners granted the crossing to Joseph R. Brown in January 1840. It really isn't known whether anyone crossed at that site. In 1856, the Minnesota Territorial Legislature gave permission to Hiram Berkey of Marine to operate a ferry at Marine Mills, which would operate until 1954." Over the years, operation of the Marine Mills ferry passed down through a string of individuals. "The ferry was guided by cables which went across the width of the river. The Marine cable was unusual because it was under the water by five or six feet and would only come out of the water long enough to cross one ▼