Chautauqua County Historical Society

2012 SUMMER PICNIC

Wednesday, July 11 - 6 to 8 p.m.
Falconer Park - Pavilion no. 3
N. Phetteplace St., Falconer NY 14733

Plus a Lecture delivered by CCHS Trustee Jason Sample
“Early Water Transportation of Southeastern Chautauqua County”
Exploring the Keelboats, Flatboats and Storeboats that navigated the region’s waterways during the early 19th Century

Open to Public - Attendees please bring a dish to pass.
For more information, including directions, visit www.mcclurgmuseum.org/blog
(716) 326-2977 or email mcclurg@fairpoint.net

(EVENT POSTER)
The History of Early Water Transportation in Southeastern Chautauqua County

By Jason Sample, CCHS Trustee

Presented at the Chautauqua County Historical Society 2012 Summer Picnic
July 11, 2012 at the Falconer Park, Falconer NY

PREFACE

When Chautauqua County Historical Society President James O’Brien suggested late last year that I serve as one of the speakers during our 2012 Programming Series, I admit I was hesitant to accept. I was well aware of the other speakers we had tentatively scheduled and they all are well-known individuals in their respective subjects:

Dr. Thomas Miller – A retired physician and current historian who still volunteers his time leading tours of the Erie Maritime Museum. He spoke in April during our annual meeting in Westfield about the History of the U.S. Brig Niagara and the Battle of Lake Erie.

Dr. Alan Taylor – A Pulitzer Prize winning author and history professor at U.C. Davis, who spoke in June at the Historic Dunkirk Lighthouse on the “Civil War of 1812,” which was also the theme and subject matter of his latest book.

Dr. Gary Lash – A geology professor at SUNY Fredonia who’s at the forefront of research into the process of extracting natural gas by way of rock fracturing. Dr. Lash will lead a discussion on the History of Natural Gas in Chautauqua County the last weekend of September at the 1891 Fredonia Opera House.

And we will have several well-educated and dedicated members of the Lawson Boat Museum in Bemus Point, delivering a presentation on the history of Lawson Boats and the effort to open a museum on Chautauqua Lake. That event will take place next month, Aug. 21 in the Museum.

Needless to say, it is an impressive roster of speakers.

And then there’s me. But while my credentials come nowhere near matching those of our other 2012 speakers (or any past year for that matter), I do have a great amount of enthusiasm for learning and sharing local history – and that enthusiasm is what I have relied upon while researching and piecing together this presentation.
Why Today’s Subject?
I’ve been interested in the local waterways here in the southeastern part of Chautauqua County since I was boy. I grew up in the southwestern corner of the Town of Poland on Buffalo St. Ext. It was a largely rural area and one of the things us kids liked to do back then was grab a fishing pole and walk or ride our bikes down the hill to the very end of Buffalo St, cross Falconer-Frewsburg Rd. (County Rd. 317) and then head down unto Dolloff Rd.

Dolloff Rd. road stretches a mile and a half across the valley and comes within a stone’s throw of where the Cassadaga joins the Conewango. It continues across and connects at the other side to Kennedy-Frewsburg Rd (U.S. Route 62). The road has two bridges near each end (one crossing over the Cassadaga and the other crossing over the Conewango) and one large sluice pipe, at least five feet in diameter, the runs under the road at about the midway point. This is where the old path of the Conewango initially was located, prior to being slightly rerouted.

Dolloff Rd. stayed open until the mid 1980s, when for several springs the valley would flood, covering much of the roadway in water, sometimes 2 feet, maybe even higher, in some areas. As a result, the town of Poland closed the roadway. The property along with the road rights has since fallen into private hands.

I should mention this road is named after Nicholas Dolloff, an early settler who came to the county from Raymond, New Hampshire in the spring of 1814 and eventually settled at “The Rapids” – today known as Jamestown. Dolloff was knowledgeable and skilled in building mills and he helped build several local sawmills and worked for James Prendergast, the founder of Jamestown. In 1817, he bought land on the Conewango in what is today the Town of Poland and moved there, where he opened two sawmills and built a home. This was located near where the Cassadaga joins the Conewango (Young, p. 341).

So while growing up, the others kids and I spent many days during the spring and summer on Dolloff Rd., taking time out from fishing to occasionally explore the area. While waiting for the fish to bite, I would sometimes stare at the water and wonder about the area’s history, and the people who may have passed through years earlier. Were they Native Americans? Explorers? Early Settlers? Has anyone ever taken anything bigger than a canoe on the river? When did people stop using the river for travel? And the questions would continue.

That curiosity may very well what planted the seed for my interest in local history. About three years ago I began the effort to learn more about local history, including the Cassadaga and Conewango. While reading Hezeltine’s Early History of Ellicott, I came across a colorful story of a bar room brawl that took place in Mayville back in 1811. The fisticuffs involved a group of early settlers vs. a group of “southern” boatmen. I was fascinated to think that perhaps these same rowdy boatmen passed through the area where I was fishing.
I later relayed this story to the historical society’s programming committee, saying it would be interesting to have someone give a presentation about those boatmen and the others who navigated the waterways. That’s when James suggested I be the one who delivers this presentation. So here we are.

PART 1 – EARLY USES

Prior to the settlement of Chautauqua County during the early half of the 19th century, the area in the southeastern portion of the county – where today sits the City of Jamestown and the Towns of Ellicott, Poland, Carroll and Kiantone – was comprised almost entirely of dense, unbroken forest.

The area especially near the Conewango and the Cassadaga was covered with what geographers call a mixed forest. There were evergreens such as great pines and hemlocks, balsam and spruce. There were broad-leaved hardwoods – maple, oak, birch, ash, walnut, elm, hickory, chestnut, cherry and others. A few places had once been cleared by the local natives for planting, but most of the land was virgin forest. (McMahon, p. 79)

If we could travel back in time and visit, the entire region, from Chautauqua Lake down the Chadakoin and along both the Cassadaga and Conewango, would be very foreign and unfamiliar.

Prior to the arrival of the first Europeans in the area, Chautauqua Lake and the nearby waterways was used often enough by Native Americans. The natives used a combination of trails and waterways to traverse the thick forests.

Brule, La Salle & le Moyne

In the early 17th century, explorers from Spain, England and France were making their way through the interior of North America. In 1615 – about five years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock – the French were exploring Quebec, Niagara and the rest of the Great Lakes region. In that year a French explorer by the name of Étienne Brûlé passed near Chautauqua County with a band of 12 friendly members of the Huron Indians. The French explorer Robert de La Salle is the next European to be mentioned a passing through the are, having at least sailed past the county’s shores along Lake Erie in 1677. But while the names are not known, by as early as 1640, French missionaries were also making their way through present day Chautauqua County. (Holder, p. 2)

By the first half of the 18th century, French maps of the region had at least included sketches of the lake and waterways. In 1739, the first military expedition to involve Chautauqua Lake took place, when Major Charles le Moyne, who served as the Baron de Longueuil, was sent on a military expedition from Montreal to New Orleans to provide assistance against the Chickasaw uprising. Le Moyne passed over the nine mile Indian portage between Barcelona and Mayville and continued down the lake
through the outlet and eventually down to the Allegheny River (which was then called "La Belle Riviere"), the Ohio River and on to the Mississippi. River. Le Moyne called our lake “Lake Ste. Croix” in an attempt to give meaning to the Indian word “Chautauqua. (Holder, pp. 2-3).

Celoron’s Expedition & War with England

In 1749, Pierre Joseph Celoron de Blainville arrived at Barcelona on July 16 to lead an expedition to claim land in the Ohio River Valley in the name of France. They cleared the Indian portage, and within two weeks he and 35 French officers and soldiers, 180 Canadian militiamen, and 55 Indians went down the lake and entered the outlet or “Chatakuin.” It is believed he and his crew camped in Jamestown, although the exact location is not known. At that point the water was too shallow for some of his boats to go any further, but a member of his party reported that he knew of a portage around the shallow, swift rapids. Whether or not this person was a member of the expedition from 10 years earlier is not immediately known. In any event, after reaching open river south of the Cassadaga along the Conewango, the party followed it to Warren where there was an Indian village. There, Celoron buried the first of several leaden plates, claiming the entire Ohio Valley in the name of his king. (Holder, pp. 3-7).

By 1753, tension was building between France and England over land claims. That year, the French sent 1200 men to Barcelona. In the spring of 1754 a French expedition of 200 of those men, led by Hugh Pean, began re-clearing the old portage road to Mayville. All through the month of July there were constant travel over the portage as men and supplies arrived from Niagara. They were then sent down the lake, down the Chadakoin and on down river all the way to present day Pittsburgh to help refortify Ft. Duquesne against the English. (Holder, pp. 9 -10)

The 1754 campaign was the last in which the Chautauqua Portage held any importance. The English attempted to make use of it in 1782 during the American Revolution, in an effort to attack Fort Pitt (formerly Duquesne). But the plan was abandoned when spies reported the fort’s strength. (Holder, pp. 13-14)

After 1782 the portage road never had any further military value. However, the road was still in evidence in 1800 when the first surveyors of the Holland Land Company came into the area, and they called it the "Old French Road." (Young, p. 44)

While it was no longer needed for military purposes, the portage would have a new role as a vital commercial lifeline for those settling the unbroken wilderness that would soon be known as Chautauqua County.

PART 2 - EARLY SETTLEMENT

By the end of the 18th century and start of the 19th century, the first generation of Americans born after the Revolution were setting out and moving west to make
their mark on the new country. In eastern New York and throughout New England, thousands travelled into Western New York – most of which was still a largely unsettled and unbroken wilderness. Nearly all the land was owned by the Holland Land Company.

Perhaps the most remote region of all Western New York was right here in Chautauqua County – where by the year 1800, less than a hundred settlers, surveyors and other transients were scattered throughout the area. But in the first decade of the 19th century, hundreds of new settlers and workers would begin coming into the county from eastern New York, Pennsylvania and New England. First, the settled along the Lake Erie Shoreline in places like Westfield, Fredonia (then known as Canadaway) and Irving. Eventually, they made their way inland to Mayville and around Chautauqua Lake. By the time Chautauqua County was incorporated in 1811, Mayville had become a bustling community and a port that feed supplies down to the Allegheny and Ohio Rivers.

**Kennedy's Mills**

There was also some settlements in southeastern Chautauqua County, the first being Kennedy's Mills on the Conewango River, near the border with Cattaraugus County in what is today as the Town of Poland. The mill was established by Dr. Thomas R. Kennedy of Meadville. Kennedy's wife was the niece of Joseph Ellicott, the land agent at the time for the Holland Land Company. (Downs, pp. 29-30)

From 1798 to 1800, the Holland Land Company surveyed its lands in Genesee County (which was most of Western New York at that time, including what is today Chautauqua County) into townships. One of his survey parties in July 1798 surveyed the area of what is today eastern Chautauqua County, near the Pennsylvania line and running north. This survey party was probably the first to note the extent and value of the pine timber in what are now the towns of Carroll and Poland. (Downs, p. 209)

Ellicott’s knowledge of the timber in that region, and his passing the information on to Kennedy during a visit in 1803, was the primary reason why Kennedy decided to purchase 3,000 acres of land in the region. He sent an employee up the Conewango to find an ideal location for a sawmill, which was located about 30 miles upstream from the point where the Conewango drains into the Allegheny. Today, that area is the community of Kennedy, located in the town of Poland. (Downs, pp. 209-210)

In a letter dated November 24, 1805, Kennedy said: "It is my intention to say that boats of 25 or 30 tons may be navigated from the State of New York by way of Conewango creek, the Allegheny and the Ohio, and then to New Orleans, where I will find a good market for pine boards." (Downs, p. 210)

In 1805 Kennedy, along with his partner Edward Work, began building a mill to manufacture lumber. This was the first work begun anywhere in southeastern Chautauqua Count. Kennedy built a double sawmill at Kennedy, and subsequently a
gristmill, with one run of stone made of common rock. Much of the wood and ironworks needed to build the mill came from Pittsburgh and Meadville and were shipped up the Alleghany River and the Conewango in canoes and keelboats. (Young, p. 460)

**Onondaga Salt Route**

Kennedy may also have been partly responsible for the salt trade that picked up in Chautauqua County in the early 1800s. In the late 1790s, Syracuse began exporting large quantities of Onondaga Salt. The Allegheny and Ohio rivers served as a great market for the salt and merchants worked to find ways to ship the salt the cheapest way possible. Because it was faster and less laborious to haul tons of salt over water than on land, much of the Onondaga Salt was exported via the Great Lakes. The challenge was then to find a way to get the salts from the Great Lakes to the Ohio River Valley and points to the south.

In one of his early letters to Ellicott, Kennedy explains what would be needed to make the shipping of salt possible via Chautauqua Lake and its outlet. These are among the earliest suggestions relating to the transportation of salt through Chautauqua County.

> "There are two men at [Meadville] who are largely engaged in the salt trade. I have mentioned to them the route through the Chautauqua outlet and the east branch of the Conewango. I was at Chautauqua last summer and thought that $350 or $400 would make the outlet navigable for boats to carry 150 fifty to 200 barrels of salt to Cassadaga; from thence there will be no difficulty." (Downs, p. 210)

It is believed that the cost to transport a barrel of salt over the French Portage Rd. to Mayville was about one dollar (Anderson, p. 9). In comparison, it cost $2.50 per barrel to transport salt from Irving and the Cattaraugus Creek overland to the headwaters of the Conewango (Downs, p. 210). As a result, it was more economical for merchants to choose the cheapest path possible, and that appeared to be through Mayville and Chautauqua Lake.

**Work’s Mill & Prendergast’s Mill**

In 1807, Kennedy and Work purchased 1260 acres of property of valuable land on both sides of the Chadakoin River below Dexterville all the way to where the Chadakoin joins the Cassadaga. The land also included a tract of valuable timberland east of the Cassadaga Creek and Levant, along the Kennedy road (Rt. 394). In 1808, Work built his first sawmills in that area and put them in operation. The wood to build this sawmill came from Kennedy’s mill. (Young, p. 332).

By 1811, a sawmill had also been constructed by James Prendergast at “The rapids” – now known as Jamestown. Incidentally, the Rapids got its from the natural dam found in the upper outlet of Chautauqua Lake, just south of what is today the boat
landing near Jones & Gifford Ave. This damn created a noticeable drop off and a swift, rapid current downstream for nearly a mile. Prendergast’s first damn was built near the Sprague St. bridge and an historic marker commemorates the site. (Leet, p. 7)

By the end of the year, 13 families had settled in the small lumber camp, and it became known as Prendergast’s Mills or just the Rapids.

While most of the wood for all the mills in Southeastern Chautauqua County eventually came from the local forests, the ironworks and other supplies typically came by way of water. When they came by way of Pittsburgh, it is said to have taken two weeks to make the trip up the Allegheny River from Pittsburgh to the mouth of the Cassadaga Creek. (Ross, p. 11)

PART 3 – KEELBOATS

During the time of early settlement, it became crucial for the communities and worksites along Chautauqua Lake and the upper and lower Rapids to be supplied with proper provisions. This meant that shipments of various goods had to be brought into the region, and because there were few if any roads, one of the primary methods for transportation was by canoe and keelboat.

Most canoes would carry smaller payloads, usually weighing only a ton or two maximum. One, two or three men were all that were needed to operate them. A keelboat – or Durham Boat - on the other hand, was much larger, with the potential of carrying over 10 tens and more.

A keelboat was typically a narrow craft, about 30 to 50 ft. long and 12 to 14 ft wide. The more durable ones were built of heavy pine plank. It was called a “keelboat” because of its shallow keel, which along the bottom, acted as a runner to slide the boat over stones and rocks. The boat was of shallow draft and pointed at both ends. Sometimes partly decked, and often with a covered storage room for goods. (Sampson, p. 2)

The typical keelboat carried 10 to 15 tons down river and 2 to 4 tons up river. The boats displaced a draft of about four inches when light and just over two feet when fully loaded. (D.H.S.)

Keelboats were also sometimes called “Durham Boats” – after the most popular manufacturer of these types of vessels - the Durham Boat Company of Durham, Pennsylvania. The company started making the boats in 1750 to navigate the Delaware River. Durham boats were modeled after boats made for centuries in Scandinavia. (D.H.S.)

The Durham Boat was most famous for its use in Washington’s crossing of the
Delaware River during the American Revolution. (Ward, pp 293-294)

Operating a Keelboat
Keelboats would often be operated by a group of 10 to 15 boatmen. This class of boatmen was known as **keelboat men**. They used long, piked "setting poles" that helped to drive their long, narrow shallow draft boats up the shallow streams.

At each side of a Keelboat was a runway even with the top of the hull, across which was nailed cleats. This was to keep the boatmen from slipping when poling. Depending on the cargo, ten to twelve men – known as **polemen** - were ranged on the cleated walkway and each were given a setting pole. The setting poles were made of white ash and about 10 to 20 feet long, with a turned knob at the small end to set against their shoulders. (Sampson, p. 3)

“The Keelboat Age on Western Waters” – printed in 1941 by Leland Baldwin, offers a great amount of details about the keelboat industry. According to Baldwin, there were several methods for using poles.

The most common use of poles was in unison when all the polemen would work together. A **helmsman** did the steering. The polemen would face the boat’s stern, and at the command of “Set Poles!” they planted their poles in the stream bottom, throwing their weight upon them, they walked or forced the boat forward. When the front man reach the stern, the helmsman called “Lift Poles! And all but one or two of the men turned and walked forward, trailing their poles in the water. One or two was left leaving his pole in place to hold the boat’s position on the river, which was important in swift current. Walking forward to make another set, the men traversed the cleated running boards from morning into the night. (Baldwin, pp 62-63)

If the current was sluggish it was possible for the men to push the boat by setting and lifting their poles while standing in place. Sometimes a file of men on the shore side would set poles while a crew rowed on the outside. Sometimes, the whole crew would push on the same side, each man as he came aft lifting his pole and running around the cargo box to take his place forward at the rear of the line. Hence the term “running boards.” At other times the men on one side pushed while those on the opposite side changed positions for a new “set.” (Baldwin, pp 62-63)

Since both ends of the boat were tapered, either end could serve as the bow of the boat since the heavy steering gear, called a "sweep" could be shifted to either end. As a result, the boat could go in either direction depending on the placement of the steering sweep and the movement of the poles or oars (Baldwin, pp 62-63). This became very useful when traveling swift currents like those often found on the Conewango and Cassadaga and especially "the Rapids."

Heading Up Rapids in a Keelboat
It’s said that Chadakoin was one of the most difficult places for ascending keelboats – or any other type of craft - from Pittsburgh to Chautauqua Lake. (Anderson, p. 7)
Ascending rapids while poling was a delicate operation. While the men in the stern held the boat steady, the two men toward the bow end at the command of “Head Two” ran forward, set their poles, and held the boat; then at the command of “Up behind!” the others changed their positions. The change of set might have to be made by pairs; thus never more than two men were absent at one time from their stations. In this way the boat was able to make headway slowly, a length at a time. (Baldwin, pp 62-63)

At the location of the Chadakoin River that was then known as Slippery Rock (located near where the river crosses Buffalo St. at the old Dahlstrom’s site), the riverbed was entirely of slate and extremely smooth, and the boatmen could not get a firm foothold for their setting poles. Because of this, they were compelled to tow their boats or canoes upstream by a rope attached to the boat by which the boatmen on shore drew the boat over the swifter water. It was back breaking work, even after half the load was removed from the boat to make it lighter. (Anderson, p. 7)

Other ways to ascend a river besides poling or rowing was cordelling, warping and bushwacking. (Baldwin, pp 62-63)

As you can imagine, ascending the river in a keelboat was tough, physical labor. As a result, the polemen were entitled to a rest every hour. The average distance covered heading upstream was 12 to 15 miles a day.

**Keelboat Cargo**

Even before Jamestown was settled in 1810, keelboats had journeyed through the area in an effort to capitalize on the salt trade. The keelboat age along the Allegheny began in the 1790s. Pittsburg served as the hub and its first industry was boat building—both flatboats to transport waves of pioneers and goods downriver, and keelboats, which a strong crew could propel upstream as well.

In 1797 James O’Hara and Isaac Craig started a glass factory in Pittsburgh, an important development since glass was the hardest material to transport. O’Hara was aware of the abundant amount of Onondaga Salts coming out of Syracuse, and worked toward finding the fastest and easiest route to get the salts to Pittsburg. It was only a matter of time before the route through Chautauqua County was discovered and put to use. (Killikelly, p. 121)

When heading up stream to Chautauqua County, the keelboats typically brought various provisions for settlers, including iron castings, nails, colored cloth, glass, knives, axes, drugs, pork, grains, dried fruit and other groceries. They also had a large and ready supply of “Old Monongahela” Whiskey, which sold for about $1.50 per gallon. Returning, they carried products of the forest, which they had obtained in trade or for cash to recargo their boats. Some of the cargo included fish, fur, lye, black ash, pearl ash and black salts – highly coveted in the manufacture of glass. (Sampson, p. 2)
As noted earlier, large quantities of Onondaga salt were transported by keelboat from Mayville to Pittsburgh, especially between the years 1805 and 1810. The discovery of the salt springs on the Allegany, Kanawha and Ohio rivers around 1810 caused the discontinuance of the primary salt trade by this route (Young, p. 332).

But before that year, at times thousands of barrels of salt were awaiting high water at Mayville for transportation. Even afterward, some salt continued to pass over the portage and down river via Chautauqua Lake. (Anderson, p. 6)

Sometimes, Keelboats would also have human passengers, bringing them up river from the Allegheny or Conewango. When the Allegheny River was at all deep, the keelboats had to keep close to the bank, and this disadvantage was added by the fact that the Allegheny is always bending one way or another. It is said that an able bodied person could make much better time from Pittsburgh by walking to Chautauqua County, rather than choosing to be a passenger on a keel boat (Bristow, p. 328). But quite a few passengers were carried on those ten-day journeys, and Arch Bristow has an interesting account in his book from a woman who was a young girl at the time and made the trip with her family.

Some of the boats used in hauling salt were built at Work's mill in 1808 (Young, p. 332). Just south of the state line, Charles Chase of Russell, Pa. helped build keelboats too. Some of the better keelboats had names such as the Transport, the Mayflower, and the Rover. (Bristow, p. 326)

PART 4 – KEELBOATMEN

You can imagine that it took a strong and hardy individual to work on the keelboats. It took 10 to 12 days to pole one of the boats from Pittsburgh to Warren, and sometimes just as long to get from Warren to Mayville. Every minute of progress was hard labor and it was reflected in the men who worked the boats.

Arch Bristow, who wrote Old Time Tales of Warren County, had this to say about the keelboat men,

“No galley slave of ancient days toiled harder than the men who poled the heavy keel boats up tortuous windings of the Allegheny River from Pittsburgh to Warren, and points above.... You could tell a keel boatman by his one humped-up shoulder, on which, if you saw under the ragged, padded coat he wore, was a callous made by the pressure and rub of the pole. The men who poled the keel boats, those who made a business of it, often had terrible galls on their shoulders, exactly like those on the shoulders of a horse that has been overworked, or worn a poorly fitting collar... The men on the keelboats had special oaths of their own, and were entitled to them. Pushing those heavy loaded boats against the current, a distance of 130 to 150 miles was toil, such as few men perform, it was not a job for striplings, or for men past the flush of
physical prime. They were known as “hard” men, the keel boaters. Nobody ever trifled with a keel boatman, unless he was drunk, or unacquainted with the country, or tired of living.”

(Bristow, p. 325)

“Half Horse, Half Alligator”
The American keelboat man first appeared as a distinct class in the 1790s and retained their identity until improved roads, the steamboat and the railroads all made the keelboat obsolete. Keelboat men were recruited from the wildest and toughest men on the frontier, at first largely Indian fighters. They were usually tall, gaunt and big boned and walked with a long stride. They often went shirtless in the summer and consequently were brown as Native Americans from head to waist. In cold weather and when in town, they dressed in buckskin or linsey-woolsey, and red shirts. Their coats were heavy strouding or blanket cloth. The boatman’s food was the coarsest and plainest, based on the usual western staples of corn, potatoes, hardtack and meat. The cooking was a matter of indifference. No boat was considered fully equipped without a keg of whiskey on deck, and a drink of whiskey, or a “fillie,” as it was called, was the reward of the crew after each arduous struggle with the current. With their whiskey the boatmen drank river water, first taking a cup of whiskey and then a cup of water. (Baldwin, pp 86-87)

At the start of the keelboat age, Isaac Craig of Pittsburgh was paying $12 a month to boatmen working for the quartermaster service, with no distinction between flatboat men and keelboat men. The masters usually received $15 to $20, with the exception of one or two who received $30. Food was always furnished in addition to the wages. (Baldwin, p. 88)

The crew of a keelboat was always much happier and pleasant whenever they had a musician on board. Any man who brought a fiddle on board (and had the ability to scrape it) automatically was given certain privileges. The fiddle player would act as chief musician at dances along the shore. The crews would often work to the tunes of the ever-present violin. During the day the fiddler amused the crew with his tales and music, and the men joined in singing while the kept time with the rowing. (Baldwin, pp 90-91)

When the boat had “headed to” and “fastened its bowlines” at night and the men had eaten their rations, they might take their dogs and go on a coon hunt. Otherwise, they spent their time in gambling, drinking, or wrestling, or they gathered under the trees and told tales of their experiences in the cities or on the rivers our west. If they were feeling tuneful they might sing a song – there were many ditties to choose from for a keelboat man. (Baldwin, pp 91-95)

Among the boatman’s amusements - shooting a mark was a favorite, and the men could spend a week profitably between that sport and drinking and gambling, with perhaps a fight or two thrown in for variety. One of the main diversions was
fighting, and on a frontier where there were thousands of men bubbling over with animal energy, they were bound to find plenty of opportunity. The boatman who wore in his cap the Red feather of victory and boasted that he had never been whipped was bound to fight everyone who challenged him. (Baldwin, p. 100)

**Incident in Cincinnati on Election Day.** A crowd was milling about the courthouse when a “screamer from the mob” – about six feet, four inches tall – sprang out and began a tirade:

This is me, and no mistake! Billy Earthquake, Esquire, commonly called “Little billy”, all the way from Noth Fork of Muddy Run! I’m a small specimen, as you see – a ramote circumstance, a mere yearling; but cuss me, if I aint of the true ‘imported breed’ and can whip any man in the this section of the country! Whoop! Won’t nobody come out and fight me?! Come out some of you and die decently, for I am spilling for a fight! I han’t had one for more than week, and if you don’t come out, I’m fly blowed before sun-down, to a certinty! So come up to taw! Maybe you don’t know who little billy is? I’ll tell you: I’m a poor man – it’s a fact – and smell like a wet dog; but I can’t be run over! I’m the identical individual that grinned a whole menagerie out of countenance, and made the ribbed nose baboon hang down his head and blush! W-h-o-o-p! I’m the chap too, that tow the ’Broadhorn’ up Salt River, where the snags were so thick that a fish couldn’t swim without rubbing his scales off! –fact, and if anybody denies it, just let ’em make their will! Cock-a-doodle-doo! Maybe you never heard of the time the horse kicked me and put both his hips of jint – if it aint’ true, cut me up for cat fish bait! W-H-O-O-P! I’m the very infant that refused its milk before its eyeyes were open, and called for a bottle of old Rye! W-H-O-O-P! I’m that little cupid! Talk to me about grinning that bark off a tree! – t’aunt nothing; one squint of mine at a bull’s heel would blister it! Cock-a doodle de do! O I’m one of your toughest sort – live fo ever, and then turn to a whiteoak post. Look at me, [said he, slapping his hands on his thigh with the report of a pocket pistol.] I’m the ginewine article – a real double acting engine, and I can out-run, out-jump, out-swim, chaw more tobacco and spit less, and drink more whiskey and keep soberer than any other man in these localities, Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!!!!!

After all this, no one offered to fight, and “Little Billy” walked off muttering that there wasn’t a man there with courage enough to collar a hen.

(Baldwin, pp. 100-101)

Boatmen’s courtesy to their passengers was not always in the highest order. However, according to one man who spent a period of time with a keelboat crew, they were careful to their conversation in front of respectable women. “Give them your hand” he wrote “accost them with a bold air, - taste their whiskey, - and you win their hearts. But a little too much reserve or haughtiness offends them instantly, and draws upon you torrents of abuse, if not a personal assault.” Nevertheless, he
advised travelers to go well armed and to be accompanied by a stanch, dependable friend. (Baldwin, p. 98)

Notable Keelboat men
Because they were so transient and only a few really settled down anywhere for very long, the names of most of the men who worked the keelboats is a mystery. But some of the more colorful characters were known from Mayville to Pittsburgh. They included Jack Collins, Orrie McCray, “River” Bradshaw, and Keel Boat Joe. Collins was considered “A hard man to get over”, a wicked fighter who would use any means to put his adversary in such bad shape, there would never be any doubt in future as to who won the battle. Jack had the merry little trick of knocking a man off a keelboat in the middle of a river, and not worrying as to whether he could swim or how he might reach shore. (Bristow, p. 327)

The greatest and most infamous keelboat men was Mike Fink, who lived from about 1770 to 1823 and was called "king of the keelboaters." Fink is described as a semi-legendary brawler and keelboat man who most exemplified the tough and hard-drinking lifestyle. Davy Crockett is supposed to have described him as "half horse and half alligator" – a description that later would be applied to most men in the keelboat profession. Fink worked as a boatman from 1790 until 1815, when he ventured out west (Wikipedia: Mike Fink). It is not readily known if he ever made it this far north on the river system. A more detailed biography of Fink can easily be found online at Wikipedia or with a quick Internet search.

Another, more prominent and decorated, historic figure was also involved in Keelboating on the Ohio River. Meriwether Lewis of the Lewis and Clark expedition spent time in Pittsburgh from 1794 to 1800 and became very familiar with keelboating on the Ohio river – a skill he brought with him when leading the corps of discovery in 1804. (Pittsburgh Legacy)

Taverns
When traveling through the area, the keelboat crews would sometimes stay in a tavern, which in those days also served as a hotel or boarding house. Taverns could be found in communities situated throughout the river system, from Mayville all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico.

Two local taverns that served keelboat operators were Fenton’s Tavern at the Rapids and Owens’ Tavern in the town of Carroll near present-day Fentonville.

John Owens was a veteran of the French and Indian War who settled in the Town of Poland on the eastside of the Conewango in 1808. In 1818, he moved downriver to near the state line at Fentonville and kept a tavern, where it stayed busy from early spring through late fall. His primary business was lumberman during the rafting periods (spring and fall). During the warmer months, he also catered to the keelboat men coming up river. John Owen declared that he had never had a sick day in his entire life and lived to the age of 108. His daughter, Elsie, became the wife of George
W. Fenton, and mother of Governor Reuben E. Fenton. (Young, p 244)

The Keelboat Landing at the Rapids was located on the northern bank of Chadakoin River, just east of the Main Street Bridge. A historical marker can be found in the area noting the location. Just a stone’s throw from the keelboat landing was Fenton’s Tavern; the first tavern in present-day Jamestown, opening in 1814. It was operated by Jacob Fenton, a veteran of the Revolutionary War. He was also the second cousin of George Fenton, father to future governor Reuben E. Fenton. Fenton was also a potter. His Tavern and pottery was located southeast of the present intersection of Main and 2nd Streets. The house faced the keelboat landing, and extended to Potter’s Alley, so named because of Fenton’s business. (Young, p 338)

The Mayville Incident
There was also a tavern located in Mayville where many keelboat men would stop and sometimes stay. This tavern was also the location of what was most likely the first bar room brawl in the history of Chautauqua County – and it involved Keelboat men.

According to Hazeltine’s “Early History of the Town of Ellicott,” Violent animosity had prevailed for some time between the southern boatmen, and the Yankees, or local settlers. An earlier conflicted resulted in Capt. James Dunn (one of the earliest settlers in Portland) getting his eye gouged out by boatman named Valentine. This incident is believed to have left sore feelings between both parties, and it culminated with a large brawl involving 16 to 20 men. The result was one local resident - Caleb Thompson of Ellicott – getting his thumb bit off. A keelboat man was also apparently scalped – that is, he was cut so badly that “the skin and flesh on his skull fell lose over his eyes and he could see to fight no longer.” The keelboat man was laid up for two months as he recovered from the injury.

The keelboat man, who is only known as “Esq. Jack,” filed a lawsuit against the man who injured him, James Akin of Ellicott. It was one of the first court cases to be herd in Chautauqua County. The jury gave Jack a verdict of $80, allowing him his medical bill, and time actually lost, but he did not get any ‘smart money’ – today more commonly known as damages for pain and suffering. After this encounter the locals and the boatmen lived in what’s described as perfect harmony and both Akin and Esq. Jack actually got along with one another afterward, with Akin helping him later that year make repairs to Jack’s boat – “Sally Jack” near Worksburg (present day Falconer). (Hazeltine, pp 50-52)

This scene was not uncommon. If several keelboat crews met at a town, riot was usually the result. There were vicious battles between boatman and townsmen, in which the former usually won, in the process of breaking up the furniture in the taverns and amusing themselves by tearing down fences, outbuildings and signs.

Fortunately for people who had to endure the wrath of the keelboat men, the advent of the steamboat put an end to these rowdy days.
Decline of Keelboats in Chautauqua County

From 1800 to 1815, the Rapids grew quickly, with several mills cropping up along the waterway. By 1815, keelboats could only get to a certain point up the Chadakoin River due to impediments like dams and mills. So the Keelboat would drop off its cargo in Jamestown, where it could then go to wherever it was needed throughout Chautauqua Lake. Most of the time the keelboats did not return empty-hulled, and so they would pick up cargo at Jamestown. If they were interested in hauling salt, a large salt scow or flatboat would deliver the salt from Mayville to the keelboats at Jamestown free of charge. An expensive canal with five locks had been erected for the accommodation of these “canal boats” and Nicholas Dolloff was hired to help build it. Before long, dams and mills soon heavily accumulated on the outlet, the Cassadaga and the Conewango. It is said that a total of 40 milling operations were located on the river-way from Pittsburgh to the outlet. As a result, the keelboats, after some quarreling and after the building of several unnecessary locks, gave up the trade. Saw mills were too much for them. After 1825 – near the completion of the Erie Canal – Keelboats came up the river no more, although “Old Monongahela” continued to be transported from Pittsburgh up river as far north as Warren. From there, it was brought into Chautauqua County by wagons. (Hazeline, p 70)

Miles’ Big Canoe

In 1804, Robert Miles of Warren County, PA completed a road that ran from his home in Pine Grove Township, through Sugar Grove and onto Chautauqua Lake, at what was then called Miles’ Landing. This overland road would serve as a portage between the Conewango and Chautauqua Lake, with a stop in Sugar Grove. The object of this road was to give the settlers in Pennsylvania easy access to Chautauqua Lake to obtain fish and also to obtain salt and other necessities. This road was the great highway of the wilderness (Hazeltine, p. 68-69). It still exists today and is known as Big Tree Rd.

Incidentally, Robert Miles first arrived in Warren County from Pittsburgh in 1797. It is said he came by way of a keelboat, the first to find its way to Warren County. (Schenck, p. 420)

PART 5 – RAFTING & FLATBOATS

Even though the keelboats stopped their trip up the Conewango by 1825, there still was plenty of traffic coming down the river. About the time the last keelboat made its way up the Conewango and Cassadaga, there were dozens of sawmills alone here in Southeastern Chautauqua County. And the waterways were the only way the sawmills could export the millions of feet of virgin pine each year. They developed a system of cutting the timber and binding the boards into rafts, which were then floated downstream, joining other rafts along the way and heading south to Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville and even New Orleans. This went on for several decades until the forests were entirely depleted. (McMahon, p 70-71)
Store-boats & Flatboats
After about 1840, the chief interest in Jamestown and other villages began to focus on adding value to hardwood by making woodenwares such as furniture, handles for farm tools and other equipment. While the growing population of the county meant there was a steady demand locally for the products, there was also enough surplus to send off to other markets. Once again, the Chadakoin, Cassadaga, and Conewango proved most effective in getting the products down river to larger markets.

The primary method for transporting goods downriver was by using a flatboat. This was commonly a rectangular, flat-bottomed boat with square ends. The flatboat could be any size, but essentially it is large, sturdy tub with a hull that displaces water and so floats in the water. This differentiates the flatboat from the raft, which floats on the water. The flatboats were almost always a one-way vessel. They were usually dismantled for lumber when they reached their downstream destination, or sold to someone who would then in turn take it further down river. (Sampson, p. 5)

The first flatboat was built in by Jacob Yoder at what is today Brownsville, Pa. for use along the Monongahela River. Yoder freighted the boat with flour and sent it all the way to New Orleans in May 1782. It is said an average of 3,000 flatboats descended the Ohio River each year between 1810 and 1820, the great majority of them being constructed at Brownsville. (Wikipedia: Flat Boats)

Flatboats began running out of Jamestown by 1920. For nearly 20 years, various businesses – including furniture makers - would send crude versions of the boat downriver with manufactured goods, including pales from the city's first factory. The flatboats would stop at various communities and farmhouses along the way and sell merchandise, acting almost like a floating warehouse for specific items. (Sampson, p. 5-6)

Nathan Brown & ‘Yankee Notions’
In the spring of 1843, the most well-known flatboat builder from Chautauqua County and perhaps anywhere along the entire Mississippi River system ran his first boat downriver. Nathan Brown was a businessman in the area who was aware of the potential of the flatboats, and thought that by improving the concept, he could get more goods down river and sell them more easily. As a result, he built his first store boat. (Hazeltine, p. 191)

The store boat was similar to flatboats but longer, stronger and with a new innovation – a ‘Cabin’ that covered all but the ends of it. Brown’s store boats were typically 70 ft long and 16 ft. wide and were launched in Levant, where the Cassadaga joins the Conewango. Built of the finest dressed lumber, this floating dwelling and store contained a kitchen, an office, bedrooms and storerooms, and was fitted with the best of doors and windows. Outside was painted in bright colors and the name of the boat in three-foot letters on both sides. (Sampson, p. 6)
From between 1843 and 1880, Brown built 154 boats, loaded them with worked building materials and other wood work and sent them down river. Brown and his crew would be absent six or seven months while he disposed of his cargo and boats. When they were all out of merchandise, he would sell the boat, often times at a much greater value than what it cost him to make. (Centennial History of Chautauqua County, p. 145)

Brown became known as a dealer in “Yankee Notions.” Up until and even after the Civil War, he was considered an honest and respectable businessman by both northerners and southerners. Even after the war when there was obvious animosity toward people from the north, Brown's boats were still highly coveted. They were considered the best built on all the Mississippi River system, because if they could survive the upper Allegheny and the rough water of its tributaries, they could survive nearly any other waterway in the Mississippi River system. (Hazeltine, pp. 199-203)

By 1880, Jamestown and the rest of Southern Chautauqua County no longer needed to use it waterways for commerce. It was faster and more affordable to haul goods by freight, and with two rail lines running through the region – one east-west and the other north-south, the idea of using boats to sell goods downriver was old fashioned and outdated. Thus concluded the era of water transportation in southeastern Chautauqua County and most of the Allegheny River region.

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