

Steamboats and Shortcuts



King Street Dock

Imagine the scene here in 1825. The dock is crowded with saddle horses, ox carts, fancy horse buggies, pigs, goats, cows, chickens, piles of freight, and people. There are farmers, soldiers, merchants, and sailors. It's noisy. Workmen are yelling, whistles are blowing, and horses are neighing. The smell of barnyard animals, wood smoke from the ferry's smokestack, and food cooking fills the air. Even though the scene is very different today, the Lake Champlain Transportation Company's mission is the same—to safely deliver passengers across Lake Champlain.



In the late 1700s, the first ferries on Lake Champlain looked like this. Small and powered by the wind, they crossed narrow parts of the lake. By the early 1800s, Gideon King, for whom King Street is named, had a fleet of schooners to transport goods and people from Burlington's waterfront to destinations including Essex, Whitehall, and Plattsburgh, New York.



The Roosevelt – the last wooden-hulled ferry on Lake Champlain – served for 36 years. The president of the Lake Champlain Transportation Company himself sank the boat by chopping holes in its hull when it had outlived its usefulness in 1959. Today, the Roosevelt rests at the bottom of the broad lake before you.



Early Travel in the Champlain Valley

For more than 175 years, people have been boarding Lake Champlain Transportation Company ferries from the King Street Dock. Crossings weren't cheap in the early days. A one-way trip to Port Kent for a two-horse passenger buggy – the equivalent of today's automobile and driver – cost \$2 in 1825, the equivalent of \$30 today.

The fare was worth every penny. Travel was tough in those days. Local roads were glorified trails at best. Railroads weren't built yet. On horseback, the 160-mile trip around the lake to Port Kent could take a week. The Company's first steamer, the 75-foot *General Greene*, had a top speed of 8 miles per hour. It could reach Port Kent in less than 90 minutes.

The R.W. Sherman – the fastest commercial vessel ever on Lake Champlain. In 1852, the steam-powered, wooden-hulled Sherman made the Port Kent-to-Burlington crossing in 27 minutes. That record hasn't been broken in 150 years. The Lake Champlain Transportation Company purchased the Sherman in 1853 and changed its name to the America.