

## Navigation on the Fox

To the newly arrived settlers in 1843, the Fox River stretched south from Green Bay, promising an easy route to their new homeland in east central Wisconsin. However, it was a false promise, for lurking beyond the tree-grown banks were a series of rapids of dangerous proportions. The waters of the Fox roared northward through Grand Kakalin (Kaukauna), Little Chute, Grand Chute (Appleton), and Winnebago Rapids (Neenah), on their journey from the placid waters of Lake Winnebago. These rapids had for centuries blocked passage on the river for the Indian canoe, the bateaux of the French trappers, and now the canoes and Durham boats of the new settlers.

Something was about to be done to alleviate the laborious portages around the rapids. Two events brought a movement for change. First, in 1829, the Supreme Court ruled against the steamboat monopoly of Fulton in the case of Gibbons vs. Ogden, thus removing the ban on steamboat construction by anyone but the Fulton group. The second was the opening of the Erie Canal. Steamboat construction flourished in the East and along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, while in the midwest territories a cry for the building of canals came from the populous. In the 40's this movement reached Wisconsin and the first steps to open the route from Portage on the Wisconsin River to Green Bay began. About the same time, a steamboat captain from New York area arrived in Green Bay in a reconstructed canal boat. The date was 1843, and the man was captain Peter Hotaling. Steamboating had arrived on the Fox River.

Hotaling's boat, the Black-Hawk was a crude side-wheel vessel (a former Erie Canal boat hull) of some 80 feet in length, 15 feet in beam, with a "newfangled" steam engine. During the summer of the year 1843 he carried newly arrived immigrants up river against the current as far as Grand Kakalin. Here the rapids prevented further passage to the south, and the passengers had to portage, and continue their voyage in Durham boats (a scow-like boat of some 30 feet in length poled and rowed against the current, and when favorable, sailed with the

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aid of a single mast and square sail). With the coming of winter, Hotaling pondered his next move.

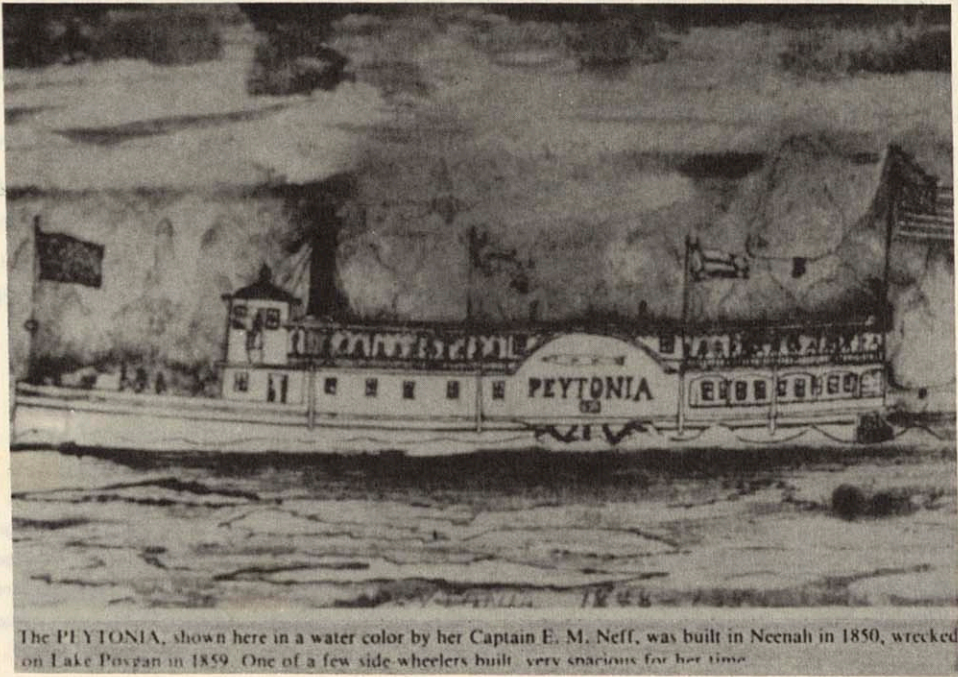
Lake Winnebago lay seven miles south of the rapids. Here was an opportunity for additional commercial business as many new settlers came overland to Taycheeda at the southeast corner of the lake, looking for passage north and west. Hotaling, therefore, determined to strip the hull of the Black-hawk of all useable fittings and engine parts and set out on a journey to the shore of Lake Winnebago. Using sleds and oxen, the heavy cargo was pulled to the ice-covered lake, and thence skidded down the east shore to the small community of Manchester (near Brotherton). Using green wood, which was plentiful in the region, he constructed a sternwheel craft 85' x 13' with a hull of 3', and called her Manchester after the port in which she was built. The Manchester sailed the waters of Winnebago, from Taycheeda to Oshkosh, Fond du Lac, Winnebago Rapids, and Menasha. It also traveled up the Wolf River via Lake Butte des Morts and down the Fox, when the water was available, to trading posts near Appleton. These voyages continued until 1849 when a new steamboat combine was put together in Oshkosh by Morgan L. Martin along with M. C. Darling, Capt. A. B. Bowen, J. Bannister, T. Conkey, J. Jackson, Augustine Grignon, and as "Admiral", Captain Peter Hotaling. The fleet was captained through the years by Messrs. Estes, Harris, Bowen, and Warden. The company's first vessel was the Manchester which was lengthened 20 feet and rebuilt into the Badger State. She blew up in 1853.

To the north in Green Bay, Morgan L. Martin had the Pioneer constructed (a 100' X 14' side-wheel). This vessel worked the waters of Green Bay and De Pere. At the same time, Martin built the Indiana (of the same size as Pioneer but a stern-wheeler). She was the first vessel through the locks at De Pere, and ran regularly to Kaukauna. Before the Portage-Green Bay locks were completed, she interchanged cargo and passengers with the steamboats from the south. Kaukauna was the last unit in the Portage-Green Bay canal system to be built.

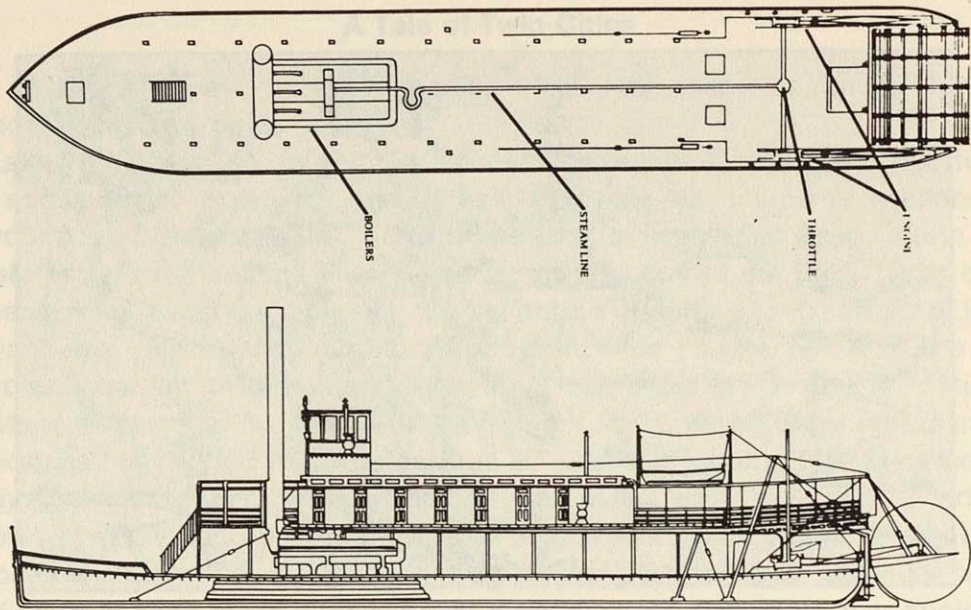
Meanwhile, builders in Neenah and Menasha were constructing steamboats. In 1850, a hull was cut in two at Kaukauna and worked over the rapids to Neenah. Here it was rebuilt into the Peytonia, a lovely side-wheeler captained by James Estes for the Oshkosh combine. The work took place at the boatyard near the site of the present Neenah Library. She ran on the Neenah, Oshkosh, Wolf River passage. The Peytonia sank in Lake Poygan in 1859 when sheet ice cut through her hull. At one time she was captained by E. M. Neff who painted



*A durham boat could carry 15 to 50 tons of freight. Pointed poles were used to propel the vessel. When water was too deep, a sail was hoisted.*

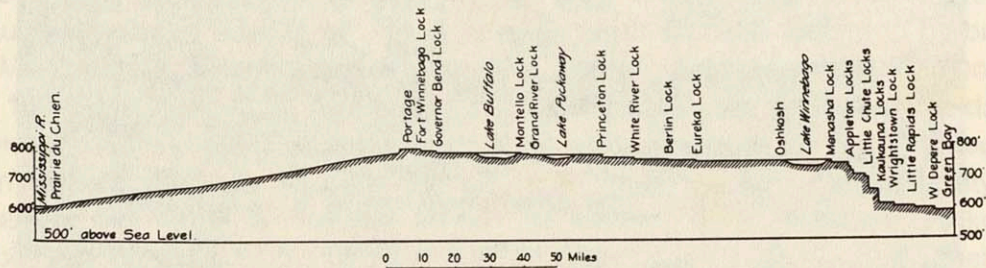


The PEYTONIA, shown here in a water color by her Captain E. M. Neff, was built in Neenah in 1850, wrecked on Lake Poygan in 1859. One of a few side-wheelers built very spacious for her time.



TYPICAL FOX RIVER STEAMBOAT

UPPER and LOWER FOX RIVER



PROFILE OF FOX-WISCONSIN WATERWAY FROM PRAIRIE DU CHIEN TO PORTAGE TO GREEN BAY

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a fine watercolor of her which is in the possession of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. In Menasha in 1850, Curtis Reed and James Doty had a large side-wheeler, the Menasha, built for them in a yard at the end of Cedar Street. She was too big for the new locks (165' X 40') and after a year of unprofitable voyages on Lake Winnebago, she was cut and made into two barges for wheat shipment. The stern section went to the Mississippi, while the bow sunk under the Main Street bridge in Oshkosh.

In 1851, a Menasha boat company built the John Mitchell, a large stern-wheeler that traversed Winnebago for one season, but was unprofitable. She was sold to Mississippi sources and became the first boat to make the westbound trip to Portage and beyond in 1852. The Jenny Lind was built for Dr. M. Peake of Menasha at the yard at the foot of Cedar Street. She, too, was a big vessel of 150' X 22' and proved unprofitable just as the Mitchell had been. She was sold to Mississippi buyers in 1852. Charles Velte, in his book, Historic Lake Poygan, quotes W. A. Titus in his article "Early Navigation on the Fox River and Wolf Rivers and Lake Winnebago," as saying, "It seemed that anyone with a little cash wanted to build and run a steamboat, and it may be said that every one of these investors lost his money in time". The Peytonia and the W.A. Knapp (formerly The Badger State and Manchester) continued to operate for the combine.

Meanwhile, two boats were built in Oshkosh in 1851, the D. B. Whitacre (renamed the Oshkosh in 1852 and sold to the Tennessee River trade in 1853), and the Berlin. The latter was a side-wheeler later owned by local business man Elisha D. Smith who became the largest industrialist in Wisconsin with his Menasha Wooden Ware Company. Smith was a better maker of pails than a steamboatman. He trusted a rogue by the name of Mr. Malbourn. Smith gave the following narrative on "business experience" to an "Old Settlers" meeting.

*My early experience here in storekeeping was exceedingly trying, when in my ignorance I supposed everyone was honest. During the winter, the steamboat Berlin was being rebuilt for the 1852 season, and the owner persuaded me to take his orders for merchandise with a promise of payment in the spring. But the spring came and brought no money, and I was obliged to take up several liens on the steamboat in order to secure myself. In doing so, I became the owner of the steamboat at the cost of over \$5,000. I then arranged with a Mr. Malbourn of Neenah to take my boat through to La Crosse by way of Portage and the Wisconsin River, the Portage Lock having been completed, with a view of making a sale of the boat. He sold*

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*the boat, but no money came to me, Mr. Malbourn having appropriated the proceeds of the sale. I instituted suit against him in La Crosse. It was an expensive affair. My La Crosse lawyer got full judgement in the amount of \$2,500, which he stole, and died soon after! Thus ended my first steamboat experience.*

Neenah interests built the big Vanness Barlow on the shore of Little Lake Butte des Morts near the present Bergstrom Paper Mill of the Gladfelter Company. She barely cleared the lock with her length of 150' and width of 25'. John Stevens II in his papers reported that she was the first boat to traverse the Neenah lock in 1852. She ran Neenah to Appleton where her freight was teamed to Kaukauna to connect with the Indiana. On August 7, 1854, her boiler blew up in Oshkosh. Two were killed and her upper works destroyed. Repaired and rebuilt with new upper works, she worked the Valley and Winnebago system until she went to the Mississippi in 1857.

The Portage-Green Bay Canal System was soon to be completed, and in 1853 Peter Hotaling went east to purchase machinery for a new boat he was building to run on the system. Unfortunately, he died of lung hemorrhage in Detroit at the age of 54. Later, his son, Stephen, would carry out his father's dreams.

There was a spurt of boat building in 1854 and 1855. Two boats were built at Eureka, the Eureka and the Lady Jane. Meanwhile, in Oshkosh, the Oshkosh City was constructed (renamed the Arizona). She ran the route until she was sold to service on the Mississippi in the Civil War.

Final work on the locks and dams on the Fox River was completed, and the system opened in 1856. New boats were being constructed up and down the river to take advantage of the new commercial waterway. The Menominee was built at Shiocton on the Wolf, the Sampson and Pearl at Oshkosh, and the Morgan Martin and Ajax at Green Bay. Most of these were of the side-wheel variety as the machinery of the time favored that type of construction. However, the beam of the craft caused by the side wheels took up valuable cargo and lock space. Thus, the stern-wheel type of construction began to take over. Each variety was built of local pine and hardwood which was readily available. Some of it was green and caused trouble and gave short life to the craft. There were no naval architects, and the local boat builder built by line of sight and imitation. The results were surprising and were of good lines with a nice balance. The drawing shown in this chapter is a composite of many but is a representation of the type.

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The boats carried local produce, new settlers, manufactured imports from the east and bagged wheat, the principal crop of the region. The busy traffic served a vital link in the settlement of the northeastern area of Wisconsin, and until the arrival of the railroads had the field to itself. Even with the coming of the rails, the boats still had a wide area to cover filling in the gaps in the rail system. Neenah and Menasha in the center of the northern part of the system grew to be industrial centers using the river for raw materials, and shipping of finished goods, and wheat flour to the nation.

As a fitting climax to the year 1856, the steamboat Aquila piloted by Stephen Hotaling, son of Peter Hotaling who had started the steamboat parade, made the journey from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, via the Ohio River to Cairo on the Mississippi, thence up the river to the Wisconsin at Prairie du Chien and on to Portage. At Portage, the gala celebration began and continued at each river hamlet along the Fox. Bands, military salutes, artillery, and official welcomes awaited the Aquila at each stop. Velte describes it as "the noisiest, merriest and longest parade and celebration ever in the history of the State of Wisconsin!"

Once the celebrating was over, the Aquila left Green Bay and joined the fleet of steamboats operating on the Fox, Lake Winnebago, and its tributary streams. She was a frequent visitor to Neenah and Menasha. Worn out, she was dismantled in 1860.

The communities in the Fox River Valley saw a continuous stream of steamboats plying the river on their working trips. On the weekends, the same boats became the source of recreation as they hauled fraternal, church, and sports groups on excursion trips. Steamboats were an integral part of early life of the river communities. "Steamboat round the bend", was a common cry.

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Donald Mitchell

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**HUZZA! HUZZA! HUZZA!**

Green Bay Steamers in Appl ton.

On Wednesday, June 4, 1856, the Steam Tug *Ajar* arrived at Appleton from Green Bay, having 'worked her way' through Fox River and the Locks and Canals built by the Improvement Company around the Rapids, at Kaukauna, Little Chute and Cedar Rapids, as well as one of the Lower Locks at Appleton; and on Thursday, the *Pioneer* came thro' with colors flying, and landed at the 'Island' amid the cheers and shouts of the multitude. The *Aquila* came down from Berlin about the same time, and their steam whistles joining in unison made merrier music to the ears of those who have labored and hoped on for years in anticipation of this hour than the spirit stirring strains of the most exquisite band to which we have ever listened. Our River Pioneers may exult; they will exult; it is right they sho'd: **HURRAH!**

Neenah Bulletin June 11, 1856

**MOOSEWINE.**—Our friends of the Green Bay *Advocate* and Appleton *Crescent* are making a great a-do about the fact that the steamer *Aquila* has made trips to Appleton through the Neenah lock; and from this they attempt to make people abroad believe that the Improvement is completed. So far from this being the case, the steamer *Barlow* made regular trips between here and Appleton four years ago. The *Aquila*, nor no other boat, can run through that lock in two weeks hence, and could not now were it not on account of the extreme high-water, which is now falling rapidly. Try another ruse to gull folks, gentlemen!

Menasha Advocate May 31, 1856

The Improvement Company are entitled to the congratulations of the People; and they will receive them. And in the general jubilee which will soon follow, let us not forget that much, very much, is due to J. KIR ANDERSON, the Engineer to whom most credit belongs for the success of this stupendous Work. The work of his hands, the creation of weary hours of thought, and care, and calculation, is crowned with success. It speaks for itself. May his future life be one of profit to himself, and usefulness to his race.—*Appleton Crescent.*

Just what we expected. That the Appletonians would be making themselves merry, and holding general jubilee when two Boats, one from the North, the other from the South, meet there to greet each other. And when the only remaining lock is completed and they can make their regular trips, Neenah will join her voice with Appleton in a longer, louder and more triumphant shout. **Hurrah!**