
Friends of the Peconica River Foundation

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History

Early Steamboats On Peconica River Part 10 of 15

The use of the Peconica for recreational or pleasure boats apparently began in 1882 when Capt. C. F. Taggart, a railway mail clerk, built a steam yacht at his home. It was 18 ½ feet long, with 5 feet 2 inch beam, was built out of pine with an oak keel, was copper bound, had a 2 H.P. upright steam engine, a screw propeller, and could travel at 8 m.p.h. It could carry 20 people and carried the name, "The Success". The next steam boat was the "John F" built in 1884 by John Ellis, Jr., a blacksmith and wheelwright, who came to Freeport in 1853 with his father, John Ellis, Sr. This boat was a small open vessel with an upright steam engine which carried only six persons. Ellis was a craftsman who built the steam engines as well as his boats. The success of the "John F" led in 1887 to the construction of a 28-foot boat, the "J.F. Taylor" powered by an upright one-cylinder steam engine. It carried 20 passengers and was rented for parties. Although it was named for J. F. Taylor who furnished the pennant and ensign for the craft, it was owned and operated by Ellis until he planned a larger boat and sold it to Doctor Sunderland, a local dentist, who later fitted it with a gasoline engine. Shortly after launching the "J.B. Taylor", Ellis built a boathouse on pilings on the south bank of the river just west of the Cedarville Bridge. There was a large landing deck adjacent to the boathouse. The boat floated in the boathouse when not in use. The river was nearly 200 feet wide at the Cedarville Bridge at that time.

The finest and best-known steam powered boat on the river was the "Columbia" built by John Ellis, Jr. in 1893. It seated 40 passengers and was powered by an upright 2-cylinder steam engine built by Ellis who designed it. The vessel was built in the back yard of the Ellis home on N. West Ave. at West Galena Ave., mostly at night by lantern light. The frame and keel were oak and ash while the bulkheads were white pine fitted together by use of special concave and convex planes. The gunnels were ash and the decks, fore and aft, were made of alternating one-inch strips of walnut and ash. There were happy and sad times for the Columbia. On the happy side there were many enjoyable river trips when John Ellis, Jr. took picnic parties up river to such favorite spots as Dreyer's Landing, McGraths and Catfish Point. Among organizations making frequent use of the boat was the Matchbox Club. William Ascher, a personal friend, chartered the boat for an outing at least once each year. But the Columbia was sold to Beckman and Young in 1903. Contrary to good advice, they put the boat in the river below the dam and, when convinced that boating downstream was not good, sought to float the boat upstream over the dam during high water. During the operation the boat capsized and the engine and boiler were torn loose and dropped to the bottom of the river. A diver from Chicago was employed to locate and harness these items so that they could be raised. After this sad experience they sold the Columbia to William Ware, who shipped it to a small lake near Milwaukee. Ware soon returned the boat to Freeport. Eventually Leo D. Ellis, a son of the builder, purchased it and converted it to a clamming vessel and installed a gasoline engine. Thus Columbia ended her days on the Peconica.

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