

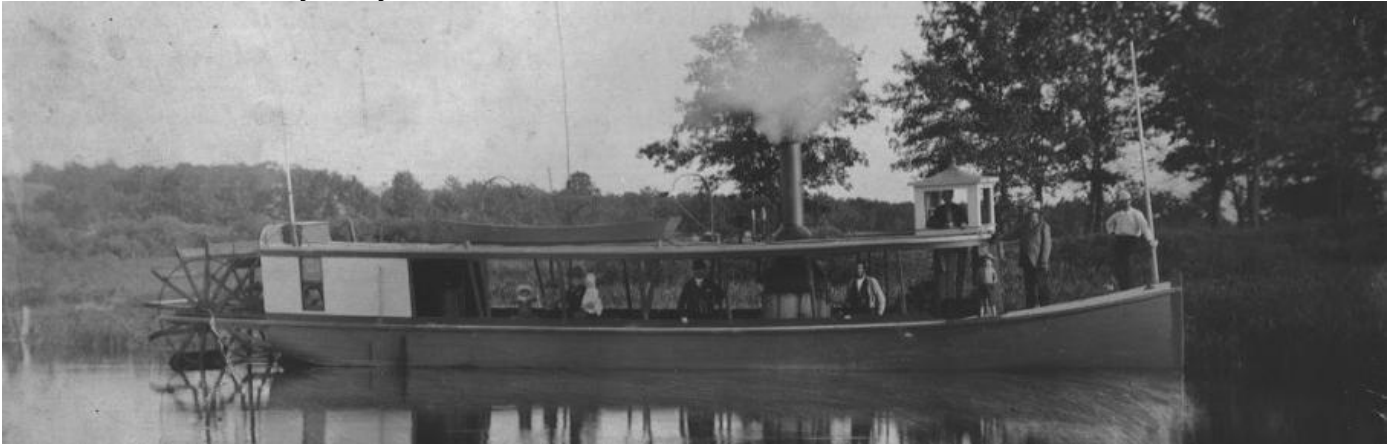


Steamboats, as the name suggests, were powered by coal or wood burning boilers that turned large paddle wheels on the rear or sides of the boat. The first really successful steamboat was built in 1807 in New York, and the technology spread rapidly, becoming a major form of transportation.

If a river was a bit too shallow or narrow, steam-powered "dredge" boats with shovels on their fronts could dig up sand to make more room. This is why many of the banks along the Fox River have big mounds of sand! You can still see these "dredge banks" at the Princeton and White River locks if you move off the beaten path a little. Locks and dams were also used to help boats navigate places where the natural level of the water changed drastically, like rapids or waterfalls. Before locks were built and dredging was done, the Fox River was only navigable by larger steamboats from Green Bay to De Pere (about six miles).



One of Princeton's prominent citizens, H.A. "Ham" Megow, apparently had a close connection with steamboats on the Fox River. In our archives, we have a photo of him traveling with his family aboard the "Pastime" in 1890, when he was only five years old.



Another photo of Ham and his family aboard a steamboat has a label indicating the Ham's father, H.E. Megow, was a cook on board "The City of Berlin," photographed at a Princeton dock.



Another steamboat, "Rapids," is pictured below as it cruised past Princeton.





Rapids was one of the largest steamboats ever seen in our area, along with her sister ship, the Grand. Both were constructed in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1905. The Grand was the larger of two, being 136.3 by 32.3 by 5 feet, while Rapids was 134.8 by 28.4 by 4.5 feet. The two boats are pictured below on the WI river.



Both the Rapids and the Grand were originally built to carry passengers on the Grand River in Michigan, but they were purchased by the Memphis and Little Rock Packet Company for hauling cargo on the Arkansas River. To get there, the boats had to make the dangerous crossing of Lake Michigan, then travel around the "thumb" of Door County into Green Bay. After that, according to the [Wisconsin Marine Historical Society](#), the "Waterways Journal" of February 26, 1938 reported that the boats, "ascended the Fox River and descended the Wisconsin River to the Mississippi." To do this, the boats had to go through several locks as well as the Portage canal. It was all a bit of a tight squeeze, and, "the locks on the Fox were so narrow that it was necessary to cut the outriggers and remove the lower deck guards of the Grand in order to pass her through."



Sadly, the Rapids was crushed by ice at Paducah, Kentucky on December 12, 1917. Her crew of two survived. It is not known what happened to the Grand.

Steamboats were a fairly common sight on the Fox River in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In a time when most roads were either dirt (which turned to mud) or bone-jarring wood "corduroy," travelling by boat was often faster and more comfortable. Of course, there was also the possibility that a steamboat's boiler could explode. When one did, boiling steam, hot coals, and metal shrapnel burst outwards, doing horrific damage to anything (or anyone) in the way, and usually sinking the boat. This happened frequently enough that tragedies prompted some of the first major federal safety legislation, including the Steamboat Acts of 1838, 1852, and 1871.

A boiler explosion killed nine people aboard the "Berlin City," built in Berlin WI in 1857. She was racing the steamer "Pearl" at the head of Lake Butte des Morts when it happened. Sam Anthony the engineer was killed, along with Gerome Trow of Eureka and Stilman Wright of Berlin. The sunken boat was raised, repaired, and sold to Tom Wall, Ruben Doud, and Captain John Lynch, but burned on Nov. 4, 1870. According to the Chicago Tribune, steamboat boiler explosions killed an estimated 7,000 people from 1816 to 1853 alone. In 1842, Charles Dickens wrote, "... Western steamboats usually blow up one or two a week in the season," in his "American Notes" travelog. Mark Twain also wrote about these horrific accidents for newspapers and in his fiction.

In 1865, a boiler explosion on the paddle wheeler "Sultana" killed around 1,200, people, mostly just-released Union P.O.Ws. The soldiers were returning home mere days after the end of the Civil War. Many of those that survived the initial explosion drowned in the Mississippi River, died of hypothermia while clinging to wreckage in the chilly spring water, or died later from their burns. Oshkosh residents Harvey Annis, his wife Ann Annis, and their daughter Isabelle (age 7) were on board the Sultana. Harvey was a 2nd Lieutenant in the 51st United States Colored Infantry, and Ann had traveled to Vicksburg with Isabelle to nurse him back to health. Sadly, only Ann survived the explosion of the Sultana. You can read the story of her narrow escape at [www.sultanadisastermuseum.com/ann-annis](http://www.sultanadisastermuseum.com/ann-annis).

There a wonderful book, "Steamboats on the Fox River: A pictorial History" written by D.C. Mitchell available to view at the Princeton Library. Finally, of course, you should visit the Princeton Historical Society museum, where we have a quarter-sized replica steamboat with a working paddlewheel and lots of great artifacts and photos! The museum is located at 630 W. Water Street and is open Saturdays from 11am-3pm, May through October.

Please consider helping us preserve local history! Make at donation at our website, [princetonwihistoricalsociety.org](http://princetonwihistoricalsociety.org). You can also find a calendar of events at other resources there. You should also check out the Berlin Area Historical Society, Berlin Wisconsin. Many steamboats were built there.



The "Busy Dollar," a boat based out of Princeton, WI.