

The Queen of the Canandaigua Steamboats

by Ray Henry

When Alonzo (Lon) Springstead (1844 - 1939) was asked in 1888 by James McKechnie of Canandaigua Brewery fame, to build a large, new steamboat for the Canandaigua Lake Steamboat Company, the largest ever built for Canandaigua Lake, the timing was perfect. Alonzo already had a great deal of experience at steamboat construction. Starting in the business when he was 16 with his father, Benjamin Springstead, (both of Geneva) they had already rebuilt the "Joseph Wood" for the Wood Brothers, and built the "Canandaigua" and the "Ontario II", along with several other boats for Cayuga, Seneca, and Keuka Lakes. Alonzo had gone into business for himself at age 21.

Why now?

In 1847, the Village of Canandaigua had built a municipal pier well out into the Lake which facilitated the loading and unloading of passengers and produce for a number of steamboats. The Northern Central railroad installed their tracks down the west side in front of the boathouses. The Woodville Pier had grown to 200 feet with a good deal of dredging having taken place. Other landings soon followed suit which attracted the construction of larger steamboats with deeper drafts.

The Canandaigua Lake Steamboat Company had been organized as the Canandaigua Lake Navigation Company in 1880 to establish a regulated steamboat schedule on the lake. The McKechnies and their steamboat company already owned 3 of the 4 active steamboats on the Lake at that time. The "Ontario II" had burned at the Village Pier in 1887, and the "Canandaigua" was already 24 years old.

Alonzo's masterpiece, considered Canandaigua Lake's "**Queen of the Steamboat Era**", the "Onnalinda", would carry 600 passengers on Summer Sundays, with another 400 on a boat in tow" (Arch Merrill, Slim Fingers Beckon). Launched on May 18, 1888 and christened by Miss Maud Sayer, a niece of Mr. James McKechnie, it was 142 feet on the keel with a 40 foot beam (22.5 feet between the paddles). Powered by a 40 pound boiler, and a 34 inch diameter low pressure 250 horsepower engine. Due to the improvements to the Canandaigua Pier, the Woodville Pier, and other landings, the size of the Onnalinda, requiring a 32 inch draft, was able to be accommodated by nearly all of the docks on the Lake.

Also, due to the length of this steamboat, the heavy weight of the engine, and her relatively shallow draft, an effort was made to keep the boat from sagging in the

middle around the paddle wheels, through the installation of a "trestle" type structure. Similar to bridge trestles it was incorporated to spread the weight evenly along the length of the ship.

She was the only boat operating in the Finger Lakes that had 14 foot diameter feathering paddle wheels, which had buckets mounted on pivots that could be adjusted by connecting rods for finer tuning. The effect was that the buckets would enter and leave the water much cleaner than the old paddles which tended to slap the water. This gave the Onnalinda greater speed and efficiency than older steamboats. However, this made the steamboat harder to manage and the pilot needed additional training.

The interior construction of this larger more modernized steamboat provided other amenities for the clientele of the day. She was one of the first to have plumbing and hence Ladies and Gentlemen's restrooms. Some Private Cabins were available. It also had a snack bar.

One of the most recognizable features was something which identified every Steamboat that Benjamin Springstead was involved with, a hand carved eagle with spread wings perched on top of the pilot's cabin. Something that Benjamin often provided due to his love for woodcarving.

According to the Repository and Messenger on May 24, 1888 p.3 col. 5

"Last Saturday morning the new steamboat was launched according to the announcement. Although the weather was extremely unpleasant a large crowd gathered to witness the interesting affair, not only from this village but a large number came from up the lake. When everything was ready the props were removed, a push from the Northern Central engine sent the new craft down the incline and she rested in the water like a duck."

It took about three more months until the "Onnalinda" was ready for regular trips. It was felt by many to have been the most elegant steamboat on the lake. It was often chartered by different organizations for picnics and "Moonlight Excursions". They were carried to places like the Seneca Point Hotel, rebuilt to grand proportions in 1888. It burned, however, in 1899.

Another popular establishment was the Woodville Hotel, especially during the duck and deer hunting season. The hotel was built in 1856 and in the 1870's changed its name to the Steamboat Hotel when Mr. and Mrs. W. Russell Standish bought it. It was sold again in the 1920's and demolished in 1924.

Other public points on the lake were Willow Grove at Vine Valley, and Linden Lodge at Cook's Point. Many cottagers used the steamboats for transportation to their cottages,

both on a daily short term basis, and also for extended vacations. Some even commuted to their place of employment.

In 1904 the Pier was rebuilt. The Northern Central RR was relocated to the east side. The electric trolley tracks of the Rochester and Eastern Rapid Railway were run down the west side, and the boathouses were moved to new side piers (Winter of 1903 – 1904)

By 1908, the Onnalinda was still going strong. According to the Ontario County Times ,

“The steamer Onnalinda that first slid into the water in 1888 has been doing great work as a freighter all the fall, carrying from 30-50 tons of fruit a trip. She passed the official inspection, was given all the repairs that seemed necessary and is making good in every way” .

The Onnalinda remained in service from 1888 until 1913, after which time she was dismantled, the wood used for a home on Antis Street, the hull was set adrift near the Yacht Club, and sunk near the Country Club. For a period of time the rudder was used as a beach table at the Yacht Club.

Alonzo, though he never again built such a large steamboat, would go on to build the Genundewah, the Ogarita; Oriana; Onanda and the Eastern Star for Canandaigua Lake as well as many steamboats for Seneca; Keuka; Cayuga; Otsego and Owasco Lakes. Just prior to the Onnalinda , Alonzo built the Maid of the Mist III for Niagara Falls, which would stay in service for 70 years until 1955. Alonzo was 94 years old when he passed away, still a very active man!

Resources:

“Canandaigua Lake Steamboat Era” – Robert & William Vierhile: 1978

“It Started With a Steamboat” – Steven Harvey: 2007”

“Story of the Canandaigua Lake Steamboats” – James Lee; 1922

“Canandaigua Lake Steamboats” – Dr.C. Harvey Jewitt; 1976

“Historical Tour of Canandaigua Lake” – Dr. Preston Pierce