

# Erie Canal launched boating boom on Cayuga Lake

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(Photo: The History Center in Tompkins County)

## Story Highlights

- Throughout the 19th century boat yards operated at many points along Cayuga Lake
- One of the earliest boat builders in Tompkins County was the Cayuga Steamboat Company
- By 1866 Ithaca had 11 boatyards, each producing between 30 and 40 canal and lake boats each year
- The History Center opens an exhibit on 19th century boating commerce on Jan. 9

The Erie Canal officially opened in 1825, and this was of enormous significance to a business that would prove to be an important one for Tompkins County.

Throughout the 19th century boat yards operated at many points along Cayuga Lake. In some instances they were near a sawmill to provide easy access to timber supplies. Oak trees abounded

in the woods around the lake. They could be felled, hauled to the boat yard, sawn into appropriate sizes and lengths and built into canal boats, steamboats and recreational boats.

One of the earliest boat builders in Tompkins County was the Cayuga Steamboat Company, established in 1819. The Enterprise, Cayuga Lake's first steamboat, was built here and made its first journey in 1821. Its 24 hp engine came by wagon from the shops of Robert Fulton in New Jersey. The company grew and prospered over the next several decades, changing hands (and names) several times, and producing such notable steamships as the DeWitt Clinton, the T.D. Wilcox, and the renowned Frontenac.

By 1866 Ithaca had 11 boatyards, each producing between 30 and 40 canal and lake boats each year. The focal point of most of this activity was Cayuga Inlet where an Ithaca Journal article dated Oct. 23, 1880, exclaimed, "The music of the saw and hammer means bread for many a family, shoes and schooling for many little ones." About 150 men were given steady employment at several boat yards, producing canal boats with an average value of \$3,500. The article further stated "paint and putty cover fewer deficiencies in an Ithaca canal boat than any other that "crawls the water." About 450 pounds of white lead and 40 gallons of oil were required to paint each boat.

One especially productive boat yard was that of Benjamin F. Taber. Taber's produced the private steam yacht, the Clara, which was sleek and fast, and the winner of the only official steamboat race on Cayuga Lake. Both horse- (and mule-) drawn, as well as steam-powered barges came from there, also. Benjamin, William and later Henry Taber built boats in Ithaca from the 1850s until the early 20th century.

Ferry boats provided transportation for goods and people from 1808 to 1913, including the Busy Bee and the Polly Ann.

With the rise of the railroads in the mid and late 19th century the usage of the Erie Canal declined, and so did the boat yards on Cayuga Lake. They were replaced by small boat shops producing rowboats of oak and cedar.

[The History Center](#) is showing the exhibit Captains Commerce and Community: The Impact of the Erie Canal on Tompkins County. A second installation of the exhibit will look at the rich history of boats and their builders in the busy years of the mid- 19th century on Cayuga Lake. It opens on First Friday Gallery Night, from 5-8 p.m., Jan. 9.

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