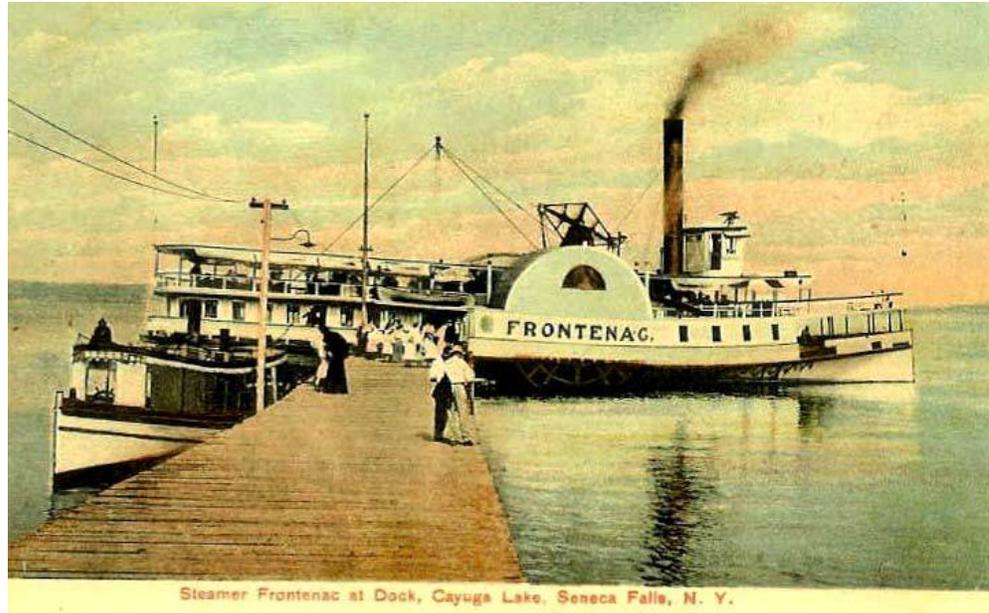


## The Frontenac: The Mighty Steamboat on Cayuga Lake

The *Frontenac* was the largest steamboat ever to operate on Cayuga Lake. It was built in 1870 by T.D. Wilcox of Ithaca at a cost of \$50,000. It was a “side-wheeler” that was 135 feet long and had a 22 foot beam between the inside cases for the paddlewheels.<sup>1</sup> As many as 350 passengers could be accommodated in her cabins, her decks, and dining room.

Four years after Wilcox’s death, his heirs sold the *Frontenac* and the



Steamer Frontenac at Dock, Cayuga Lake, Seneca Falls, N. Y.

rest of Wilcox’s lake navigation business to the Cayuga Lake Transportation Company. In 1902, this business was then sold to Captain Melvin T. Brown of Syracuse. When Brown bought this business, the *Frontenac* had already been operating successfully for 30 years. Brown had parts of the wooden structure rebuilt and in the spring of 1907, installed new boilers on the ship at a cost



Steamer Frontenac Landing at Dock, Cayuga Lake Park, Seneca Falls, N. Y.

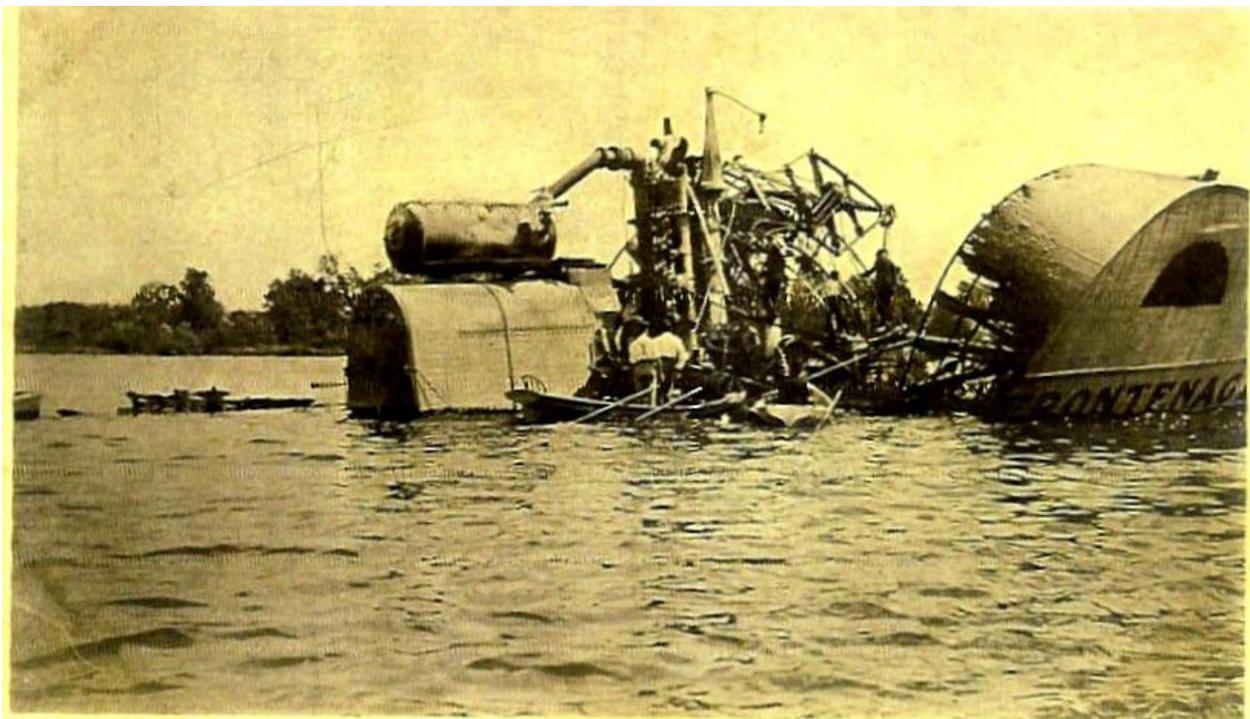
of \$5,000. In June, the annual state-required inspection of the *Frontenac* prompted state inspectors Van Keuren and Welling to pronounce the boat “seaworthy and safe against all accidents due to construction.”

The regular schedule of the *Frontenac* in 1907 was a departure from Ithaca at 9 a.m. and proceeding north, making 10-12 stops and arriving at Cayuga landing about 1:15 p.m. Then the *Frontenac* would leave Cayuga at 3:45 p.m. and cross the lake to Cayuga Lake Park and then make stops on the way back to Ithaca, arriving at about 8:10 p.m. This time schedule could be upset, however, by rough weather. Sometimes, the *Frontenac* would be used for a special excursion group,

necessitating the use of one of the smaller steamers owned by Brown, such as the *Mohawk* or the *Iroquois*, to operate on the regular schedule for that day.

It was a special excursion that kept the *Frontenac* overnight at Cayuga landing on Friday, July 26, 1907. The next morning, the *Frontenac* left Cayuga landing carrying the passengers that were originally scheduled to be on the *Mohawk*, met the northbound *Mohawk* at Sheldrake and exchanged passengers, so as to get both boats back on their normal schedules. The *Frontenac* then proceeded back north with about 60 passengers, Captain Brown and a crew of 5 men and 1 woman. The pilot was Albert E. Smith of Ithaca; the chief engineer was Howard Bachman of Seneca Falls. As the boat proceeded north, there was rough water. Captain Brown reported, "The waves were high and the wind was blowing a gale." The rough water caused the boat to not make its scheduled stops at Aurora and Levanna, at the widest part of Cayuga Lake. As the boat proceeded toward Farley's Point, people on shore, such as James Harris, could see the boat was on fire and emergency help would be needed.

The Genung family were the first passengers to discover the fire. An Ithaca newspaper reported this from its interview with Mrs. John Genung, wife of the sheriff of Tompkins County: "...The wind was so strong on the upper deck that it made the chairs in which the two women were seated nearly tip over several times, after the boat left the vicinity of the Aurora dock. The fire was first discovered by little Roland Genung, 12 years old. He saw smoke issuing from the pilot house. Mrs. John Genung thought that the boat could not possibly catch fire and declared



Wreck of Steamer *Frontenac*, Cayuga Lake, Burned July 27, 1907.

that it was cooking smoke or steam. She was soon disillusioned however, at the sight of flames. When Mrs. Genung finally realized that the *Frontenac* was afire, she did not feel any immediate fear, nor did she have any apprehension of the terrible ordeal through which she would have to pass. She thought that the fire could be extinguished before it made dangerous progress, and later

entertained the further hope that the boat could be brought close enough to shore to allow all the passengers to land safely.” This was about 1:00 p.m.

Captain Brown tried unsuccessfully to extinguish the fire. As some passengers were putting on life preservers, it became clear that they needed to jump into the water and get away from the boat as soon as possible. Although the water was perhaps only about four feet deep, the strong waves made it very difficult for the women in their large skirts to make much success in paddling or swimming toward shore, a distance of perhaps only 200 feet! One woman later described it this way: “In the water I had expected to stand on bottom, but my feet failed to touch. Then the waves, instead of washing us ashore, continually beat us back against the side of the boat, now all ablaze. We kept off as best as we could. The waves beat about fiercely....A woman near me cried out that she was floating away. I caught her by the skirt. Finally one of the men from the shore got out to where I was and pulled me in and my companion with me....”

The Frontenac had grounded near a section of the east shore known as Dill’s Cove, just north of Farley’s Point and about 2.5 miles south of the village of Union Springs. Five women and two children died.

A coroner’s inquest on Monday, July 29<sup>th</sup>, concluded “that the loss of life could not have been prevented by any act of the crew.” The coroner exonerated the captain and crew from any blame and said, “They were brave, cool-headed fellows, and did far more under all the circumstances than many others would have done. They are not only entitled to exoneration, but the highest praise.” The inquest report said the fire “which caused the burning of the steamer Frontenac was caused by some unknown source which could not be ascertained by examination of passengers and crew.”

Shortly after this inquest, the two state navigation officials who had inspected the Frontenac in June inspected the wreck. Their findings were the same as that of the inquest.

The wreckage of the Frontenac was still a curiosity for years after the tragedy. Lying in a rather isolated section near the lake shore, it remained there until World War II. The demand for scrap iron was so great that the wreckage was used to help the U.S. fight the Japanese.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Robinson, *Cayuga Lake Boating*, p 15.

<sup>2</sup> Donald J. Stinson, *The Burning of the Frontenac*, Interlaken, NY: Between the Lakes Publishing, 1985.