# Rail Ferries

Rail cars were ferried across the St. Lawrence river at three places in our region: Brockville and Prescott, Ontario, and Coteau Landing, Quebec. Services at the first two were cross-border interchanges of freight cars with US railroads, lasting for decades. The Coteau ferries briefly served as part of the Canada Atlantic main line through the Province of Quebec, carrying passenger trains as well as freight.
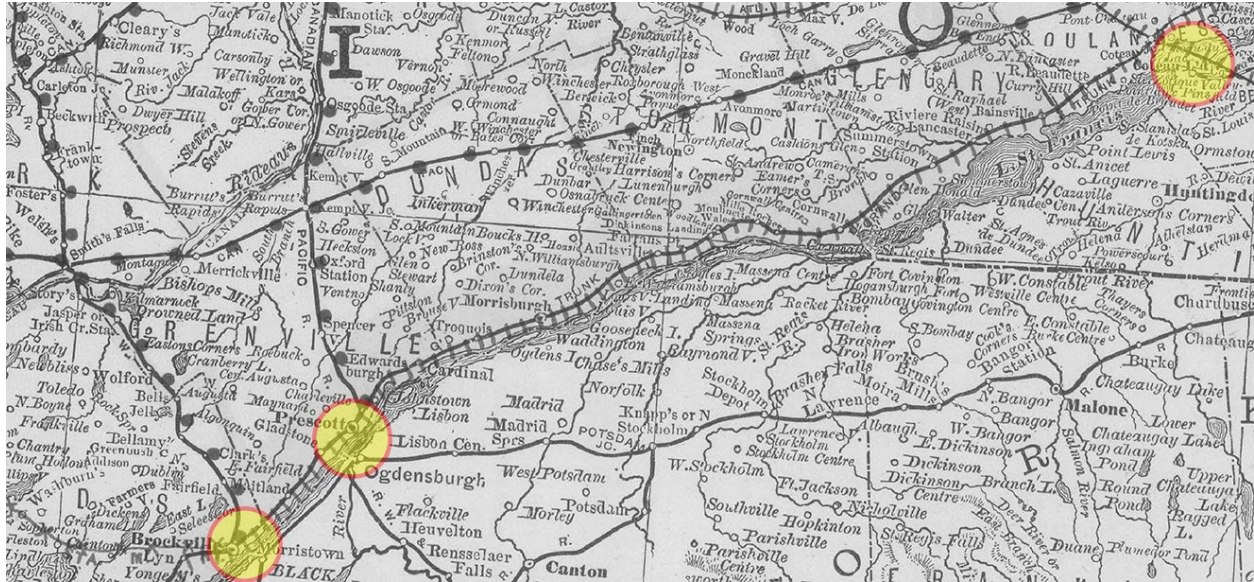
Rand McNally & Co., 1889, *Ontario No, 2* (alt). David Rumsey Map Collection 2094.012

Brockville

Brockville's own Brockville and Ottawa Railway opened its waterfront terminal in 1860 and immediately began bringing Ottawa Valley lumber to waiting ships and barges that carried it to US markets. There was no railway opposite Brockville on the American side, so no possibility of ferrying cars. Residents of the facing village of Morristown were served from 1817 by a small passenger ferry.

In 1875 the Utica and Black River Railroad reached Morristown while the B&O was still a broad-gauge line. This added railway connecting passengers to the local ferry traffic. Captain David Lyon of Ogdensburg in 1876 launched a steam ferry and excursion boat, the *William Armstrong*. The B&O absorbed the Canada Central Railway in 1878 and adopted its name. When new owners announced that the CCR would narrow its gauge in 1880, the Utica and Black River responded by constructing a ferry slip at Morristown.

1880-1888   Capt. David Lyon, Ferry *William Armstrong* and barges

On July 1, 1880, the *William Armstrong*, with a car transfer barge, inaugurated rail car ferry service between Brockville and Morristown. Less than a year later the CCR was absorbed by the newly created Canadian Pacific Railway, making the Morristown ferry that company's only direct connection to US railroads east of Emerson, Manitoba.

In 1882 the *Armstrong* was rebuilt with a through car deck, making it a true rail ferry on its own. Its capacity was only three cars, so it often operated with a barge to handle heavy traffic. In 1885 control the U&BRR was taken by rival Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg and the CPR completed its takeover of the St. Lawrence and Ottawa
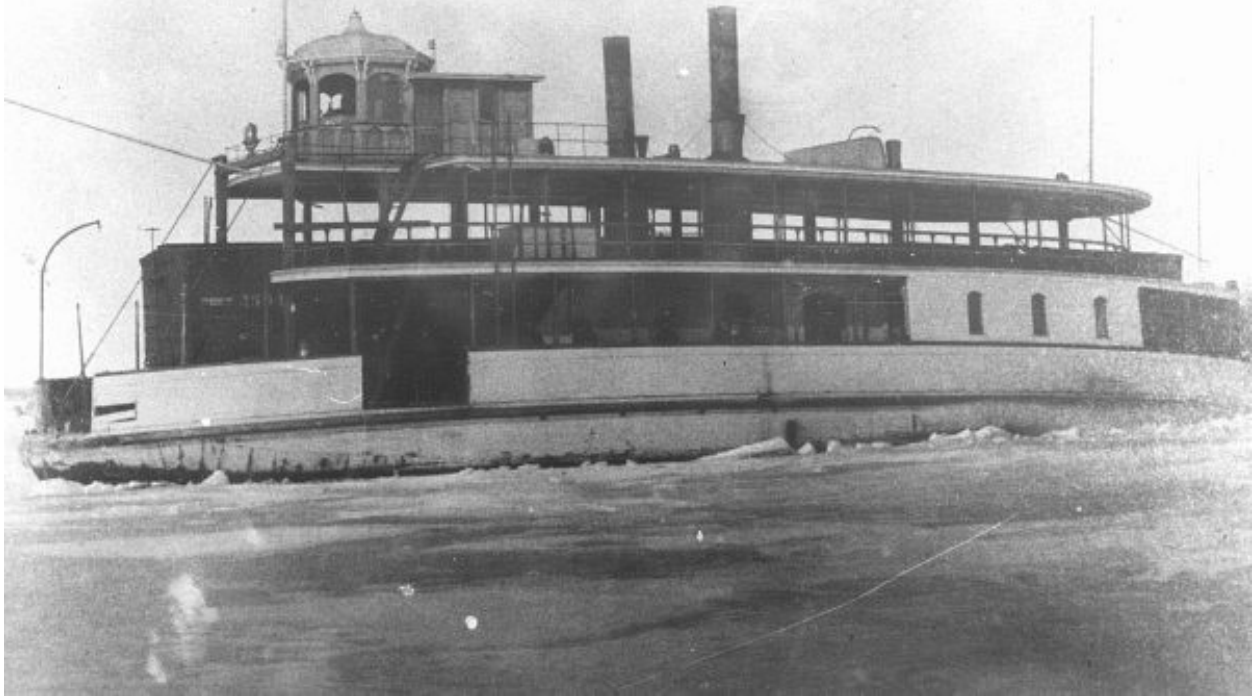
The *William Armstrong* on a winter crossing. Undated, photographer unknown.

The RW&O built a car ferry slip on Ogdensburg's lighthouse point at the mouth of the Oswegatchie, that opened on Feb. 3, 1886. With the RW&O having slips at Morristown and Ogdensburg and the CPR similarly equipped at Brockville and Prescott, the railways were able to play the independent local ferry operators off against each other.

1888-1908   Canadian Pacific Car and Passenger Transfer Company, various craft

David Lyon responded to the railway duopoly in early 1888 by buying out his Ogdensburg based competitor Isaac Purkis (see Prescott, below) and establishing a rail ferry monopoly. The name of his new company was perfectly descriptive of its business – transferring cars and passengers to and from the CPR – but Capt. Lyon's small company no doubt benefitted from the impression that the great railway was its backer.

The company's rail car transfer fleet grew from Purkis' *Transit* and Lyon's *Armstrong* to include the former South Eastern Railway ferry *South Eastern* in 1890. Other CPC&PTC boats provided town ferry service and handled rail car barges as needed. Ferries seem to have moved between routes frequently, as traffic volumes at Brockville and Prescott varied. The car ferry link enabled the Gillies Brothers Ltd. lumber company of Braeside ON to establish a lumber yard and planing mill at Morristown in 1891.

Topographical Section, Canadian General Staff, 1908. Sheet 2197 Brockville (alt).

Over two decades the volume of traffic through the Brockville-Morristown link gradually diminished to the benefit of the Prescott-Ogdensburg route. In 1908 the CPC&PTC launched a new ferry, the *Charles Lyon*, whose dimensions required rebuilding the slips. The CPR did not rebuild at Brockville, nor did RW&O owner New York Central at Morristown. There was no regular service after 1908, though the old boats could operate in emergencies until they were disposed of over the next couple of years. Gillies Bros. closed their Morristown mill and yard in 1913. A local company bought out the CPC&PTC's Morristown passenger ferry business in 1908 and continued to serve the route until 1953.

Prescott

Prescott is across the St. Lawrence from Ogdensburg NY (until 1868, Ogdensburgh), which was a major port city in the early nineteenth century, being at the foot of Great Lakes navigation. The trans-shipment of goods from lake vessels to river steamers and barges generated a thriving marine economy in Ogdensburg and, to a lesser degree, in Prescott. From an early date the two towns were linked by ferries.

In 1850 the Northern Railroad (popularly called the Ogdensburg RR) opened from Ogdensburg to Rouses Point, where it had a rail connection to Boston and a steamboat link to New York. The Northern's terminus was on the St. Lawrence shore in the north-eastern corner of Ogdensburg.

Its arrival inspired a group of Bytown lumbermen to launch a same-gauge (4'8½") connecting line from Prescott, which opened to Bytown on Dec. 31, 1854. The Bytown and Prescott had a waterfront terminus and intended to operate a rail car ferry to connect with the Northern Railroad at Ogdensburg. It ordered a car ferry from a Philadelphia shipyard, but ran so short of money that the order was cancelled.

The existing town ferries provided passenger and mail connections, calling at the railway docks to meet trains. From Jan. 1, 1855, until the Grand Trunk opened to Brockville on Nov. 17, mail from Ottawa to Montreal was routed via Ogdensburg and Rouses Point.

A second railroad, the Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburgh, arrived in that city in 1862, but its terminus on the west bank of the Oswegatchie river had no provision for a car ferry.

## 1863-1973   Ogdensburgh Railroad Co. Ferry *St. Lawrence*

The broad-gauge Grand Trunk Railway decided in 1862 to try to serve the port of Boston via a link with the Ogdensburgh Railroad (by then legally so called). The GTR obtained access to the Ottawa and Prescott's waterfront yard where a wharf and shed were erected. It financed the construction of a car ferry by the Ogdensburgh on the condition that only broad-gauge cars be carried and the transfer of cargo to standard-gauge cars take place on the US side.

In its June 18, 1863 issue, the *American Railroad Journal* reported:

> **Launch at Ogdensburg — Railway Connections between Boston and the West.**
> There was launched at Ogdensburg, N. Y. , on the 27th ult. , a steamer named the St. Lawrence, of 125 feet length, 31 breadth, furnished with two propellers, worked by engines of sixty horse power, and destined to form the connecting link across the St. Lawrence River between the Northern (Ogdensburg) Railroad, and the Grand Trunk Railway at Prescott, Canada, by which freight from Chicago and the West can be shipped directly through to Boston, and landed at tide water without handling or cartage. Upon the main deck of this boat are to be laid tracks, so that six cars of the broad gauge pattern used on the Grand Trunk can be taken across the river and placed beside the narrow gauge cars used on the route from Ogdensburg to Boston, and the freight transferred from the one the other, according to its destination.

The *St. Lawrence* entered service on June 29, 1863 as reported in the *American Railroad Journal* of Aug.1. The article went on to say that, "At the same time an express passenger train was put upon the line leaving Boston at 6 A. M., arriving at Ogdensburg the same evening, and going through to Chicago in 49 hours." The *St. Lawrence* had enough passenger accommodation to occasionally fill in as a town ferry.
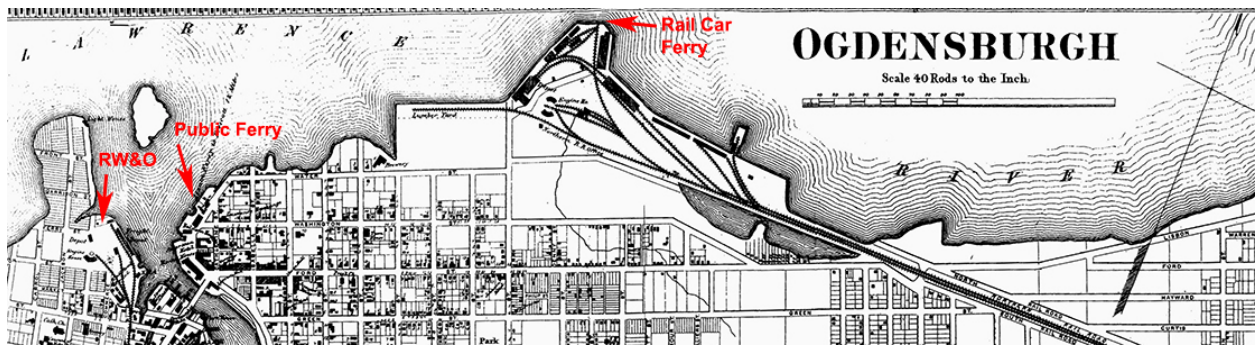
S.N. & D.G. Beer, 1865, *New Topographical Atlas of St. Lawrence County* (detail). S.N. Beer, Philadelphia

Over the next decade, the Ogdensburgh RR became first the Ogdensburg & Lake Champlain, then the Vermont Central. But it kept its Grand Trunk connection via the *St. Lawrence*. When the GTR briefly tried using 'gauge change' cars in 1871-73 the work of changing gauge took place on the American side, just as trans-shipment had. In August 1873, with the ferry in need of major repair and just two months to go before the GTR changed its gauge, the Vermont Central retired the *St. Lawrence* and quit the ferry business. No image of the *St. Lawrence* is known to exist.

1874-1876   various operators, Ferry *Transit*

In response to the withdrawal of the *St. Lawrence*, local entrepreneurs had a new car ferry, the *Transit*, built in Clayton NY. Car ferry service resumed after a fourteen-month hiatus. The ferry changed hands several times and was briefly chartered by Capt. David Lyon (see Brockville, above). The *Transit* had track space for three 33-foot standard-gauge rail cars and passenger cabins on both sides. No image of the *Transit* is known to exist. It might, however, be the unidentified ferry at the left of the panorama below, published in 1878.

Canadian Illustrated News, June 22, 1878. Artist unknown.

1877-1888   I.D. Purkis & Co., Ferry *Transit* and barges

In February 1877, Prescott coal dealer Isaac Purkis, who had operated a passenger ferry in the 1860s, bought the *Transit*. Initially, it handled the railroads while Capt. Lyon's *William* Armstrong served the town. Over the next decade, Purkis also came to dominate the passenger and cargo ferry business at Prescott, acquiring four boats for that trade. In 1880, he bought a three-car rail car barge to supplement the *Transit* in moving cars to and from the Vermont Central.

The Utica and Black River Railroad arrived in Ogdensburg in 1878 but chose in 1880 to build its ferry slip at Morristown. David Lyon moved upriver to enter the rail car transfer business. The U&BR was purchased in 1885 by the Rome, Watertown and Ogdensburg while the Canadian Pacific completed its absorption of the St. Lawrence and Ottawa. Early in 1886 the RW&O opened a new ferry slip at Ogdensburg's lighthouse point. Now the RW&O and the CPR could exchange traffic at the port of their choosing.

1888-1970   Canadian Pacific Car and Passenger Transfer Company, various craft

David Lyon responded to the railway duopoly in early 1888 by buying out his Ogdensburg-based competitor and establishing a rail ferry monopoly. The name of his new company, the Canadian Pacific Car and Passenger Transfer Company, stated its business – transferring cars and passengers to and from the CPR – rather than its ownership.

1888-1908   Ferries *Wm. Armstrong, Transit, South Eastern* and barges

With business growing, the CPC&PTC bought a third, larger ferry, the *South Eastern,* in 1890 while the *Armstrong* was out of action after an accident. The *South Eastern* had previously served the railway of the same name, connecting its Longueil terminus with Montreal, and could carry five rail cars. After a major refit in 1896, it was renamed the *International III.*

That was the year that the Central Vermont ended its lease of the Ogdensburg and Lake Champlain. The latter enjoyed five years of independence before becoming part of the Rutland Railroad in 1901, the year the *Transit* was retired
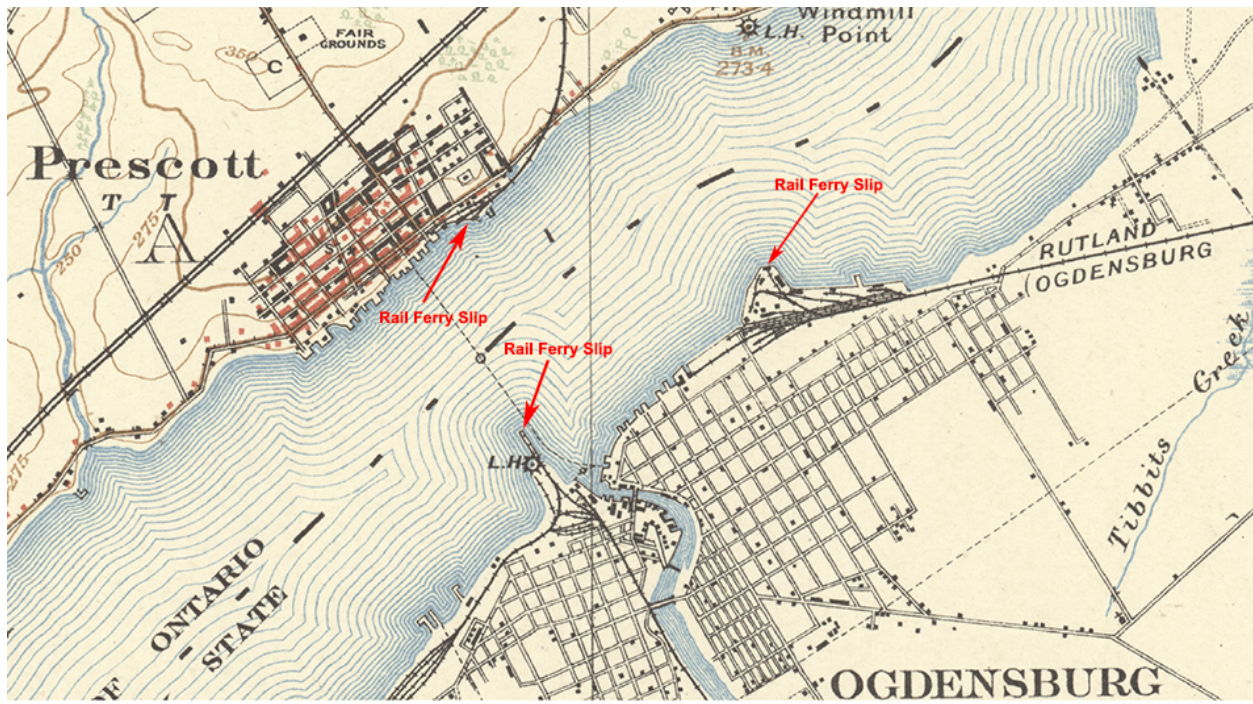
Topographical Section, Canadian General Staff, 1908. Sheet 2197 Brockville (alt).

After two decades of growth, David Lyon decided to have a much larger double-ended steel ferry constructed by the Polson Iron Works of Toronto. It would have a capacity of twelve cars, more than the *Transit, Armstrong,* and *International III* combined.
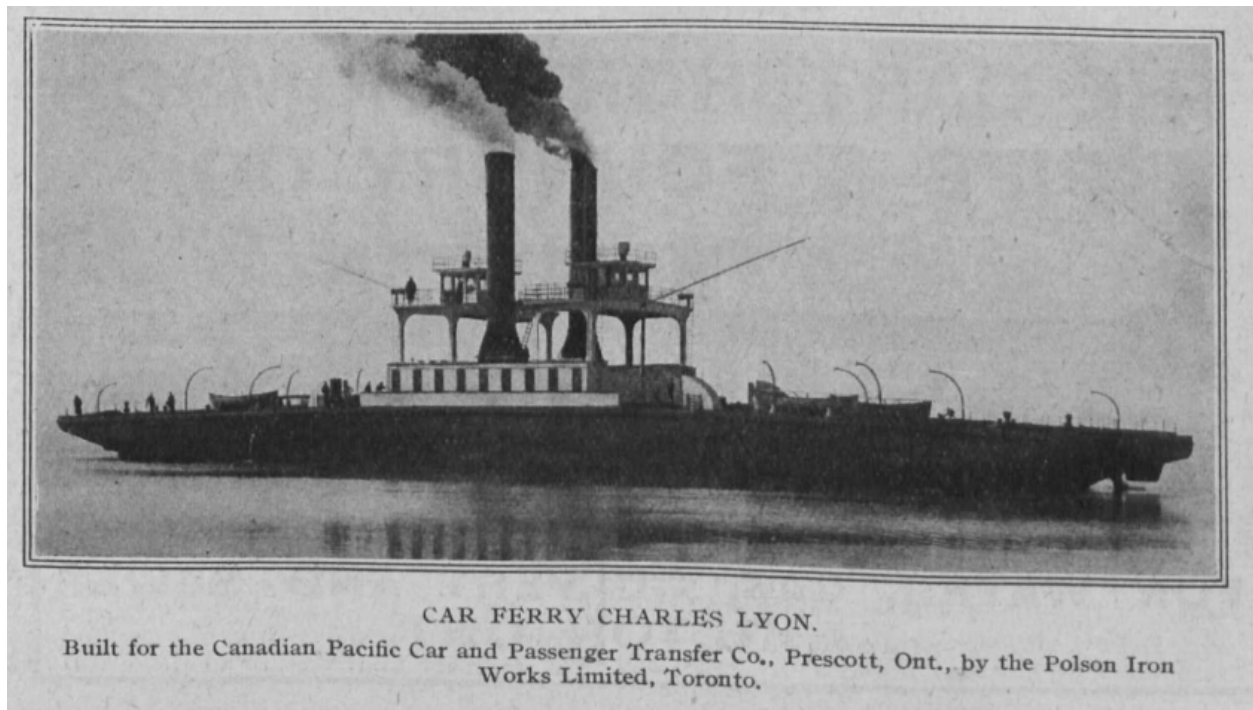
The new ferry would require extensive rebuilding of the railways' ferry slips. The RW&O and the CPR decided to abandon the Morristown – Brockville crossing and only renew their facilities at Ogdensburg and Prescott. The Rutland chose to end car transfers entirely in 1908, rather than rebuild.

1908-1929   Ferry *Charles Lyon*

The new ferry was named *Charles Lyon* after Capt. David's father, owner of an Ogdensburg lumber mill and a director of the Ogdensburg and Morristown railroad.

The *Charles Lyon* had an overall length of 85.3m and a beam of 12.2m. Its twin screws were driven by separate 1200 hp. steam engines. Because of the double-ended design, there were two elevated pilot houses fore and aft of amidships, joined by a catwalk that permitted the helmsman to change ends without descending to the deck.

It joined the CPC&PTC fleet late in 1908. A year later, the company decided to focus exclusively on rail car transfers, and it sold all its other boats. Though "Passenger" remained part of the company name, passengers were no longer part of its business. For the next two decades the *Charles Lyon* transferred rail cars between the CPR and its US partner. That was the RW&O until April 1913, when it became part of the New York Central Railroad.

CAR FERRY CHARLES LYON.
Built for the Canadian Pacific Car and Passenger Transfer Co., Prescott, Ont., by the Polson Iron Works Limited, Toronto.

The Railway and Marine World, April 1908 p209

Capt. David Lyon died on Sept. 1, 1929. Shortly thereafter his estate sold the CPC&PTC to the Canadian Pacific Railway.

1930-1970   Tug *Prescotont* and barge *Ogdensburg*

In April 1930, the CPR sold a fifty percent interest in the CPC&PTC to the New York Central Railroad. The partners quickly decided to replace rather than refit the *Charles Lyon*. The replacement would not be a new ferry boat, but a tug and dedicated car transfer barge.

Prescotont at Prescott CPR wharf 1967-06-03
© 2015, Bill Linley
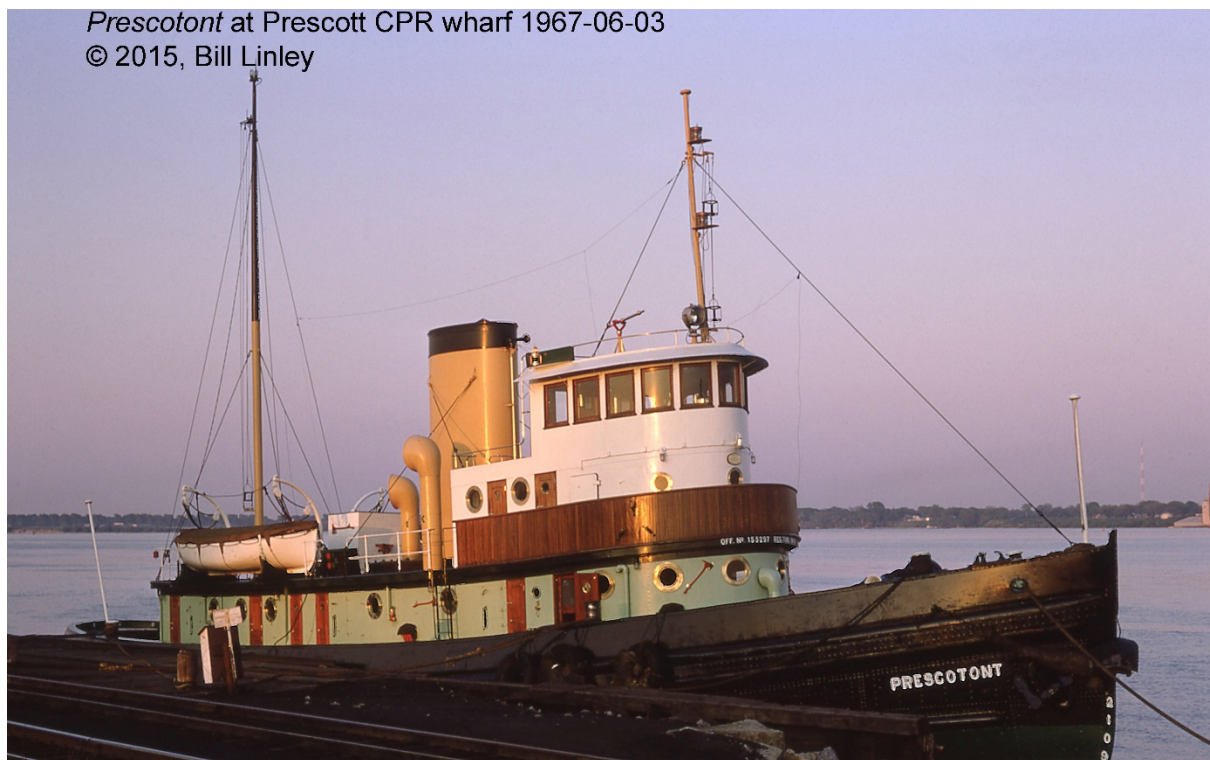
Tug *Prescotont*, built 1930 by Davie Shipbuilding in Lauzon QC. Length 37.7m, beam 8.2m, 800 hp.

The tug, bizarrely christened *Prescotont*, was the first diesel electric tug on the St. Lawrence. The change to electric propulsion made the control systems simpler and more flexible.

Ogdensburg and Prescotont at Ogdensburg 1969-03-24
© 2016 Bill Linley

Barge *Ogdensburg*, built 1930 by American Shipbuilding Co., Lorain OH, Length 88.4m, beam 13.7m

The more conventionally named barge *Ogdensburg* was even more technically innovative. Unlike previous barges, it was built with a forward bridge whose pilot house could operate the tug by wired remote control. Steering was enhanced by two rudders on the barge powered from the tug. The *Ogdensburg* could carry from sixteen to twenty rail cars, depending on their lengths.

The pair operated for almost exactly forty years. Then, on Sept. 25, 1970, the Ogdensburg ferry slip was destroyed by fire. NYC successor Penn Central, bankrupt since April, could not afford to rebuild it. After a period of uncertainty, the *Prescotont* and *Ogdensburg* were transferred to the Detroit River and rail car transfer service was gone from the St. Lawrence.

Coteau Landing

There was never supposed to be a ferry across the St. Lawrence from Coteau Landing QC. The Coteau and Province Line Railway and Bridge Company was chartered in 1872 to build an uninterrupted line. But the promoters failed to raise the necessary capital and in 1877 gave up the right to build a bridge in return for an eight-year extension of the charter. J. R. Booth and partners bought the Coteau and Province Line in 1879 and made it part of their Canada Atlantic Railway. The CAR charter allowed for a bridge only if the government gave permission.

Opposition was fierce, from the Grand Trunk Railway, owners of the sole bridge over the St. Lawrence, and from the Montreal business community in general. It took until 1887 for the government to authorise the bridge and it did not open until February 10, 1890.

The railway could not wait that long. Early in 1884, as rail-laying south of the river neared completion, the CAR commissioned a ferry from Pittsburgh builder John Dunbar. It would be built on-site at Coteau Landing.

1885-1890   Canada Atlantic Railway, ferry *Canada Atlantic Transfer*

Dunbar's team worked quickly; according to the *Montreal Daily Witness* of August 3, 1885, the frames were laid in June 1884 and the vessel got up steam for the first time on January 1, 1885. On February 9, the *Ottawa Citizen* reported that

> "The Canada Atlantic will open a line for freight traffic on Monday next on the south of the Coteau. Freight leaving here in the morning will reach St. Albans the same evening on the way to the east and south."

The *Canada Atlantic Transfer* entered service on Monday, February 16, 1885, carrying through trains in both directions. It operated between Coteau Landing and Clark Island (now Île aux Chats), which already had a bridge connection to the south shore

Its role and situation were quite different from those of the ferries up-river. While they only carried rail cars, the *Transfer* also had to move whole passenger trains, complete with locomotive. The upstream boats operated in open water, the *Transfer* in sheltered conditions. As a result, *Transfer* was a 171-foot flat-bottomed, twin-engine, side-wheel paddle steamer that drew only four feet loaded – a design that provided stability under varying loads in calm water. Not coincidentally, the design was cheap and quick to build for what was meant to be short-term use. In keeping with that, the engines were well-used units, having been re-built in 1874.

Placing the twin boilers and engines at the outer edges of the forty-foot-wide hull with the load between them provided great lateral stability, made still greater by four pumped ballast chambers in the hull. The latter also provided fore and aft trimming. So stable was this design that the *Transfer* could operate with only one of its two tracks occupied while propeller car ferries of the era had three tracks, so the load could be kept centred. Engine rooms and cabins extended beyond the hull on a deck that was seventy feet wide fore and aft of the paddle boxes.

These scale drawings are based on two photographs (Library & Archives Canada C-029161 AND C-029168) which have yet to be digitized, and dimensional information provided in the *Daily Witness* article and in shipping registers. The newspaper said the boat was "a chocolate colour".
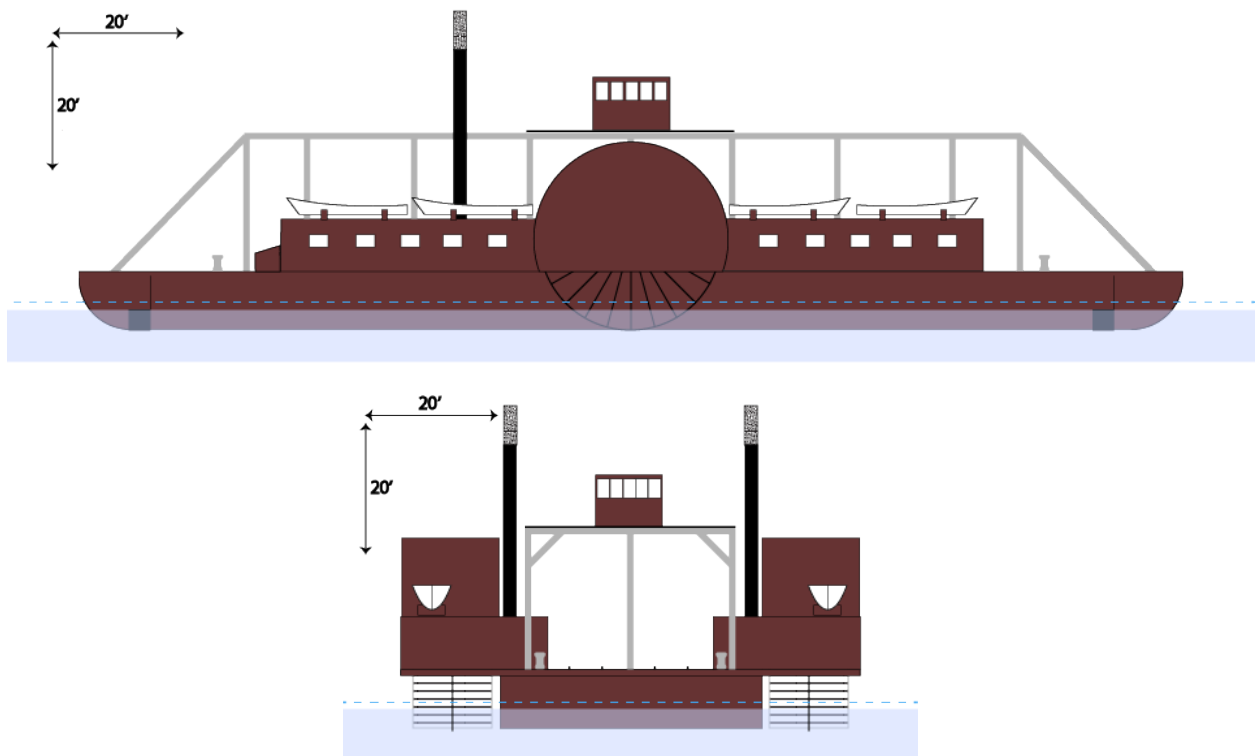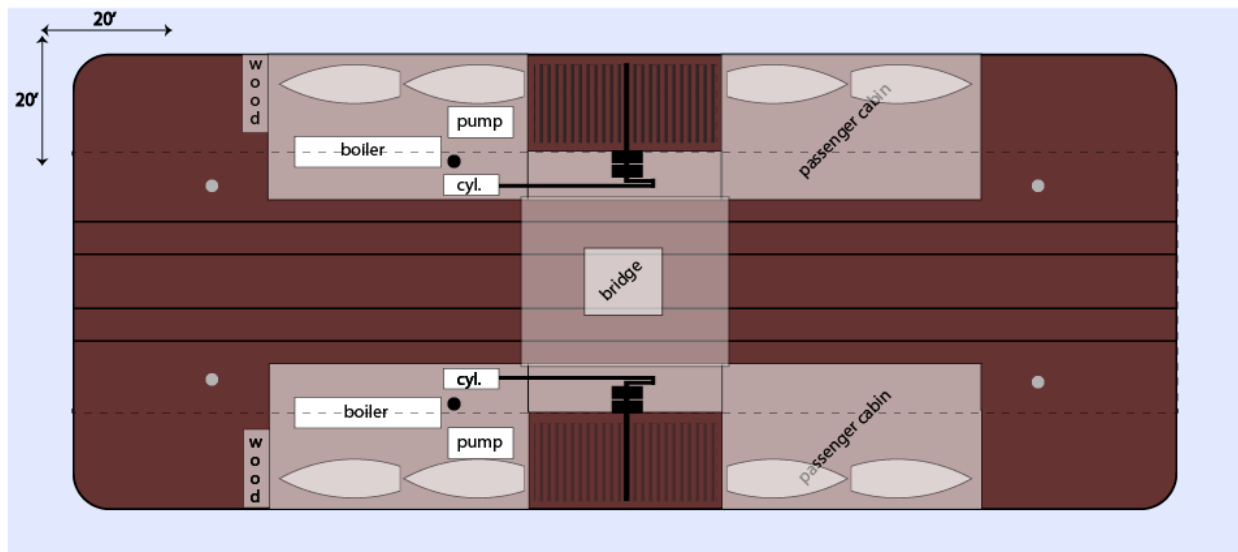
According to the *Witness*, the two through tracks could accommodate ten 33-foot freight cars or a locomotive, tender and five 55-foot passenger cars. The two LAC photos show both configurations, with C-029168 including a locomotive in steam as well as passenger cars. Since the *Transfer* was double-ended, I have chosen the 'engine end' (left in the drawings) as the stern. The LAC photos show the boat operating with the bow pointed south.

Through the ferry era there was a single pair of un-numbered through Ottawa – St. Albans trains daily except Sunday. In the *Official Railway Guide* issues from 1885-86, those trains were shown as Mixed. By 1888, the still numberless train was upgraded to Passenger status and carried through sleeping cars for Boston and New York. An Ottawa – Valleyfield and a Coteau – Valleyfield service were offered briefly and dropped.

The *Canada Atlantic Transfer* was always intended to be a short-term expedient, and such was the case. It made its final trips on February 9, 1890, less than five years from its first.

The boat ended up with the Montreal Lighterage Co., which removed the engines in 1895, and continued to use it as a barge until at least 1901.

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