This Week in Saratoga County History
The Sacandaga River Steamboats
Submitted by Dave Waite October 28, 2021

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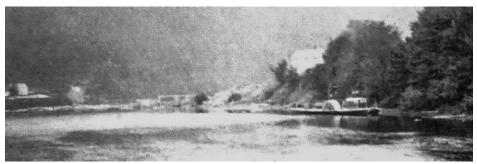

Map indicating original course of the Sacandaga River
Source: The Sacandaga Story by Larry Hart

It has been over 90 years since the Conklingville Dam was completed and the river that flowed through the Sacandaga Valley became the Great Sacandaga Reservoir. When visitors hear of this river that once ran through the area, they likely visualize it as a small meandering creek passing quietly past the picture-perfect farms and tiny settlements that dotted its shore. In reality, the river was wide and strong as it made its way past the long-lost communities of Osborn Bridge, Fish House, Batchellerville, and West Day. For over twenty miles it flowed through the Sacandaga Valley only narrowing when it encountered the Conklingville rapids. As it ran its way through the valley it had the power to carry thousands of logs each spring during the annual river drive to the Hudson River, as well as the depth to allow navigation by the steamboats that are the focus of this story.

In 1848, Albany County native Gurdon Conkling saw the commercial advantages of the Sacandaga Valley and established the Lynwood Tannery along the south shore of the river. This location soon came to be known as Conklingville. Along with numerous tannery buildings, Gurdon also constructed a hotel, stores, and homes on both sides of the river. At the same time as he was building his tannery, Conkling also built two wood-burning sidewheel steamers, the *Whip Poor Will* and the *Colonel,* to move lumber, wood, hemlock bark, and other goods to and from his new business interests.

The arrival in Batchellerville on October 30, 1848, of the first of these steamboats, was a day of celebration, with a crowd watching the progress of the plume of smoke off in the distance as the boat headed down river towards the hamlet. When the seventy-foot-long, fifteen-foot-wide steamboat came into sight it was greeted by a hearty cheer and the firing of a cannon. A few honored guests, feasting on oysters, fruit, and cake, had ridden downstream from the site at Fish House where the boat had been constructed. Soon additional passengers boarded, and the boat headed toward Edinburgh, where this maiden voyage was concluded.

The only known photograph of a Sacandaga River Steamboat
Source: Edinburgh Historian Priscilla Edwards.

The Conklingville tannery changed hands in 1863 when it was purchased by leather merchants Henry Poor and Sons. As part of the sale, they also acquired the steamboat *Whip Poor Will,* the *Colonel* having been destroyed in 1855 when the steam boiler exploded. In the accident, the captain of the boat, Joseph Greenslete was killed. Don Bowman tells of hearing that the explosion was caused by logs used to fire the boiler that had been filled with gunpowder by disgruntled teamsters, whose teams had once hauled the hemlock bark that the steamboats carried.

Two years after Henry Poor took over the Conklingville tannery he also bought the Croweville tannery on Sand Creek, a tributary of the Sacandaga River in Hadley. With this purchase, the company added another steamboat to the fleet, the *L. E. Wait*. Named after the supervisor of the tannery, Lewis E. Wait, this boat was also used to move the hemlock bark on the Sacandaga River.

The Sacandaga River was an ideal path for the transportation of the tons of hemlock bark that was required for the tanning of raw leather. From May to August the bark was cut and after being allowed to dry, transported to the river from the surrounding forests and left in huge piles along the shore. In autumn the bark was loaded onto flat bottomed scows and towed by steamboat downstream to the tannery. In reminisces from those who lived in the valley during these early years, it was recalled that these loads were so immense that they resembled small houses being towed down the river.

Along with bark and supplies for the tannery, the steamboat carried products manufactured in the factories along the river. At Batchellerville, Sherman Batcheller loaded wooden measures, barrel covers, and wooden pegs onto the boats and the King-Snow Wooden Ware Company supplied wooded flour pails and buckets. This merchandise was carried to Hadley where it was shipped by rail and sold across the northeast.

Sacandaga River steamboats were also used for carrying passengers. In his memoirs, Ira Gray states that his mother remembered having boat rides in the 1860s on the *Whip Poor Will* piloted by Captain William Ellis Greenslete, older brother of Joseph Greenslete mentioned earlier. This is likely a reference to Autumn Sunday School trips where two barges were fastened together, and picnickers were taken upriver from Conkingville for an all-day picnic at a grove near West Day.

By the early 1880s, Henry Poor and Son closed their tanneries along the Sacandaga River due to a drastic drop in leather prices and a diminishing supply of hemlock bark in the region. The *Whip Poor Will* made its last trip in 1883. The *L. E. Wait* also operated on the Sacandaga River, until 1883, when it sunk in April of that year. While the passengers and crew all got safely to shore, 1,600 logs on barges bound for the woodenware works at Batchellerville were lost.

The sixty-five-year-old Greenslete retired that same year after 35 years running steamboats on the river and passed away October 21, 1887, in Broadalbin, Fulton County, New York, and is buried in Union Mills Cemetery in the village.

Sources: Sacandaga Story, A Valley of Yesteryear by Larry Hart; Village of Northville and Town of Northampton by Gail Cramer; In Days Past by Nancy Morris; Don Bowman letter provided by Edinburgh Historian Priscilla Edwards; material from Day Historian Dave Davidson; online newspaper archives: nyshistoricnewspapers.org and fultonsearch.org.