Steamships
THE LINK TO THE MAINLAND

Most of the steamships that once traveled the waters between the Bass Islands and the mainland are gone forever. Some were dismantled, some burned, some wrecked, some run aground, some converted into barges or tugs, and some sold for scrap. For many of these mighty vessels, all that remain are photographs taken at the height—or the depth—of the ship's career.

The pages that follow are designed to give the reader a glimpse of the great era of Bass Island steamship travel by providing first an introductory summary of that era and then a more detailed look at the history of the island steamship trade including photographs of some of the steamships that once navigated the waters around the Bass Islands.

Introduction

For the inhabitants of the Bass Islands, water transportation has always been a vital concern. Prior to the mid-1850s, the earliest islanders used small sailing vessels to carry themselves, their supplies, and their export products to and from the mainland. In addition, wood-burning steamers occasionally would stop at the islands to refuel, using timber from the abundant forests, and would pick up goods or passengers during these stopovers. But in the early 1860s, when numerous German grape-growers began to settle the islands and the wine trade grew, regular steamship service became profitable. And, as access to the islands increased, so did the number of tourists who came to enjoy the pleasant scenery and peaceful atmosphere that the region offered.

The Bass Islands became more and more popular as a resort area, and the number of steamship routes and the frequency of travel along them steadily grew. For islanders and others who
Several steamers gather at Put-in-Bay in July 1869 to embark veterans attending the Grand Army of the Republic convention. The vessels are (from left to right) the R. N. Rice, the Lake Breeze, the Evening Star, the Reindeer, and the Jay Cooke. Gibraltar Island forms the backdrop.

regularly made trips between the Bass Islands and the mainland, the names of specific ships were household words and their routes and schedules were known by heart. The most heavily traveled steamship route ran straight from Sandusky (which featured rail service going directly to the main ship docks) to the islands. This run often included stops on the Marblehead Peninsula and Kelleys Island. Another important route stopped at the Bass Islands on the way from Sandusky to Detroit. Occasional service also was offered between both Toledo and Cleveland and the islands. A shorter, more local route existed between the islands and the region that included Port Clinton, Catawba, Lakeside, and Marblehead.

Travel was most frequent in the summer, when thousands of resort visitors crowded the ships; interspersed with the regularly scheduled trips were weekend and holiday excursions and moonlight cruises. In the spring, steamship service was also important, for it enabled the islanders to replenish supplies and catch up with mainland business that had been neglected during the forced isolation of the winter months when the lake was frozen. Autumn was harvest time, and in the fall vessels carried grapes—sometimes as many as 1,600 barrels of them—as well as peaches, wine, and other island products to Detroit, Toledo, Port Clinton, Catawba, and Sandusky.

The heyday of steamship service to the Bass Islands lasted from the 1870s through the turn of the century. During the first decade or so of the 1900s, however, the popularity of moving pictures
made folks more likely to spend weekends in their hometowns, and the advent of the automobile made close-to-home travel easier and more fun. Both of these turn-of-the-century inventions contributed greatly to a decline in travel to the Bass Islands. By the beginning of World War I, much of the lake traffic between the islands and the mainland had ceased, and daily service from Toledo, Sandusky, and Detroit was all that remained. After the war, Prohibition, which destroyed the island wine industry, and the Depression, which further damaged the region's economy, dealt the final blows ending the great era of the island steamships. A few steam vessels continued to make runs to the islands until 1948, when the Put-in-Bay, the last steamer, made its final voyage from Detroit to Sandusky.
A History of the Island Steamship Trade

In 1846 Daniel Dibble, a Sandusky shipwright, was hired by Ira and Datus Kelley and others to build a steamboat on Kelleys Island. The resulting vessel, the Islander, ran on a varying schedule for the next eight years and called at Kelleys Island, Marblehead, Sandusky, Venice, Ottawa City, and Fremont. In the spring of 1854—the same year that José de Rivera came to the Bass Islands and settlement of the region began in earnest—the great era of island steamship travel began when the Islander's schedule was changed to include a stop at Put-in-Bay. The Islander was the first of nearly half a hundred ships that island residents and visitors would come to know during the next several decades.

The Kelley family became increasingly aware of the financial advantages of operating ships in the Bass Islands area. In 1855, the Kelleys added the Island Queen to their line. And in 1866, the Evening Star was purchased by the family from its owners in Saginaw, Michigan.

Meanwhile, Peter and Simon Fox, who had settled at North Bass Island in 1859, decided that they too would take part in the steamship trade. In 1863, they invested in the business by tying in with a Detroit man named Walter Ashley, and together they operated the Philo Parsons between Sandusky and Detroit, with the

The Evening Star
Bass Islands as a stopping-off point. In 1867, the Fox family bought their own steamer, the *Eighth Ohio*. They placed her on nearly the same route used by the Kelley ships. Business improved, and two years later they bought a larger vessel, the *Reindeer*.

Competition between the Fox and Kelley interests became fierce, and much haggling went on during the winter of 1869-70, ending in a merger which formed the Lake Erie Steamboat Company, with Alfred Kelley as president. The *Reindeer* was placed on the route between the Bass Islands and Toledo, while the *Evening Star* continued to travel from the islands to Sandusky. By 1873, the Kelley-Fox company was experiencing other competition on the Sandusky route; to make things worse, both the *Reindeer* and the *Evening Star* needed major overhauls. The fierce competition and the high cost of upkeep expenses resulted in the disbanding of the company. The *Reindeer* and *Evening Star* were sold to parties in Toledo and Detroit, respectively.

Much of the competition that had threatened and helped to destroy Alfred Kelley’s company had come from John P. Clark, a dry dock and vessel owner from Detroit. Along with Selah and Ollie Dustin and Walter Ashley (who had operated the *Philo Parsons* with the Fox family), Clark was involved in steamboat trade from Detroit to Sandusky via the Bass Islands; indeed, the Dustin-Ashley-Clark sidewheeler *Dart* had made regular runs along this route as early as 1862. The *Dart* and *Philo Parsons* were followed by a succession of steamships, such as the *Jay Cooke*,...
The Frank E. Kirby

the Gazelle, the Riverside, the Pearl, and the beautiful sidewheeler Alaska. These ships traveled the Sandusky-Bass Islands-Detroit route until around 1890.

When Clark died in 1880, Walter Ashley, working closely with Clark’s estate, became manager of Clark’s steamship line. A decade later, the Ashley and Dustin Line was formed with the building of the Frank E. Kirby. This ship, nicknamed the “Flyer of

The Chief Justice Wilte
the Lakes," was one of the best known vessels on the Sandusky-Bass Islands-Detroit route, which she followed from 1890 to 1922. Beginning in 1873 with the steamer Gazelle, the Clark interests also covered the route from the islands to Cleveland. (They were preceded here only by the Messenger in 1866 and by the sidewheeler Lotta Bernard in 1870.) In addition, the Clark line also ran the sidewheel steamers Pearl and Alaska (both of which had serviced the Detroit-Sandusky run) between Cleveland and the Bass Islands. Buffalo was added to the route in 1878, but the run proved unprofitable and was dropped.

In Toledo, meanwhile, under the leadership of Charles West, yet another steamship company had formed in 1873. Under the name of the Toledo, Lake Erie, and Island Steamboat Company, West and his associates had bought the Reindeer from the Fox-Kelley line when the two families bowed out of the steamship trade rather than renovate the ship. The next year, West’s company brought out the elegant sidewheel steamer Chief Justice Waite, powered by the Reindeer’s engine. The Waite ran between Toledo and the Bass Islands from 1874 until 1888, when she was sold to a Chicago company. Other ships that plied the route between Toledo and the Bass Islands were the Gazelle, the Pearl, the Metropolis, the Grace McMillan, and the Leila.

Another important name in the history of the Bass Islands
steamship trade was that of island settler Andrew Wehrle. Wehrle, a German wine grower and founder of Middle Bass Island’s enormous Golden Eagle Winery, brought out the small propeller ship *Golden Eagle* in 1872; this was replaced by the small passenger steamer *American Eagle* in 1880. Two years later, the Sandusky and Island Steamboat Company was established with Wehrle as president. Wehrle’s namesake ship, the *A. Wehrle, Jr.*, was built in 1891 but she ran for only a short time between the islands and the mainland. Four years later the company brought out the popular passenger steamer *Arrow*, which was powered by the *Jay Cooke’s* engine. When the *Arrow* burned in 1922, she was replaced by the equally popular *Chippewa*. Together with Ashley and Dustin’s *Frank E. Kirby*, the *Arrow* and the *Chippewa* are perhaps the best remembered of the island passenger steamers.

In 1890, the Detroit and Cleveland Steam Navigation Company put the sidewheeler *City of the Straits* on the Cleveland to Put-in-Bay and Toledo route. Six years later, through a cooperative arrangement with the Cleveland and Buffalo Transit Company (known as C & B), the *State of New York* began making the same run. This service continued until 1914 with only slight variations. Another C & B steamer, the *State of Ohio*, was later to be a familiar sight on this route until 1917. C & B operated regular week-
day Cleveland to Put-in-Bay service with the *City of Erie* from 1914 to 1926, and with the appealingly named *Goodtime* from 1925 to 1938. A final cruise ship, the well-known *Alabama*, made the last weekday excursion to the islands from Cleveland in 1945.

The forties saw the end of Bass Island steamship travel. The *Erie Isle* ran as an auto ferry between Catawba and Put-in-Bay from 1930 until 1946 but later ended up as a lowly coal barge. The island harbor namesake *Put-in-Bay*, the last of the true island steamers, made a final voyage from Detroit to Sandusky in 1948.
The Mystic Isle

Of course other ships, such as the motor vessel Mystic Isle, have continued over the years to travel to and from the Bass Islands. The Burger Boat Company of Manitowoc, Wisconsin, built Mystic Isle for the Erie Isle Ferry Company in 1942. Today the ships seen in the region are diesel propelled, and their silhouettes differ radically from those of the great steamers, like the lovely B. F. Ferris, with their elegant sidewheels and tall smokestacks. The names of the great steamboat skippers—George and Victor Brown, Harry Tyrie, Ed McNelly, and Frank Hamilton (who was the last skipper of the Put-in-Bay and later became a respected historian of Great Lakes shipping)—are nearly forgotten now, as are the vessels they captained.

Today’s ships are faster and more efficient than their predecessors, and a boat trip from Port Clinton or Catawba to the islands is still an exciting experience for the Bass visitor. But as the modern tourist ship approaches or leaves Put-in-Bay, her passengers may wish to close their eyes for a moment and visualize the great steamships that provided a mainland link and helped create the history of the Bass Islands.