

# Master of Conesus Lake

## The McPherson Steamboat

by Vince Disalvo,

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*The McPherson steamboat at the Lakeville dock circa 1883 - 1889. Later it was named the Starrucca and burnt in 1902*

Some years ago, I helped my friend Tom build a deck along-side the old farmhouse his family lived in in Conesus. While taking a break one afternoon, I looked at his house and it struck me that, while we were working with all the latest power tools to build his deck, the men who built his home did so without a single power tool. Over the years since, I have enjoyed many hours using power tools and building things from wood. But it has been my recent interest in the history of Conesus Lake that has brought back the thoughts of how very large structures were once constructed without modern tools. The very structure that provoked this thought was the McPherson Steamboat. Not only was it a large, wooden structure built on land, but once it was built it was expected to float. And so, in all its splendor, it did.

The interest that was aroused this summer over the recent appearance of the remains of the McPherson/Starrucca Steamboat as reported by Kenny Sharpe and the Livingston County Sheriff's Department, just off the point at Vital Park, reveals one more chapter in the amazing history of Livingston County. It was a visionary step on the part of Colonel James A. McPherson of Avon to enlist the ship builder Samuel Kingston from Rochester, to build a steam powered excursion boat to carry passengers on Conesus Lake. At the time of his retention, steamboats were in full use on many of our countries waterways and Kingston had constructed several that were in operation on Lake Ontario. It would not be hard to guess that Colonel McPherson might have been drawn to steamboats after an outing on one of the paddle wheel steamers that were in operation on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, as research shows he was with the military unit that took part in the occupation of New Orleans, during the Civil War. But whatever the source of his inspiration, it proved to be a very successful venture as interest in Conesus Lake was growing even more popular with the passing of each summer. New York's economy had quickly returned to increasing industrial growth after the Civil War and people were looking for places to spend their free time, and money. Especially people from Rochester. The many hotels on Conesus Lake and the lake itself became an attraction on which Colonel McPherson staked his business venture and built the largest boat to ever cruise the waters of our local lake.

In our research into the history of the "McPherson", my wife could not find any pictures during the construction stage of the steamer. But she was fortunate to be given a picture by Jane Schryver showing the construction of the second largest boat to cruise the waters of Conesus Lake, the excursion boat named the "Conesus", which gives good insight into the process of building such large structures at that time. Once Colonel McPherson had struck his agreement with Samuel Kingston, the building process was set in motion. It would make sense that the construction would take place in the Lakeville area as this was the easiest place to deliver the materials needed for such a project as it was closest to the major forms of transportation of the time - the Erie Canal and the Erie Railroad. The boat dock at Lakeville and its proximity to Rochester, surely were additional influences in the selection of the building sight.

As best as I can put together the time-line, the construction began around the beginning of November, 1882. In an article in the November 3rd, 1882 Livonia Gazette it was reported, "Most of the lumber for the new steamer for Conesus Lake is already at Lakeville." "The boat will be built by the Conesus Lake Transportation company of which Col. J. A. McPherson is president and the estimated cost, we believe, from \$8,000 to \$12,000." In the January 19th, 1883 issue of the Livonia Gazette, one article states, "The Conesus lake steamer begins to take shape. The ribs are set so that a good idea of the dimensions of the boat can be formed." while another article reported, "The boiler for the new steamer at Conesus lake has been purchased and is on the way from Buffalo. It is a marine boiler twelve feet long and five feet in diameter. It is calculated to be of 100 horse power."

Then an article in the "Gazette" dated April 13th, 1883 is quoted as stating, "They will finish planking and caulking the big Conesus lake steamer this week." In one June, 1883 article they report, "The engine for the "McPherson" was shipped from Pittsburg on Monday. It is calculated that the boat will be ready for business by the 15th of this month." My research into the steamboat era revealed that at the time of the building of the "McPherson", Pittsburg was a hub of the steamboat building industry. (In a September issue of "Mechanics" magazine, the McPherson's engine is said to have been, "... a Westinghouse marine engine, having two vertical single acting cylinders, each 11-inch bore and 11-inch stroke.)



*The McPherson steamboat at Conesus Lake NY circa 1883 - 1889. It was also known as the Starrucca*

And then an article, posted in the June 8th edition of the Livonia Gazette, announced the festivities that would be enjoyed for the combined opening of Jerry Bolles' Lake View House and the initial trip of the new steamer, "McPherson", on June 21st, 1883. With a construction crew of between 8 and 12 men, using only hand tools, the largest boat to ever cruise Conesus Lake was built and put into service in less than nine months. I think most would agree that this was no small accomplishment considering the boat's size and the fact that five of those months were during a New York winter.

The initial structure had just two decks but the third was soon added. Although advertised as capable of carrying 1000 passengers, on several occasions as many as 1400 would board her at the Lakeville dock when people came by train loads to vacation at the many hotels and cottages that had sprung up on the shores of the lake. The attraction of riding the McPherson was further enhanced with the retention of bands that provided music for passengers to dance to on the way to their destinations. The operation of the big steamer required a six-man crew which included a captain and an engineer. Once away, the steamboat provided a pleasant ride and it was said to be able to attain a speed of 15 miles per hour when under a full head of steam. But steering the boat up to the docks such as those at Long Point and McPherson Point, proved to be the most difficult part of each trip and tested each of the captains who stood at her wheel in the nineteen years of her operation.

But, in short time, the skill of these men became such that soon Moonlight Excursions were offered. Once a knowledge of the lake and its shore line was established, Moonlight Excursions became a major source of the "McPherson's" popularity. Many a warm summer evening was enjoyed by thousands as the steamer would make its trip to the head of the lake and back with bands, such as the four piece "Bullfrog Band", playing tunes for the passengers to dance to. Although there were approximately 10 other smaller steamboats in operation at the time, it was the "McPherson" that passengers would literally run to after they had arrived by the train loads for a weekend outing. The resort attraction of Conesus Lake grew so quickly that by 1890, besides the other passenger boats operating on the lake, a two-deck barge was built that would often be towed by the "McPherson" to make room for more excursionists. The Lakeville dock was enlarged to accommodate the new steamer and soon took on the appearance of something you would expect to see in New York City. And, with a direct spur of the Erie Railroad coming right to the dock, it is no wonder that Conesus Lake became a popular resort for those living in Rochester and other communities with connecting rail service. Once operational, the "McPherson" triggered greater interest in



*The McPherson steamboat at Conesus Lake NY circa 1900*

the land surrounding the lake and new cottages and hotels began to appear with each new year. Colonel McPherson, besides owning the first cottage to be built on Conesus Lake, Cluny Cottage, purchased what is now McPherson's Point to expand his "resort" holdings with his own hotel business.

It is recorded in the history of steamboats that the most common danger associated with steamboats was a boiler explosion and the "McPherson" came very close to being a part of those statistics. In 1895, just after the

boat was fully loaded with passengers at the Lakeville dock, a flue in the boiler exploded causing a large noise and steam to bellow from the engine room. Fear caused a small panic with some men jumping into the lake while others scrambled back onto the dock. But the captain and engineer quickly took steps that prevented the boiler from fully exploding which would have certainly resulted in several deaths and extensive damage to the "McPherson". The steamboat was soon repaired and back into service.

In my initial research I assumed that, due to what would appear to be a change in business interests, an article in the April 12th, 1889 Livonia Gazette states, "The Steamer McPherson is for sale, and anyone can learn all the particulars by writing to Mr. McPherson, 64 College Row, New York." But, as is typical when researching history, my wife found the obituary for Colonel McPherson in the May 18th, 1888 Livonia Gazette which presents a much clearer explanation as to why he would sell something he had put so much of himself into. The article reads, "He had been an invalid for the past six months or more, and his death had been daily expected for some time. Col. McPherson was a generous, kind-hearted man, who was always ready to do a good turn for another. He was a man of good ability, and it is not likely that Conesus lake would possess the advantages it does now had it not been for his enterprise." With the visionary force behind the "McPherson" gone, the steamboat was put up for sale.

It was soon purchased by Captain Wemett of Hemlock Lake who contracted with the Erie Railroad to run excursions on the lake. This agreement continued until 1898 when it was taken over by the company of Sackett & Northrup who had ties with the Erie Railroad. Updates were made, including the removal of the third deck, and it was relaunched in 1899 as the "Starrucca", named after a large viaduct in Pennsylvania that still stands today. The excursions continued until one fateful night in December of 1902. As was the practice of the time, the steamer was driven under a full head of steam onto the shore, leaving only the stern in the water to protect it from damage caused by ice and waves in the winter. Between 8 and 9 o'clock it was discovered to be on fire and the fire became so intense that people came from all over to watch as the infamous McPherson/Starrucca Steamer burned to the water line. The steam engine and boiler were recovered and then sold for junk in 1905.

Two years after the fire, the smaller boat, the "Conesus", was built and continued the excursion rides on Conesus Lake. But progress in the field of transportation began to chip away at the steamboat business around the turn of the century. With more people owning automobiles, and better roads to and around Conesus Lake, people no longer needed the train or steamboats to get to their destinations on the lake. People were no longer tied to the schedules of the trains or boats and the thrill of driving your own automobile replaced the thrill of a ride on an excursion boat. The turn of the century would see steam engines replaced by motors run on gasoline and once known for its large dock, in 1923 Lakeville became known for having 12 gas stations. The portrait of life on Conesus Lake was taking on a new "face" and the automobile was the painter.

The age of steamboats on Conesus Lake is long gone but I, for one, would jump at the opportunity to take a Moonlight Cruise on a three-deck steamboat, with a small band playing music. Some experiences are so very unique

that time cannot replace them. The experience of a ride on the “Master” of Conesus Lake may never be repeated but the mark in local history the McPherson Steamboat made will not soon be forgotten.

Editor's note: Vince DiSalvo writes historical articles about Conesus Lake NY which appear in the Livingston County News.

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