

STEAM LAUNCH *BUTTERCUP*
Long Lake City Hall
Long Lake
Hamilton County
New York

HAER NY-347
HAER NY-347

PHOTOGRAPHS
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

ADDENDUM TO:
STEAM LAUNCH *BUTTERCUP*
Long Lake City Hall
Long Lake
Hamilton County
New York

HAER NY-347
HAER NY-347

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

STEAM LAUNCH *BUTTERCUP*

HAER No. NY-347

Location: Long Lake City Hall, Long Lake, Hamilton County, New York

Date of Construction: 1881

Rig/Type of Craft: Steam launch

Trade: Commercial passenger service

Registration Number: N/A

Principal Dimensions: Length: 24'-3 11/16"
Beam: 6'-3 1/4"

Designer/Builder: Unknown

Original Owner: William West Durant/Blue Mountain and Raquette Lake Steamboat Line

Present Owner: State of New York, loaned to Town of Long Lake

Present Use: Exhibit

Significance: Steam Launch *Buttercup* is the sole survivor of a large group of small, propeller-driven steamboats that were essential in opening up the central Adirondacks to tourism in the decades after the Civil War.

Description: Steam Launch *Buttercup* is presently a hulk, having rested on the bottom of Long Lake from 1885 until 1959. In spite of this, the launch is remarkably intact, and the shape, plumb stem, and elegant fantail stern are obvious. The hull is carvel planked on 1" x 1" steam-bent oak frames on about 12" centers; the frames are doubled under the engine. Planking is 1/2" cedar. The fastenings are iron cut nails, and the seams are caulked with oakum that has a layer of what looks like white lead on the outside. There is no sheer clamp. The ceiling is present, although not in place throughout the boat, and a number of turned spindles that once held up the canopy are present. The short decks at bow and stern were canvassed.

The single-cylinder steam engine is still in place just aft of the boiler, which is also extant. J.C. Todd of Paterson, New Jersey, built the engine. The cylinder is mounted on a platform supported by four decorative columns with simple capitals. The engine engages the propeller

through a clutch that pushes the shaft against a pad located on the end of the propeller shaft. The pressure gauge, built by E.H. Ashcroft and able to measure up to 200 pounds, is still with the boat.

The skipper steered from the bow. Lines led from a drum on the wheel (the wheel is missing) around on deck and through sheaves and eyelets to connect with the rudder post. The rudder is also missing. The propeller has two blades with a diameter of 24" and a 14" pitch.

History: *Buttercup* was part of a scheme to make transportation through the central Adirondacks easier and cheaper in order to appeal to the large numbers of middle-class tourists who “discovered” the region after the Civil War. William West Durant, a developer with extensive properties around Blue Mountain and Raquette lakes (just upstream from Long Lake), already had several small steamboats on those two lakes at the time he commissioned *Buttercup*. Other steamers operated on the Raquette River below Raquette Falls, forming a through line all the way to Saranac Lake. The new boat was built on either Blue Mountain Lake or Raquette Lake, probably by a small crew of experienced shipwrights assisted by local craftsmen. Although the region has a rich history of small boat construction, most of the steamboats whose histories are known were built by professions from outside the region.

After completion, the boat was sledged to Long Lake in winter 1881-82, since waterfalls, rapids, and shallows obstructed large vessel traffic along the route. For four years, *Buttercup* carried passengers on the 21-mile route from the head of Long Lake to a dam built by Durant about 2 miles above Raquette Falls. After fortifying themselves with pancakes at “Mother” Johnson’s passengers would then board another steamer and continue on to Tupper Lake and points north.

Prior to the introduction of steamboats to the central Adirondacks, most visitors got around the region by hiring a local guide with a guideboat, a small, double-ended pulling boat. Guideboats carried at most two clients. Adirondack men had been earning good seasonal wages as guides for two or three generations when *Buttercup* appeared, and they resented the competition. One night in the summer of 1885, the boat’s lines were cut, and it was towed to the center of the lake and scuttled. The following year, Seneca Ray Stoddard, author of popular guidebooks for the region, wrote “ ‘Little Buttercup,’ one of the Durant fleet of steamers...disappeared from the Sagamore [Hotel] dock, ‘though I could never tell why.’ ” His audience (and modern fans of Victorian operettas) would have had no trouble identifying the allusion to Little Buttercup, the character in Gilbert and Sullivan’s wildly popular *H.M.S. Pinafore*, which premiered in London in 1878.

Nobody was ever charged with the crime, but in 1959, two amateur scuba divers had no trouble learning the exact location of the boat from an older resident of the town who remembered the guides’ talk of his youth. With the help of the community, they raised the boat. Since that time, *Buttercup* has been stored in several covered locations. In 1993, a purpose-built structure consisting of a solid roof with good overhangs and a chain-link fence extending to the roof was erected.

Sources:¹

Bond, Hallie E. *Boats and Boating in the Adirondacks*. Syracuse, NY and Blue Mountain Lake, NY: Syracuse University Press and the Adirondack Museum, 1995.

Hochschild, Harold K. *Township 34. A History with Digressions of an Adirondack Township in Hamilton County in the State of New York*. NY: privately printed, 1952.

Seaman, Frances. "The Buttercup Mystery of Long Lake." 1991.

Historian: Hallie E. Bond, Curator, Adirondack Museum, 2012

¹ In addition to the published works cited, many historic photographs exist at the Adirondack Museum that document the appearance of similar small steamboats in the Adirondacks.