Mariposa Belles: The Steam Excursion Boat
Robt. Davis & Sons

The **Olive** was built in Smiths Falls in 1875 by William O'Mara. Although very much a "freighter" it became a popular excursion boat in the 1890s.
- National Archives of Canada

The Olive was part of Ogle Carss's transport and excursion business, based in Smiths Falls

In 1845 owning a pleasure steamboat was about as likely as owning your own private jet is today. If you wanted to journey by water, you went on a commercial excursion craft, much as you would a cruise ship now.

Captain Robert Davis learned the trade the way they all did, starting off as a chore boy and working his way up to the wheelhouse as a ship's master. Like Knapp, Mallette and many other rivermen, the season on water lasted from April to November and then you had to find other work or live off your summer savings, which were usually pretty minimal. Davis wasn't the first boatbuilder from Wolfe Island. The first was Thomas Davis, builder of the legendary sloop

Nonsuch, which was launched in 1841 and sank shortly after, the first major commercial ship to sink in the Great lakes. There was no relation though, Robert Davis was born in Ithaca, New York and moved to Wolfe Island to set up a boat and later shipbuilding business.

The St Lawrence Seaway in the late 1800's could not be navigated all the way by any but the smallest boats. Seagoing ships could venture as far south as Morrisburg before running into the Long Sault rapids. There was a navigation canal dug on the south side of the Cardinal village peninsula which allowed passage by smaller boats (it's mostly still there, with the stone riprap sporting a fading version of the national flag). There was unimpeded progress straight from there to St. Catharine's, where you came to the Welland Canal, which was expanded in 1882 to allow for ships over 200 feet long through. The Americans built much larger locks at Sault Ste Marie and on the St Clair River which allowed for development of the big ore and grain ships known as Lakers. The big ships, which would include the Noronic, Hamonic, Assiniboine, and Keewatin were all true lakers, they were all too big to escape the Seaway and until 1913, Port Weller and Buffalo were the end of the line.

As a result of the planned 1878-1882 Welland canal expansion, there would be larger boats needed to be built and needing repair. Davis was able to find the backing for a drydock installation. His company, known a Robert Davis and Sons (Matthew had been born in 1861, John, George and daughter Francesca came shortly after) had actually been set up on Wolfe Island and his earliest steamboat projects Constance and Princess Louise were launched there in 1878 and 1879. This was only temporary as he had purchased a strip of waterfront behind French harbour known as Fort Frontenac. This was to be the new home of Davis & Sons and where he would build a dry dock.

There was no shortage of ship and boatbuilding competition in Kingston. The first steamboat, a low-pressure steam powered boat named Juno was built and launched from Kingston in 1833 by John David Smith. The boats rolled off the launch ways regularly, from schooners, barques, brigantines to the low pressure and after 1860 the high-pressure steamboats. Some were specialized boat building companies and others were shippers who rented a yard and hired carpenters and millwrights to build them a cargo carrier. After the boat was launched and sent on its shakedown cruise, the tradesman moved on. All of them used a wooden rail leading into the water to set up and launch their boats. They all went stern-first. At the time Kingston ship building (these were commercial builders) was dominated by Calvin Company and Henry Roney, both who had yards on Garden Island. Calvin Company, was run by Dexter Calvin, was part of a trading and shipping business that had been in the business since 1841. Later Calvin

picked up Henry Roney's operation and put Roney in charge of the combined enterprise. Davis was the new man in town, literally.

The drydock concept had been around, in various forms, since the Phoenicians, but only came into its current form with iron hinges and gates and steam pumps to remove water. These structures required considerable capital investment. A large hole had to be dug in the shore, in this case 180 feet by 31 feet wide and 10 feet below the waterline. The earthen walls had to be lined with pilings, watertight swing doors installed as well as powerful steam pumps to pump the water out and keep it out. However, once it was working you could simply build a ship or boat in it, flood the drydock and open the gates or have a ship steam in, close the gates pump out the water and work on the hull. In 1879 the dry dock opened. Shortly after the steamer Myles headed in for hull repairs. Myles's hull stuck on the sandy bottom before even getting close to the dock facility. The boat was pulled loose, and Davis's first big customer steamed away for service at a yard in Port Dalhousie. Further dredging was done. It should be noted that there are actually two separate dry docks in Kingston. The first, was as noted, the Davis installation, the second was a government project on the Lake Ontario side. The Davis dry dock was a basic no-frills, wood-walled dirt-floored hole, the government operation had concrete reinforced sides and floor, with large step-like shelving at the bottom. The Davis dry dock is still in business, the government dry dock was closed years ago and now is permanently flooded as part of the in-water display of the S.S. Keewatin, the last of the Great Lake cruising ships.

The real money was in building steamboats and the challenge was in building the steam engine. The early steam engines were huge and slow. They worked on the low-pressure principle, which had been the standard for almost 150 years. Steam built up in a boiler and by means of a valve was let into the cylinder where the steam cooled and then a valve let the steam out into a second chamber where it condensed. Originally this system was used in a water pump, but James Watt came up with the idea of containing the steam in a cylinder and using the steam to push a piston up and down, turning a metal rod now known as crankshaft. The condensation left a partial vacuum in the cylinder which pulled the piston up, creating the power stroke. A flywheel kept the motion. This action provided a useful power source, since almost all powered mobile action requires the turning of a wheel.

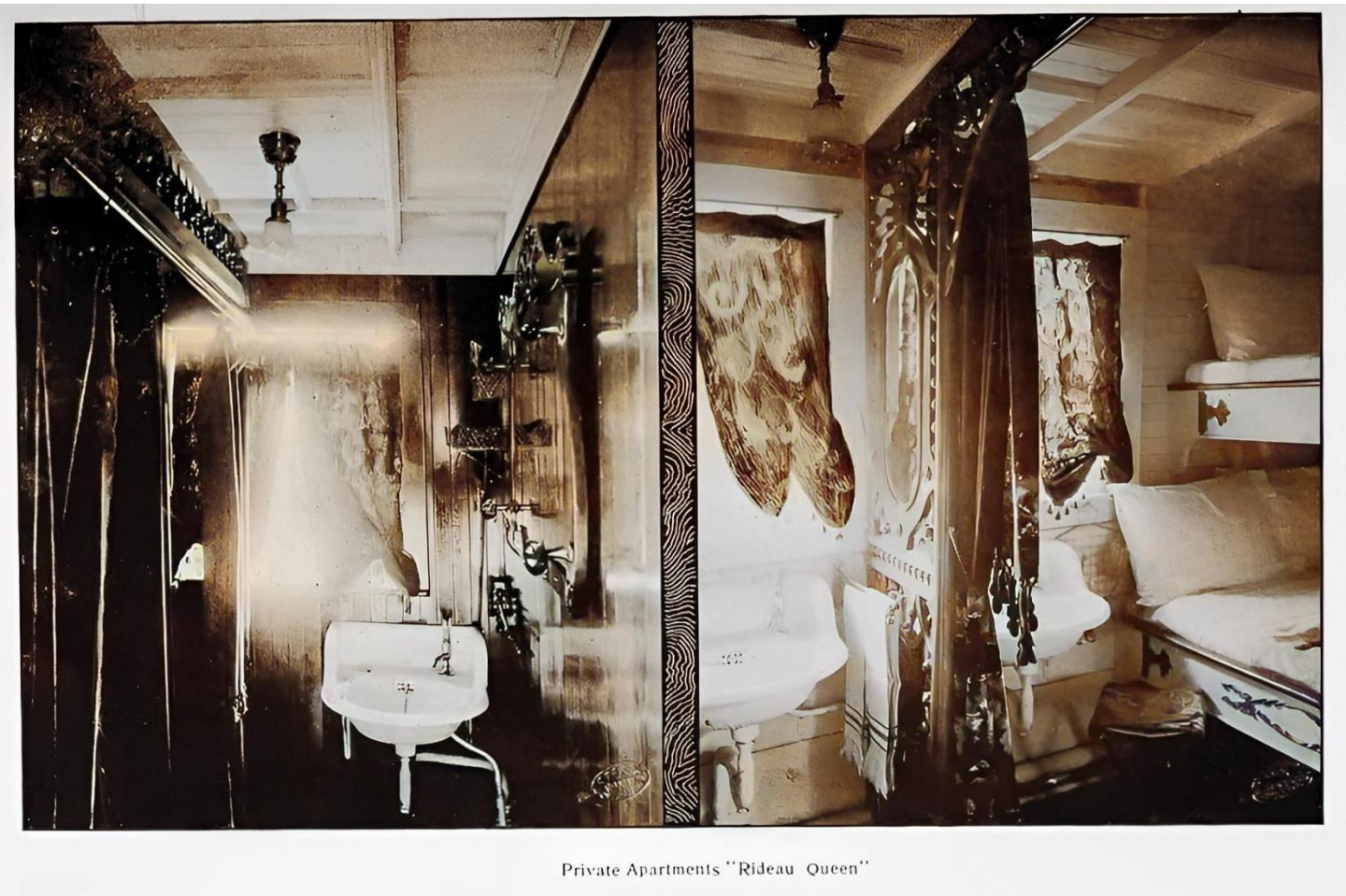
The machining work for the early engines was crude in the extreme. Cylinders were made by attaching concave forged iron plates together to form a tube, which was then clamped into a large wooden brace which contained a vertical boring device. The boring device was run by horses at a wheel which would run the boring bar at probably little more than 30-40 rpm which

as any machinist knows, such extremely low speed cuttings tend to sound like the giant fingernail on a giant blackboard. This process usually took six weeks and if there was an error, you had to start all over again. By the 1850's the low-pressure engines were being phased out by the new high-pressure systems, which ran much higher boiler pressures and worked by forcing steam into the cylinder and pushing the piston down and then letting the partially condensed steam out so the cycle could begin again with a fresh charge. Later, engineers added a second and sometimes a third cylinder to make maximum use of the exhaust steam from the first cylinder. These compound marine engines were complex and extremely expensive and were usually only seen in naval and commercial seagoing ships. The small boat engines on the Ottawa, Rideau and St Lawrence waterways were usually just singles. The most important advance was made in 1862 when a young British machinist and model maker named John Thornycroft built a scaled down version the huge ship steam engines and fitted one into a 36-foot launch. The boiler and engine were housed below decks where they would be attended to by an engineer while the passengers rode in comfort in an aft cockpit with seats and a canopy. The engine drove a shaft which fitted through the keel to which a screw propeller was attached. The powered pleasure boat had arrived.

Steam yachting in the US was expensive. The boats and engines cost several thousand dollars and you still needed a certified steam engineer to run your steam engine, regardless of size along with regular government boiler inspections. That is to say you could still run your own steam engine, but you had to take all of the courses and qualify, whether you were a doctor lawyer or engineer. Steam rules in Canada were predictably more muddled. You didn't need a licensed engineer, officially, for a small personal steamboat. But you needed to know what you were doing.

The Rideau Queen

Davis's two sons joined the business in 1878. John had learned the business on the ground and Matt learned it as his father had, as an apprentice on a ship. The first big contracts were for commercial shipping, mostly for hauling bulk cargoes such as lumber or coal. In 1885 they built the Rideau Belle. The Belle was one of the first excursion boats built. An excursion steamer is basically a party boat, and the Belle was designed to carry 40 passengers for day trips-there was no overnight accommodations. It had one closed deck and was trimmed with cherry wood.



Private Apartments "Rideau Queen"

The original investors Willam Bajus and Donald Norman operated the Belle for only four years. The boat caught fire and partially burnt in 1884. It was sold to Ned Flemming and his brother William in 1885 and rebuilt and recertified for 50 passengers. The Belle continued to have problems. Excursion passenger traffic was growing, but it was still a short season, basically June through to the first Sunday in September (the Labour Day Monday was still to come). In 1887, Rideau Belle was held liable for causing $1000 worth of damage to the newly built Tay locks. The reason for this is not known, it certainly wouldn't have been due to a collision, the boat didn't have enough power and couldn't go fast enough to do anything more than bump into a lock gate. The other possibility might have been as a result of storage. During the winter it was normal for the big steamboats to winter inside a lock. This served as kind of a drydock for hull repairs and marine inspections. It is possible that the Belle wintered in Beveridge locks and its weight caused damage to the stone walls during spring thaw. That is more likely the source of such a big bill. At any rate that was a huge and unexpected cost.

Dining Room "Rideau Queen"

Flemming was an experienced captain and just as important, a popular cruise host. However, by the mid 1890's there were numerous cruise boats running the Rideau and St. Lawrence systems and the Belle may have been one too many. In 1893 its passenger capacity was recertified from 50 to 100 passengers. This hints at some urgency in finding a way to make the boat pay (there were rumors that Flemming was even trying for a 200-passenger limit, fortunately this prospective disaster never went through). Finally in 1895, while tied up at Sand Lake, the Belle caught fire once again and was a total loss. In spite of the fire, some of the cherry wood trim was salvageable and the Newboro Lockmaster used it to build himself a handsome outhouse. Flemming took a job as Captain of the Rideau Queen. After the cruise boat era declined, he finished his career as master of the government run work tug Loretta .

Another master, Captain William O'Mara of Smiths Falls built a steamer named the Olive in 1879. The Olive, like all steamers of the period was built outdoors, there were no buildings to house these big boats. The men did all the woodwork, fastening and fitting and testing in the open air, dealing with the cold wind, frigid East Ontario winter temperatures and ice and snow

when it fell. For O'Mara, like all builders, winter was building, and the open water season was for shipping or cruising. The Olive was a dual-purpose boat, with the main deck used for hauling cargo and the top deck for cruise customers. Unlike Rideau Belle, Olive was a success (I expect the cargo paid the bills) and remained in service into the 1920's.

Hallway, "Rideau Queen"

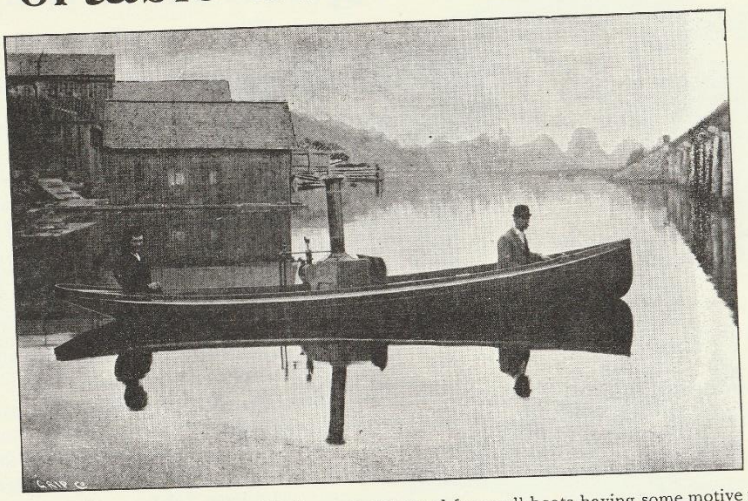
The grandest and most memorable of the Davis excursion boats was James Swift. James Swift was the principal coal merchant for Kingston and had a hand in a number of businesses, (and I suspect, was one the original backers of the dry dock project). Swift decided to get into the excursion boat business as well. This was Matthew's first big project. He was the designer as well as the project leader. Matthew had the designer's touch and Swift was one of the handsomest of the excursion boat fleet. The Swift had an iron plated hull, so there was less hassle with rot in the wooden hulls. It had a 25 hp engine. All of the excursion boats had relatively low horsepower high torque engine. The torque makes all the difference. The historical record rates these engines as very weak, at 5, 10, 15 or 25 hp, but I suspect the power assessments of the time are different than today, if you put one on a dyno it would show a lot more; recent studies with draft horses had found that a live horse actually pulls about 14 hp.

In less than six years the Swift had burnt, not to the point of being unusable, but it needed a complete deck and cabin reconstruction. Davis had the Swift towed back to the dry dock. The steel hull was gutted, the boiler and engine replaced and a whole new deck and superstructure was built. The boat was renamed the Rideau King and fitted out with an observation deck on top and staterooms below for overnight cruising. The King had cooking galleys, toilet facilities and running water going through taps into a small porcelain sink in each stateroom. The rooms themselves had two beds which could be divided, as on a train, by pulling a heavy curtain. The King carried trippers up through the Rideau system from Kingston to Ottawa and back again.

Davis was only one of a number of commercial ships and boatbuilding yards that had appeared in the latter 19th century. The largest was Dexter Calvin's installation on Garden Island. Calvin had a genuine business empire, including shipping, storage, and the shipyard. Under the supervision of Henry Roney, the Calvin yard produced ships from the 1850's up until the end of World War 1. However they were strictly commercial builders and did not make any private yachts, or bother with cruising steamers, they were strictly in the freighter, tug, and barge business.

Davis: The Private Steam Yachts 1885-1923

Portable Steam Launches.



FOR some time there has been a rapidly increasing demand for small boats having some motive power to propel them, other than the oars or paddles—something so simple that they will not require a practical engineer to

The private steamer, very much like the one advertised in the Canadian Canoe Co. brochure 1895, on Lake Muskoka.

When a new product hits, everybody tries to make one. The motorboat mania of the 1901-1914 period was matched was a mad rush to build gas inboard boat engines. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of builders appeared in North America during this era. It was not hard for a small machine shop to build a basic inboard boat motor. One relatively small Canadian builder built quite a few such engines, although perhaps no more than many. Yet today it is St. Lawrence that is the definitive marque of old boat inboards. Perhaps a thousand still exist and many more are being found and rebuilt. Davis had jumped into the gas engine powered boat business, they basically pioneered in Canada, but their motorboat line continued to be very heavy solidly built slow moving Something new was appearing in Canada as well, the private steam powered pleasure boat. Until the 1860's steamboat engines were simply too large and at several thousand dollars at a minimum still useful only for commercial purposes. The idea of owning your own steamboat made little sense unless you were a king or a rajah. This would change.

All polished up and nowhere to go. Actually a reproduction, built by Hunter Boats for Cameron Peck to demonstrate a turn of the century naphtha steam engine. Gasoline was boiled in a boiler, then condensed, sent to a second gas tank and then used to feed the boiler. Go for a ride? Thanks I'm good. Peck family archive

In 1862 a young British machinist and model maker named John Thornycroft built a scaled down version the huge ship steam engines and fitted one into a 36-foot launch. The boiler and engine were housed below decks where they would be attended to by an engineer while the passengers rode in comfort in an aft cockpit with seats and a canopy. The engine drove a shaft which fitted through the keel to which a screw propeller was attached. The powered pleasure boat had arrived. Before we get carried away, it is important to note that steamboats were still only for the very well off. These boats, even the simple ones, could cost anywhere between three to five thousand dollars even for a 25–40-foot launch. The owner needed a qualified fireman and engineer aboard and this was a highly paid servant.

Davis Dry Dock 1907 Steamboat "Scudder" Peck family archives

Interior shots of Davis 1905 built Elizabeth J. Author photos

Elizabeth J Bow view. Photos by author

The 1890's was the Golden age of the private steam yacht and its preeminent builders in Canada was Polson's in Toronto and Davis in Kingston. Private steam yachts prior to 1870 were usually only for the richest individuals. Davis began building smaller scaled steam yachts frequently only 35-40 feet long and even smaller, some only 18 feet long. The personal powered watercraft had arrived. Again, this was still at a price and that price was between $2-$3,000 at the lowest, and $5,000 and up for some of the 40 foot plus models. This was serious money and way past the means of most families, even in the middle class. This was the cost of an average family home. This was something mostly heirs, factory department store owners and generally any owner of a medium-sized business could afford. Like the gasoline engine cars that would show up thirty years later, they often needed a chauffeur, or in the case of steamboats, an engineer.

1907 Davis Dry Dock steam boat Scudder Peck family archives

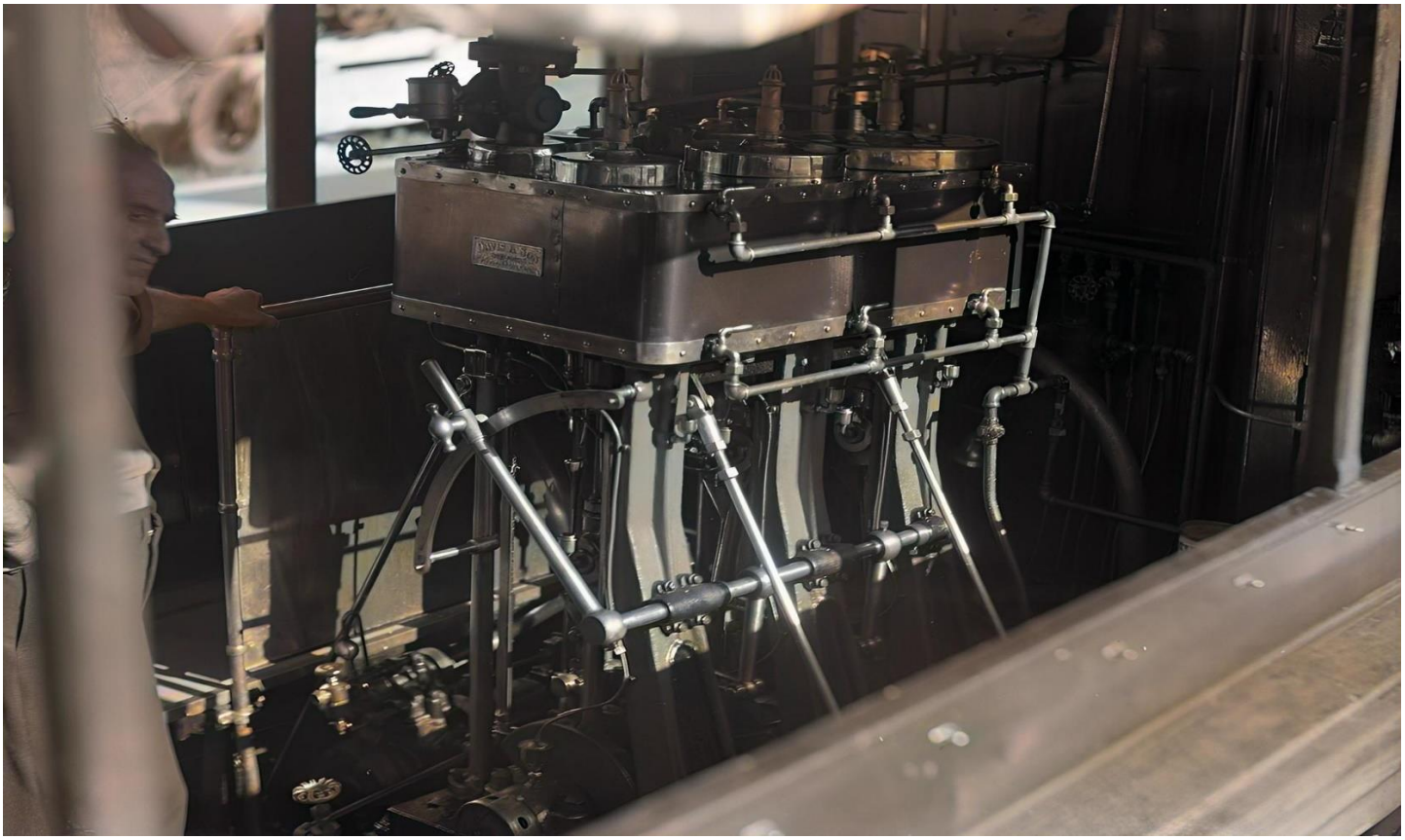
Scudder's small triple expansion Davis built steam engine. Peck family archives

You had to know what you were doing in running a steam engine. A half hour before leaving the dock, the engineer would climb into the boat and open the boiler and start the fire. This was done by setting a few small sticks in the fire chamber, and then feeding in progressively larger pieces of wood. This was usually hardwoods such as maple or oak although birch would do. Coal was expensive and mostly for commercial craft, wood was cheaper and easier to obtain. The boiler was comprised of a combustion chamber at the bottom and on top was a series of tubes through which water was fed. The tubes provided greater heat surfaces and got the water boiling that much faster. The steam was let into the cylinder by means of valves, operating very much in the same manner as car engine valves today, although the tolerances were not as tight as they needed to be in a gas engine. The steam pushed the piston down until the valve opened again and let the partially condensed steam out. In some of the later turn of the century models, there would be an expansion chamber on each side of the piston. doubling the power output. Some of the larger engines were compound double and even triple expansion engines where the cooling steam would travel from the small initial cylinder to two or more progressively larger ones to extract all possible power from the steam. But these were rare at the pleasure boat end of the business, and only appeared in Davis boats by the end of the 1890's. There were other pressures, not just mechanical and economic ones. John was the company president, Mat worked as the plant manager, boat designer; he was the senior carpenter and problem solver, but he was still management and part of the Davis family executive. At the time the Davis boat shop staff were all listed as carpenters, and there was a set pay of $0.175 an hour and given 59-hour work week meant an annual salary of just under $600 a year. The per hour was just an average, all workplaces had a sliding pay scale; the foremen and senior workers made more, the apprentices and new guys and low-skill guys made a lot less. The steamfitters and boilermakers were paid much better, and they were not as prone to fomenting labour trouble. By 1900 the carpenters were demanding a pay increase to $0.20 an hour for a nine, as opposed to a ten-hour workday. This seems to be a perfectly reasonable request; John replied with a firm no and told them to get back to work. The following events were reported by the Kingston Whig-Standard March 15, 1900.

"The carpenters employed last week at Davis's shipyard at the joiner work on the new steamer, numbered ten men, nine of whom belonged to the union. On Thursday they sent a requisition to Mr. Davis, requesting that on and after Monday, March 12th, they be allowed

the privilege of working nine hours per day and their wages be twenty cents per hour. This was signed by eight of the union men. Nothing was spoken of the matter again until Saturday afternoon, March 10th, when three of the men received a note in their envelope with their money stating that their services were no longer required. The other five men got a note stating their services were no longer required unless they would work for $1.75 for a ten-hour day. They went back pending a meeting of the union on Monday night, and at the meeting decided to quit the next day if a settlement was not arranged between the head men of the company and a committee appointed by the union. The committee visited one of the company and he stated he could do nothing until he saw another of the company, who was out of the city at the time. The men then visited Mr. Davis, who stated that he would not grant the men the privilege of working nine hours a day, or twenty cents per hour either."

Of the ten workmen on the project, eight made demands, three were fired outright. The eight men (and the three dismissed and remaining five under threat belonged to be United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. The union generally provided strike pay ($1 a day for six days) in these situations, but this time, couldn't seem to decide about what to do and ultimately never provided any support. The strike fizzled out. As is always the case, the actions left a bitter taste, the next year Mat, who had worked closely with the strikers, left the company, and set out on his own as an independent designer and ship inspector on contract with the Federal Government. John simply moved past the issue, there were new contracts, both commercial, but increasingly for private luxury steam yachts.



Davis "Il Cid" triple compound engine Peck Family archive

Il Cid coming into a lock. Peck family archive

And going… Peck family archive

Dr John Alfred Brashear's long association with Lake Muskoka and Davis did not begin happily. Brashear had started out as a Pittsburgh millhand in the 1850's and through sheer force of intellect, personality and effort had risen to become, first expanding on his millwork skills, an optical products manufacturer and using this technical know-how to become a respected astronomer. He lectured, served on the boards of Carnegie Mellon and Pittsburgh Universities, set up the Allegheny Observatory and his optical business outfitted the high-resolution reflecting telescopes that made possible the astronomy breakthroughs of the next fifty years. As often happens in successful lives, the trouble piles on all at once. in 1895 he was faced with the death of his only son from typhoid. To make the weight heavier, his wife, Phoebe, exhausted from caring for their son, tripped on the stairs and broke her leg in several places. The next summer he was able to convince Phoebe, who was fading physically from the mental and physical stresses of the previous year, to take the summer off and rent a cottage in the Muskoka's. Three years after, using money earned from lecturing, he bought an Island in Lake Muskoka and had a cottage and boathouse built on it. Mrs. Brashear enjoyed the cottage lifestyle but with her leg injury never felt comfortable in the little rowboat they owned. In 1901 He contacted the Davis works and ordered a thirty-four-foot steam launch. This was not cheap. The boat, complete with steam engine would cost $5,000 (probably more than the island and

cottage had cost). He had some mad money saved up for a trip to Europe so he had planned to buy an island he knew he could get cheap (recommended by a rich friend) and then flip it at a quick profit (cottage properties were hot in Muskoka, as they continue to be 100 years later). However another one of their rich friends a Mr. Oliver, simply paid for the cost of the boat (It must be nice to have friends like that...). The Brashear's were the kind of magnetic couple that people simply gravitate around, they provide a kind of charisma and warmth many could not find elsewhere.

Phoebe the Second, shortly after arriving in Gravenhurst, summer 1915. Herb Ditchburn (at far right, in straw boater hat) takes five to admire the competition.

The first boat, which they named the Alleghenia was thirty-four feet long. It had a Davis built vertical water tube boiler and a compound steam engine. The boiler and engine compartment were amidships, and the cabin was separated into stern and forward sections. This is just a

guess, but I assume the women would congregate in the stern section and the lads would head forward where they could smoke their cigars and hang out with the Professor who would be at the helm. They hired a local boy to serve as engineer and fireman and it was his job to watch the pressure and feed hardwood pieces into the boiler. He had a habit of stowing extra wood underneath the boiler so to have a supply handy. In the summer of 1903 after a rough trip back to the island they tied up the boat and left the boiler apparently to burn itself out. However, the heat from the boiler continued to cook the wood stored underneath and at 11at night their neighbor saw a fire in the boat, rowed over to their island and raised the alarm. Dr. Brashear was able to put the fire out with dry chemical fire extinguishers but there had been a fair amount of charring and scorch damage to the woodwork and planks. He decided to have the repairs made. This time none other than Andrew Carnegie himself came to their aid and paid for a whole new launch from the Davis works. The new boat, a copy of the Alleghenia was named the “Phoebe” and it was completed in 1904 and delivered, by flatcar to Gravenhurst where it was launched in the spring. Phoebe survived Mrs. Brashear. who died in 1910. In 1913 the boat was put up for the winter in a boathouse owned by Mr. Robinson. The boathouse burned in November 1913 while Dr. Brashear was lecturing in California. The boat was destroyed. Once again, Mr. Brashear’s Muskoka friends came to his rescue and ponied up for a for a third steamboat, to be known as Phoebe II. Again they contacted Matt Davis to provide the design and Davis Dry Dock to build the boat.

Steam technology had come a long way since the Davis’s had started in business. Phoebe II’s boiler could produce 180 psi and the double compound engine could produce 65 hp. In this case the steam was let into the space above the piston and the space below as well, doubling the power output. It was a very efficient way of using steam but the convenience of gasoline engines, even with their notorious starting problems, was pushing steam aside. Weight was a problem, for one. Advanced as it was, Phoebe II’s steam system including boiler, engine and the assorted metal fittings weighed 2.2 tons or 4,400 lbs. A medium duty 36 hp four-cylinder gas engine made by Erd Motor Co in 1910 weighed 700 lbs. Like all of its predecessors, Phoebe II was a solidly built boat. The cabin work was all Honduras mahogany (at the time referred to as “Cuban“, although this was just advertising, as most mahoganies were now sourced in French West Africa). The planking was 1” pine over oak ribs and engine stringers. The boat was 9 feet wide but 48 feet long which gave it the appearance of a fast launch , even though its top speed was 10 mph.

Preparing Phoebe II for spring launch, 1920's. Photo Peck family archive

Dr Brashear died in 1920. The boat went through several owners on lake Muskoka until it was purchased in 1939 by D. Cameron Peck, another Muskoka cottager. After Peck sold his collection of boats and cars in 1952, Phoebe was purchased by a steam enthusiast named William Weiant. Mr. Weiant was part of the first generation of antique boat restorers, who focused on reviving the old steam launches. The steamboat group, mostly Americans, gravitated around several East Coast old timers such as George Whitney and Oscar D. York who had actually built and run the old steam launches, in one case since 1879. They kept Phoebe for several year and after a few more owners a man named Jack Telgmann would be able to purchase the boat and donate it to the Kingston Pump House Steam Museum. Phoebe II was still floating and workable and was able to make the trip up to the Manotick Antique Boat show in 1980. Even so it was in serious need of attention and the pilots were extremely careful not to bump the boat's frail and crumbling stem.

IN all respects the Davis works was in the mold of the classic British yacht yard, in the same manner as Herreshoff in Massachusetts or Thornycroft in England Everything for the boat was made in the shops. The boat hulls were built there, the steam engines were made in the machine shops (one of Herreshoff's boilers exploded in 1888, and Nat Herreshoff lost his steam license, and therefore was barred from designing engines for sale; they stuck to boat hulls after that). Davis had no disasters on its resume, although a number of its boats were lost to fires, this was considered to be a natural hazard of steamboats. Small hardware items such as fittings were made at foundries, particularly the Ontario Steel works in Gananoque but everything else was the creation of the works craftsmen. Steam engines were built, as much as possible out of stock metal products, round bars, sheet metal and cast-iron plates. Cylinders were ordered from the foundry and then set in a boring device and bored out. Pistons were set in a lathe and cut down to fit in the cylinder. There was no concept of mass production, but since every boat was a special custom contract there was little need for it. This was the same for Polson Iron Works, but with more justification.

Davis yacht up on blocks at Baysville, mid 1940's. Photo Peck family archive

Davis had plugged through the war years by building lifeboats for ships making the dangerous

trips across the Atlantic. Every ship needed proper lifeboats and the loss of so many ships ensured a lot of repeat business. Davis was able to survive the war that would wipe out or permanently cripple so many of East Ontario's boat builders. The question was what would they do after? The steam yacht business was dead and there didn't seem to be much interest in their gasoline powered yachts either.

Two more boats were launched in 1918, including a 57-ton gas powered 57-foot boat for Daniel Kenney of Gananoque for use as a tourist excursion boat. 1919 saw only a retrofit of a 1903 boat, the Gisnet for Carroll H. Powell of Kingston, probably to replace the steam engine with a gasoline one. With little to do in boat designing or building, Matt concentrated on his job full time as a government ship inspector and busied himself with his service clubs such the Oddfellows. He worked for the company on a contract basis only and had set up his own business on Corrigan Street, advertising as a machinist and hull inspector. The youngest of the Davis sons, George had left the company for good in 1900 and moved to Smiths Falls where he started up a successful ferry service with his steamboat (the 20-foot model). John and his wife Barbara had been listed as the company principals for the renamed company in 1901 and thereon.

John Davis set up an arrangement where Davis Dry Dock would build the boat and sell it to him and them he, acting as the second party, sold the boat personally to the customer. Matt had the same arrangement for his clients, who were considerably fewer than John's. The point of this is not clear, it may have been a way for the company principals to earn some profit from the boat sale without taking money out of the company.

Captain Davis had retired and sold his share to John in 1913 and parceled out $3,600 of his share proceeds equally to Matt and George. The daughter Frances, who had moved out to San Jose, California with her second husband, a pastor, returned to Kingston in 1916 and tried to convince her father to move back with her so she could look after him. He decided against it and elected to stay in Kingston. She had been promised some of the proceeds, but her father only told her she would get this when he passed on. Her nose was out of joint over this. Her stepmother, Captain Davis's second wife, had died in 1909 and promised a bequest of $500, but this money had been reloaned to the company. Shortly after the company and Captain Davis loaned money to John to build a substantial 10 room residence, money which the daughter felt should have gone to her.

No new orders were on the books for 1920 and there didn't seem to be much promise for future

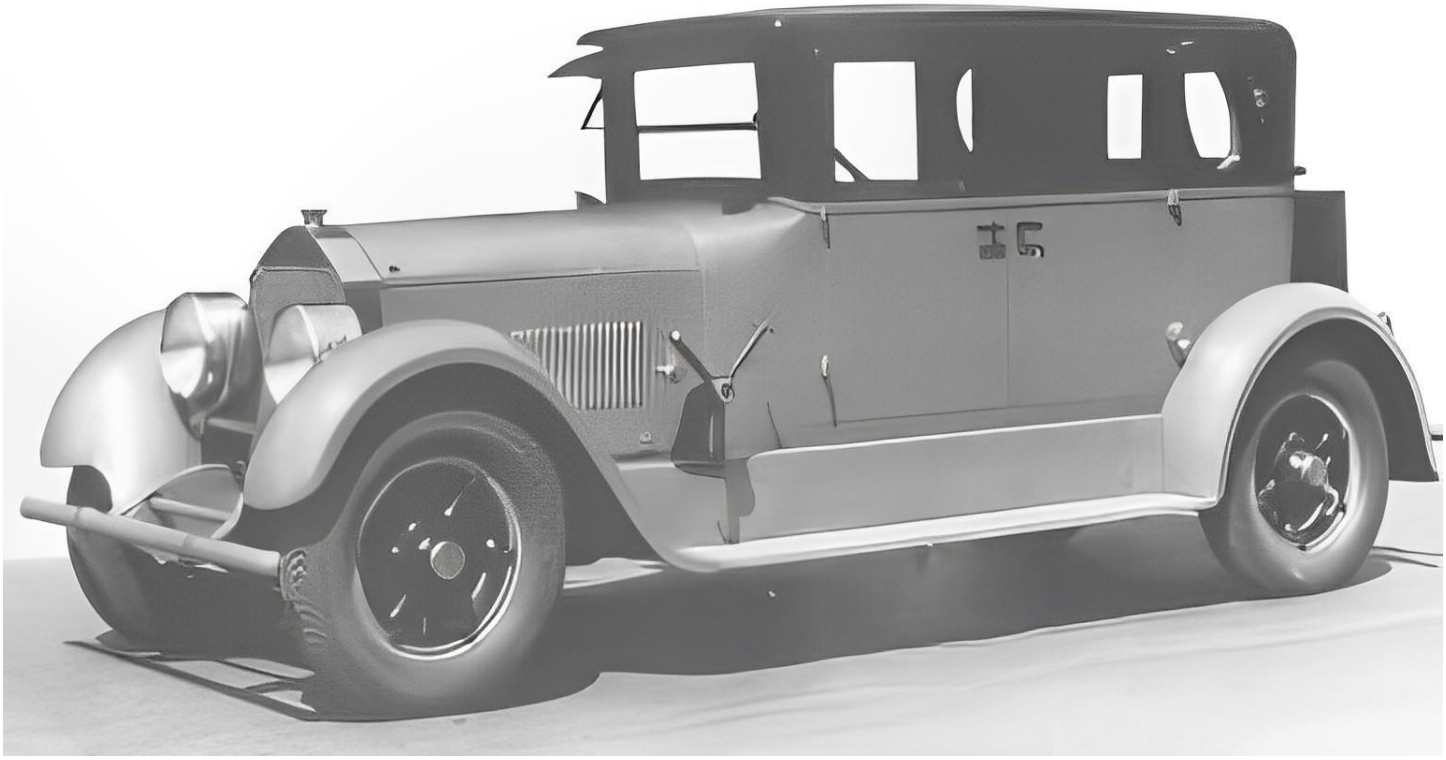
contracts. Davis Dry Dock survived on repair and refit work. With Mat and the Captain out of the picture , John and John's son Lloyd were now in charge. In 1922, with the boat building business going nowhere John and Lloyd decided, of all things, to go into the custom car manufacturing business. Custom car shops, so common at the turn of the century still did exist but they survived by catering to the auto racing business or very high-end purchasers who couldn't find what they wanted at Packard or Cadillac (Zumbach's in New York City was such a shop). Even a custom operation required heavy capital investment for items such as shaping frame parts (Zumbach's even had its own in-house forge). Davis did have well fitted machine shops and machinists who could fabricate almost anything but no production line. It's likely the old school machinists would have quit if he had tried to set one up.

The style was a touring car, a fairly large vehicle with four comfortable seats (the coachwork was also apparently done by Davis as well, which was unusual in the industry where auto bodies were usually subcontracted). This was, for some reason, a big secret. Mr. Davis had his men build the frame and then moved it into a cordoned off section of the shop behind a locked door which only John Davis, son Lloyd and a friend E. Wray Van Luven, had access to. Van Luven had come to Kingston as the regional agent for Ford Motor Company. At the time the Model T was selling for $515.00. Perhaps Mr. Van Luven didn't want to dampen his friend's enthusiasm, or maybe they still thought, against advice, that it would still work. Admittedly, touring cars such as the style the Davis's wanted to build (i.e. Packard, Lincoln) could go high as $1,500 to $2,000. But these vehicles were backed by big manufacturing businesses with established reputations and the kind of dealer network Mr. Van Luven was a part of.

Captain Davis died in 1923 and split the remainder of his $3,000 estate between George and Matt. The key asset was a loan of $2,000 secured by a mortgage on John's house. Frances intervened in the probate and petitioned the probate judge to force Matt, as executor to turn over the $500 to her. John was not mentioned in the will and by default George and Matt ended up holding the mortgage on his house.

Regardless of this, work on the car project pressed on. Mindful of the importance of looking after the basic bread and butter service and refits, all work on the car was done after hours. Except for the frame all the mechanical parts were sourced from various parts suppliers, the transaxle was from Timken, the wheels, transmission, steering assembly from other sources. They chose a Continental Red Seal for the engine. The Red Seal, (a.k.a. the "Durant") was a versatile 4 cylinder 40 hp power plant used in the Stutz Bearcat and was also finding its way into many boat hulls. The car was to be called the "Fleetwood-Knight; it didn't have any

connection to the Davis's or Kingston or boats, it just sounded posh.



The prototype "Fleetwood-Knight" built by John and Lloyd Davis in 1924.

From all intents and purposes, this car was really a hobby and, at a cost estimated between $2,000 and $3,000 in parts alone, a very expensive one. Mechanically it was a success. It ran well, handled well, looked good and needed little maintenance. Everyone admired it but no one wanted to buy it, not even at cost, which all in was over $5,000. Eventually Mr. Van Luven bought it himself for $900. Even this turned out not to be a friend price as Van Luven couldn't sell it at his cost even in Kingston. The car was sold to another Toronto dealer for about $450. Eventually the car ended up back in Kingston in the hands of another Mr. Davis, who was a Pontiac-Buick dealer. In the 1970's the vehicle turned up in the hands of a local car collector. The odometer had 300,000 miles on it.

Nothing is certain in any business. Davis had prospered by always being a step ahead of its competitors. The dry dock was innovative and put them on the map. They started building luxury private yachts as well as standard size powered stream and gas engine powered boats earlier than anyone. They were the first builder in Canada and possibly the earliest in North America to build and market gas engine for powering boats. They developed an international reputation as a yacht builder equal to that of Thornycroft or Herreshoff. Yet when the era of

high-speed gas engine powered launches arrived they waited too long to catch up and in a few years they were lost. The car was a last gasp, more wishful thinking than anything else. There were no boats or cars to come out of the Davis shops after that.