

THE HISTORY OF COBOURG HARBOUR

THE TRANSITION YEARS

In 1875, the Cobourg, Peterborough and Marmora Railway and Mining Company suffered a financial collapse and shipments of lumber and iron ore to Cobourg dwindled. The lumber mills in Harwood eventually closed and attempts were made to popularize the journey to Rice Lake with tourists. But due to high maintenance expenses, the rail line was forced to close and by 1895 it had become largely a storage siding.

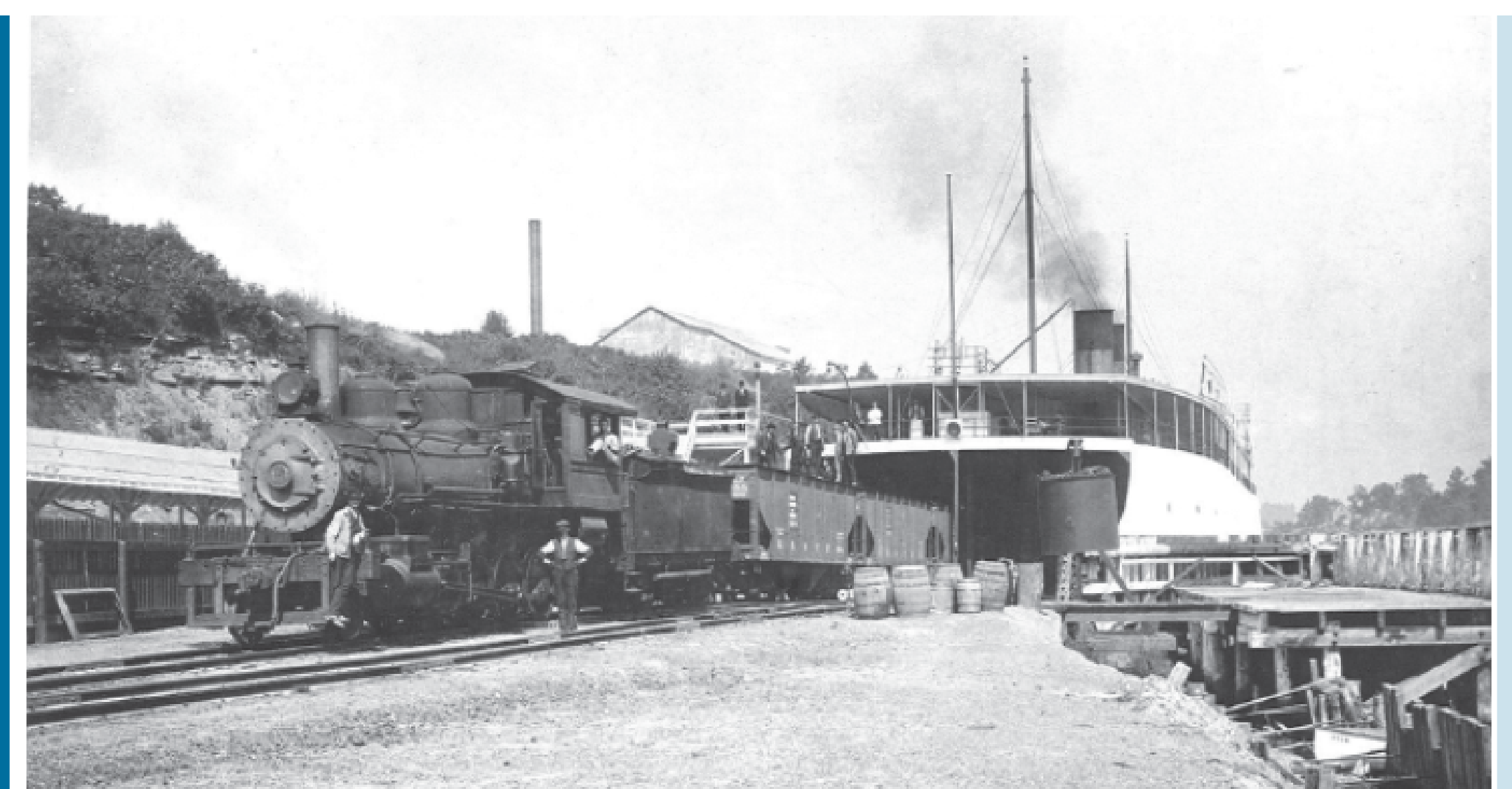
At the beginning of the twentieth century, Cobourg was a quiet and beautiful community of just under 5,000 residents. Although its days as an important economic centre were over, the Town still had several large factories and flourishing businesses and merchants.

For Cobourg's harbour, the halcyon days of sail were declining as steamships replaced schooners and the railway became a more important and efficient means of transporting goods.

In 1905 a change in the fortunes of the harbour occurred. The Ontario Car Ferry Company was formed as a joint venture between the Grand Trunk Railway of Montreal and the Buffalo, Rochester and Pittsburg Railroad – this was to breathe new life into the harbour!

The new company was formed for the primary purpose of transporting coal from Pennsylvania to Cobourg. The GTR wanted this coal for their locomotives. Rochester, New York was the immediate choice for the southern terminus with excellent docking facilities and railway lines at Port Charlotte. Cobourg was eventually chosen as the northern terminus because it was located directly north of Rochester and was in close proximity to the raw materials to be shipped south. The south-bound cargoes were feldspar, lumber, pulpwood and flour.

A contract to build the required ferry was awarded to the Canadian Shipbuilding Company of Toronto. Ontario No. 1 was launched in April 1907. This was a significant occasion for the Town of Cobourg which had visions of becoming a major port once again.



A Brooks 8-2 switcher engine here used to load/unload the ferry. Some of the later accommodations for freight & passengers show at the left. The building at the top of the photo is the feldspar plant.

The Ontario No. 1 had a steel hull, twin-funnels and twin screws for propulsion. She was a handsome vessel, always painted a spotless glowing white with two raked stacks, buff with black tops. She was licensed by the Government to carry 100 passengers. The passenger deck had staterooms and cabins, a dining salon and large parlour, a music room as well as a ladies' lounge and rest room.

By 1914, the success of the Ontario No. 1 was firmly established and the demand, especially on the northbound crossings, warranted another vessel. The Ontario No. 2 was built by Polson Iron Works Ltd. of Toronto and was launched on April 3, 1915. Her capacity and layout for the coal cars was similar to that of Ontario No. 1, and the accommodations were almost identical.

COMPARISON OF ONTARIO #1 & #2

	ACE (#1)	DEUCE (#2)		ACE (#1)	DEUCE (#2)
Gross Weight - in tons	5,146	5,568	Draught - in feet	18.7	16
Beam - in feet	54.2	56	Length - in feet	317	318
# of Rail Hoppers Carried	28	30	Cost - in \$	375,000	423,333

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END OF AN ERA

The Ontario Car Ferry Company had an outstanding safety record. However there were several incidents. On January 6, 1924, Ontario No. 1 sailed from Port Charlotte and soon encountered a heavy gale with 20 foot swells and 75 knots of wind. After making only one and a half miles in one hour, Captain Redfearn decided to run with the storm. By radio, he instructed the Cobourg offices to have lighthouse keepers light their beacons along the shore for guidance. The lake was so rough that at Bowmanville and Newcastle, the keepers couldn't get to the lighthouses. At Port Union, an enterprising CNR agent put fuses along the shore as an aid.



The vessel finally reached the approaches to Toronto harbour at 2:30 a.m. on January 7, but Captain Redfearn decided not to enter the harbour. Instead he cruised up and down the shore off Port Credit and rode out the storm until morning. The vessel was coated with a thick layer of ice – 3 feet on the deck and the pilot house and windows were covered.

The Ontario No. 1 prepared in Toronto harbour for the trip home and finally hove up the anchor at 7:30 p.m. and set sail for Cobourg arriving safely on January 8. Bells of the Town Hall and the churches rang as the citizens of Cobourg rejoiced at its safe return.

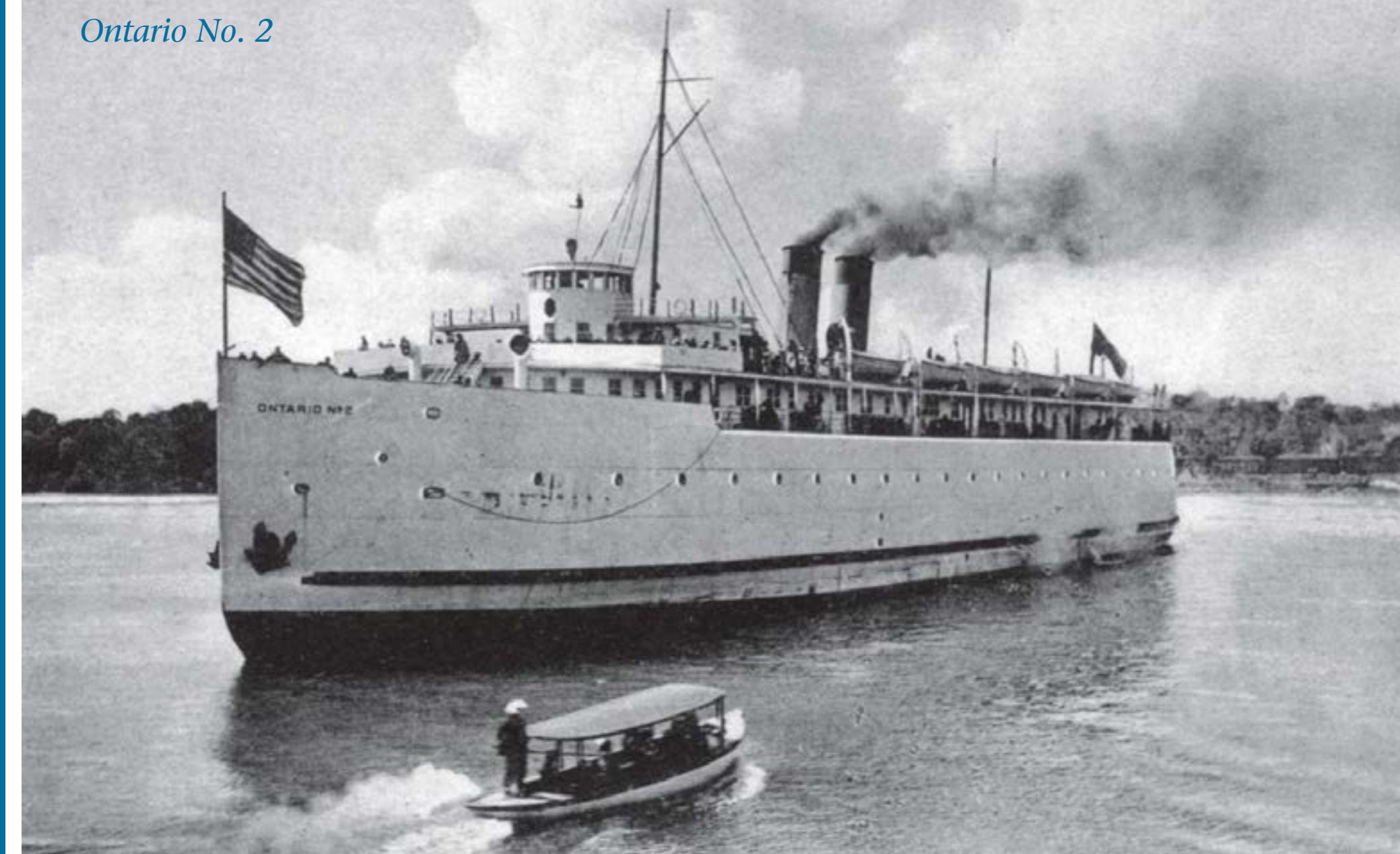
Another incident occurred on August 5, 1924 when Ontario No. 2 was attempting to return to Cobourg in dense fog with 930 passengers on a church excursion. Captain Forrest misread the fog horn signals and the ferry grounded on the sandy bottom. Passengers had to be removed by smaller boats and barges to the pier until the ferry was refloated.

On March 23, 1923 the two ferries collided in dense fog and both vessels sustained considerable damage.

The 1910s and 20s represented the golden era for the car ferries and the Company. They carried 70,000 passengers per season during this time and in 1925 they loaded and ferried 12,863 coal cars. With the advent of the Depression years, hard times hit. In 1923 the Grand Trunk Railway had been absorbed by the Canadian National Railway. Then in 1932 the Buffalo, Rochester and Pittsburgh Railway was purchased by the Baltimore and Ohio.



Ontario No. 2



To keep the ferries busy, both vessels were leased out for excursions at various places around Lake Ontario. By the 1940s even these excursions could not prevent financial losses from mounting.

Ontario No. 1's last trip out of Charlotte was on July 31, 1949 – her certificate expired and she had to be dry docked. On the day of her last crossing, April 30, 1950, the Ontario No. 2, blew her whistle and left the Genesee dock for the last time. The Ontario Car Ferry Company's service ended when the steam was let down for the last time after the Ontario No. 2 docked at Cobourg.



The last trip out of Charlotte for Ontario No. 2, April 30, 1950