

MAID OF THE MIST

The first ferry service across the Niagara River, in the form of manually operated row boats, was established by William Forsyth in 1818. Until 1846, row boat ferry leases were granted to many different people, including Thomas Clark and Samuel Street, who built a cobblestone carriage road (part of which is still in use today) down the side of the gorge to the ferry landing in 1827.

In 1846, the Niagara Falls Ferry Association received a charter from the State of New York, allowing it to operate a ferry across the Niagara River. In May of 1946, the first Maid of the Mist was launched, a clumsy steamship which ferried people between carriage roads on either side of the river. However, the traffic was not as heavy as the operators had anticipated and with the opening of a suspension bridge over the gorge at the Whirlpool Rapids in 1848, the ferry lost more business. As a result, the ferry began to make sight-seeing trips, taking tourists from a dock on the American side, up the river and close to the Horseshoe Falls. On July 14, 1854, a larger, more luxurious Maid of the Mist replaced the first boat. This Maid of the Mist, primarily intended for sightseeing, had a length of 72 feet, and a steam driven paddle-wheel. The passengers were all given coats and caps to protect them from the spray of the Falls as Captain Joel Robinson took them on an exhilarating trip to the base of the Horseshoe Falls. This Maid of the Mist was in operation for six years until its owner, W. O. Buchanan sold it to a Montreal Company. One of the conditions of the sale was that the boat be delivered to Lake Ontario, and so Captain Robinson became the first person to navigate a boat through the dangerous Whirlpool Rapids, on June 6, 1861.

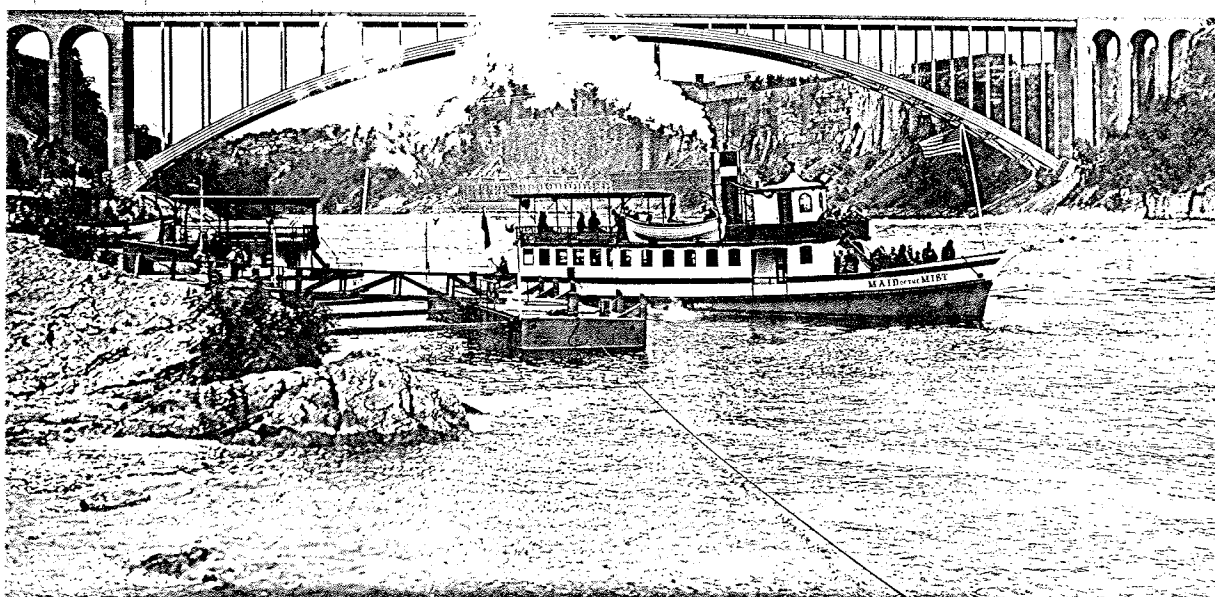
With the sale of the Maid of the Mist, the row boat ferries once again resumed operations until 1884, when R. F. Carter and Frank LeBlond, from the town of Clifton, formed the Maid of the Mist Steamboat Company and invested \$10,000 in a new Maid of the Mist boat. This boat was made of white oak, measured 70 ft. in length, and operated from the Canadian side of the river. The first Maid of the Mist was so successful that they launched a second one from the American side in 1892. The two boats were christened Maid of the Mist I and II (even though they were technically the third and fourth Maids of the Mist). In 1887, the Province of Ontario had deeded the land around the Falls, including the Maid of the Mist landing, to the Niagara Parks Commission, for the purpose of developing parklands. This was challenged by the Town of Niagara Falls and not resolved until 1895 when the Supreme Court decided in favour of the NPC. Carter and LeBlond, who had leased the wharf from the Town of Niagara Falls, had to negotiate with the NPC to receive wharf and landing rights which they did in 1898, for a fee of \$300/year.

The two Maids of the Mist operated for the next 45 years without a single mishap. During the great ice jam of 1938, however, the two boats were almost destroyed. The ice, which had covered the landing and destroyed the caretaker's house, came up to the deck level of the boats but did not do any serious damage. On April 22, 1955, as the boats were being prepared for the coming season, a spark from a welder's gun ignited one of the boats. Both boats were soon ablaze, and the fire destroyed them beyond repair. As a temporary substitute, a 40 foot yacht called "The Little Maid" was built and lowered into the river within a month of the fire. A new, all-steel Maid of the Mist was built in Owen Sound and transported to the river in four pieces. Welders worked 24 hours a day to assemble the new boat. This Maid of the Mist was 66 ft. long, with a 200 horsepower engine, and was launched on July 28, 1955.

Her sister ship was launched on June 12, 1956, and the two boats were again christened the Maids of the Mist I and II (technically the fifth and sixth). The Little Maid remained in use until it was sold in 1956.

In 1971, the Maid of the Mist Steamboat Company was purchased by James V. Glynn. On June 13, 1972, the Maid of the Mist III, a 65 ft. long boat with two 235 hp engines, capable of carrying 150 passengers, was launched. She was followed by the Maid of the Mist IV on June 15, 1976, and the Maid of the Mist V on June 9, 1983. The Maid of the Mist IV was 72 ft. long, and could hold 200 passengers, while the Maid of the Mist V, a double decked boat, was the largest and most powerful yet, with two 250 hp engines and a carrying capacity of 300 passengers. During the winter of 1985-1986, the Maids of the Mist III and IV were double decked, expanding their capacity to 210 and 300 respectively. The most recent boat, the Maid of the Mist VI was launched in 1993, and can carry 600 passengers. All four of the Maids are still in use, with the Maids III and IV operating from the American side and Maids V and VI from the Canadian side.

The Maid of the Mist celebrated its 150th Anniversary in 1996. On April 8, 1997, a few weeks before the scheduled summer opening of the Maid of the Mist, strong winds pushed large amounts of ice over the ice boom in Fort Erie. The level of the river rose, flooding the bottom two levels of the Maid of the Mist Administrative building with over 16 feet of water and ice. The Maids V and VI were lifted off of their winter supports, and placed in a precarious position which could have considerably damaged the boats. Luckily, there was no serious damage done, and the Maid of the Mist Company opened for the season on May 17. A new boat, the Maid of the Mist VII, an 80 foot long, 600 passenger vessel, is scheduled to be launched sometime in July, 1997. The Maid VII will replace the Maid III, which will be kept on standby duty.



Maid of the Mist, circa 1941