



Passengers and crew get aboard the Queen of Peace ferry at the Erie Barge Canal in City of Tonawanda on Sunday. (John Hickey/Buffalo News)

After 80 years, river ferry returns to Grand Island and Tonawanda

By [Deidre Williams](#) | Published August 6,

Boarding the Queen of Peace ferryboat for its inaugural voyage on the Niagara River on Sunday brought back memories for Matthew Scanlon Hamp and his brother, Fred Hamp.

As the ferry was leaving the City of Tonawanda, bound for Grand Island, the Hamp brothers shared passed-down stories dating as far back as the 1880s and early 1890s, when their great-grandfather, Matthew Scanlon, ran a tugboat and ferry service along the same route.

“They had a barge and a tugboat that ran back and forth to carry people, produce, whatever,” Fred Hamp said.

“And the building right over there – the tall, concrete building,” he said, pointing from the Queen of Peace. “That was the original site of his hotel and social hall. It was called Scanlon Hall, and it was the seat of his political connections when he was New York State senator.”

Hamp and his brother were among more than a dozen pedestrians and bicyclists crossing the upper Niagara River on Sunday morning aboard the first ferry boat service between Grand Island and the City of Tonawanda since 1935. That’s when the Grand Island bridges were built and ferry service ended, Fred Hamp said.

“What goes around, comes around,” he said of Sunday’s excursion. The service is called the Bike & Hike Ferry and takes about 20 minutes one way.



Charlie Rach, whose father worked on the old ferry between Grand Island and Tonawanda, and grandson J.J. Hayward hold a photo of the old ferry at Sunday's maiden launch of Queen of Peace ferry service between City of Tonawanda and Grand Island. (John Hickey/Buffalo News)

The 42-foot Queen of Peace ferry leaves the city side at the nexus of the Niagara River and Erie Canal (across from the Long Homestead Historical Museum) and docks in Grand Island near the old ferry landing at the River Oaks Marina. The Tonawanda landing is close to shopping across the Main Street bridge on Webster Street in North Tonawanda and a short bike ride to the Rails to Trails path.

Before the north and south Grand Island bridges opened in 1935, ferries and private boats were the only way to get from Grand Island to the mainland. Pedestrians, horses and buggies and eventually cars traveled on open scows that were towed by tugboats, although there was a ferry powered by horses on a treadmill, said boat Captain Robin Hoch, an owner of Niagara River Cruises.

Winter was another challenge. Freezing weather could mean that no one could cross to sell or receive goods – or get to school. Grand Island schoolchildren regularly took the ferry to attend Tonawanda High School because the island had only an elementary school.

What's more, there was no ice boom back then, said another passenger, Charlie Rech.

“So if there was a lot of ice, people were stranded on Grand Island,” he said.

The ferries back then were expensive, too, according to the Grand Island Historical Society. At a time when a loaf of bread cost 10 cents, a round-trip ride on the ferry in the 1930s cost 50 cents for cars and 20 cents for pedestrians. A team of horses pulling a load of hay was \$1 and heavier trucks were charged more.

These days, Grand Island residents pay 9 cents in tolls to cross the bridge, which is less than the cost of a loaf of 1930s bread. Non-residents who are not EZ Pass holders pay \$1, the 1930s rate for a team of horses loaded with hay.

And as of Sunday, the ferry service is back in business. The \$15 round-trip ferry service for pedestrians and bicyclists will run only on Sundays through Sept. 10, Hoch said. The boat can carry up to 45 passengers. Tickets must be reserved online in advance.



Before the bridges a tug boat pulls a ferry across the upper Niagara River between Grand Island and the mainland, Bedell Dock circa 1901, courtesy Grand Island Historical Society

“So here we are 82 years later, there’s a ferry boat to Grand Island again,” Rech said. “It’s kind of fun. It’s neat.”

Rech and his sister, Janice Bodie, remembered stories about the old ferry from their father, Charlie, who worked on the ferry boat back in the 1920s and 1930s.

“As we grew up, we heard tons of stories about people missing the last ride to the island. They were stuck,” Rech said.

“They’d sleep in a barn overnight” until the next day, when the next ferry boat came, Bodie said. “He was full of stories.”

Tonawanda Mayor Rick Davis said he is looking forward to the return of ferry service.

“This is why we wanted to restart it, to bring back some history and hopefully bring some people into the City of Tonawanda that will spend money,” he said.

The ferry service is a good way to connect communities, said Grand Island Supervisor Nathan McMurray, especially since the town is building bike trails and installing scenic “boardwalks in the woods.”

“It’s awesome,” McMurray said of the Bike & Hike Ferry. “It’s smart. It’s a good thing to do because we want to celebrate our waterfront more. We have something more precious in Western New York than oil or gold. We have fresh water...And for too long we’ve ignored that, and we’ve taken that for granted, but I think now we’re starting to celebrate it. So all the good things that are happening in Buffalo along the waterfront are now extending to here, and I think it’s good for our whole region.”