

A Steamboat at Aztalan N.P. Hawks (Updated Version)

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Wisconsin is bisected by rivers and from the time of the earliest peoples to the pioneer era these rivers were the earliest highways across Wisconsin and to the interior of the State. There were many attempts to take advantage of these waterways as connections to the Mississippi River, one major attempt was to turn the Fox and Wolf Rivers into a lock system from Green Bay to the Mississippi River. The very first attempt was undertaken by Nelson Hawks who would build a steamboat to prove the navigability of the Crawfish and Rock Rivers all the way to the Mississippi River. Nelson Hawks was a character, born in Manlius, New York 18 March 1803. Hawks had apparently patented a machine for making shingles in 1836 and in 1837 had emigrated westward to Wisconsin and made for the "Rock River Country" and had purchased 160 Acres in the Aztalan region.

His early neighbors in region were an encampment of three hundred Winnebago's or Ho-Chunk led by a Chief named Osuchka. When Hawks first arrived to Aztalan, Osuchka was sick and thought to be close to death. Hawks was able to administer medicine he had on hand to the ailing chief and Osuchka had made a complete recovery. Osuchka and Hawks became good friends and neighbors and Hawks would build a cabin, a farm, and a trading post in Aztalan and would trade with

the Ho-Chunk tribe. In 1839 Hawks had also struck East to Milwaukee, taking over management of the Old American House and a year later he had built his own Inn called the Fountain House. Hawks had saw the opportunity in the Crawfish River and set out to raise interest in building a steamboat there. Hawks' plan was to establish Aztalan as a head of navigation to bring people and material up Rock River from the opposite head of navigation at St. Louis, Missouri on the Mississippi River, which his steamboat was intended for regular service.

Nelson Hawks had organized a stock company and convinced many of the early settlers of Aztalan/Lake Mills to invest in his steamboat; historic crowdfunding. It was supposed to be a "source of profit for all concerned". The plan of the boat was drawn up by Newhall and Cotton. Named for its owner, the *N.P. Hawks* was a sternwheeler, 101 feet long by 18 feet in width and would draw only 12 inches of water. Which seems impressive for the Crawfish River. All of the materials for building the steamboat had to be transported from Milwaukee by wagon through the woods which was a great undertaking as at the time there were no roads yet connecting Milwaukee to Lake Mills. Initially in this research, the exact date of the construction is problematic as many sources date it to being between 1839 to 1841.

One source L.R. Caswell states that it was built in 1841 because "I have it from the diary kept by George W. Ogden, a neighbor of mine at that time, and I know him to be very accurate...The extract from the diary is as follows: "June 3 1841, a steamboat built at Aztalan came down the river." Ogden went aboard, stayed overnight near Catfish and went on to Janesville the next day. "The vessel was named *N.P. Hawks* after its builder and it would be the boat to singlehandedly establish Aztalan as the head of navigation." Another source a diary of Recollections of his son Nelson C. Hawks also states that the year of building and launch of the *N.P. Hawks* was in 1841 "Here was my birthplace, August 21st 1840...When the boat was completed, I was a year old." These two sources confirm the date of construction and launch as 1841 possibly making the *N.P. Hawks* the first steamboat built in Wisconsin. A third source, the early territorial newspaper, the *Madison Express* gives the exact date of the launch as 19 April 1841.

To put the steamer *N.P. Hawks* into context, steamboat inventor Robert Fulton's first steam boat *Clermont* was built in 1807, Fulton's first Mississippi River boat *New Orleans* was launched in 1811, and the first Great Lakes Steamboat *Walk-in-the-Water* was built and launched in 1818 steaming into Green Bay in September that same year. The first Mississippi River boat to steam the upper Mississippi River from St. Louis, Missouri to St. Paul, Minnesota was the *Virginia* in 1823. The *Savannah* was the first steamboat to make an Atlantic crossing in 1819 and finally, the first two British

steamboats the *Great Western* and *Sirius* built to make Atlantic crossings were built in 1837 and 1838 respectively.

Hawks had employed workmen to build the vessel with a Captain Baber as the superintendent and had a captain James L. Thayer whom was also a resident of Aztalan. The launching of the *N.P. Hawks* was a great event and “the whole country” came from miles around to view the spectacle. The vessel was launched successfully to a cheering crowd, however it quickly ran into trouble and grounded in the shallow Crawfish River about halfway between Aztalan and Jefferson (perhaps on an ancient fishing weirs). Cattle from the local farms were yoked and pulled the steamer across the rocks. The vessel made it to Jefferson, Wisconsin with much fanfare and celebration was held to commemorate the vessel. The *N.P. Hawks* continued on its voyage down the Rock River stopping at every town along the way never to return again. Once the *N.P. Hawks* had reached Rockford, Illinois and was used to ply between Rockford and Dixon, Illinois. The *N.P. Hawks* had left in gallant style with what started as a small party which had increased at every village along the Rock River until the vessel was carrying “some three hundred gentleman and ladies.” And arrived in Dixon to the sound of artillery fire.

The Rock River had proved to be unnavigable in spots and apparently due to the challenges of this voyage, Nelson realized the impracticality of his plan to establish Aztalan as a head of navigation and abandoned his plan. Nelson Hawks returned to Aztalan later that fall without his steamboat to a group of concerned investors, he had told them that his boat had made it to the Mississippi but he wasn't able to return upriver due to low water. He had offered his investors to become the sole owner and pay them back 50% of the amount they had invested in his boat. He gave notes payable one year from that date and investors were double concerned because cash and provisions were low at that time of year. All Hawks had at that point was a small stock of goods and little cash, but he was able to pay back his investors exactly as he had stated and his payment was accepted. In 1846 Nelson P. Hawks would establish the Hawks Inn in Delafield, Wisconsin.

There is no complete account of the entire voyage of the *N.P. Hawks*. Hawk's son would report that "steam boating on the Mississippi River lasted only a year (1842), where father sold his boat to a Hungarian named Haraszthy." Agoston Haraszthy is another character in early Wisconsin history and had purchased the vessel for \$16,000 for half interest and the condition that the vessel would operate on the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers and Haraszthy is widely reported as the owner of the first commercial steamboat on the Upper Mississippi. Reportedly Haraszthy arrived in

Milwaukee in May 1840 where initially he had settled on the Rock River in the nearby Lake Koshkonong region and by fall of the same year, would eventually settle and found Sauk City, (Sauk Prairie) Wisconsin after being stunned by the beauty of region. Little is known of Haraszthy's doings in 1841, but Haraszthy was certainly in position to be aware of the *N.P. Hawks* and he may have been in attendance during the launch of the vessel. Haraszthy had met a business partner in Milwaukee named Robert Bryant and had returned to his native Hungary in spring 1842 to retrieve his family and had returned by summer 1842. At some point between 1842 and when Haraszthy had left Wisconsin for California gold in 1849 he and Bryant had established a steamboat business. There is little record of this, but Haraszthy had apparently renamed the *N.P. Hawks* as the *Rock River*. Reportedly the *Rock River* was built in 1843 at a place titled Mazatlan, Illinois however, there is no town in Illinois on the Rock or Mississippi Rivers by that name or former town by that name. Based on the available evidence, I believe the name "Mazatlan" was a historical error and really means Aztalan and the vessel must have come from Illinois after its voyage down the Rock River to its confluence with the Mississippi at their confluence at Rock River, Illinois.

Haraszthy had seen the utility in steamboats from his travel from his native Hungary to Sauk City, Wisconsin and had marveled at the achievements of Robert Fulton. He had stated himself in his book *Utazás Ejszakamerikában* or *Traveler in North*

America: "Sooner or later steamboats will ply the mighty Wisconsin River making it possible to ship to the South the produce of the fertile land and the area's abundance of lead, copper and even iron ore." Agoston believed that a steamboat stationed at Sauk Prairie would not only be a boon to his city but also to the surrounding county and the *Rock River* was engaged in busy trade in both the Wisconsin and the upper Mississippi Rivers with Agoston personally commanding the vessel. According to Edmond Rendtorff who Haraszthy had employed as the *Rock River's* clerk made three trips from Galena, Illinois up the Mississippi River to Fort Snelling – Minneapolis, Minnesota. Another trip was from Fort Crawford -Prairie Du Chien, Wisconsin at the mouth of the Wisconsin River to Fort Winnebago – Portage, Wisconsin. The trip to Fort Winnebago at Portage was to carry a contingent of US Army troops whom were returning from the Seminole War in Florida. It is believed that the steamboat became a financial disappointment due to the fact that it never carried enough passengers and freight to return a profit. Additionally, the *Rock River* was said to be slow and underpowered. Agoston Haraszthy would leave Wisconsin for California in 1849 and was one of the pioneers who established California's wine industry. What finally became of the *Rock River* is a matter of conjecture. Rendtorff said that the boat had become stuck in the ice at Prairie Du Chien and they were unable to free the vessel, leaving it to its fate. Which is an exciting thing to me because it means that this wreck could still be out there somewhere. Another account states that Agoston sold the vessel where it was renamed

again and continued its career in the South on the lower Mississippi. Lastly, the vessel may have been arrested while it was docked down in St. Louis by creditors whom Agoston owed money and renamed and sold again. In either case this is where the *Rock River* so far disappears from the historical record.

The steamboat *N.P. Hawks* occupies a special place not only in Wisconsin History but early steamboat history as well. It was an ambitious undertaking that is little known and reflective of the record keeping at the time when Wisconsin was the frontier. What makes the *N.P. Hawks* unique is that it was built and launched right here at Aztalan then described as “the ancient city” and not in any of Wisconsin’s major shipbuilding communities like Milwaukee or Manitowoc. The story is made from many disparate sources that are separate and removed from each other and that is the work of a historian/archaeologist is bringing them together.

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