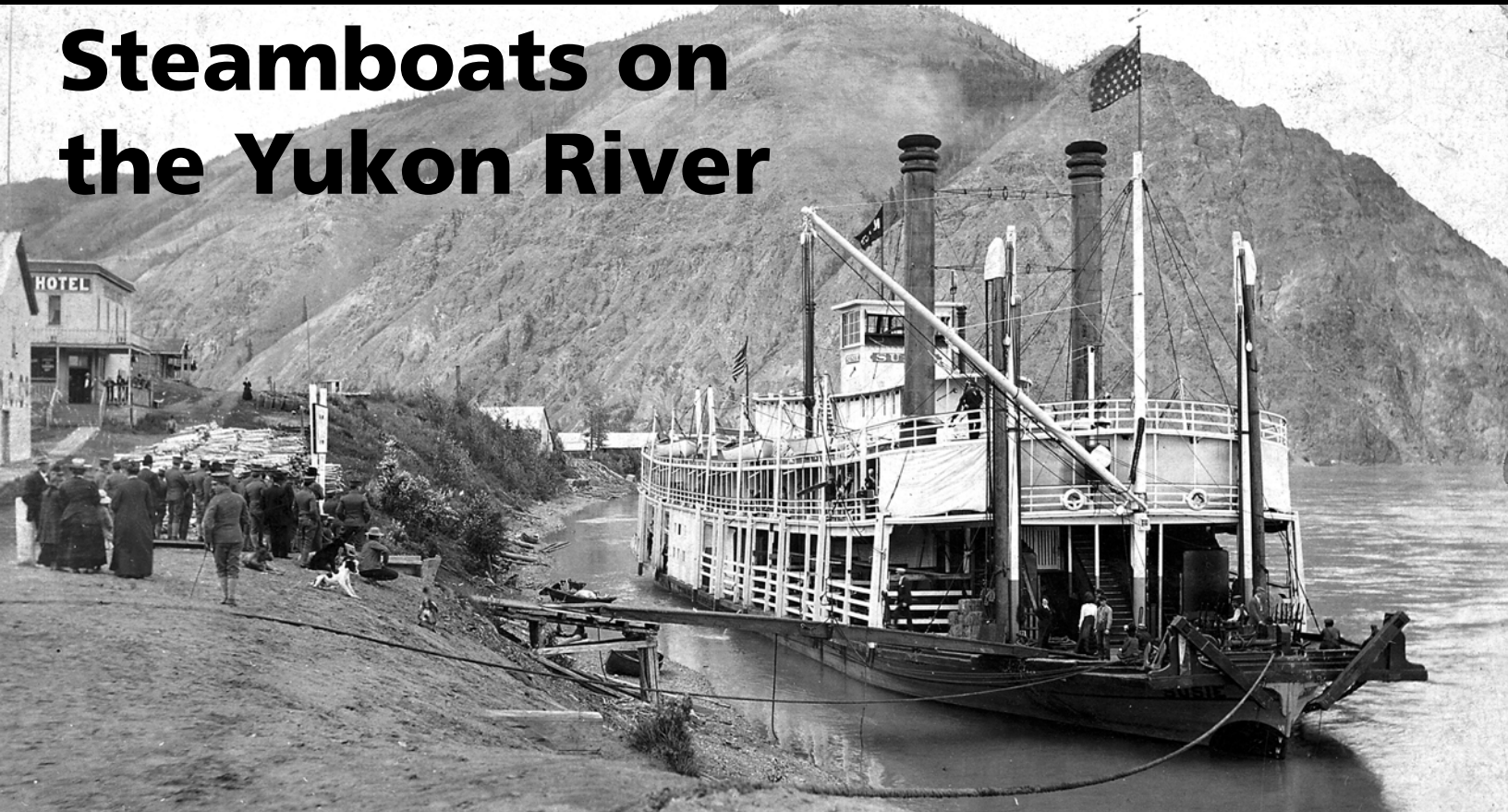




Steamboats on the Yukon River



The S.S. *Susie* offloading and refueling at Eagle, ca. 1909. Local residents, Fort Egbert soldiers, and neatly stacked cords of firewood for the steamer's boilers are onshore. For nearly 80 years steamboats on the Yukon River were a lifeline for remote communities in Alaska and the Canadian Yukon. Courtesy of Eagle Historical Society.

Perhaps no other form of transportation in North America has invoked as much nostalgia or has given rise to as much romanticism as the paddlewheel steamboat. And nowhere else were these vessels as numerous for as many years as on the Yukon River. The mighty Yukon bisects Alaska and cuts through much of Yukon Territory, offering a convenient 2000-mile highway through some of the most remote territory on the continent. During the brief summer months, steamboats were essential in the fur trade, mining industry, and the daily lives of Yukon River residents, who listened for the shrill boat's whistle and searched the sky for a puff of black smoke.

Early days

The steamboat *Yukon*, the first paddlewheeler on the Yukon River, arrived in 1869 as part of the Alaska Commercial Company's efforts to supply fur trading stations along the river and to bring furs out to market. Alaska Native men sold their furs to the company and also worked as navigators and crew on the boats. In addition to the usual hazards of low water, shifting channels, and submerged sand bars, the steamboats faced mechanical failures, boiler explosions, and collisions with logs and submerged rocks. The fur-trader Jack McQuesten became a boat captain overnight and declared, "It is a wonder to me that we didn't blow her up or sink her, as I didn't know anything about steamboating."

Three steamboats—*Yukon*, *St. Michael*, and *New Racket*—were operating on the river in 1885 when gold was discovered on the Fortymile River near the border between Alaska and Canada. Gold brought more outsiders to the region and competing trading companies began importing bigger and faster steamboats. The *Arctic*, for example, was 125 feet long and 30 feet wide and could make four round-trips between the mouth of the river and the gold fields each season.

*The next stop was old Circle City, a gold
mining region of yore / Where wood was put
on for the furnace, and freight was put off for
the store / Then, on to the village of Eagle.
Then, Fortymile Station was passed / And,
puffing, and chunking, and chugging, the
steamer reached Dawson at last.*

—John S. McCann
The Log of the Yukon (1924)

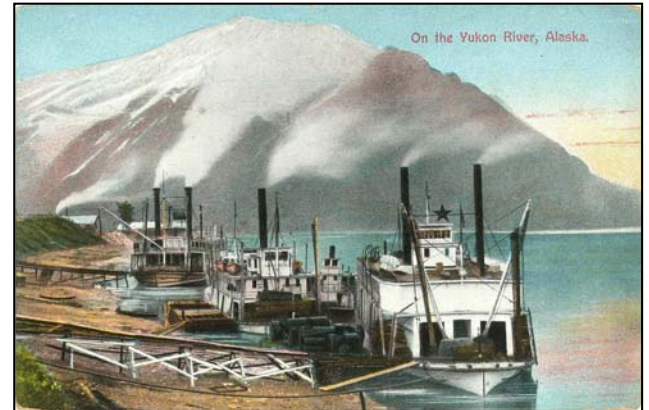
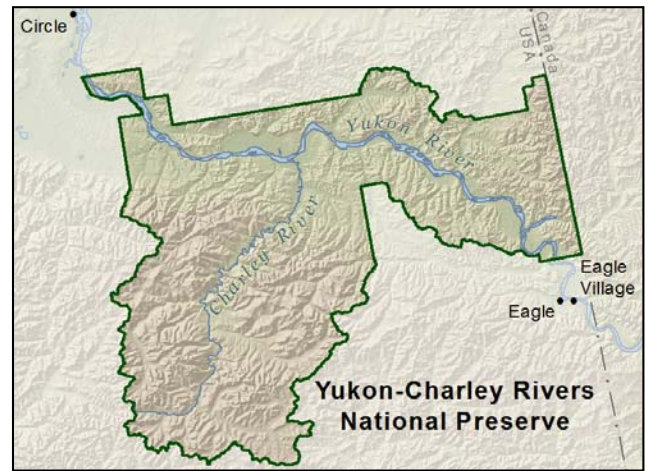
Gold rush transportation

In 1897 when the world learned of the dramatic gold strike in the Klondike, transportation companies blossomed and as many as 100 steamboats ran supplies and passengers from St. Michael near the river's mouth to the Canadian boomtown of Dawson City. The passage was called the "rich man's route" because it cost more to reach the gold fields this way than by taking the Chilkoot Trail or White Pass Trail out of southeast Alaska. The steamboats also needed fuel—the boilers burned several cords of wood each day or a combination of wood and imported coal. Woodchoppers made a living cutting spruce and birch for the ships, and enterprising stampedes looking for another way to profit from the gold rush began mining coal at several locations in what is today Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve. However, they soon found that the local coal was of inferior quality and not worth the effort. But the fact that prospectors would abandon the search for gold hints at the importance of the steamboat (and the fuel for steam boilers) in the development of the region.

A frontier lifeline

Once the Klondike rush faded and gold mining shifted to Nome, Fairbanks, and elsewhere, steamboats remained on the Yukon River, providing transportation, mail delivery, and freight-hauling for numerous river communities. In towns like Circle and Eagle the vessels could moor in front of commercial buildings and crews unloaded their cargo directly into warehouses. Steamboats could increase their freighting capacity by pushing barges from port to port. The construction of railroads to the continental interior—like the White Pass & Yukon (1900) and the Alaska Railroad (1923)—greatly diminished the need for a steamboat fleet on the Yukon, but the boats remained important to more isolated communities.

During the 1930s the ships delivered everything from groceries to enormous gold dredges dismantled for the voyage from San Francisco. In 1930 the 235-foot *Nenana*, with deluxe staterooms and a cruising speed of 12 knots, was built to carry people and freight out of Fairbanks to Yukon River locations, but the end of the steamboat era was nearing. World War II curtailed Yukon mining operations; airplanes were carrying passengers and the U.S. mail; and the grand steamboats were becoming outmoded and uneconomical. Other smaller, diesel-powered boats still plied the Yukon, but by 1955 the era of the paddlewheel steamboat was done.



Postcard of steamboats unloading cargo at Eagle, 1909.

For more information

Chris Allan, Historian
Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve
chris_allan@nps.gov
www.nps.gov/yuch/historyculture



Counterclockwise: Steamer *Nora* overloaded with gold-seekers on their way from Dawson to Nome, 1899; Alaska Commercial Co. steamer *Bella* and barge at Circle, ca. 1895; steamer *Yukon* at Circle, 1930; cord wood stacked on the banks of the Yukon River to fuel steamboats, ca. 1930. Courtesy of UAF Archives, University of Washington Archives, C.P. Johnston Company, and Eagle Historical Society.

