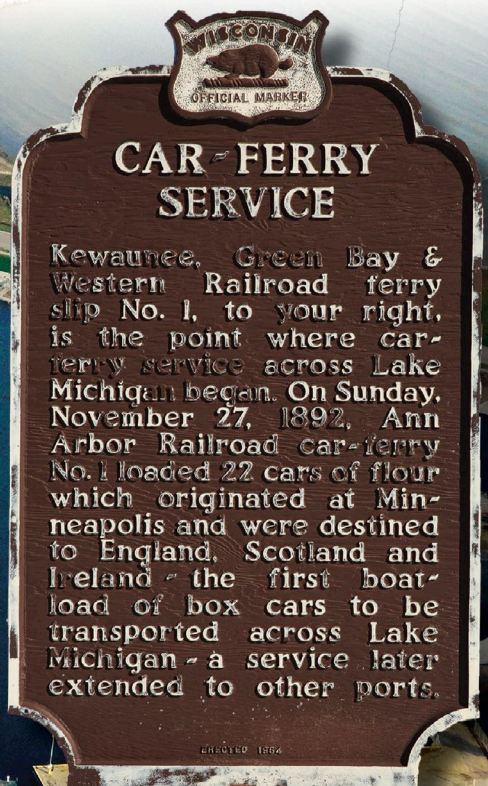




KEWAUNEE HARBOR

THE 1940s AND TODAY



by Jerry Abitz

FATHER JACQUES MARQUETTE LANDED IN THE area of present-day Kewaunee in 1674. Located at the base of a steep hill at the mouth of the Kewaunee River was a Potawatomic village. In 1836, it was the site of a gold rush. Well-known Yankees from the Green Bay area rushed in to purchase land and add to their potential wealth. Much to their disappointment, that “gold” turned out to be worthless “fool’s gold”!

Eventually, settlers moved in and harvested the abundant forests while immigrants sought land for farms. They were greeted by Edward Decker, a wealthy Yankee from Casco, Maine. He offered them small tracts of land suitable for farming at a price they could afford. A settlement was established, and, because of its harbor, flourished on the banks of the river.

Fast forwarding to the modern era, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, plunging the United States into a wartime economy. The Kewaunee Shipbuilding & Engineering Company was established on the north edge of the harbor. Part of the hill was bulldozed into the swamp below. This provided the shipyard with a suitable building site, and they proceeded to build supply ships for the military.

While those ships helped in the war effort by transporting supplies, one particular ship, the *Ager 2*, became famous in 1969. At the end of World War II, it had been moth-balled by the United States Navy somewhere on the west coast. In 1966, it was re-activated, outfitted as a reconnaissance ship, and renamed the *U.S.S. Pueblo*. Later it was captured as a spy ship by North Korea. Now, it lies anchored as a tourist attraction in the river of North Korea’s capital city, Pyongyang.

In 1968, a tragic fire burned the building that housed the shipyard and a new building was erected on the site. Today, it houses Kewaunee Fabrications, a division of the Oshkosh Corporation, which manufactures military equipment.

On the east side of the harbor, toward the mouth, is the Life Saving Station, on a narrow peninsula. Also on the east side, in 1891, the railroad came to Kewaunee. Wheat farmers in the Dakotas and Minnesota petitioned for an alternate route to the eastern seaboard for their annual crop. They complained that the extreme congestion in the Chicago railroad yards tended to delay cargo for several weeks. The Green Bay and Western Railroad already connected eastern Minnesota to Green Bay. As a subsidiary line, the Kewaunee & Western Railroad was built to link Green Bay to the port of Kewaunee. An offshoot of this railway was installed down the center of the peninsula.

Special car ferry ships were built with railroad tracks embedded in their decks so entire trains of boxcars could be loaded directly through the stern. Agreements were signed with railroads in Lower Michigan to transport those trains directly to the east coast

for overseas shipments. The first of these ferries, the *Ann Arbor, No. 1*, left Kewaunee on November 27, 1892, bound for Frankfort, Michigan. With the advent of automobiles, the ship operators discovered another source of income—transporting individuals and their autos for a faster route to Lower Michigan and beyond. The last car ferry left the harbor on November 24, 1990, when Kewaunee lost a bidding war with Manitowoc. The ferry departed south for Manitowoc and still operates there today, transporting automobiles and their passengers across the lake.

More recently, the idled rails leading to the two sites where the ferry boats docked have been replaced with a paved road. Large, luxurious homes emerged in the residential development along Hathaway Landing. The homeowners have water frontage with unimpeded views of both Lake Michigan and the harbor. Observing the area today, one sees a large number of privately owned vessels as well as commercial charter fishing boats operating on Lake Michigan. They have replaced the old-time fishing fleet and the Goodrich ships that once transferred goods and passengers to and from Kewaunee before the automobile age. Even today, the harbor remains a hub of activity attracting those from afar who enjoy fishing for trout and salmon. Especially appealing to many tourists is the tug boat, *U.S.S. Ludington*. On D-Day, during World War II, it saw action while crossing the English Channel to the coast of Normandy.

Jerry Abitz has served as a board member for the Kewaunee County Historical Society and edited the society’s newsletter. He has been a member of the Historic Preservation Committee for the Hazelwood Historic House Museum in Green Bay, where he led tours, and has been a board member of the Brown County Historical Society, which honored him with their Historic Preservation Award in 2001.

Notes

1. John Kelly, “Lake Michigan Carferries,” *Classic Trains*, <http://ctr.trains.com/railroad-reference/operations/2001/09/lake-michigan-carferries>.
2. Kewaunee County Historical Society, Kewaunee, WI, *Kewaunee Ships*, Albums 1, 2, & 3.
3. Thomas L. Schuller, *From a Swamp to a Shipyard: Kewaunee Shipbuilding and Engineering Corp.: The War Years, 1941–1946* (Kewaunee, WI: Abacus Associates, 1997).

Opposite Top: Kewaunee Harbor shipyard circa 1940s.

Opposite Bottom: Contemporary aerial view of Kewaunee Harbor.

Contemporary photos by Jacob Lendale
Historical images courtesy of Kewaunee County Historical Society