

# The Saginaw Valley's First Steamboat & Logging Cass River

By Mark Putnam

The great logging boom along the Cass River was ignited in the fall of 1848 when Curtis Emerson purchased land between the old Chippewa Village and what is now the Caro Dam and the City of Caro. This area, which was very compact, benefited greatly from the flow of the powerful Cass River.

To start this daring project of logging Cass River, essentially at the site of today's Caro, a steamboat first needed to be built. Upon the suggestion of Capt. Mowry, James Fraser, Dr. Daniel H. Fitzhugh, Daniel H. Fitzhugh Jr., Curtis Emerson, and James Eldridge, along with others embarked on a project to build a steamboat capable of navigating the shallow waters of the Saginaw River. In the summer of 1847, Mr. Fraser and Daniel H. Fitzhugh Jr. traveled to Pittsburgh and contracted for a steamboat's engines. They returned to Saginaw with the engines and began constructing the steamboat on the Saginaw River. Construction took place near Emerson's Mill at East Saginaw for easy access to sawn lumber.

It was planned by Emerson that the gigantic white pine timber from the area near the site of today's City of Caro and above the old Native Village, now Caro Dam, would be cut into logs and then put into the Cass River in the high water of spring to flow swiftly down the Cass River to its confluence with the Saginaw River. At this point, the logs would have been boomed, or corralled, using wooden pins and rope, and towed by the steamboat to the Emerson Mill where the logs were sawn into lumber.

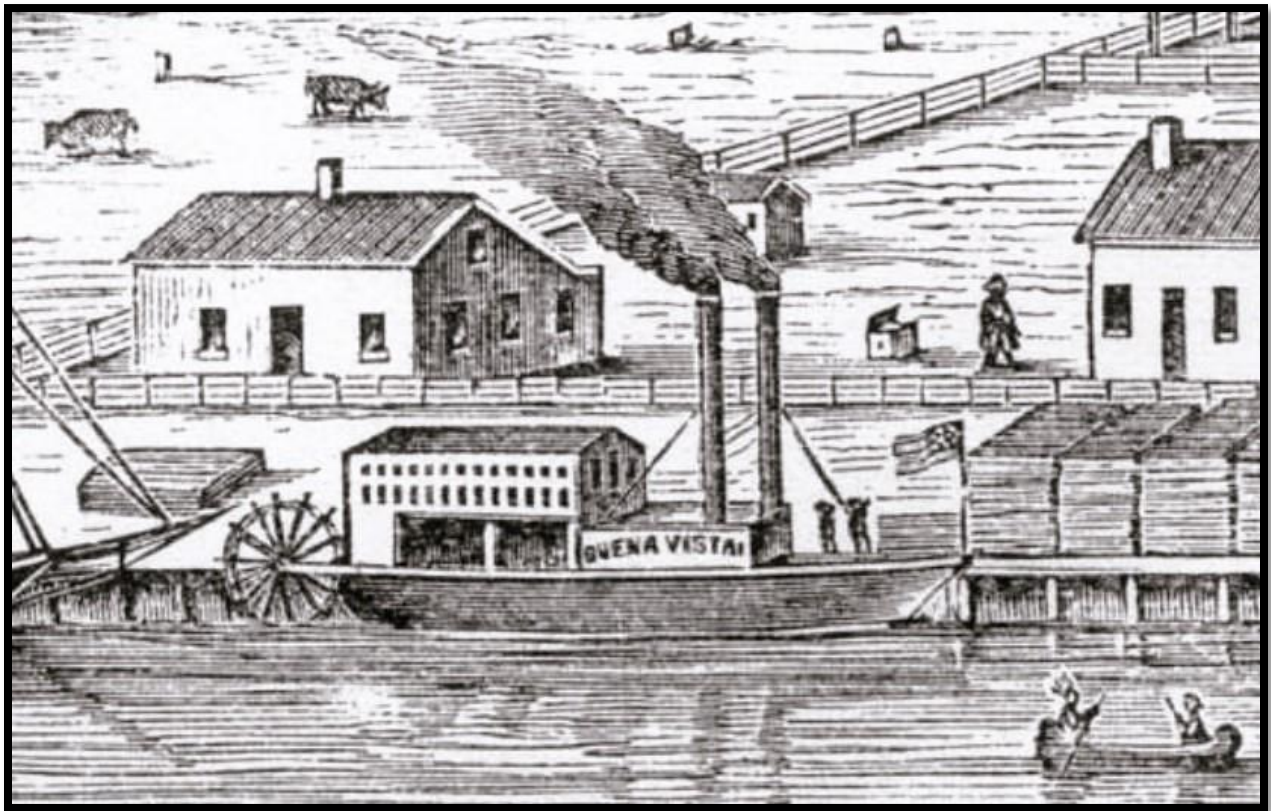
The hull of the steamboat progressed considerably during the 1847 season, built of sturdy oak timbers and lumber from Emerson's sawmill. She was launched in 1848 with much celebration under her name "Buena Vista."

The "Buena Vista" was a stern-wheeler with a boiler at the bow and long cast-iron pipes running under the upper deck to power its two rear engines. Though slow, awkward, and somewhat noisy, it would become a favored means of river travel, lacking a passenger cabin, but featuring rows of benches.

In September of 1848, Curtis Emerson and James Eldridge of East Saginaw purchased 160 acres of white pine timberland in Section 10 of Indianfields, where crops likewise flourished.

The woodland timber was felled, cut into logs, and sent downstream along the Cass River during the spring flooding of 1849. Following this, the "Buena Vista" would have encountered and towed these logs after they were corralled in booms on the upper Saginaw River. The steamboat then towed these booms down to the Emerson Sawmill, where the logs were processed into lumber. Subsequently, the lumber produced at the mill was transported further downstream along the Saginaw River to ships at Bay City or Lower Saginaw.

It's clear that the "Buena Vista's" initial significant duty was handling the products from the White Pine timberland along the Cass River, starting from the future site of Caro.



**"Buena Vista" at Emerson's Sawmill**