

# Looking Back #14

## Passenger Steamer *Thomas Friant*

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Museum at Harsha House

Charlevoix Historical Society



The 96-foot, wooden-hulled *Thomas Friant* was built in 1884 at Grand Haven, Michigan for Ralph and Reuben Vanderhoef for use as a ferry. The vessel enjoyed a full four decades of service. Five of those years were spent in Charlevoix. After ferry service on the Grand River in Grand Haven, it came here in 1887 to be put on a unique route that only the *Friant* ever served. There were two types of passenger steamers that called in Charlevoix. The larger type served in Lake Michigan, such as those connecting Chicago and Mackinac, or between Traverse City and the Straits, with stops in the region for most of them such as Northport, Norwood, Charlevoix, Petoskey, and Harbor Springs. Smaller steamers connected Charlevoix with places along Pine Lake, to be known after 1926 as Lake Charlevoix. The *Friant*, and only the *Friant*, regularly served both lakes. In 1889, it was reported to still be on duty on them as late as December.



The *Friant* comes in to Charlevoix, ca. 1891, with the Lake Michigan beach area behind it still untouched by development. Some of the lower channel's earliest wood revetments line both sides. This view would all change in 1900 with the arrival of the Coast Guard station situated along the opposite shore at left.

The *Friant's* route connected Harbor Springs, Petoskey, Charlevoix, then down Lake Charlevoix to East Jordan and back. The vessel switched its home base to Harbor Springs in 1890, probably for logistical purposes. Boyne City was presumably not included because of the already established routes between Charlevoix and that town. Why was East Jordan considered to be a necessary, and potentially lucrative stop? Because those who lived in that area might want to have direct connection to the two Lake Michigan ports without having to change boats in Charlevoix. This saved a good deal of their time. Passengers didn't have to cool their heels here in town waiting for the departure of the next available boat north or south. The schedule apparently seemed to work. Plus, a new iron works had been established in East Jordan in 1883, still going strong, and that company alone began to need regular service to the outside.

Another view of the *Friant*, this one looking northwest over the original 1885 north pier trestle, or catwalk, that gave access to Charlevoix's first lighthouse, seen at far left, ca. 1889, with its open lower forward deck





The *Friant* also served in other capacities, the view at left being a judges platform for a Belvedere Club resort regatta, probably 1891. Around 1890, these had grown to huge, three-day affairs that attracted boats and spectators from around the country. Here, a pair of two-man sculls pose in front of the *Friant*.

A Belvedere Club excursion getting ready to board at the resort's dock on the upper channel, complete with band, 1887



The same excursion, filling the *Friant* to capacity, leaving for Lake Michigan. The band is on the pilothouse roof. Behind the boat are, at left, the Fountain City House hotel, Charlevoix's first, and the Argo Milling Company grist mill at right, here two years old.



The *Friant* coming in to the Mason Street dock on Round Lake, before the redesign and repainting of 1891. All Lake Charlevoix steamer trips started here.

The sudden end of the *Thomas Friant* in Charlevoix came right after the arrival of Charlevoix's railroad in late June of 1892. All of a sudden, the boat stopped appearing here, to the bafflement of everyone in town. But the most lucrative part of its route had vanished overnight. Railroad passengers prior to this had traveled north either to Boyne Falls, from where they could take a stagecoach seven miles to Boyne City to meet Lake Charlevoix boat connections there, or onward to Petoskey where the *Friant* would be waiting for them for the trip to Charlevoix. In an instant, the *Friant* was no longer needed.

It went back into service in various ports along Lake Superior, and ended its life as a gillnet fishing vessel near Wisconsin/Minnesota. In January, 1924, the boat got caught in the ice there, which punched a hole in the hull. The crew was able to walk the two miles safely to land, but the stricken *Friant* sank into 300 feet of water. Rediscovered in 2004, the wreck was placed on the National Register of Historic Places fifteen years later.



In 1891, this version of the *Thomas Friant*, without an open lower forward deck, tied up at Mason Street, with its new steering pointer on prominent display.