



## Dick Shinn's Ferry

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Article Summary: This famous cable ferry across the Platte River just north of David City was in service from 1859 to 1872.

Note: A E Fuller's note on the operation of the ferry appears at the end of this article.

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JOHN F. ZEILINGER

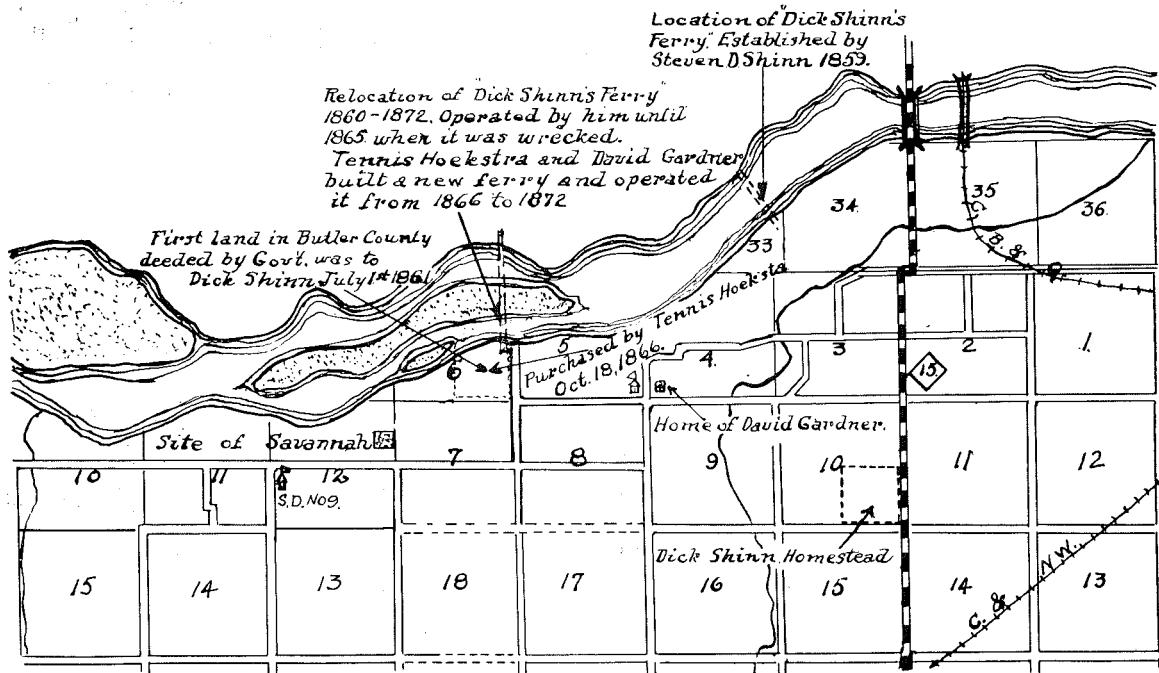
## Dick Shinn's Ferry

JOHN F. ZEILINGER, David City

The subject of the location of "Dick Shinn's Ferry" on the Platte River in the early days has been before me for a long time. In looking it up I found two living witnesses, both having helped operate it at different times and in different locations. The ferry was first located by Dick Shinn just north of the James Blair house, which is one mile west of the present Schuyler Bridge location. This was in 1859, and it was there until Savannah was located. It was necessary to change the ferry slightly at times when the channel itself changed or sand-bars formed in the way.

My first witness is Asa Garfield, who came to Butler County with his parents in 1858. The Garfields were an important family of North Butler in those days. Five sons and two daughters helped greatly to build up the material and educational interests of the county. Mr. Garfield was a boy helper in operating the ferry at its first location.

Henry Hoekstra is my other witness. He helped operate the ferry at its last location. Mr. Hoekstra came to Butler County with his parents in 1865, and his father located one mile east of Savannah. I talked to Mr. Garfield and Mr. Hoekstra when together at our Old Settler's Picnic. I told them that James Green, who at one time helped to operate the ferry,



LOCATION OF SHINN'S FERRY

had stated that it was one mile east of the Schuyler bridge location. These men (Garfield and Hoekstra) agreed that "Jimmie" was in error, and that the original ferry was one mile west of the bridge site.

This makes the ferry almost due north of the James Blair farmhouse, which is close to the east line of his farm near the section line one mile west of the bridge. Just north of the farmhouse the land slopes down to the lower bottom, and it is fully a mile down to the river where the ferry landed the pioneers. From these two men I found out that the ferry had several locations, but the one above described and another not quite a mile east of the west line of Bone Creek Township were mostly used. The landing on this latter location was near the east line of the southwest quarter of Section 6, Township 16, Range 3 East. This is about one hundred yards west of the section line, and was the first land in the county deeded by the Government.

The original "Shinn's Ferry" was lost in the spring of 1865. On a very windy and moonlight night when the water was high in the river, two men "stole the boat" (as Mr. Hoekstra puts it) and it started across the river. When about midway in the channel the boat dipped under water on the up-stream side, and soon was covered over, broke away from the cable, and went down. It was never seen again. No doubt it washed down a short distance and was buried under sand and gravel. Probably it formed the starting-point of one of the numerous towheads now in that channel.

The two men aboard, also, were never found. This loss was witnessed by the regular operators who happened to come out of their cabin just after the men got started away from the shore. As no one was missing from the locality, it was evident that the two men were strangers trying to get away without being seen. If they had been familiar with the operation of such a ferry the tragedy might not have happened.

This was the finish of the original "Dick Shinn Ferry."

Dick Shinn was an early settler, his homestead being one mile north of Octavia, on the west side of Highway No. 15. Old settlers still point out the grove of trees on the place where his house stood. No one seems to know what became of him, but I suppose it is fair to say that he "went West."

After the loss of Shinn's Ferry the people were without one for a whole year. Then, in the spring of 1866, Tennis Hoekstra\* and David R. Gardner began the construction of a new ferry. To assist them they hired Mike Ebal, a settler who lived eight miles west. They paid him \$3.00 per day, which was considered high wages at that time. This Hoekstra-Gardner ferry was sixty feet long and twenty feet wide. The bed-pieces

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\* Tennis Hoekstra was born in Holland and came to Pella, Iowa, when a young man. He was a soldier in the Union Army, and after his discharge settled in Nebraska.



HENRY T. HOEKSTRA

were hewn out of cottonwood logs, and it took three months to build and launch and make it ready for traffic. Henry Hoekstra tells me the cable for this ferry was two inches in diameter, and that it was quite a job to get it across the river and in place. They first fastened the Butler County end, then laid it on the bank up stream full length. A smaller rope was tied on the end of the cable; the other end of the small rope was carried across the river by men in boats, and then the men pulled the cable across by the small rope. Mr. Hoekstra saw this done, and he says it took all the men of the vicinity to raise the cable in place.

Tennis Hoekstra owned the land at the Butler County end of the ferry. Later he bought Mr. Gardner's interest in it and operated it with the assistance of his son Henry. This Hoekstra Ferry was located at the same place where the Shinn Ferry had been, and was operated until the Schuyler Bridge was built in the summer of 1872. Later the old boat was used to assist in repairing the bridge, which was often out of order. I do not know what became of it finally. That first Schuyler bridge was eighty to one hundred rods west of the present bridge.

A steam ferry was operated for one year directly north of Savannah. This would make its location one mile west of the last location of the cable ferry, and the time of the steam ferry the latter part of 1868 and into 1869. When our outfit crossed by cable ferry on the 25th of April, 1872, the north side was all sand-bar. We drove quite a distance over the dry sand

to reach the ferry. The channel was on the south side, with a high bank to pull up; at that time the channel was quite deep and about one hundred yards across.

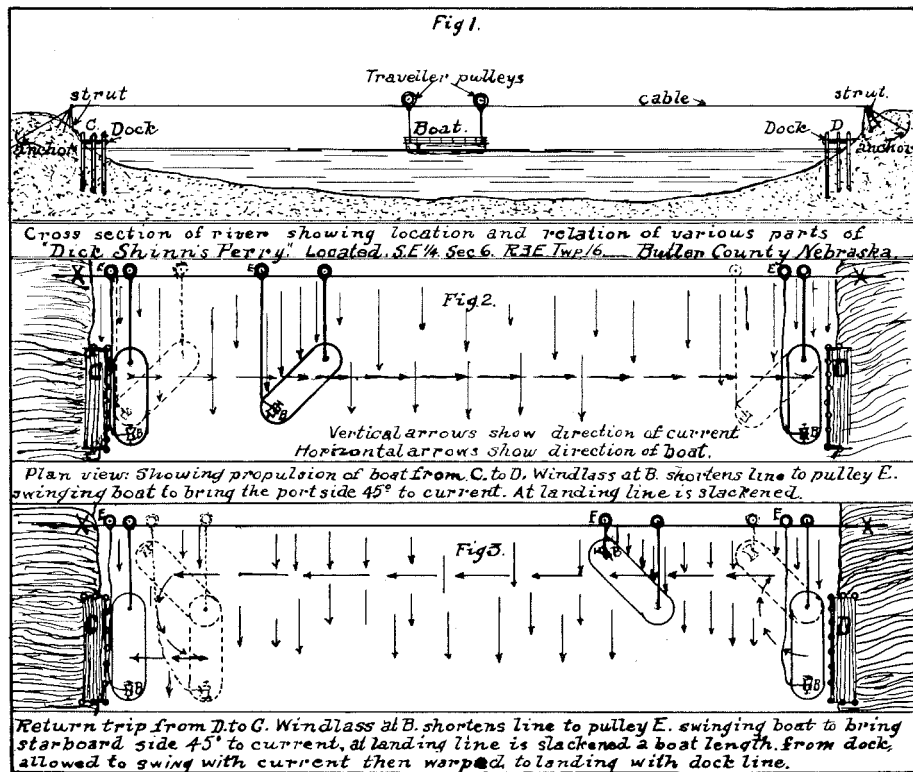
For five or six miles along the center of the north line of Butler County the Platte River has banks from ten to forty feet high, while the north bank is merely a slope of sand bars. At low water the channel is all on the south side, and when the river is high it spreads north over many of the sand bars. Further east it has no marked channel but spreads out over the whole river bed, as at the Schuyler bridge. The location of the cable ferry near Savannah was the best possible, as the channel was narrow and always navigable. The cable extended out north for some distance, which would allow its use when the river was quite high.

A cable ferry is operated by changing the length of rope at one end by means of a windlass. When the rope to cable is shortened it holds that end of the boat up-stream, and the water flowing against the side of the boat pushes it across. When this rope is lengthened it puts the opposite end of boat up-stream and the boat crosses back. The boatmen used poles ten or twelve feet long to assist in crossing sand bars.

Not a vestige of either of these ferries is known to exist today. They were built and owned in Butler County, but were operated entirely in Colfax County. The south edge of the river was the county line at that time; now, when bridges are built, Butler County has to pay for half the bridge.

MR. AND MRS.  
ASA GARFIELD





SHOWING THE OPERATION OF SHINN'S FERRY

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## The Operation and Rigging of Shinn's Ferry

A. E. FULLER

*Historical Society Topographer*

This famous ferry across the Platte River just north of David City in Butler County was in service for thirteen years — 1859-1872.

The method of propulsion and the rigging to attain it are well worth recording for history.

No doubt the landing spaces and the shifting sandbars had much to do with the novel method used, but the fact that it did operate successfully for thirteen years proves its practicability.

The description of the ferry was given by Henry Hoekstra, son of Tennis Hoekstra, who with David R. Gardner built and operated the ferry from 1886 to 1872. It was 60 feet long and 20 feet wide. That would give a dead weight of about 15 tons and a load displacement of about 55 tons with a draft of 12 inches.

The thrust of the river current against the side of the boat (assuming an average current flow of about 100 feet per minute) would be 1,650 pounds at an angle of 45°. This is about equal to a thrust of five horsepower laterally across the current.

It would seem that better control and maneuverability in starting and landing could have been attained with a windlass installed at each end of the boat.

Figure 1 in the drawing on opposite page shows the location and relation of the various parts.

Figure 2 shows the starting and landing of the boat with the pressure of the river current on the left or port side, and how the windlass is used to position the boat so that the side will be 45° to the river current.

Figure 3 shows the return trip with the pressure of the river current on the starboard or right side. It shows how the windlass was used to accomplish the trip; also, the reverse landing that could have been avoided if the boat had been equipped with a windlass at each end.