



[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Contact Us](#)



[custom_search]

UNCATEGORIZED

A Brief History Of Ferries On The Bay

 January 17, 2000  BAY CROSSINGS STAFF REPORT  Comments Off

Published: January 2000

Bay Area ferry services have played a long and historic role in the development of the region, at one time constituting the greatest water transit system in the world. From the Gold Rush until the completion of the Bay and Golden Gate Bridges, ferries provided the only transportation across the Bay.

The first recorded ferry system on the Bay was established in 1850, the year California entered the Union, when the *Kangaroo* entered service on a route between San Francisco and the Oakland Estuary. In 1852 Oakland granted the first Bay ferry franchise to a reliable maritime operator. By the late 1800s, 22 passenger cross-bay ferry companies were in operation, and another five companies carried only automobiles. The ferries served approximately 30 destinations, approximately half of them on the San Francisco—Oakland corridor.

Most ferry lines were established and operated by railroads seeking means to extend their service across the Bay. Consolidation took its toll and by the early 1930s only 10 passenger

ferry operators remained. The Southern Pacific Company was by far the largest operator, with 22 vessels in full time service in 1935. The Key System and Northwestern Pacific Railroad Company held second and third place. In 1921, these three operators carried 27 million, 15 million, and 7 million passengers respectively.

Most vessels were large and stately. The Northwestern Pacific's *Eureka* had seating for 2,300 and standing room for a further 1,000. All of Southern Pacific's major vessels had seating capacity of greater than 1,000; the *Golden Bear* could seat 2,200.

By today's standards, the ferries were slow. Vessels were powered by steam until the early 1920s when diesel engines began to appear. Even in the 1930s, the longest route between Vallejo and San Francisco, a 30-mile run, took 1 hour 45 minutes, at an average speed of 15 knots. On the more popular routes, however, service was frequent. The Richmond — San Rafael ferries ran 30 minutes apart when two boats were running, 20 minutes apart when three were in service.

The trip on all ferry lines was of sufficient duration between Oakland, Alameda, Sausalito and San Francisco to permit consumption of a substantial meal. Service, by and large, was fast and courteous and the quality of the food exceptionally high, considering the handicap of space in which it was prepared.

(San Francisco Bay Ferryboats, *George H. Harlan, 1967.*)

Due to the longer travel times and slower pace of life, restaurant services on boats were the most patronized of on-board diversions. Many concessions were not under the management of the ferry company. The most famous of these were the eating facilities operated by the National Service Company on the Key Route boats, with chefs as well trained in the culinary arts as any in the area.

In 1930, forty-three ferryboats, the largest number to have ever operated on the bay, carried a total of forty-seven million passengers and more than six million automobiles from shore to shore. Each day, fifty to sixty thousand people crossed the bay between San Francisco and Alameda; 25 percent of them rode in automobiles.

(*Mel Scott as quoted in The Ferry Building, Nancy Olmsted, 1998.*)

The great peak ferry transit years were 1935 and 1936, when 50 to 60 million people crossed the Bay annually on almost 50 ferries, and 250,000 passengers flowed through San Francisco's Ferry Building each day. On the waterside, ferries made 340 arrivals and departures daily. On the landside, connecting streetcars left every 20 seconds.

Then came the great bridges. First the Golden Gate, followed by the Bay Bridge in 1937. The decline of ferry service was rapid, and by 1958 there were no more ferries. Moreover, any entrepreneurs who wanted to start a ferry system could not. To prevent competition, the Legislature had adopted several laws and resolutions prohibiting alternative forms of transportation within 10 miles of the Bay Bridge. There was to be one way and only one way over the Bay, and that way was over the bridge.

Ironically, in the late 1950s and early 1960s the Legislature recognized that congestion would soon reach a critical stage and authorized the Bay Area Rapid Transit system. The BART transbay tube was paid for with bridge tolls – as compensation for the two Bridge Railway tracks removed from the lower deck in the early 1960s. But ferries were still prohibited from competing with the bridges.

Over time, assisted by mounting traffic congestion, transit system emergencies, and natural disasters, ferries started to stage a comeback. Beginning with at first with the 1960s Tiburon ferries, which operated only a few daily trips, the Ferry Building today hosts about 130 arrivals and departures daily – a little less than half of the activity of the 1930s, but still a significant increase.

Natural Disasters Bring Back the Ferries

By the time the Marin County approaches to the Golden Gate Bridge were closed by mudslides in 1982, ferry service had reached a turning point. Until that time, conventional wisdom held that the Golden Gate Larkspur Ferry project was a noble but failed experiment, over-budget and with disappointing patronage. Ferry operating costs were perceived as the justification behind every toll increase on the Golden Gate Bridge. But when the mudslides cut automobile access to San Francisco, ferries suddenly had another reason for existence. Their often criticized redundancy was now seen as desirable. On one day alone, the three 700-passenger Larkspur ferries carried more than 12,200 passengers.

In retrospect, the Golden Gate Larkspur ferries fell victim to the 1960s trend to push the technology beyond reasonable limits. The large Spaulding boats were initially powered by three gas turbine engines which proved enormously expensive as fuel prices increased. The Golden Gate Bridge Highway and Transportation District was already planning a re-engineering to diesel, and when the conversion did occur, operating costs dropped. This cost decrease, coupled with the newly perceived need for redundancy, put the Larkspur service on a stable course: no expansion, but no contraction either.

In the meantime, congestion on the state-owned bridges was building and there were periodic calls for increased ferry service. Two events critically shaped the public perception of ferries: the 1979 BART transbay tube shutdown, and the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. When the BART tube fire closed the system's transbay capacities in 1979, buses and some ferries were pressed into service. The Berkeley Ferry Committee established a new ferry route from the Berkeley Marina to San Francisco. Unfortunately, once the BART tube reopened, the Berkeley Ferry lost enough passengers from the unsubsidized operation to slip into financial deficit and it was discontinued. However, the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake awakened interest in the role of ferries as important emergency links. The ensuing month-long closure of the Bay Bridge powerfully reinforced that perception. On Wednesday November 1, 1989, two weeks after the earthquake, ferries from Alameda, Oakland, Berkeley, and Vallejo carried about 6,800 passengers in the morning peak period (about the same as could be carried in automobiles on three lanes of the bridge in one hour). All-day totals of 20,000 passengers were normal during the rebuilding period. Emergency preparedness became a priority and ferries were an important part of the preparedness picture.

At the same time, ferry technology was making rapid progress toward achieving higher speeds with lower operating costs. Until the mid-1980s, the fastest ferry operated at about 18 knots (20 mph), too slow to compete with highway travel. The introduction of the high-speed catamaran, powered by conventional diesel engines, brought ferries into the universe of marketable, competitive and financially viable transit options. Ferries now routinely achieve speeds of more than 40 mph, substantially increasing their marketability. Since ferries need little in the way of right-of-way facilities, overall costs (per seat mile) are much lower for ferries than for rail systems, and about the same compared to bus service. In response to the Loma Prieta earthquake, the Legislature repealed the prohibitions against

other competing transportation modes, removing the last of the passive constraints to increased ferry service.



BAY CROSSINGS STAFF REPORT

RELATED ARTICLES

UNCATEGORIZED

Just imagine....

📅 January 17, 2000 👤

BAY CROSSINGS STAFF REPORT

Published: January 2000

You live in Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, Sonoma, or Solano County and you work in Oakland, San Francisco, Redwood City, or San Jose. Or you live in the South Bay and work in the East Bay, North Bay, or West Bay. In the morning a clean, modern shuttle bus or local light [...]

UNCATEGORIZED

Are Ferries Environmentally Friendly?

📅 March 17, 2000 👤

BAY CROSSINGS STAFF REPORT

Published: March, 2000

There is good news and there is bad news for ferry advocates made anxious by charges that ferries damage the environment. The good news is that the environmentalist leading the charge against ferries now believes that “it’s possible that San Francisco will one day have the worlds biggest,

UNCATEGORIZED

Senate Bill 428 Establishes Bay Area Water Transit Authority

📅 January 17, 2000 👤

BAY CROSSINGS STAFF REPORT

Published: January 2000
On October 10 Governor Gray Davis signed into law a bill creating the Bay Area Water Transit Authority. The new Authority is charged with preparing a detailed plan for expanding ferry services on the bay as a way to reduce congestion on the region’s roads. It is

and “greenest” ferry
system, [...]

further empowered to
build and [...]

◀ Just imagine....

Governor Gray Davi...

PREVIOUS EDITION

Select Month



TOPICS

A Better Life - Blue Habits Baja (1)

Alameda/Oakland ferry (14)

Alameda ferry (13)

Ana Blanco (1)

Call of the Sea (1)

Chance of Alcatraz (1)

Chase Center (4)

Coronavirus (13)

COVID-19 (11)

Elaine Forbes (1)

Embarcadero (3)

Ferry (9)

Golden Gate Ferry (8)

Highway & Transportation District (4)

International Ocean Film Festival (1)

Jessica Alba (1)

Jim Wunderman (1)

Larkspur Ferry (3)

mission bay ferry (3)

mission bay ferry terminal (2)

Monique Moyer (1)

Nina Rannells (2)

Oakland ferry (12)

Pier 39 (2)

PIER39 (1)

Port of San Francisco (11)

Port of SF (4)

Richmond (1)

richmond ferry (9)

San Francisco (1)

San Francisco Bay Ferry (9)

San Francisco Ferry Building (4)

Sausalito Ferry (1)

sea level rise (2)

social distancing (1)

Tiburon Ferry (1)

tideline (2)

tourism (1)

Under Thin Ice (1)

Vallejo Ferry (15)

Warriors (1)

Water Emergency Transportation Authority (20)

waterfront business (1)

Waterfront Tourism Businesses (1)

WETA (22)

ARCHIVES

Select Month



CATEGORIES

Select Category



© 2025 Bay Crossings. All rights reserved.

Because we love ferries, the waterfront, and building community.