made from Fort Abercrombie to Fort Gary by John Pope, an army engineer who found the river feasible for steam boating.

The First Steam Boat on the Red River 1859

The chamber of commerce of St. Paul wanted faster transportation than ox cart from Fort Gary, to St. Paul. The chamber of commerce of St. Paul offered $2,000 for any one putting a steam boat on the Red River. A young man by the name of Anson Northup had a boat on the Mississippi. He wanted to work his money. he built the first to put a boat on the Red River. He sailed his boat up the Minnesota River as far as Crow Wing. Here he dismantled the boat and hired 64 ox teams, 34 wagons and 60 men to transport his boat to the Red River. The boat hull was 90 feet long with 24-foot wide ribbons. It took 21 days to make the trip from Crow Wing to a place called Lafayette at the mouth of the Cheyenne River. They were lost several times but reached the Red River April 1, 1859. The boat was assembled with the aid of hand-powered whipsaws and prairie schooners. It was the first trip to Fort Gary but proved that steam boats could be used on the Red River. Northup sold his boat for $8,000, bought four more steam boats and went into business. In 1862, Northup raised a company of militia men to protect the unprotected settlers of the frontier from Indian massacres.

At the peak of the steam boat days on the Red River there were six different boat lines. Some made as much as 65 trips a year. There were steam boats on the Red Lake River, Grand Forks to Fisher’s Landing and for five years, 1871 to 1876, to Crookston. During this time freight was hauled to Crookston instead of Moorhead and then transferred to steam boats. Crookston became head of navigation and over 1,000 tons of freight were hauled by the two steam boats, “The Dakota and The Independence.”

Jim Hill and Norman Kittson had boats on the Red Lake River and the Red River. These same men gained control of almost all the boating on both the Red Lake River and the Red River. One of the first steam boats bought was built in Grand Forks. It is standing at that point today. This boat was purchased from Fisher’s Landing and the men of the Red River were so averse to having a foreigner with the same name take command of the river. It is today at King City.

Steam boats were built at Lafayette landing and a few at Moorhead, mostly sawed by hand-powered whipsaws. Fort Gary docks built and repaired steam engines. The steam boats ran into problems in times of low water level and sometimes cut off part of the river to the west. In 1879 Gary navigated the water and found any account of steam boats going up the Red Lake River from Crookston to Thief River Falls. But at Thief River Falls there were five steam boats of the smaller size that went up river on the Red Lake River.

In 1861, government land surveying was in full swing in Minnesota and Polk County. The Detroit Station, now Detroit Lakes, was one of the headquarters for survey crews in Minnesota, and Old George Town was another. Days were eight to ten to get around this town. In the early years there was a large number of Indian men sent to every landing to report the number of Indians in the area. The Indians would come in from the south and west. They would camp out on the river and then travel back to their homes.

In 1862 the Homestead Act was passed by Congress and any person could get government land under the three different options that were available. Steam boats were on the Red River. This made people come and demand land in the Red River Valley even though the land still belonged to the Indians. Indians were molesting the French families that lived along the Red River and where trappers cut wood for the steam boats and raised a garden for a living. Indians were demanding tolls for steam boats on the Red River, they wanted $10,000 a year for damages, claiming that boats frightened their game and ruined their fishing. The biggest complaint of all was that boats noise and whistles bothered their dead so they could not sleep.

1862 - Treaty of Old Crossing of Red Lake River That