

CHAPTER VII

RIVALRY BETWEEN STEAMBOAT COMPANIES—STEAMBOAT DISASTERS —GREAT IMPROVEMENT IN STEAMBOAT CONSTRUCTION

In 1831 the North River Steamboat Company commenced running the North America as a day boat, leaving the foot of Barclay street at 7 o'clock A. M. The New "Philadelphia" and DeWitt Clinton left at 5 P. M. It was advertised that "Passengers on the night boat for Troy will be sent by stage or steamboats free of charge."

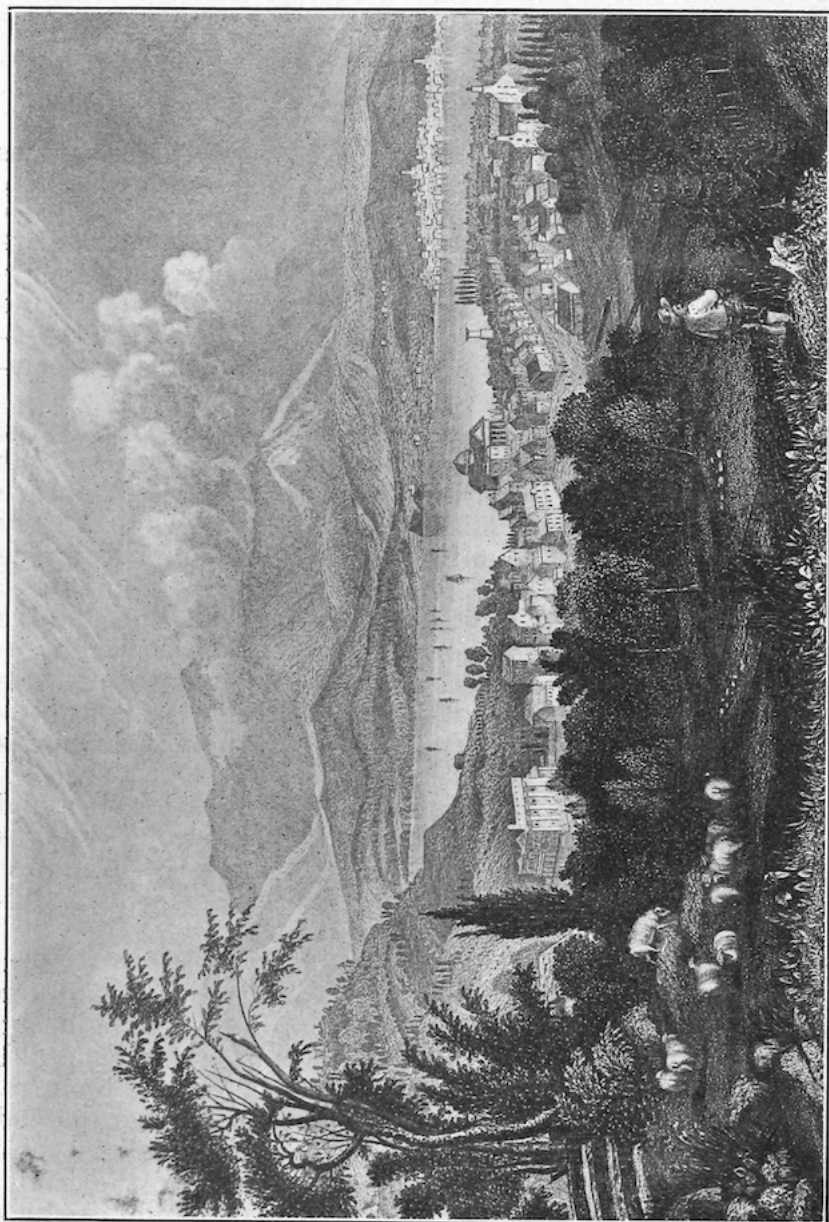
Great advancement had now been made in the speed of boats, and the New Philadelphia and North America, both built by Robert L. Stevens, were two of the fastest boats afloat. On June 10, 1831, the "New Philadelphia" ran from New York to Albany in nine hours and forty-five minutes, including stoppages. She arrived at Newburgh in three hours and forty-seven minutes.

In 1833, the North River Line, the Hudson River Line, and the Troy Line consolidated, and formed the Hudson River Association. The company ran both a day and night line. The steamers Albany, Champlain, Erie, and Novelty, were run as day boats; and the North America, DeWitt Clinton and Ohio as night boats.

The People's Line was established in 1834 as a day line, and as an opposition to the Hudson River Association. Cornelius Vanderbilt was largely interested in this venture. The first boat connected with this line was the Westchester, which was followed in 1835 by the Nimrod and Champion.

In 1835 the People's Line was sold to the Hudson River Association for \$100,000, and \$10,000 yearly payment for ten years. But in 1836 the People's Line was revived as a night line by Daniel Drew, who purchased the Westchester and Emerald, and the following year the Utica. Steamers of greater tonnage, increased capacity and improved accommodations were added not long after.

With improved capacity and increased speed of the boats, there sprang up a rivalry between the steamboat captains which the owners evidently encouraged, which resulted in frequent accidents and sometimes serious disasters. One of the worst was that of the steamboat Swallow.



VIEW OF HUDSON CITY AND THE CATSKILLS 1835

BURNING OF THE STEAMBOAT SWALLOW.

This occurred on April 7, 1845. The Swallow left Albany on her downward trip at the usual hour. The night was dark and the pilot became confused while going through the western channel near Athens, and ran the boat on a shelf of rocks while going at a high rate of speed; she filled rapidly and was sinking when her rival, the Rochester, came to her assistance and took most of the passengers off, as was supposed at the time. A passenger in describing the scene, said: "In less than five minutes by the mercy of God the stern rested on the bottom, the water being above the windows of the after saloon staterooms by darting in the windows. The bow had been forced high and dry upon the rock, and the boat split open amidships, was left rising almost perpendicular upwards, covered with anxious persons clinging to the bulwarks. The steamboat Express came up and took off part of the passengers and in the course of an hour the others were all taken off by the Rochester. The boat is a complete wreck. It was an awful sight when we cast off from the side."

"A final summing up of the passenger list gave the following estimates: The Express took 40, the Rochester 94, and 70 arrived at Albany, leaving 80 to be accounted for. An official investigation showed that the accident was due to the recklessness of the pilot.

In 1836 the "New Line for Albany" ran the Novelty and R. L. Stevens. The People's Line ran the Rochester and Utica and reduced the fare to \$1. The competition was sharp and in 1838, appeared the following advertisement in the New York and Albany papers:

FREE TRADE AND YOUNG MEN'S RIGHTS

STEAMERS SUN AND BELLE

OPPOSITION TO IMPOSITION. NO MONOPOLY!!!

The People's Line cut down the fare to 50 cents, and for five or six years following, passengers for Albany could take their choice of routes day or night for fifty cents.

Notwithstanding the legal restrictions racing between the boats of the competing lines continued and accidents were of frequent occurrence. On May 23, 1844, the following notice appeared in the New York dailies:

"The proprietors of the Troy Line would respectfully inform

the public that their steamboats will for the remainder of the season depart at their advertised hours, making the usual landing, *and will avoid all racing.* Having, unprepared for the race, beat the finest boat in the world, (so called by the owners), the South America, in a contest sought by her proprietors with both boats of the Troy Line, the Empire and Troy, leaving New York at 7 o'clock A. M."

This line ran the Knickerbocker, South America and Columbia. An independent opposition line ran the R. L. Stevens.

Alexander Matthews, who, for many years had an office at 165 Greenwich Street, directly opposite the site of the first established Steamboat Opposite, kept and preserved a list of all the "Passage Boats built and running on the Hudson, between New York and Albany, and New York and Troy from 1807 to 1845. The following is the list:

Clermont, built 1807, enlarged and improved, and named changed to the
 North River, 166 tons; completed 1808.
 Car of Neptune, 295 tons, built 1809.
 Hope, 280 tons; built 1811.
 Perseverance, 280 tons; built 1811.
 Paragon, 331 tons, built 1811; sunk 1825.
 Richmond, 370 tons; built 1813.
 Olive Branch, 295 tons; built 1815.
 Chancellor Livingston, 495 tons; built 1816.
 Portland, broken up in 1834, and her engines placed in a new boat named the Portland.
 James Kent, 364 tons; built 1823.
 Hudson, 170 tons; built 1824.
 Sandusky, 289 tons; built 1825.
 Constitution, 276 tons; built 1825.
 Constellation, 276 tons; built 1825.
 Chief Justice Marshall, 300 tons; built 1825; lost on Long Island Sound.
 Saratoga, 250 tons; built 1825.
 Sun, 280 tons; built 1826; burned 1831.
 New Philadelphia, 300 tons; built in 1826 by Robert L. Stevens; later, ran on the Delaware River.
 Albany, 298 tons; built 1827.
 Independence, 368 tons; built 1827.
 North America, 497 tons; built 1827 by Robert L. Stevens, destroyed by ice, 1829.
 Victory, 290 tons; sunk in 1845.

DeWitt Clinton, 571 tons; built in 1828; engine taken out and put in Knickerbocker.

Ohio, 412 tons; built 1829.

Novelty, 477 tons; built 1830.

Champlain, 471 tons; built 1832.

Erie, 472 tons; built 1832.

Helen, built 1833; destroyed, 1834.

Robert L. Stevens, 288 tons; built 1835.

Rochester, 491 tons; built 1836.

Swallow, 426 tons; wrecked at Athens April 7, 1845.

Utica, 340 tons; built 1837.

Diamond, 398 tons; built 1838.

Balloon, 204 tons; built 1839.

North America (No. 2), 494 tons; built 1839.

South America, 638 tons; built 1840.

Troy, 724 tons; built 1840.

Columbia, 391 tons; built 1841.

Rainbow, 230 tons; built 1841.

Curtis Peck, built 1842.

Empire, 936 tons; built 1843.

Knickerbocker, 808 tons; built 1843.

Belle, 430 tons.

Express, 288 tons.

Niagara, 730 tons; built 1845.

Rip Van Winkle, 510 tons; built 1845.

Hendrick Hudson, 1,170 tons; built 1845.

A letter prepared by the Secretary of the Treasury of the United States, in answer to a resolution of inquiry of the House of Representatives, June 20th, 1838, made the following report:

"The number of accidents resulting in loss of life or much injury to property from the use of marine steam-engines of every kind in the United States is computed to have been about 260. Of these, 253 are ascertained, and the rest are estimated. Accidents, by explosions and other disasters to steamboats, appear to have constituted a great portion of the whole, and are estimated to have equalled 230, two hundred and fifteen of which are ascertained. The first of these is believed to have occurred in the 'Washington' on the Ohio River, in 1816.

"Since the employment of steamboats in the United States it is computed that 1,300 have been built here. About 260 of these have been lost by accident, as many as 240 worn out, and the rest are running.

"The largest boat in the United States is the 'Natchez,' of 860 tons, and about 300 horse power, designed to run between New

York and the Mississippi. The 'Illinois' and the 'Mattison,' on Lake Erie, are next in size, the first being 755, and the last 700 tons. The 'Massachusetts,' on Long Island Sound, is the next, being 626 tons, and the 'Buffalo,' on Lake Erie, next largest, being 613 tons.

"The whole number of steamboats ascertained and estimated to be in this country (1838) is 800. In England, in 1836, the whole number of steamboats in that country was computed to have been 600. As an illustration of the rapid increase of steamboat business on the Ohio, the steamboat passages through the Louisville Canal, increased from 406 in 1831 to 1,501 in 1837, or about fourfold in six years. Of the 800 steamboats now in the United States the greatest number ascertained to be in any State is 140 in the State of New York.

The greatest loss of life on any occasion in a steamboat was by a collision, and the consequent sinking of the 'Monmouth,' in 1837, on the Mississippi, when 300 lives were lost. The next greatest were by the explosions of the 'Oronoka,' in 1838, on the Mississippi, by which 130 (or more) lives were lost; and of the 'Moselle,' at Cincinnati, Ohio, by which between 100 and 120 persons were destroyed. The number of steamboats built in the United States in 1834, was 88; in 1837 it was 184, having increased over 200 per cent. in three years. The greatest number of steamboats and other steam-machines appear to have been constructed at Pittsburg, Cincinnati, and Louisville on the Western waters, and New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore, on the Atlantic."

From 1845 to 1855, the principal aim of the rival steamboat companies appeared to be to increase the speed of their boats, and every improvement that could be devised in this direction was readily adopted. Stevenson, who visited this country in 1837, was much impressed. He says: "The voyage between Albany and New York is now generally performed in ten hours, exclusive of the time lost in making stoppages, *being at the astonishing rate of fifteen miles an hour*. They have effected this great increase of speed by constantly making experiments on the form and proportions of their engines and vessels,—in short by a persevering system of *trial and cover*, which is still going forward; and the natural consequence is, that even at this day, no two steamboats are alike, and few of them have attained the age of six months without undergoing some material alterations."

From 1845 to 1850 the size of the boats was increased from about 200 to over 300 feet in length, and more attention was paid to form and symmetry in their construction. The Isaac New-

ton, built in 1846, was 341 feet long, and had accommodations for five hundred passengers. Her cost was about \$150,000. The Hendrick Hudson, the Alida, the Henry Clay, the Francis Skidder, and other boats of increased dimensions, followed in rapid succession, and the carrying capacity was considered of greater importance than speed, although there was a still further increase in this direction. In 1850 the Isaac Newton was lengthened fifty feet, making her over four hundred feet in length, the largest, at that time of any boat in the country.

Notwithstanding the immense expenditure of money for larger, finer and better boats the competition continued at ruinous rates to the companies and the fares reduced to a mere nominal rate. In 1847 the proprietors of the Alida announced:

“THE ONLY REAL OPPOSITION ON THE RIVER. Fare 50 cents.

And in 1850 the Rip Van Winkle was carrying passengers from New York to Albany for twenty-five cents. In 1847 the Citizens New Day Line ran the Roger Williams and the George Dobson. In 1848 the Santa Claus was added to the People's Line; and in 1850, the Manhattan, Capt. Nelson, was running as an opposition boat. The Henry Clay was built in 1847; in 1851 she was running in opposition to the Armenia, and racing between the two boats was of almost daily occurrence, each trying to make the landings ahead of the other in order to secure the passengers. It was during one of these races with the Armenia, on July 28, 1852, that the Henry Clay took fire, and was burned to the water's edge at a point just below Yonkers. The following is the account as it appeared in the New York *Evening Post*, July 29, 1852:

“The Henry Clay left Albany yesterday morning in company with the Armenia at 7 o'clock, with between 300 and 400 passengers. Neither the exact number nor the names of the passengers can ever be ascertained probably, as no passenger list was kept.

“Although immediately after leaving the wharf it was apparent that the boat was racing. At Hudson the Armenia, by taking the west channel, and not landing, succeeded in getting ahead of the Clay. About half an hour after passing Catskill the Clay overtook the Armenia, and for the following three-quarters of an hour the two boats were running side by side, and it became necessary to use fenders constantly to prevent damage from collision.

That put a stop to racing, and from this time forward the steamboat companies directed their energies to the improvement

of their boats and comfort of their passengers, and resulted in the early fifties in a fleet of boats which were recognized at that time as "floating palaces." Among the first of these was the steamboat Oregon, built in 1846. Rear Admiral Preble, U. S. N., in his History of Steam Navigation says:

"The Hudson River steamer 'Oregon,' the most magnificent steamer afloat in 1846, it is said, maintained a speed against a west-northwest gale and head sea of twenty miles an hour. In calm weather she made an average speed of *twenty-five miles an hour*. Her length was 330 feet by 35 feet width of beam and her measurement one thousand tons. Her engine was eleven hundred horse power, and had a seventy-two inch cylinder with eleven feet stroke. The massive engine in the centre, and four or five side parlors fitted up with ten or twelve berths to each, opened out over the guards, as also a smoking room, denominated the 'Exchange,' and the wash-room and barber's shop—the latter fitted up with marble slab, Croton water, wash bowls, etc. A portion of the after cabin was set aside for ladies. The dining saloon accommodated two hundred and fifty persons. The state-room hall on the upper deck was 220 feet long by 16 feet wide. Out of it opened sixty state rooms furnished in sumptuous style. The cost of the furniture and fittings was thirty thousand dollars, and the boat itself about one hundred and thirty thousand dollars. She was built under the superintendence of her commander, Capt. St. John; and her symmetry, the beauty of her model and the arrangement of her engines, which gave her unrivalled speed were the result of his long and practical experience."

Thus at the end of the first half century of steam navigation the prophecy of John Fitch had been fulfilled, that "all our great lakes, rivers and oceans would be navigated by vessels propelled by steam."

The half century since has developed new styles of steamboat construction with modern equipments for the accommodation of passengers equal to the finest hotels in the world. Among the latest of these is the second Hendrick Hudson and the Robert Fulton. Of the latter the *New York World* says:

"The Robert Fulton, which, built in honor of the Hudson-Fulton celebration this fall, [1908], was finished in record time, two months and ten days after the keel was laid. She is 346 feet in length, 76 feet in breadth over guards molded. Her hull is 42 feet in breadth, and her displacement only 12 feet. She was designed by Frank E. Kirby to meet the problem of carrying only passengers and no cargo as ballast. She is more luxuriously furnished than any other boat on the Hudson. She has private

parlors with separate deck room. She will convey between 4,000 and 5,000 passengers and is thoroughly fireproof. Everything below the main deck is of steel. The kitchen is built in separate compartments of steel, so that it could catch fire and not affect the remainder of the boat. The engine room and the boiler room are similarly encased. Asbestolith is generously used on the upper decks, and as a result there is the least amount of inflammable material possible on the boat."