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■ *Kate Sutton, one of the first women in the country to efficiently operate a fleet of tugboats, may have been the inspiration for the famous character Tugboat Annie.*



THE Providence STEAMBOAT COMPANY: STILL A FAMILY BUSINESS

by Jillian Fulda, Ed Spinney & Brent Dibner

IMAGES FROM SSHSA ARCHIVES

ONE OF THE OLDEST TUGBOAT operations in New England, the Providence Steamboat Company has played a key role in commercial shipping on Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay since its inception. Incorporated in 1881, the company has remained a family-run business. In March 2007 the founding owners, the Mauran family of Providence, sold the business to the McAllister family of New York City, who continue to run the company as part of their own family business, McAllister Towing and Transportation Company.

PROVIDENCE STEAMBOAT COMPANY traces its roots back to a company of that name that operated early propeller tugs and provided passenger and freight service in the Providence area in the 1850s and 1860s. Its earliest vessels were steamer *Barroso* of 1852, which was sold in 1855 to a Sag Harbor, N.Y., owner, the *American Eagle* of 1861, which was sold in 1863, and the *George Bullock* of 1862, which operated in Providence between 1864 and 1882.

In 1870 Capt. Nathaniel W. H.

Sutton and Frank Mauran Sr. founded a competing tugboat company that merged with the Providence Steamboat Company and was formally incorporated by them in 1881.¹ Frank Mauran Sr. was the business manager and Nat Sutton was a tug master and managed the marine operations and crew.

THE PRINCIPAL BUSINESS of Providence Steamboat was ship assistance in the greater Port of Providence and Narragansett Bay, R.I. The company towed coastal schooner barges between the "stream" where large coastal tugs would deliver them to loading and unloading berths. They also towed powerless ships being built or repaired at local shipyards and drydocks as well as smaller harbor barges within the bay.

PROVIDENCE STEAMBOAT served the greater Port of Providence. Their work

included towing on the Seekonk River estuary (reached by passing through rail and road drawbridges), where various mills and factories were located as well as in smaller harbors on the bay such as the Newport Naval Station, Bristol, Somerset, Tiverton, Melville, Quonset, Davisville and Fall River. The primary cargoes were domestic trade: lumber, coal, coke, bricks, gravel, salt, building stone, and later petroleum products (kerosene, diesel fuel, gasoline, heavy fuel oil) and some manufactured goods.

DURING MOST of its history the company experienced limited competition. It created the affiliated Massachusetts Towing Company, based in Fall River, Mass., after it acquired some of the tugs that had been operated by smaller competitors in the late 1960s and early 1970s. No fewer than 25 tugs have operated under the Providence Steamboat

THROUGH COOPERATION of both the Mauran and McAllister families, SSHSA became the benefactor of Providence Steamboat Company corporate records in 2007. The preparation of this article was greatly enhanced by information from SSHSA member Edward D. Spinney's book *Towboating on Narragansett Bay*, published by Dutch Island Press in 1992.

■ *The tug Maurania was built in honor of the Mauran family and is considered to be Providence's first fire boat.*



Company “white circle” emblem, and nearly 10 more operated under the Massachusetts Towing “MT” logo. The fleet reflected the typical evolution of many American tugboat companies: beginning with small, first-generation, single-cylinder wooden steam tugs in the 1850s and 1860s (the first propeller harbor tugs appeared in Philadelphia and New York in 1849 and 1850), then acquiring larger wooden tugs with compound (two-cylinder) engines in the 1870s and 1880s, acquiring its first welded, diesel-powered tug in 1929 (the *Reliance*), then more powerful tugs in the 1930s to 1950s, followed by more powerful twin-screw steel tugs in the 1970s that were equipped with a towing winch for possible barge pushing, and finally an azimuthing stern-drive tug in 2007, spurred by the

hope of LNG tankers calling in the bay and the desire to protect the company’s longstanding presence in the bay.

TODAY Narragansett Bay is a major receiver of petroleum products, coal, salt, liquefied petroleum gases, automobiles, cement, and other commodities. The Providence Steamboat Company has competently and quietly guided ships and large barges for approximately 160 years.

Tugboat Annie?

IN THE EARLY 1900s HOWARD SUTTON, the son of Capt. N.W.H. Sutton, took over as president of Providence Steamboat. Upon his death in 1923 his wife, Kate A. Sutton, assumed control with Frank Mauran Sr., and became one of the first women in the country to

operate a fleet of steamboats, although she hardly ever set foot aboard a tug. She mainly worked from the business office, managing a fleet of five tugs. *The Providence Journal* in May 1928 wrote that Providence Steamboat was said to be the only steamboat company in the country run by a woman.

KATE SUTTON’S CAREER as the manager of the tugboat company became known throughout the country after the publication of a fictional story in *The Saturday Evening Post* on July 11, 1931, about a woman dubbed “Tugboat Annie,” who usurped a traditionally masculine role by running a tugboat company (although many businesses that were founded and managed by men were managed by women upon the deaths of their husbands or fathers). The

author, Norman Reilly Paine, provided the groundwork for the Hollywood movie “Tugboat Annie,” which premiered in 1933. When asked by a reporter if she was in fact the model for the famous character, Kate Sutton replied, “I hope not.” It’s unlikely that an educated, upper middle-class president of a company was really the model for the uneducated Tugboat Annie. If not a model, then perhaps an inspiration – according to an article written by Mr. Paine in the November 1934 issue of *Pacific Motor Boat*, Tugboat Annie was a suggested subject for a story by a friend, who informed him about the woman from Providence who took over a tugboat business from her deceased husband.

Providence’s First Tugboat to Provide Fire-Fighting Capability

THE TUG MAURANIA (I) WAS BUILT IN HONOR of the Mauran family, the first owners of Providence Steamboat. Built in 1925 at the William G. Abbott Shipyard in Milford, Del., this wood-hulled, 100-foot tug featured a 600-hp engine and oil-fired boiler. It was acquired by the company in 1937. The *Maurania* is considered to be Providence’s first fire boat because it was built with a special fire pump that had four hose connections, giving it the ability to deliver 1,200 gallons of water per hour at 150 pounds of pressure, which could be increased to 250 pounds in an emergency. The tug met its end in 1954 when Hurricane Carol’s tidal surge and winds lifted the tugboat onto the pier at Fields Point in Providence, grounding and damaging its aging hull. The tug was subsequently broken up.

THE NAME was carried on with the building of the tug *Maurania II* in 1952 at the Ira S. Bushey shipyard in Brooklyn, N.Y. This 101-foot, 1,200-hp steel tug was eventually sold to other owners before being acquired by the Providence Steamboat affiliate Massachusetts Towing and renamed *Towmaster*.

A THIRD TUG, *Maurania III*, was gradually built at Massachusetts Towing’s base at the Globe Wharf in Fall River

between 1990 and 2006. This massive 102-foot-long tug featured a raised bow for improved sea-keeping and had space to install a towing winch, although this equipment was never installed.

Tug Names

THE MAURAN FAMILY CHOSE NAMES FOR their tugs that were steeped in Rhode Island history. Such names included the *Roger Williams* (Rhode Island’s first governor and an early and outspoken foe of slavery and proponent of religious tolerance, who died in 1683 or 1684), the *King Philip* (a Wampanoag Indian chief who led an insurgency against the early colonists and was killed in 1675) and the *Gaspee* (a British naval ship that grounded and was burned by a group of Providence patriots in 1772 in protest of the King’s taxation of the colonies). Several tugs were also named for the Sutton and Mauran families, such as the *Maurania* previously mentioned. The *Capt. Walter E. Sutton* was named in honor of one of Kate and Capt. Howard’s three sons, who all worked for the company. The *Nat Sutton* was named for the late founder, Capt. N.W.H. Sutton. Later on in the life of the company, tugs received other names with historical significance, such as the *Resolute*, *Reliance* and *Rainbow*, named after the America’s Cup contenders, which were magnificent “J” boats that raced off the coast of Newport in previous years.

The Mauran Eagles

BETWEEN 1870 AND 1964 IT WAS A common practice for some Northeast tug companies to have a wooden or cast metal eagle attached to the front end of the pilot house roof as an expression of American styling and identity. The open-winged eagle is grabbing an orb. The tradition of mounting eagles waned after World War I when many war-surplus tugs built without eagles were sold, and steel-welded tugs began to be ordered. Providence Steamboat, however, continued to place eagles on many of its tugs during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, using a pattern based on an original wood carving, which was recast for each new and acquired tug. The McAllister family removed the eagles,

refurbished them and provided them to members of the Mauran family after their acquisition of the company in 2007.

Fathers and Sons

THE FATHER AND SON TRADITION RAN DEEP within Providence Steamboat. It began, of course, with the Sutton family. Company founder Capt. N.W.H. Sutton’s two sons worked with him, Capt. Frank M. and Captain N. Howard, husband to Kate. Their own sons also worked in the company. This tradition continued throughout the history of the company, more recently with father and son teams Capt. Al Lancashire, and his son Ken; Capt. Roger Francis and his son Roger Francis, Jr.; and Capt. Gary Oliverira and his son Nathan. Gary Oliverira currently manages the Providence operation and his son is a tug captain for McAllister.

Buried in the Cribbing

DURING THE POWERFUL AND FATAL Hurricane of 1938, the tug *Gaspee (i)* was struck by an empty railroad tank car that had floated off its siding near the India Wharf. The damaged tug had broken free from its mooring and floated over the submerged India Point drawbridge support and protection cribbing and sank. In 1992 the wooden hull of the tug was rediscovered by engineers surveying for the removal of the old bridge. The rotting and partially dismantled tug had been “missing” for 54 years.

Radios

DURING CAPT. AL LANCASHIRE’S TENURE as a tug captain for Providence Steamboat, he and his brother Capt. Sam Lancashire, a docking pilot, were the first on Narragansett Bay to use hand-held radios for communication during the docking and undocking process of ships. As a result whistle signals became obsolete. The process of docking and undocking was now much safer and more efficient, although tug captains continue to confirm the docking pilot’s radio commands with their peep whistles and/or tug horns.

■ *The Mauran family chose names for their tugs that were steeped in Rhode Island history.*





■ *The Rainbow was built for the Providence Steamboat Company in 2004.*



The Gaspee's Recording

IN 1960 A SMALL LOCAL RECORDING STUDIO called Droll Yankee created two long-playing records based on Capt. Cecil Nickerson, master of the tug *Gaspee* (ii). One side of *Captain Nickerson and the Tug Gaspee* captured the sounds and ramblings of its master amidst the sounds of the pilot house, engines, horns, whistles, instructions to the crew on freighters as they handled lines, bells, a little swearing, whistling, singing, and sea gulls. The other side captured Captain Nickerson's memories of coastal towing and sailing in his youth. The second album recounted Captain Nickerson's ribald songs and

jokes. The original album could be bought for \$4.98 in 1960, and if you can find one the going price is \$35.00 on eBay. To our knowledge it is the only LP recording of tugboat-related sounds and banter in the United States, although at least one recording of a tug in New York harbor was made as a smaller 45-rpm record.

Cooks

IN JUNE 1977 TUGBOAT COOKS, THOUGHT to be indispensable, became wrapped up in a labor strike that would last for six months, ending in the demise of that position. Consequently, crew members began receiving what is known as "grub money," with which they handled their

own shopping and their own cooking. The cooks, now out of jobs, either took positions as deck hands or went to ply their trade elsewhere. This trend is now common on both harbor and coastwise/seagoing tugs throughout the United States.

Rainbow

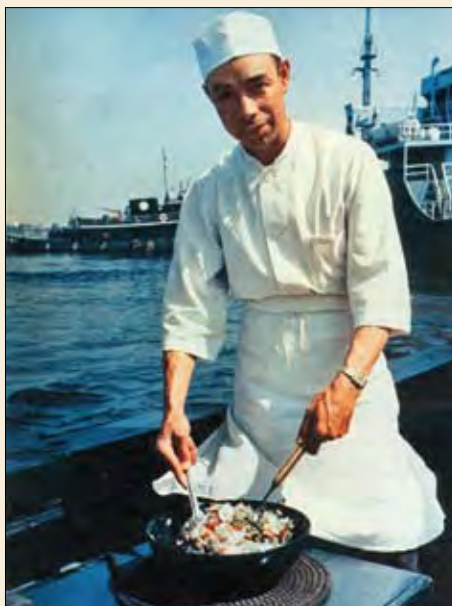
IN DECEMBER 2004 A NEW TUG WAS BUILT for Providence Steamboat. It was the 92-foot by 32-foot Z-drive tug, *Rainbow*, now used for assisting ships. The *Rainbow* is powered by two Caterpillar 3516 HD engines rated at 2500 hp at 1600 rpm and Rolls-Royce Aquamaster model US 205 Z-drives with NiBrAl 90.5-inch propellers in Kort nozzles.

The Company Office

THE FIRST OFFICE OF THE COMPANY WAS located in Providence at the end of Crary Street off Allens Avenue. It would remain there until 1954 when Hurricane Carol destroyed the office. As a result the company moved across the harbor to One India Street, where they can still be found today, still doing business as the Providence Steamboat Company but owned by McAllister (McAllister Towing of Narragansett Bay, LLC).

McAllister Towing and Transportation

THE PROVIDENCE STEAMBOAT COMPANY was sold in March 2007 to the McAllister Towing and Transportation Company. McAllister was founded in 1864 by Capt. James McAllister, after his move from Ireland to New York. In the 1880s Capt. McAllister acquired their first steam tug, the *R.W. Burke*. In the early 20th century he became one of first to make a bulk oil carrier from a sail lighter so that oil could be moved around the New York Harbor. They became the McAllister Steamboat Company in 1909 after acquiring another company. It wasn't until 1918 that they became involved in the ocean towing business. Captain Brian A. McAllister, great-grandson of Captain James McAllister and SSHSA member, is the current president, the fifth McAllister generation to run the McAllister Towing Company and, now, the Providence



■ The position of cook aboard Providence Steamboat Company tugs ended in June 1977 after an extended labor strike.

Steamship Company. In addition, they own the Bridgeport and Port Jefferson Steamboat Company established in 1883 and running between Bridgeport, Conn., and Port Jefferson, N.Y. They also have several offices up and down the east coast and as far south as Puerto Rico. ⚓

NOTES

1. Sources: Frank Mauran; State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Office of the Secretary of State, Division of Business Services; McAllister Towing, "At the Helm," Number 9, 2008.

About the Authors



JILLIAN FULDA is a Development Assistant at SSHSA. She holds a B.A. in History from the University of Rhode Island. As an intern with SSHSA she completed a mass index for Steamboat Bill/PowerShips covering its entire publication history.



ED SPINNEY is a long-time mariner who spent his career on commercial and working craft on the Narragansett Bay and continues to monitor bay traffic. He is the author of *Towboating on Narragansett Bay and Piloting on Narragansett Bay*. Ed is an active volunteer at SSHSA headquarters.



BRENT DIBNER is President of Dibner Maritime Associates LLC. He spent 25 years with Mercer Management Consulting where he directed all consulting activities to the maritime industry. He is the editor of *Tugbits*, *The Journal of the Tugboat Enthusiasts Society*, a member of the SSHSA Board of Directors and Chairman of the Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



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