

HISTORY WRITING

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Steamboatin' to Sag Harbor

Full Fare from Manhattan: \$2

by Jim Marquardt

When the steamboat *Shinnecock* built by the Montauk Steamboat Company left Pier 13 on the East River on almost any morning in the 1890s, office workers hurrying to their jobs on Wall Street stopped and stared in wonder at the “smoke and clatter and pounding paddles.” Her coal-fired steam engines generated 2500 horsepower to turn giant, side paddle-wheels that would propel her up to 17 mph and power her through treacherous Hell Gate into Long Island Sound. Three decks topped by a giant black funnel accommodated 84 staterooms in her 250-foot length. After a stop at Greenport, the *Shinnecock* would arrive at Sag Harbor at 4 o’clock that afternoon and disembark hundreds of passengers onto Long wharf. From there they walked to the American Hotel and country inns, or took stages to Bridgehampton and East Hampton. The next morning the *Shinnecock* boarded new passengers and returned to Manhattan. Full fare was two dollars.

By the mid-19th century, the nation was bursting at the seams with immigrants, entrepreneurs and adventurers who would thrust the young country into a prominent

place in the world. With a still crude road system inadequate for land travel, steamboats on waterways all over the country provided low freight rates and faster transport. They rivaled ocean liners in bulk and magnificence. Their origins went back to John Fitch in 1787 and Robert Fulton in 1807. By 1830 eighty steamboats sailed the Hudson River and Long Island Sound alone.

In 1855, an advertisement in the New York Times announced a “new route” for Greenport and Sag Harbor. “The splendid steamer, *Island Belle*, Capt. J. Post, Jr., will leave New York from Catharine Market-slip for Sag Harbor, on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 11 a.m. Returning will leave Sag Harbor on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 10 a.m., landing at Greenport, Orient Point and Northport both ways. Fare to and from Sag Harbor, Greenport and Orient Point \$1.50, Northport 50 cents. Freight taken at reasonable rates, payable on delivery of the goods.”

Interior decor of the Long Island Sound steamers varied widely but many were quite ornate. The *Bristol* steamboat of the Fall River Line, was described as a “...floating palace. In the main saloon, ladies saloon, and social hall, may be seen very delightful specimens of good taste in the selection of the new velvet carpets, rugs, mats, silk curtains, lace curtains...The whole of the furniture in the grand saloon and ladies saloon is covered in plum-colored velvet, while that of the social hall is done in velvet and rep.” Another glowing description referred to “gilt-edged spittoons,” apparently a mark of elegance.

Business wasn't limited to New York City. A commerce report by Congress included the data that in 1866, two smaller steamboats made over 200 trips between New London and Sag Harbor carrying some 10,000 passengers. *The Long Island Forum*, a

valuable source of local history, wrote of the steamboat *Sunshine* running between Sag Harbor and Hartford in 1887, and in earlier years between Sag Harbor, Greenport, Shelter Island and New London, making a round trip daily.

By the early 20th century, wood-hulled steamboats gave way to steel hulls and used coal instead of wood to fire high-pressure boilers. Coal figured in an accident on Long Wharf in July, 1908. *The Brooklyn Times* reported “While backing a train of two coal cars down on Long Wharf...Engine 23 which runs between this place (Sag Harbor) and Bridgehampton, undermined the tracks which...toppled into the bay...Engineer Joseph Smith stuck to his post and shut off the controlling lever and hung on for life as the engine fell. The cow-catcher, forward trucks and boiler were submerged.” We presume Long Wharf was subsequently reinforced.

As any sailor will tell you, if you go to sea often enough, you inevitably will face a crisis. In January, 1840, the 120-ft paddle-wheeler *Lexington*, built by Cornelius Vanderbilt, left New York for Stonington, Connecticut, on a bitterly cold day. Aboard were 115 passengers and a cargo of bales of cotton loaded around the smokestack casing. Soon after she entered Long Island Sound, encountering strong wind and heavy seas, fire broke out among the bales of cotton and couldn't be contained. Captain George Child headed for the north shore of Long Island, hoping to beach the vessel, but the rudder lines burned through and the ship went out of control. Passengers jumped overboard to escape the flames but succumbed in the icy water. Only four people survived the disaster, one of them Second Mate David Crowley who dug into the center of a cotton bale and floated ashore 48 hours later.

A greater tragedy struck in June of 1904 when the 235-ft. *General Slocum* of the Knickerbocker Steamship Company headed up the East River on a chartered trip to Eaton's Neck near Huntington. She carried 1,342 passengers, mostly women and children from a German-American Lutheran Church who looked forward to a pleasant sail and a picnic ashore. As she passed 90th Street, fire broke out in the paint room, possibly from a cigarette, and spread quickly. Rotten fire hoses, aged life preservers and wired-in-place lifeboats added to the terror. She sank near North Brother Island just off the Bronx with a loss of 1,021 people, the worst single disaster in New York City until 9/11, over a hundred years later. As a result, Federal and State governments enacted tough regulations for ship safety equipment. Her captain was convicted of negligence and served three and a half years in Sing Sing.

The Montauk Steamboat Company mentioned earlier became part of the Long Island Railroad in 1899, after the two had competed for business between New York City and Eastern Long Island and beyond. Besides the *Shinnecock*, the company ran the steamboats *Montauk*, *Orient* and *Nantasket* and established daily service from New York. One passenger in those steamboat days wrote that "the old whaling town (that's us) is my favorite place on Long Island...even if it gets more foo-foo all the time."

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