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2003

**Steamboats of Monmouth County, New Jersey.  
Lecture presented at the Atlantic Highlands  
Historical Society, Atlantic Highlands, NJ,  
November, 2003.**

Megan E. Springate



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## **Steamboats of Monmouth County**

By: Megan E. Springate

Presented at the Atlantic Highlands Historical Association, Atlantic Highlands, NJ

November 19, 2003

**Abstract:** Steamboats provided a critical commercial link between Monmouth County, New Jersey and New York City from the early nineteenth through the third quarter of the twentieth centuries. Over 200 vessels have been documented as plying Monmouth County's waters, carrying farm goods to market and leisure patrons to the shore. This presentation summarizes the steamboat's history in Monmouth County, and provides several examples of vessels that ran in the area.

From March, 2002 through April 2003, the Monmouth County Historical Association held an exhibit at the main museum in Freehold, entitled, STEAMBOAT! During the research for that exhibit, I discovered, to my surprise, that well over 200 steamboats had run in and out of Monmouth County ports from the early 1800s through the 1960s (I had initially thought I would find maybe 50 or so vessels). While we couldn't possibly include all 200-some-odd boats in the exhibit, we were able to fund the compilation and publication of the book, *Steamboats in Monmouth County: A Gazetteer*. This volume includes all of the details I was able to find on all of the steam vessels running in Monmouth County, the text of the exhibit panels, and many photographs and images of the vessels, many of which are from the John C. Mills Collection currently housed in the Museum's Library and Archives. There is also an appendix detailing information on the over 50 steamboat companies that operated vessels in and out of Monmouth County. The format of my presentation this evening will be a general history of steamboats, followed by a chronology of steamboats that visited Atlantic Highlands.

[slide: On the Shrewsbury River]

For over a century, from 1819 to the late 1960s, Monmouth County residents were accustomed to hearing the sounds of steamboats along the coast and up and down the Navesink and Shrewsbury Rivers. After Robert Fulton's NORTH RIVER made its first historic run in 1807 up the Hudson River from New York to Albany, steam-powered water travel was an almost instant success. Unlike sailing vessels, steamboats did not rely solely on wind and weather conditions. The generally poor quality of early American roads also contributed to steamboats' long-lived practicality as a logical choice for dependable, scheduled travel for both passengers and freight.

In Monmouth County, steamboats offered farmers the quickest and most efficient method of transporting their produce to profitable New York City markets. Some steamboats, such as the HOLMDEL, were operated primarily as freight carriers. As shore towns in the county became popular tourist destinations during the nineteenth century, passenger trade became a staple income-earner for many steamboat companies. During the summer months, New York visitors flocked via steamboat to resorts in Long Branch, Asbury Park, and others, firmly establishing tourism as an important industry in New Jersey.

Between 1841 and 1868, the small Monmouth County town of Keyport, which in 1841 had a population of less than 200 people, became the largest center of steamboat construction in the state, ahead of Camden, Hoboken, Perth Amboy, and Jersey City. This success was due in large part to ship's carpenter Benjamin C. Terry, who moved from New York City in 1851 to Keyport to start his own shipyards. During his career at Keyport, Terry built steamboats for such firms as the Keyport and Middletown Steamboat Company, the Red Bank Steamboat Company, and the Farmers Transportation Company of Keyport. By 1881, when the last steamboat made in Keyport left its drydock, the small coastal town had produced over 55 steamboats, with about 45 of those built in the Terry yards.

[Slide; The HOLMDEL sketch by John Mills]

Robert Fulton is often incorrectly credited as the inventor of the steamboat engine. In fact, when Fulton's steamboat the NORTH RIVER made its way up the Hudson River in 1807, it used an engine first developed in 1702 by Englishman Thomas Savery to pump water seepage out of deep English coal mines.

Despite improvements on the steam-engine design by folks such as Thomas Newcomen, the engine remained commercially unviable. This changed in 1765, when James Watt introduced a number of refinements, including a condenser and a double-action piston. Watts improvements reduced fuel consumption by 75%, and the practical steam engine had arrived.

In America, as in Europe, men worked to apply Watt's principles to ship propulsion. In 1786, a full 22 years before Robert Fulton and his NORTH RIVER, John Fitch completed an experimental steam-powered water vessel. On the strength of his designs and enthusiasm, Fitch was awarded New Jersey's first state grant, giving him, "... the sole and exclusive right of construction, using and employing or navigating all kinds of boats which might be impelled by steam within the jurisdiction of this State."

Armed with similar grants from Delaware, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, Fitch began his Steamboat Company, secure in his belief that he could bring successful steam-powered travel to America's waterways. By 1790, Fitch had a steam powered vessel able to cruise at 5 to 6 miles an hour on its regularly scheduled trips between Philadelphia and Trenton.

Unfortunately, repeated mechanical and equipment problems and lawsuits brought against him by other inventors caused Fitch's financial backers to withdraw their support. Fitch ended his days in poverty, considered a dangerous and obsessive lunatic by many of his former colleagues and supporters. In 1798, upon hearing that the New York legislature had transferred his exclusive 1787 grant to Fulton's partner-to-be, Robert Livingston, Fitch committed suicide.

It was Fulton's genius as a mechanical engineer and his power of persuasion that allowed him and Livingston to produce the first commercially successful steamboat. In 1806, he built the 133-foot long NORTH RIVER, named after the lower portion of the Hudson. Fulton never named his ship the CLERMONT; this historical inaccuracy appeared in an early Fulton biography and was never corrected. Fulton's vessel featured a steam engine built by Watt and his partner Matthew Boulton. On August 17, 1807, with a crew and about 24 guests, the NORTH RIVER left New York City, heading for Albany. Fulton's historic first journey, a trip which took a land traveler seven to eight bone-jarring days by stagecoach, took 32 hours upriver, with an average speed of 5 miles an hour.

The jeers of sloop and schooner captains quickly turned to dismay when it became clear what a threat Fulton's NORTH RIVER would be to passenger and freight business. The "devil in a sawmill", a nickname given to the odd-looking craft with its bobbing walking beam engine and puffing smokestack, would change the face of water transportation forever.

[Slide: KEANSBURG arriving at pier]

Fulton must have had little inkling of the impact his steamboat design would have on both transportation and the nature of leisure in American society. The introduction of the steamboat as a practical method of travel directly influenced the development of the Jersey Shore into a prime vacation spot.

Thousands of people availed themselves of the many steamboats that plied the waters between New York and Monmouth County. Wealthy families, laden with luggage, traveled from their city homes to spend the entire summer at one of the luxurious seaside resort hotels. Working families scraped together the price of cheap excursion tickets to spend the day in rented bathing costumes bobbing in the surf.

As early as 1819, steamboat companies began offering regularly scheduled summer trips from New York City to Monmouth County shore points. By the mid-nineteenth century,

the grand hotels and less-expensive rooming houses offered vacation accommodations to visitors.

[Slide: The KEANSBURG (a. NANTASKET) smoldering at Marvel's Yards, April 1928]

Since many steamboats were made mostly of wood and used combustion as their source of power, it is no surprise that reports of fire were common – both while docked and under weigh. Likewise, the steam used to power the paddle wheels was used under considerable pressure, and occasionally, steam explosions occurred – often with disastrous results.

It was not uncommon for steamboats to burn to the waterline, often while tied up at a dock, or in dry dock for repairs. One such fire destroyed the KEANSBURG (a. NANTASKET) while tied up at her winter dock in Newburgh, New York.

Boiler explosions took place most often while the boats were under weigh. In these cases, due either to flaws in the equipment, or excess pressure, gallons of boiling hot steam and water exploded out of the engine. Unfortunately, these explosions often resulted in severe injuries and deaths, as well as extensive damage to the vessel. On September 4, 1852, on a run from Albany to New York City, the boiler of the REINDEER exploded violently, causing the deaths of 31 people, many injuries, and the loss of the boat.

[slide; Sea Bird]

While many burnt vessels were written off, some were rebuilt and went on to serve many more years. One example from Monmouth County is the SEA BIRD. Build in 1866, she burned May 5, 1867, but was refloated and rebuilt. After the disaster, she went on to become one of the most popular and recognizable steamboats in our waters until finally retired in 1932.

[slide: KEYPORT by Bard]

In other cases, while the vessel itself was not to be rebuilt, the engine and other metal fittings were salvaged, to be used in newly built boats. The CHINGARORA, built in 1850 in New York City, ran from Keyport to New York from her launch until 1851, when she was sold to concerns in New Orleans, Louisiana. Shortly after her arrival there, she burned to the water at her dock. H.H. Seabrook, owner of the Keyport and Middletown Point Steamboat Company, happened to be in New Orleans at the time, on his honeymoon, and witnessed the fire. Shortly after, he bought the engine from the wreck and brought it back to Monmouth County, where it served many more years in the KEYPORT.

[Slide; Hulks unidentified]

Modern vessels are equipped with extensive navigational equipment, including radar, global positioning systems, and sonar, to help ensure they stay on route and avoid any collisions. Early steamboat captains, however, did not have the benefit of these instruments, and relied on their keen vision, familiarity with their routes, and the sounds of marker buoys and the whistles of other ships (each boat had its own distinctive whistle tone and sequence of blasts to identify itself).

Boats regularly ran into each other, into rocks, and stranded themselves on shoals and sandbars – particularly in heavy fog, which compromised the captains' vision and sense of hearing. While it may seem prudent in hindsight to stay docked in heavy fog, competition between the various steamboat companies was so fierce that the boats ran even in the foulest weather, often taking significant risks to stay on schedule.

Remarkably, collisions and groundings resulted in few casualties – often, a rival boat was close enough to take on the passengers and crew of the damaged vessel before she sank, which could occur in minutes. When the steamship ACADIA rammed the steamboat

MANDALAY (a. EXPRESS) in May of 1938, during a run between Atlantic Highlands and New York, the ACADIA kept her prow in the breach until all of the MANDALAY's 325 passengers and crew got to safety.

Boats were rarely retired after a collision – rather, they were refloated, repaired, and put back to work. In those cases where damage was minimal – above the waterline or primarily cosmetic, the boat would often complete its run before docking for repairs.

[slide: Asbury Park running for Monticello Steamship Co., San Francisco to Vallejo]

Many successful Monmouth County steamboats did not end their careers in these waters, but instead were sold or chartered to other locations. For example, the REINDEER, which I previously described having the disastrous boiler explosion, ran from Keyport to New York City very briefly in 1851, but was put on the Hudson River run due to her speed. The WILBUR HEISLEY ended up running on the Delaware River, while the SETH LOW and the PLEASURE BAY went as far south as Florida and Louisiana, respectively. Some boats also went north – the PLYMOUTH ROCK, long a common sight off of Long Branch, was eventually sold and ran around the Boston area.

Some vessels from Monmouth County traveled even further. The ASBURY PARK, a well-loved boat built in 1903 in Philadelphia for the Central Rail Road of New Jersey, ran for many years from Atlantic Highlands to New York. In 1919, she was sold west to California, making the trip through the Panama Canal and up the west coast to carry passengers and cars from San Francisco to Vallejo.

[slide; KAHLOKE]

After many years in California, she was sold to Canada, running out of Vancouver for BC Ferries as the KAHLOKE. She was later retired, and spent her golden years as the LADY GRACE, serving as a small craft repair shop, offices, and a restaurant as late as 1977.



Other boats went even further afield. In 1895, just prior to the Spanish-American War, the LEON ABBETT, NAVESINK, and the SHREWSBURY, all Monmouth County steamboats, were sold to the Spanish government. These three vessels traveled to Cuba together in the hold of the steamship ARDENROSE. Upon their arrival, they were renamed ALMIRANTE CHACON, GENERAL LABORDE, and GENERAL TACON. Their fate, as with many other steamboats sold to foreign interests, is unknown.

[slide: RIVER QUEEN]

Although they were built for and served private concerns, many steamboats from Monmouth County saw wartime service during the Spanish-American War, World War I, and World War II. Their contribution to the Civil War, for both sides, is especially significant, as they served as troop transports, scout ships, blockade runners, and messenger boats.

During the Civil War, steamboat owners would offer to charter their boats to the Quartermaster Department, often for considerable sums of money. For example, the RIVER QUEEN, built by Benjamin Terry in Keyport, was chartered to the Quartermaster from December 1864 through 1865 at \$241 per day. This considerable income was guaranteed during the charter, unless the boat was destroyed, in which case the replacement value was paid – the RIVER QUEEN's replacement value was listed at \$145,000. She spent 1864 to 1866 in Union Civil War service on the Potomac River as General Ulysses S. Grant's dispatch boat.

[slide: conference on the RIVER QUEEN]

President Lincoln conferred aboard her with A.H. Stevens, then the Vice-President of the Confederacy, near the close of the war. Lincoln traveled aboard her on the Potomac River just hours before his assassination. Following the War, the RIVER QUEEN returned to Monmouth County, and ran from Spermaceti Cove, Sandy Hook to New York from 1866 to 1870.

[slide: SS SANDY HOOK just post-war]

Another Monmouth County Vessel that saw wartime service, this time during World War II, was the SANDY HOOK. Built at Wilmington, Delaware in 1889, she ran from Horseshoe Cove, Sandy Hook to New York City until 1891, then from Atlantic Highlands to New York City through 1939. She was acquired by the US Army in 1942 as a troop ferry from Fort Hancock to New York, and in 1943 was renamed FS-541 (Freight and Supply), and served as an inspection craft for the New York Port of Embarkation to 1945. The photo of her here is from just after the war, when she was returned to the Central Railroad of New Jersey to run from New York to Monmouth Park; her smokestacks do not yet bear the markings of the CRRNJ after her wartime service.

### **A Few Atlantic Highlands Vessels – in roughly the order they ran here**

The earliest steamboat to visit the Atlantic Highlands vicinity was the CONNECTICUT. She was built in 1816 for Robert Fulton's North River Steamboat Company at a cost of \$80,000. She ran from New York City to Sandy Hook on an excursion run on April 25, 1820. She was sold to foreign interests in 1836.

The earliest regular run to the Atlantic Highlands area was by the SARATOGA, built in 1825. She ran from Highlands to Sandy Hook to New York City from 1829 to 1832, and was finally taken out of service in 1847.

A notable vessel in steamboat history, the RICHARD STOCKTON, built 1851, was one of the earliest large iron-hulled steamboats. Measuring 270 feet long and 1,048 gross tons, each of her iron paddle wheels was 22 feet in diameter. She ran from Spermaceti Cove, Sandy Hook to New York City from 1865 to 1870.

[Slide: THEODORE STEWART painting after an engraving in the collection of the Monmouth County Historical Association]

The THEODORE STEWART was a small boat, only 56' long and weighing in at only 33 or 34 gross tons. She was built at Keyport in either 1867 or 1868. She ran from Highlands to Pleasure Bay from 1870 to 1882, with stops at Sea Bright and Branchport, and also served as a ferry (pictured here) between the mainland and New Jersey Southern Railroad terminal at the base of Sandy Hook. Her first owner was Mr. Joseph Thompson of Highlands, formerly the keeper of the Twin Lights. In August of 1877, she collided with a private steam yacht on the Shrewsbury River, continuing on her regular runs after being repaired. Her last document was surrendered at Charleston, South Carolina in January of 1886, noting she had been "laid up."

[Slide: CRYSTAL WAVE]

Another notable vessel that ran near Atlantic Highlands was the CRYSTAL WAVE. Built in 1874 at Greenpoint, New York, she measured 203' long and boasted 2 stacks. She ran from New York City to Horseshoe Cove, Sandy Hook from 1875 to 1876, and again in 1878 for the Central Railroad of New Jersey (also known as the Sandy Hook Line) and was a fast boat. She was subsequently sold to the Bridgeport Steamboat Company to run against the vessels of the People's Line up in Providence. This competition was quite heated, and ended in a "gentleman's agreement" between the two lines. This "gentleman's agreement" was subsequently followed by the first court action brought under the Sherman anti-trust laws. On her way to the Potomac River in 1889, the CRYSTAL WAVE collided with the coast liner CLEOPATRA just off the Delaware Capes, and both vessels were lost.

The THOMAS COLLYER was the oldest boat to run a regular route from Atlantic Highlands to New York City. She was built in 1850 and measured 130 feet long. Her Captain was James H. Leonard from 1879 to 1880, the years she ran out of Atlantic

Highlands. The trip took approximately 2 to 2.5 hours, and she made most of her money carrying produce from Monmouth County to New York. A small percentage of her income came from passengers and freight on the return trip. As of 1897 she was no longer in service.

[Slide: KILL VAN KULL with her sister ships]

The KILL VAN KULL was built at New York City in 1858. She was 252 feet long. In 1879, she was put on the New York City to Sandy Hook run, but did not have enough power to make the runs in the time required, and was put on other routes. She spent the 1882 season running from the City to Atlantic Highlands. She was destroyed by fire at Elizabethport on March 3, 1889.

The BREDELL, built in 1881 at Lewes, Delaware, was only 77 feet long. She ran between Atlantic Highlands and Horseshoe Cove for the Atlantic Highlands Steamboat Company, owned by Thomas H. Leonard and others, in 1882 and 1883. Although she frequently broke down and was sold at the end of the 1883 season, she proved to the Central Railroad of New Jersey that there was a profitable market for regular steamboat service at Atlantic Highlands. After selling the BREDELL, they put the JESSE HOYT and the ST. JOHNS on the Atlantic Highlands Route. She was taken out of service in 1907.

[Slide: JESSE HOYT]

In 1862, Benjamin Terry built the JESSE HOYT for Alfred Van Santvoord to use on the Hudson River (van Santvoord was soon to become the principal owner of the Hudson River Day Line). Originally 219 feet long and 624 tons, she was rebuilt in 1876 to 239 feet long and 828 gross tons, with a speed of 20 miles per hour. She cost approximately \$50,000 to build, and was named for the Superintendent of Lighthouses at the Highlands of the Navesink, Sandy Hook, and Staten Island's Prince Bay. Mr. Hoyt later became Collector for the Port of New York. In June of 1862, the HOYT was sold to the Long

Island North Shore Passenger and Freight Transportation Company and ran from New York to Glen Cove, Long Island as the J.D. BEERS. Not long after, in the early part of 1863, she was sold to the Alliance Steamboat Company, who put her, again as the JESSE HOYT, on the Port Monmouth to New York City run to connect with the pier terminal of the Raritan and Delaware Bay Railroad. From 1870 through 1888, except for part of 1874, the JESSE HOYT ran from New York City to Horseshoe Cove, Sandy Hook and Atlantic Highlands. During this time, she changed hands considerably for various legal reasons; however, each of the companies who owned her had some connection to Col. James Fisk and Jay Gould of Tammany Hall fame. The JESSEY HOYT had the longest career of any sidewheeler on the Sandy Hook route. In 1888, she was laid aside, and hauled coal until 1890, when she was finally withdrawn from service.

[Slide: MONMOUTH]

The MONMOUTH was built in 1888 in Philadelphia for an original cost of \$250,000. Over 270 feet long and 1,440 gross tons, her inverted triple expansion engines generated a total of 3,000 horsepower. She was powered by twin screws (not a paddle wheel), each with three blades and measuring 9-1/2 feet in diameter. The 20 private parlors available onboard were rented by the season for \$350 to \$400 each. She could carry 2,200 passengers. Known affectionately as “The Bankers Special, “ she ran from Horseshoe Cove, Sandy Hook to New York from 1888 to October 1891, when the New Jersey Central Railroad moved their terminal to Atlantic Highlands. She then ran from Atlantic Highlands to the City from May 1892 through 1939, when she was taken out of service, due to decreased traffic and the prohibitive costs required to refit her to meet new sea safety regulations (the estimated cost to bring her up to spec was about \$125,000). In April 1941 she was sold for scrap to the Northern Metals Company of Philadelphia.

[Slide; SANDY HOOK in Dry Dock 1937 May 11]

The SANDY HOOK was the sister ship to the MONMOUTH. Built in 1889, she also ran for the New Jersey Central Railroad. She ran from Sandy Hook to New York City from 1889 to October 1891, when the Railroad moved their terminal to Atlantic Highlands. She then ran from Atlantic Highlands to the City until 1939. In 1931, while tied up at her winter quarters at the marine repair division yard of the Central Railroad of New Jersey, she caught fire and burned, leaving only her iron hull and engines. After \$300,000 worth of work, she was back in service in 1932. At the outbreak of World War 2, her routes were discontinued due to marine security concerns, and she went into war service.

[Slide: SANDY HOOK under weigh]

After the war, she was returned to the Central Railroad, who ran her to Monmouth Park, offering weekly commutation tickets for regular patrons. Her future was doomed, however, as a World War II Government Decree prohibited route duplication – as long as the Central Railroad was running trains to the Jersey shore, their vessels were not allowed on similar routes. She was broken up in 1948 by the scrap firm of K. Kerzman and Sons of Elizabeth, who paid \$34,500 for her hulk.

[Slide: WM V WILSON at winter dock, Red Bank]

The WM. V. WILSON was built near Cuttrel's shipyard in Keyport by James Wilson for the Middletown and Port Monmouth Steamboat Company in 1880 at a cost of \$30,000. 163 feet long, she was a wooden side-wheeler with 2 decks. She is best known for her Port Monmouth to New York City runs from 1880 to 1907, but she also ran excursions. One of these took place on April 27, 1897 when she took about 50 men and horses from the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Jersey National Guard Cavalry Troop from Atlantic Highlands to New York City for the dedication of Grant's Tomb. The WILSON was named for Rev. William Wilson, an active and prominent Port Monmouth resident. He and his son-in-law Benjamin Griggs were both stockholders in the Middletown and Port Monmouth Steamboat Company (Griggs served as her captain for almost 20 years, from 1880 – at least 1898). Primarily a market boat, she also carried some passengers to and from the

city. Due to the shallow water at her dock on the north side of Compton's Creek, and despite regular dredging, the WM V. WILSON ran on a tidal schedule, usually only between May and October, wintering at Red Bank.

[Slide; WM V WILSON burned]

She was completely destroyed by fire at her dock on September 20, 1903. Her wrecked hull was used as a breakwater on Compton's Creek through 1907.

[Slide: CASTLETON running from Staten Island to Sandy Hook for the Staten Island Rapid Transit, 1903]

Built as the ERASTUS WIMAN in 1888, she was running as the CASTLETON between Staten Island and Sandy Hook for the Staten Island Rapid Transit Company in 1903. The City of New York sold her in 1915 to C.L. DIMON and others, who used her for a short time between New York City and Atlantic Highlands, ca. 1916.

[Slide: CASTLETON loading at Atlantic Highlands, ca. 1916]

She was known on these runs as a "dime boat" because everything cost just 10 cents. She was replaced on this run by the MANDALAY, and then sold to the Chesapeake Ferry Corporation in Newport News, Virginia. On March 3, 1918, while in a Norfolk, Virginia yard for repairs, she caught fire and was destroyed.

[Slide: EXPRESS, loaded with rail cars, running for the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad Co., July 20, 1909]

The EXPRESS was built in 1889 at Wilmington Delaware at a cost of \$140,000. She ran from the Mott Haven yards of the New Haven Railroad to Jersey City's Exchange Place Station of the Pennsylvania Railroad. She was equipped with rails, and the railway cars were shunted directly on board. Although convenient for the railway companies, it was a

rough process, and not very popular with travelers. She burned during the winter of 1913 at Mott Haven and her hull was towed up the Hudson to Dutchess Junction and tied up. Her remains were purchased by Charles Diamond, who had her rebuilt at the Morse Dry Dock and Repair Company as a triple-decker excursion boat with a 3,000 passenger capacity.

[Slide: MANDALAY]

Upon her completion, she was renamed the MANDALAY, and put on the Hudson River, where she spend only one season, before being put on the Atlantic Highlands to New York run. She was in the Narrows, running to New York City in May of 1938 when she was struck by the steamship ACADIA, and sank in about 50 feet of water in minutes. All 325 of her passengers and crew were saved. Her remains were removed in August 1938.

The GRAND REPUBLIC was built in 1878 in Long Island. Her engine, which had been salvaged from the wreck of the S/S MORRO CASTLE off of Asbury Park, had originally been built for the Lake Erie steamboat, CITY OF BUFFALO. 300 feet long, she weighed 1,760 gross tons and had paddle wheels 36 feet in diameter. Her passenger capacity was 4,000. An open deck boat, she didn't have a heating plant – in the winter months, a stove was set up in the pilot house with the chimney extending out one of the windows. The GRAND REPUBLIC spent much of her life on the Hudson River, but ran from Atlantic Highlands to New York City from 1920 until she was destroyed by fire in 1924.

[Slide: RESTLESS, 29 August 1928]

The RESTLESS was built in 1884 and had a passenger capacity of 719. She ran excursions for the Boston, New York and Southern Steamship Company, visiting Atlantic Highlands on July 8, 1932. She is also recorded as having run from Atlantic Highlands to New York City in 1931.



There is mention of the SUSQUEHANNA, built in 1898, running from Atlantic Highlands to the City in 1931. She was decommissioned in 1954.

There is a brief mention of the AMBASSADOR running from the City to Atlantic Highlands in 1933. Built at Chester, Pennsylvania in 1881, she was out of service in 1940. No other information was found.

The YANKEE, built in 1904 in Boston, Massachusetts, replaced the MANDALAY on her Atlantic Highlands to New York run for the 1938 season. On her first run, less than a month after the loss of the MANDALAY (which had also been on her first run of the season), the YANKEE spent three hours grounded on a sandbar just off of Highlands. The YANKEE ended her career in 1941.

[Slide: BELLE ISLAND drawing]

While I was unable to find the specific dates, the BELLE ISLAND, built in 1925 at Marvel's Shipyards in Newburgh, New York, is recorded as running from Atlantic Highlands to New York sometime during her career. She was designed by Townsend Smith of Rumson, who also designed the CITY OF KEANSBURG. While very little information is available on the BELLE ISLAND, there is a wonderful series of photographs taken roughly every other week during her construction at Marvel's yards. Several photographs from this series follow:

[Slide: BELLE ISLAND Dec 17 1924]

[Slide: BELLE ISLAND Jan 3 1925]

[Slide: BELLE ISLAND Feb 15, 1925]

[Slide: BELLE ISLAND March 1, 1925]

[Slide: BELLE ISLAND ca. March 15, 1925]

[Slide: Launch of the BELLE ISLAND, ca. Early April 1925]

[Slide: BELLE ISLAND 15 April 1925]

[Slide: BELLE ISLAND 1 May 1925]

[Slide: BELLE ISLAND 17 May 1925]

[Slide: BELLE ISLAND 1 June 1925]

[slide: CITY OF KEANSBURG, color]

The CITY OF KEANSBURG was built in 1926 for the Keansburg Steamboat Company for almost \$500,000. She ran primarily from Keansburg to New York until 1961, and then from Atlantic Highlands from 1962 to 1965. Primarily a track boat, she carried passengers to Monmouth Racetrack. When the Keansburg Steamboat Company began running busses from Keansburg to New York, the CITY OF KEANSBURG began to lose money. In 1948, a buyer purchased the Keansburg Steamboat Company – everything, that is, except the steamboat. This left her with former Company president, Henry Gelhaus, who, despite the expense, ran her for many years. Her Keansburg dock was destroyed by a hurricane in 1962, and after the Army refused to let her dock at Sandy Hook, she made Atlantic Highlands her home. In 1965, the pier at Atlantic Highlands burned, leaving her homeless. She continued to run sightseeing tours around New York Harbor until 1968, when she was sold to Thaite Marina Company for \$60,000. They put her up pending conversion to a floating restaurant, and work began in 1974. Plans fell through, however, and the CITY OF KEANSBURG was for sale in 1979. She was derelict at Jersey City as late as July 1985.

For over 100 years, steamboats were a major force in the economy of Monmouth County. They were the lifeblood of farmers who sent their produce to market in New York City, and of the tourist trade, bringing thousands of New Yorkers to summer at the shore and to enjoy the races at Monmouth Park. Hundreds of people including dock workers, ship builders, engineers, and deck hands were employed in the steamboat industry, and they spend their earnings supporting other local businesses, from restaurants to clothiers to the local five and dime. Since Robert Fulton's commercial success with the NORTH RIVER, steamboats were recognized as the fastest and most reliable means of transportation for large quantities of people and goods.

The early success of the steamboat industry was due to the involvement and promotion of the railroad companies, who built up the steamboat routes to connect their various rail lines. Ironically, it was also the railroads that contributed most significantly to its decline. As the railroads laid more track, they connected by rail those routes previously only connected by boat. Trains also had the advantages of serving non-coastal communities for freight and passenger service and of being significantly less dependent on uncontrollable factors such as tides and the weather.

Improvements in the road system, as well as engineering advances in automobiles and trucks, also marked the decline of the steamboat trade, as goods could be moved quickly and easily from door to door.

Buses, as well as passenger trains, became increasingly popular. The opening of the Garden State Parkway and the New Jersey Turnpike in the 1950s sealed the fate of the steamboat. In the beginning, a steamboat could take you in relative luxury from Keyport to New York City in about 3 or 4 hours, while a stagecoach could take several uncomfortable, dusty, days. By the 1950s, the same trip by highway took a comfortable 1-1/2 to 2 hours.

The last steamboat to run in Monmouth County was the CITY OF KEANSBURG, built in 1926. She ran from various Monmouth County ports to New York City for most of her life, and was finally retired in 1968 after running many years at a loss.

History, however, lives on – the new, fast diesel-powered ferries, including the SEASTREAK NEW JERSEY out of Atlantic Highlands, still run from Monmouth County to New York City on many of the old routes. With increasing traffic on the roads, and the overcrowding on the trains and buses, these water routes are again becoming popular as a quick and convenient way to get to the City.

Note: Images are predominantly from the John C. Mills Maritime Collection, Monmouth County Historical Association, Freehold, New Jersey.