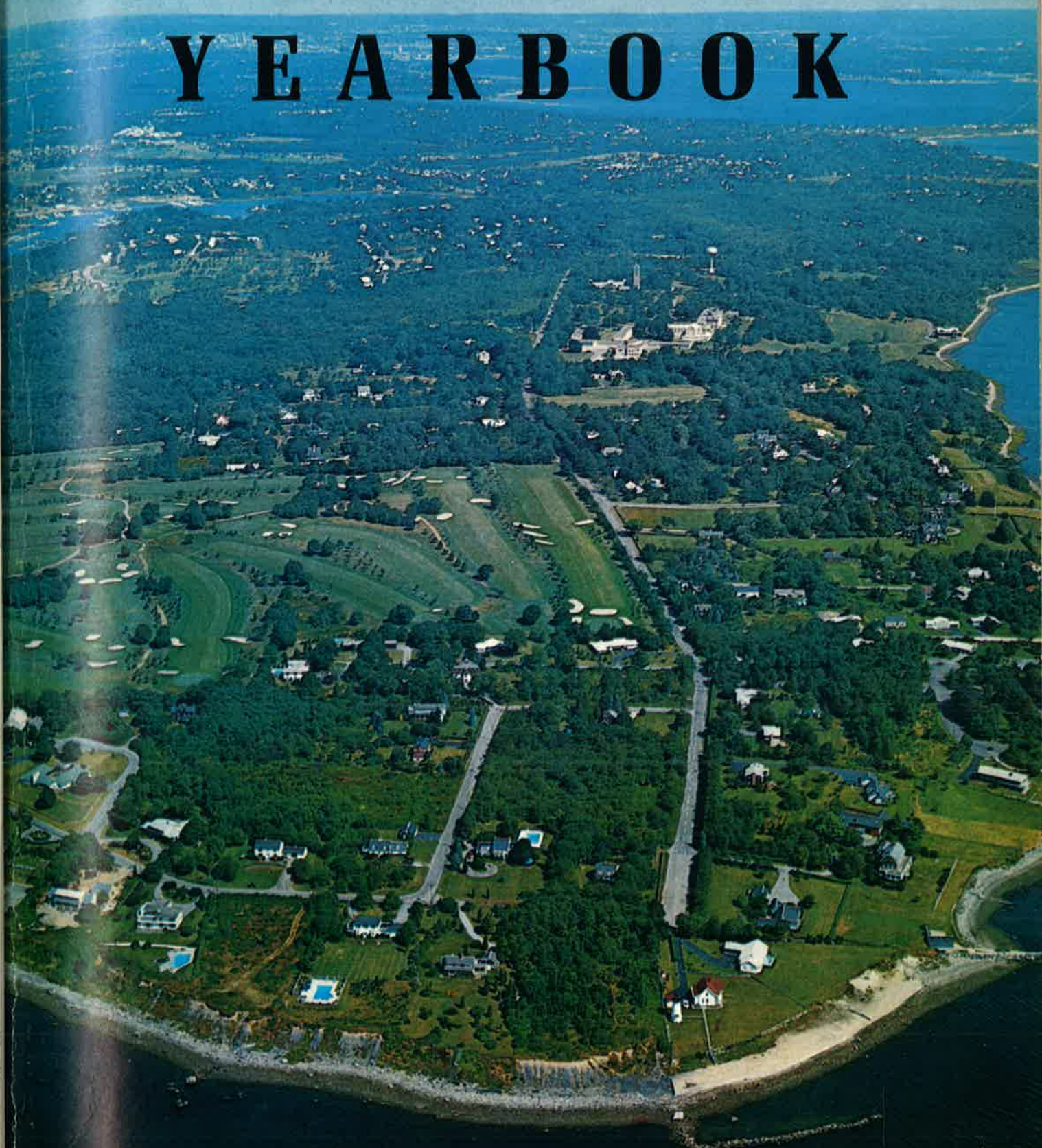


RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



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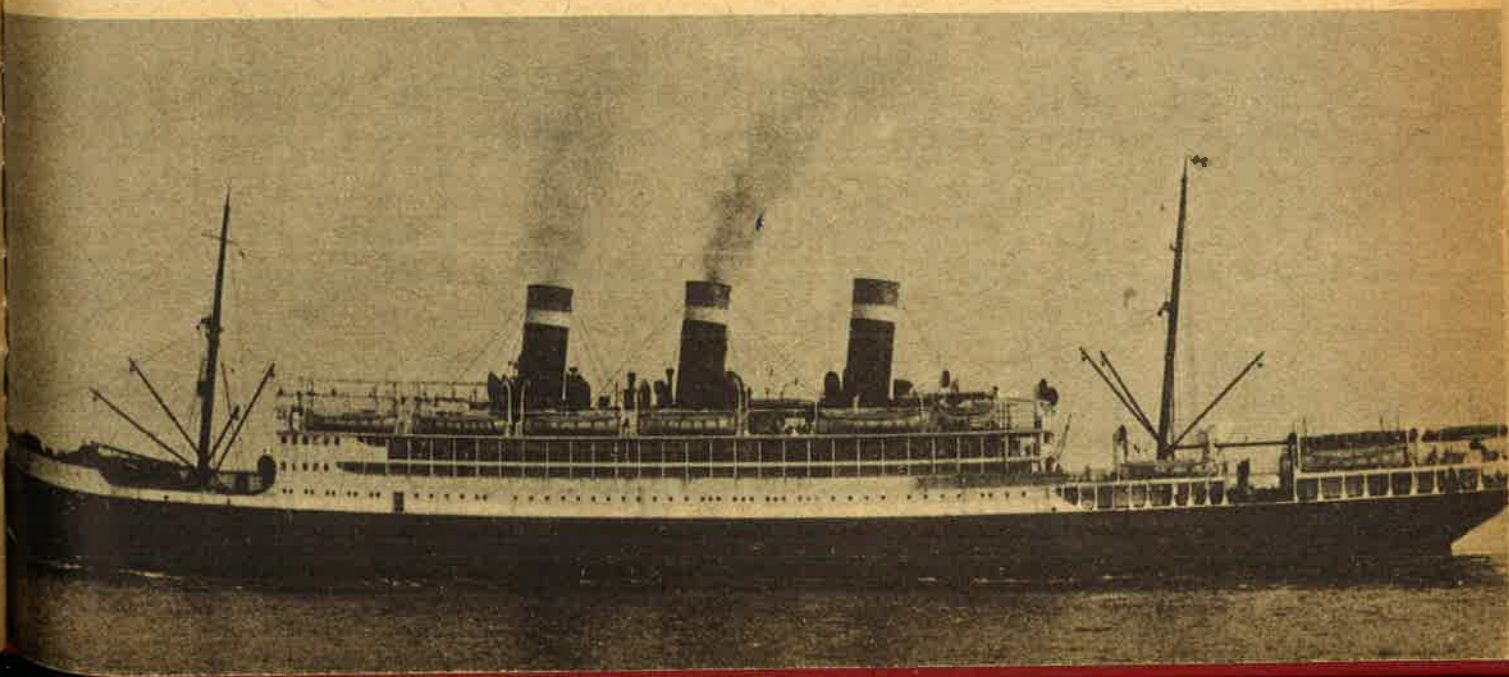
The Age Of Steamboats

By WILLIAM KING COVELL

THE nineteenth century was preeminently the age of steam, in terms of power and of transportation. Preliminary experiments began late in the eighteenth century, of course, and at the other end steam locomotives and steamships continued in operation and a few still were being built up to the late 1930's. But, in general terms, the Age of Steam, of which steamboat building and operation was a significant part, opened with the close of the Napoleonic wars in Europe and came to an end with the beginning of World War II. And the "golden age" of that era — the period following the early experimental stage but preceding the last phase when scientific application dominated the thinking of designers and operators alike — was the middle period: from just before the Civil War to just before the first World War. It is with that part of the history of steamboats and steamships that we are concerned here.

Today, when land transportation is predominant, sharing its function in part only with aviation, it is generally forgotten that, a century and more ago, travel by water was the familiar and customary means of getting from place to place. The highways of the seas were made by nature and were ready at hand; travel over land was slow and difficult, over roads that were unthinkably bad in terms of modern standards. Travelers habitually went by ship, resorting to land travel only when there was no other way to reach their objectives. To get from New York to Boston, for example, one went by boat the length of Long Island Sound, completing the trip by stagecoach over the shortest route. To go from New York to Philadelphia, one went first by boat across New York bay, then overland across New Jersey at the narrowest point, and finished by taking a boat down the Delaware River. The steam railroads, which began in the 1830's, about a generation after steamboats began their development, modified this travel pattern to some extent but did not for many years, except in terms of inland towns, affect this general pattern of transportation. At first, the railroads served largely as connecting links between steamboat lines. Only gradually did the railroads reverse this arrangement, making steamboat services supplementary to and dependent upon the railroad systems. The motor vehicle, of course, with its greater economy and flexibility of operation, brought an end first to the building and finally to the running of steamboats; and now the passenger railroad train is faced with the same problem. Whether, in the long run, we have gained more by this change than we have lost is a question that

The Fabre Liner "Providence" brought many an Italian immigrant to Providence.



only time can answer. With the talk of electrically-powered cars now being heard, perhaps the era of the internal combustion gasoline and diesel engines, today so apparently dominant, may be at the beginning of its decline. If so, the record of the Age of Steam may be repeated in different terms. And there may even come a time when the navigable waterways, now so well maintained and marked by aids to navigation but relatively so little used, may once again become a major highway of travel.

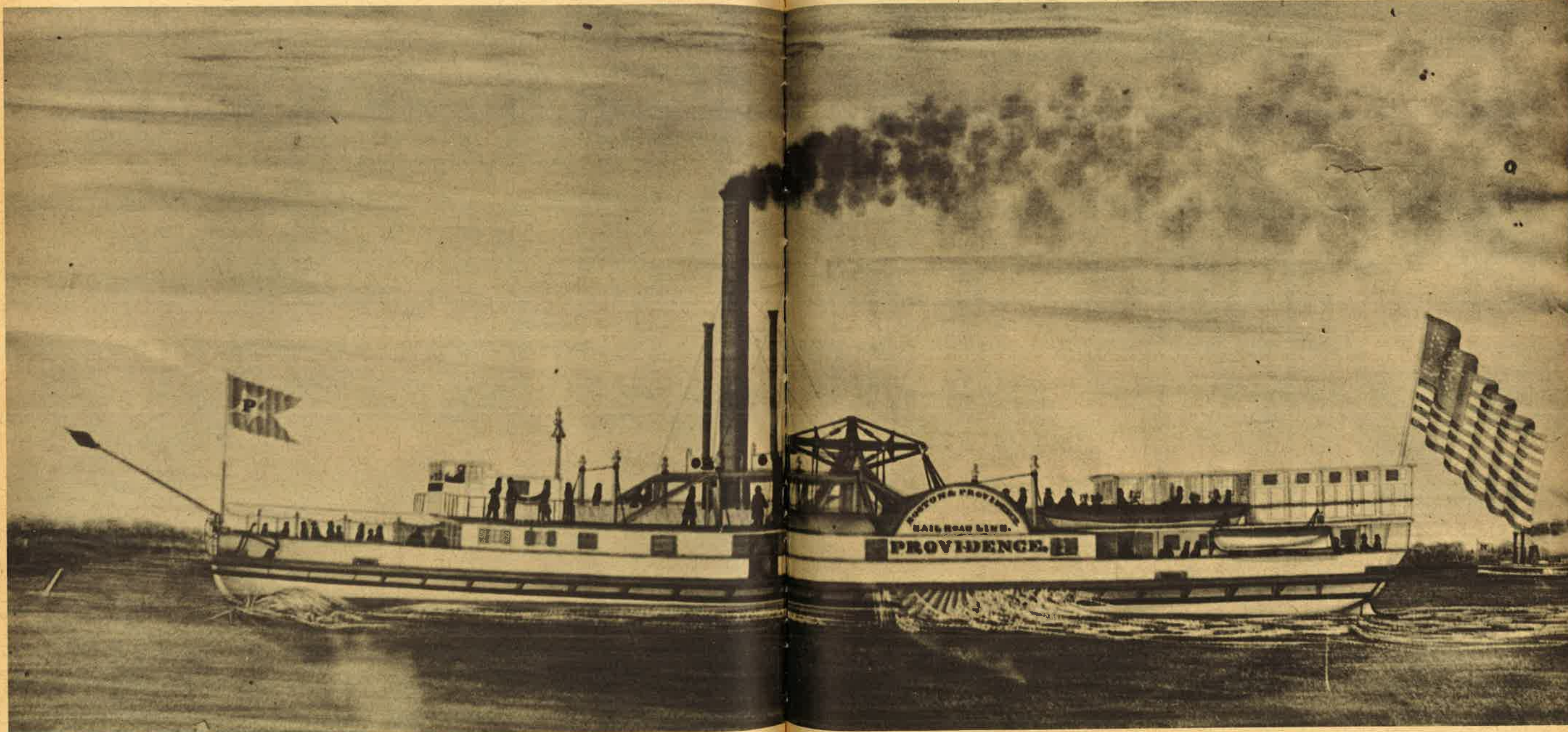
Further evidence of the basic importance of travel by water, by sail in the early days and by steam during the last century, exists in the fact that most of the principal cities on and near the Atlantic Coast still stand where there are good natural harbors or at the head of navigation on rivers. Boston, Providence, Newport, New London, New Haven, Hartford, New York, Albany, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and many others of the original settlements are examples. Few of these

towns would be where they are if travel conditions had been in the seventeenth century what they are today.

Before the coming of steam-powered vessels, multitudes of small sailing vessels provided local and coastwise transportation facilities. "Packets" sailed from almost every seaport town to almost every other, forming a network of travel routes quite comparable to the system of highways that has been developed in modern times. For example, my grandfather, about 1848, when going from Newport to Wilmington, North Carolina, to enter a ship chandlery business there, went by sailing packet directly from one port to the other. The Custom House records and the advertisements or notices in the newspapers of early days confirm both the existence and the wide extent of this mode of travel. Today, except perhaps for the airlines, we have no equivalent.

The larger and better known sailing ships were at the height of their activity in

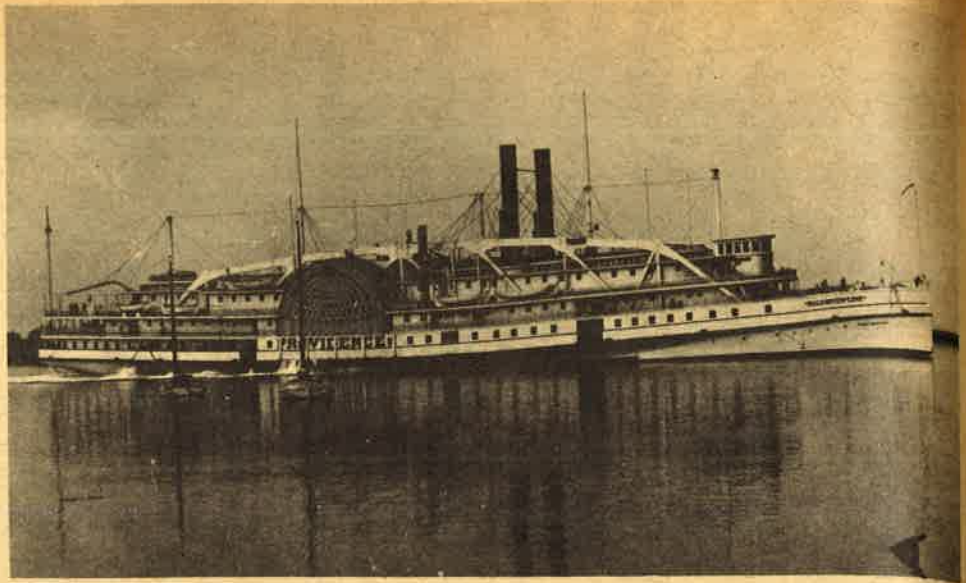
The first steamer "Providence" built in 1832.



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The second "Providence" built in 1867 by William H. Webb.



the 1850's, just over a century ago. Clipper ships, built chiefly for the trade in tea with China, and whalers which cruised around the world in search of their prey, both are well known again today but largely in a romanticized or unrealistic interpretation. Both were built for strictly practical considerations, with money-making as the chief objective, the undoubted beauty of form especially of the clippers and the seemingly adventurous wanderings of whaling ships in all of the oceans of the globe are later-day interpretations, hardly imagined in the days when the said ships existed. One cannot but suspect that, as with classical archaeology, the subject has been unduly "enriched" and rather over-published.

If certain types of sailing ships have been placed on pedestals, so to speak, and admired rather to excess, it seems equally sure that their contemporary steamboats and pioneer ocean-going steamships have been unduly ignored. It is surprising to some people to learn that Donald McKay, so well known as a builder of clipper ships, intended to build also a wooden side-wheel steamship for the North Atlantic trade and failed to do so only because of the lack of financial support. At New York, William H. Webb, from whose famous yard on the East River came several clipper ships, built also the two largest Long Island steamboats of post-Civil War days. In the lines of the hulls of these steamers it is not fanciful to see the same beauty of form that is characteristic of the better known but short-lived clipper ships whose names are familiar to every maritime historian. In other words, despite the opinions of popular writers, there is little inherently beautiful about the sailing ship or commonplace about the steamboat. Time may be a corrective here, as it has proved to be in other fields, such as art history, for example. One can only wait to see!

To interpret the character of the steam vessel and even to sketch its development is scarcely possible here. It must be said, however, that the steamboat, unlike some modern developments in architecture, did not grow out of nothing: it came from the sailing ship tradition in design and construction, and for many years steamboats were built by the same builders and had the same hull characteristics as had sail-driven ships; even to masts, rigging, and sails. Continuity of tradition, thus, rather than a pursuit of the novel and the functional as today, governed the building of steamboats for many years through several generations. Even the gradual acceptance of iron, and then steel, for steamboat hulls modified only slowly the sailing ship heritage. Not until the present century, and only with the latest of



"Pilgrim" of the Fall River Line.

Pictures of "Pilgrim," "Bristol," "Rhode Island" and "Priscilla" from the Heathcote collection courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

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the steamboats to be built, was anything like a functional character to be seen, and such vessels, despite their recent date, have been, in some cases, notable failures as well as short-lived.

In terms of Rhode Island, more specifically, steam vessels may be classified into three groups: local transportation, coasting travel to nearby ports, and overseas or longer-range travel. A brief commentary on each with a few illustrations follows.

Ocean-going steam vessels may be mentioned first since their number was relatively few and their service was intermittent. Furthermore, they were of foreign rather than American ownership and management. The Fabre Line, of Italian proprietorship, is the best remembered of such steamship lines. Many Rhode Island citizens, of an older generation, came here on Fabre Line ships. They and their descendants make up an important part of the population of the state today. An illustration of the *Providence* is included herewith. She was one of the later and larger of the Fabre Line ships. She was built in 1915 in France, and was over 500 feet long and had a tonnage of 11,996. Her first trip to this country was made to Providence, and in later years she ran largely to New York with occasional calls at Boston or Providence. She was lost during World War II when in government service in the Mediterranean. The picture was taken in 1927 at Boston by Mr. R. Loren Graham and is used with his permission.

Steam vessels of the second group may be divided into two parts: those in service between Providence and other seaport towns such as Boston, Philadelphia, Norfolk, and those running through Long Island Sound to New York. Steamers of the Merchants and Miners Line, the Windsor Line, and the Clyde Line used to be seen frequently in the harbor of Providence, the wharf with wharf building at Fox Point was, for many years, the landing place of these steamers, most of which, due to their off-shore route, were, in effect, ocean steamships on a smaller scale.

The Long Island Sound steamboats, however, were more numerous and were more closely associated with the Port of Providence and the State of Rhode Island. Three such steamboats were named *Providence* and a picture of each of the three is published herewith. The first *Providence*, built in 1832, is shown by an early watercolor painting which is used with the permission of the owner of the picture, the Rhode Island Historical Society. She was one of several steamboats, built from the late 1820's to the late 1830's, to run between New York and Providence, connecting with the railroad to Boston. Steamboat development then was going forward rapidly. Consequently in 1840, after only eight years of service, this early *Providence* was replaced by newer, larger and faster boats. Observe in the picture the tall, thin smokestacks — needed because of the wood fuel then used. The engine is of the type later known as the "walking beam" — a form used generally for American side-wheel inland-water steamboats for nearly one hundred years. Little superstructure appears in the picture. Most of the passenger accommodations then were placed within the hull. The next *Providence* was built in 1867 at New York by the famous shipbuilder previously referred to, William H. Webb. She was one of two sister ships, the other being named *Bristol*. Being 373 feet long and of 2,962 gross tons, they were among the largest steam vessels of their time, just one hundred years ago. This *Providence* is remembered in connection with the infamous event "Black Friday" of September 24, 1869 because, a few months before that day, she carried President Grant as guest of Fisk and Gould when the president was en route to Boston to appear there at the Peace Jubilee. On the evening of the trip eastward from New York, after being entertained at dinner, Grant was pressed by the gold conspirators to accept their point of view regarding gold and yet gave only a conditional assent. Even so, Grant's grudging toleration of the ideas of the planners made possible their "pirate raid on the nation's economy"



"Rhode Island" operated by the Providence and Stonington Steamship Co.



The "Islander" of the Sakonnet Line. Photo courtesy of the Steamship Historical Society of America.



"Bristol" which plied between Providence, Bristol and Boston.

shortly afterward; an event in economic history still well remembered. The *Providence* remained in service long after that event, surviving the loss of the *Bristol* by fire at Newport in 1888, and being retired only after the coming of the *Priscilla* in 1894. The photograph, taken by Philip Caswell of Newport, on a summer morning early in the 1890's as she was leaving Newport en route up the bay to Fall River, shows her in her later days. She remained as a "spare boat" of the Fall River Line until the late 1890's, being sold in 1901, after being laid up for several years at Providence, and towed to Boston to be broken up early in 1902.

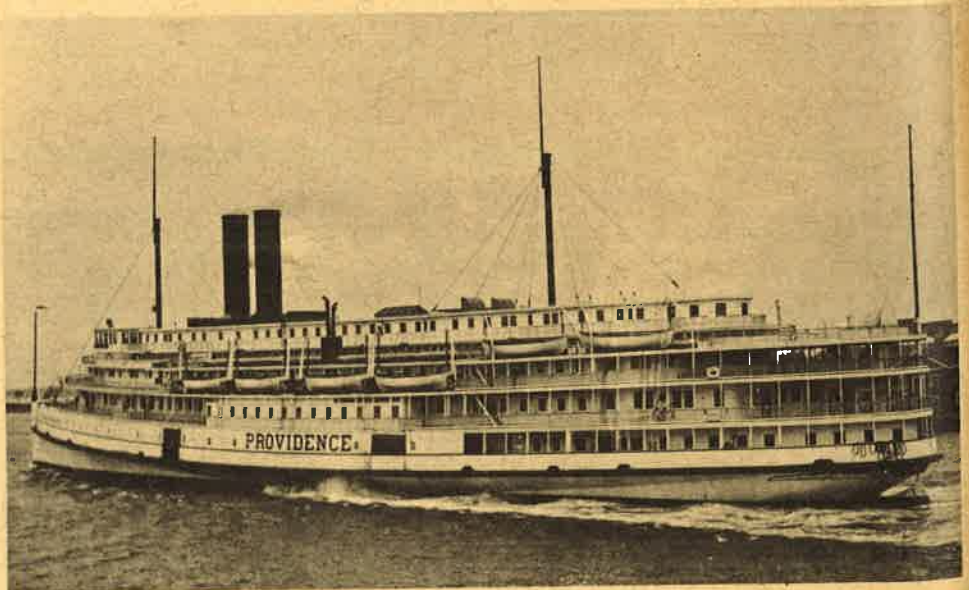


"Priscilla," pride of the Fall River Line.

A more recent *Providence* is shown by a photograph taken about 1935 by Ralph M. Arnold of Newport. This steamer was built in 1905 at the Fore River shipyard at Quincy, Massachusetts, for the Fall River Line. Her name was given her because, although one of the smaller steamboats of that famous line, and intended to run to Fall River in winter, she was planned to run out of Providence in the summer. When she was built, hulls had come to be made almost in every instance of steel, although the superstructure was still of wood, comparable to that of the older boats but larger and more elaborate. She was in active service for 32 years, being laid up at Newport in 1937 when the Fall River Line was closed, and being towed to Baltimore to be broken up in December of the same year.

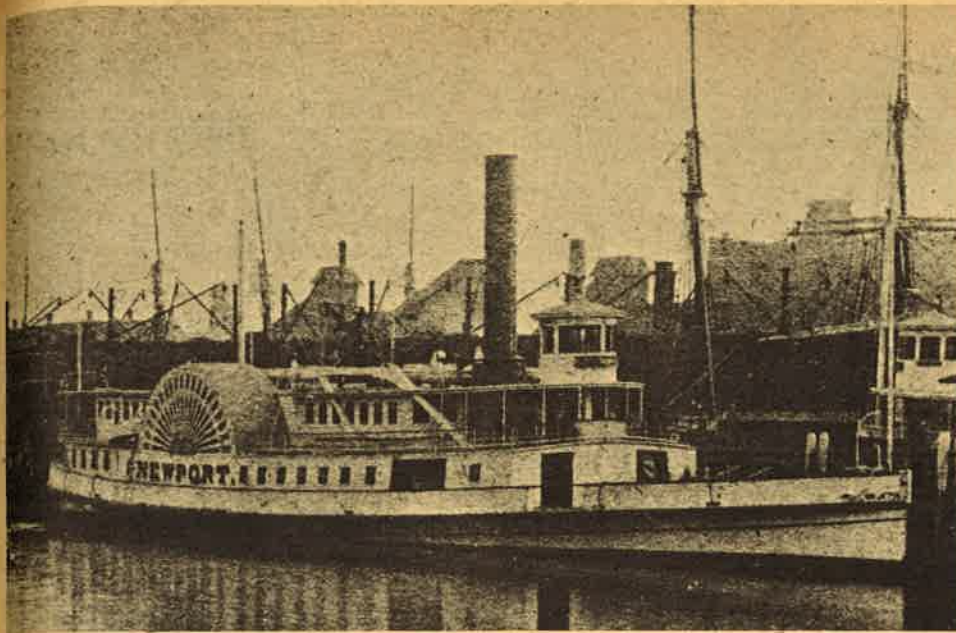
When referring to the Fall River Line, it seems hardly possible not to mention the *Commonwealth*, the last and the largest of the many steamers to be built for that line. In 1908, when she was new, she was the largest side-wheel steamer ever to be built, and since that time, only four steamboats of the side-wheel type, built to run on Lake Erie, have been larger than she in length and in tonnage. She, also, was sold and broken up after the Fall River Line was closed in 1937, and although she has now been gone for thirty years, many Rhode Islanders remember her spacious and beautifully furnished interiors and her unusual power and speed — more than 20 knots per hour — exceptional still today in terms of passenger-carrying steam vessels except for a few of the larger of the North Atlantic steamships.

There is still to be mentioned the steamboats that ran primarily from port to port on the bay, providing an earlier marine equivalent of what is known as commuter service on land today. As had their sailing-ship predecessors, bay steamboats ran between Providence and Newport, Providence and Fall River, Providence and Sakonnet (Little Compton), Newport and Wickford, Pawtucket and Newport, Newport and Narragansett Pier, and, in earlier days, over even other routes. And, of course, most of the boats covering these runs made at least a few landings



The third "Providence" built at Fore River in 1905.

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"City of Newport" built in 1863.
From a photograph taken in 1876.

en route — in many cases, several landings along their established courses. Along the Providence River, from Rocky Point and Crescent Park northward, the landing points were numerous. This marine activity varied from decade to decade and from year to year, but for a long time it was well maintained and was for the steamboat owners, a prosperous business enterprise. At about the turn of the century, electric trolley lines began to be built and they set up the first serious competition to the steamboats. Even more serious was the trend toward motor car transportation which grew rapidly during the 1920's. As the boats grew older, they were retired or sold and as steamboating no longer was an attractive field for investment, few, if any, new boats were built or purchased to replace them. Costs of operation were increasing, Coast Guard requirements became more and more exacting, and finally, the depression years of the 1930's practically put an end to this phase of marine activity. Today, except for summer boat service to Block Island, local marine activity is entirely a thing of the past, in terms, that is, of passenger steamboats.

Pictures are included of three of the many steamboats that formerly were to be seen here. The view of the *City of Newport*, of 1863, is interesting both because the date of its being taken is recorded — February 21, 1876 — and because it shows in the Providence River several of the small sailing vessels that used to be active in the local carrying and passenger trade. The later and better known *Mount Hope*, the last and one of the best steamboats built for local service on Narragansett Bay, ran each year through the summer of 1934, a total of 46 years; an almost unique record of continuous service, hardly to be equalled by any transportation vehicle of modern times. And finally, the *Islander*, of the Sakonnet Line, which ran for several years early in the present century from Providence to the several landings along the Sakonnet River, represents the many smaller boats that provided local service between points along the shores of Narragansett Bay.

Steamboats, then, although now only a memory, did take an active part in the life of Rhode Island and, indeed, of all parts of the country, save only a few places far in the interior remote not only from the sea but also from lakes and rivers; and since they represent a link between the more informal ways of living of the recent past and the perhaps over-mechanized age in which we now live, they remain a significant part of our national experience and heritage.



"Mount Hope."