
RHODE ISLAND FERRIES

THROUGHOUT the world, ferries have ever played a mighty part in the development of transportation. In early Colonial days they were extensively used along our Eastern seaboard and, even in these modern times, there are still many plying to and fro. True, they have changed in type, power and carrying capacity with the passing years, and many, of course, have become obsolete or unnecessary through the building of bridges, small at first, but increasing in size to the huge spans of this modern day.

Yet, despite the most magnificent achievements in bridge architecture, ferries are still doing a steady and profitable business in many localities. If ferries are still an important means of transportation, how much more so they must have been in Colonial days when the post roads ended on opposite shores and the ferry was the only means of communication between.

Wherever there was a stream or a body of water to be crossed they were a vital necessity, but nowhere were they more needed than in our own little State of Rhode Island, located as it is on both shores of the great inland waterway, Narragansett Bay. The early settlements in Rhode Island were built along its shores, on the islands in its waters, or on the banks of the rivers emptying into it.

The first ferry boats were operated under the principles of the old English common law but they were controlled by the towns which granted franchises to private owners and operators. For a long time, before the

business became recognized as profitable, towns had great difficulty in obtaining men to run the ferries, grants of land sometimes being offered as an inducement to take the position. Later on we find rich men, like Benjamin Ellery, of Newport, and Deputy-Governor Abbott, of Providence, making exceptional efforts to secure ferry franchises.

After the ferries became an established feature, many Acts were passed by the Assembly for their management. By 1690, post riders were rated as free passengers and by 1747, an Act provided that ferrymen must be ready to transport passengers from 5 A. M. to 8 P. M., from March 10th to September 10th, and from 6 A. M. to 7 P. M. during the balance of the year "if the weather will permit boats passing." However, "Physicians, Surgeons, Midwives, and Persons going to fetch Physicians, Surgeons, or Midwives were to be carried at any Time of Night."

Also, by 1747, laws required that ferry wharves be well built and kept in good repair, that all boats be good and sound, and that ferrymen give good service. A later provision stated that each boat must have two good oars and a boat hook. Ferries had to be kept afloat at all times and kept at the ferry landings except when laid up for repairs. The penalty for all inexcusable absences from the landings was fixed at ten dollars per hour.

In many instances, ferrymen also kept inns near their wharves and countless subterfuges were practiced to obtain the patronage of their passengers over night. And,

just as often, the passengers would pretend they were hurrying for a doctor in order to get quicker service. The ferryman's "House of Entertaynement" was a great convenience, however, since many of the ferries were sailboats and favorable winds were necessary for their operation.

Ferryman were exempt from military duty but frequently complaints were lodged against them for being absent from their posts on private business. Also, they were often prone to let their wharves and equipment fall into disrepair. Many of the operatives were none too skillful in the management of their boats and frequently "passengers, masters, and servants were compelled to work to disengage the ferry, jumping into the water to dislodge it from a sand bank."

Ferries in Rhode Island were located at the ends of highways where good landings were available and where the distance in water travel was the shortest. As a matter of fact, the post roads were followers of the ferries in development and, in 1715, Newport contracted for its first paved street between the ferry and the Colony House. Towns were often named for the ferries and, for one hundred years, Howland's Ferry, established in 1640 and the first in Rhode Island, gave its name to the present town of Tiverton.

Ferry owners with other business interests hired substitute operatives to run the ferries for which they held a franchise. And sometimes, the younger members of the family did the work. Andrew Edwards, who ran the Red Bridge Ferry in 1695, was only fourteen years old, and William Daggert, running the same ferry in 1770, was the same age. Captain Eaton sailed the large South Ferry when he was but fifteen years of age.

The post road was, at one time, made to cross as many ferries as possible (a money-making scheme, to be sure), highly necessary to the success of the ferries. Yet the roads were often in terrible condition. Gates hung across many of those which led to the ferries as late as 1739.

By 1743, wheeled vehicles had become so common as to make regular schedules of rates a necessity. Bristol Ferry, in the following hundred years, got most of this sort of traffic and a Ferry Act of 1844 mentions

rates for a "coach, barouche, wagon, four-wheel carriage, chaise or sulky, carryall or pleasure carriage, wagon hung on springs, or ox wagon or cart."

The first ferries were rowboats or canoes. Those at James Street, Providence, were round bottomed with a seat around the sides capable of holding a dozen passengers. The ferryman used crossed oars and stood up in the middle of the boat as he rowed. In 1830, Bristol Ferry had two rowboats, two sailboats, and one horse-powered ferry. Most ferries usually kept several small skiffs on hand for use in transporting one or two passengers at odd times.

Open sail boats of jib and mainsail type were quite extensively used. They were usually between thirty and forty feet long and were suitable for conveying small vehicles and cattle as well as passengers. These sail boats were sluggish, not easily managed, and extremely difficult to handle in strong winds. Passengers, advised by ferryman not to cross when the water was too rough, often thought the latter were afraid but such was seldom the case.

Scows hauled across by the aid of a rope, a method much used in other sections of the country at this period, were not of much value for use in Rhode Island waters where the crossings were more often rough than otherwise. However, a few of this type were utilized to replace bridges which were temporarily closed.

Horse ferries were of two kinds, those which were fitted with a treadmill operating the paddlewheels directly and those in which the horse or ox trod a circular platform which transmitted power to the paddles by cogs. One of the later type was used for a while at Jamestown. These types, however, were not satisfactory, because no progress could be made with them in rough weather.

The first steam ferry was operated by the Boston and Providence Railroad for transporting passengers from its terminal at India Point to the Stonington railroad station at Pawtuxet Cove. By 1873, Jamestown had a steam ferry of the New York type but Bristol did not have steam power until 1905 (due to the effect of the Fall River steam boats upon the ferry traffic).

Before the coming of steam ferries, the ferry landings had been generally built of

stone, but now slips of piles sunk in the bottom in the shape of a horseshoe were found more practical.

In olden days the bay was often frozen over solid in the winter and at those times ferries were, of course, useless. Sometimes, as in the winters of 1739, 1740 and 1780, it was possible to drive across from Narragansett to Portsmouth, or from Bristol to Portsmouth and Prudence Island.

In Revolutionary days the ferries were invaluable for the transportation of troops and supplies. It was as important that they be kept running as for the English channel to be kept open. Only during the occupation of Newport by the British were there extended interruptions in the service. How-

land's Ferry at that time was guarded by a fort and barracks.

Many of the old ferries are now gone and those remaining are fast disappearing. As Mount Hope Bridge has eliminated the Bristol Ferry so other bridges yet to be built, particularly between Jamestown and Newport, will doubtless replace the famous old ferries now in use at the mouth of the bay.

This brief sketch is necessarily incomplete. As much again might be written about each ferry that ever operated in Rhode Island waters. But, perhaps, enough has been said to arouse an interest in one of the most important means of transportation in the early development of the State and country.