

The steamer *Cimbria* at Somesville.

Stereopticon view courtesy of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission

Getting Here from There: Steamboat Travel to Mount Desert Island

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For the first hundred and fifty years after Mount Desert Island was permanently settled, the preferred highway was the ocean. While coasting vessels and pinky schooners reigned supreme in the eighteenth century, by the turn of the nineteenth, change was afoot. Following European advances in steam technology and the work of Robert Fulton in America, a new mode of passenger transportation was introduced to the United States, one that revolutionized access to Mount Desert Island.

In May 1824, the Kennebec Steam Navigation Company unveiled Maine's first steamship at Bath. Costing \$13,000, the steamer *Maine* was created by joining two eighty-foot schooner hulls together by means of a central paddle wheel. Leaving Bath, the *Maine* connected with the *Patent*, which ran to Boston, providing passengers with easy access to distant cities. From Bath, the *Maine* stopped at many coastal communities, including Boothbay Harbor, Owls Head, Camden, Belfast, Sedgwick, the Cranberry Isles, and points Down East.

The *Maine* was soon joined by other steamers, all of which shared a similar weakness: while sailing vessels were afforded large deck space for cargo, early steamboats such as the *Maine* and the *Patent* also required space for their fuel, cordwood, which was far more abundant in Maine than coal. One early steamboat, the *Bangor*, which was launched in 1834 to run between Bangor and Boston, is said to have consumed twenty-five cords of wood per trip, requiring 3,200 cubic feet of space for fuel storage alone. Despite their engines, early steamers were also equipped with sails, which served not only to allay the fears of passengers concerning the steam engine, but also to provide backup power in the event of engine failure.¹

By the 1830s and '40s steamboats were becoming increasingly popular and routes were rapidly expanding along on the coast of Maine. In some cases, steamers were also connecting American ports, such as Boston, with ports in Canada, stopping in Maine along the way. This was the case with the *Royal Tar*, an ill-fated steamer that has received some attention in recent years in a number of publications.

After a busy summer on the road, the Macomber-Welch Circus found itself rushing to St. John, New Brunswick to gain passage on the *Royal Tar* back to Boston. With so many animals to accommodate, including an elephant named Mogul, a gnu, a zebra, two dromedaries, a tiger, two lions, and a number of birds and snakes, the *Royal Tar* required some alterations before it could depart. After the construction of a special stall for the elephant and the removal of two lifeboats to provide additional deck space, the *Royal Tar* left St. John on Friday, October 21, 1836, and arrived in Eastport that evening. Due to poor weather, Captain Reed elected to stay in the harbor over the weekend, and departed on Monday, only to be forced to anchor off Cutler due to continuing bad weather. Hoping to avoid the

rough waters of the Gulf of Maine, the steamer followed a coastal route, finding itself off Vinalhaven on the afternoon of October 25. Noticing a rapid loss of steam pressure, Captain Reed anchored to investigate the cause of the problem and soon found that the boilers had been allowed to run dry and had ignited a fire. Further complicating the matter was the fact that the fire fighting equipment was kept in the engine room, and was now inaccessible. Recognizing the imminent danger, Captain Reed ordered the sails raised and the anchor line cut in order to try to beach the vessel and thereby save the passengers, who would not otherwise fit in the two remaining lifeboats.

As the *Royal Tar* burned, circus animals were released. Some were pushed over the side while others, like Mogul the elephant, waited until the last possible moment before jumping into the ocean. As one passenger later noted, "He [Mogul] remained, poor fellow, viewing the devastation, until, the fire scorching him, he sprang over the side and was seen striking out for shore with his trunk held high in the air."²

Luckily the revenue cutter *Veto* spotted the burning *Royal Tar* and came to her aid. Having dispatched one lifeboat filled with passengers to Isle au Haut, Captain Reed began ferrying passengers in the second lifeboat to the *Veto*, which was forced to remain at a distance from the burning *Royal Tar* due to the ammunition she was carrying. Along with the total loss of the *Royal Tar*, twenty-nine passengers, three crewmembers, and all of the circus animals died—though stories of exotic animal populations on isolated islands persisted for years.³

For the most part, however, steamboat travel along the Maine coast took place without incident and became an accepted and convenient mode of transportation. The journals of Colonel John Black, now preserved at the Woodlawn Museum in Ellsworth, Maine, make many references to steamboat travel in and around New England. Living in Ellsworth, Colonel Black boarded the steamers when they landed at Bucksport. In reading his journals, the difficulties of nineteenth-century travels become readily apparent; even in good weather, travel was slow. "Saturday 12th March (1842)—clear and pleasant. Left Portland in Steamer *Express* for Bucksport at half past 5 o'clock a.m. Uncommonly smooth and pleasant—arrived at Bucksport, about 4 p.m. Left in stage about ½ past 4 p.m.

and got home about half past eight p.m. and found all well.” In other entries Black makes references to the difficulties caused by fog. On Friday, August 22, 1845 Colonel Black boarded the *Charter Oak* at 9 p.m., staying onboard overnight. His journal entry for the next day read:

Started from wharf at 4 a.m.—very foggy. Ran for Monhegan, but could not make it. Had to anchor to prevent drifting—northerly 4 miles an hour—in 40 fathoms water. Laid 3 or 4 hours, not feeling very pleasantly in a southeaster. About noon it scaled a little and we descried Duck Ledges near Monhegan Island—hove up and ran for Whitehead [likely Whitehead Lighthouse near St. George], which we found in a very dense fog, by the bell. Stopped at Thomaston and Camden and got to Belfast about dark. Fog as thick as ever. Captain Howes thought best to stop there ‘till morning—very prudently.

Sunday, 24th August—dense fog at daybreak.

Left Belfast with great difficulty and danger by very thick fog—arrived at Bucksport around 6 a.m. It was running the gauntlet among vessels and the shores, etc. After breakfast [I] left in the stage, alone, and arrived about noon at home and found all well.⁴

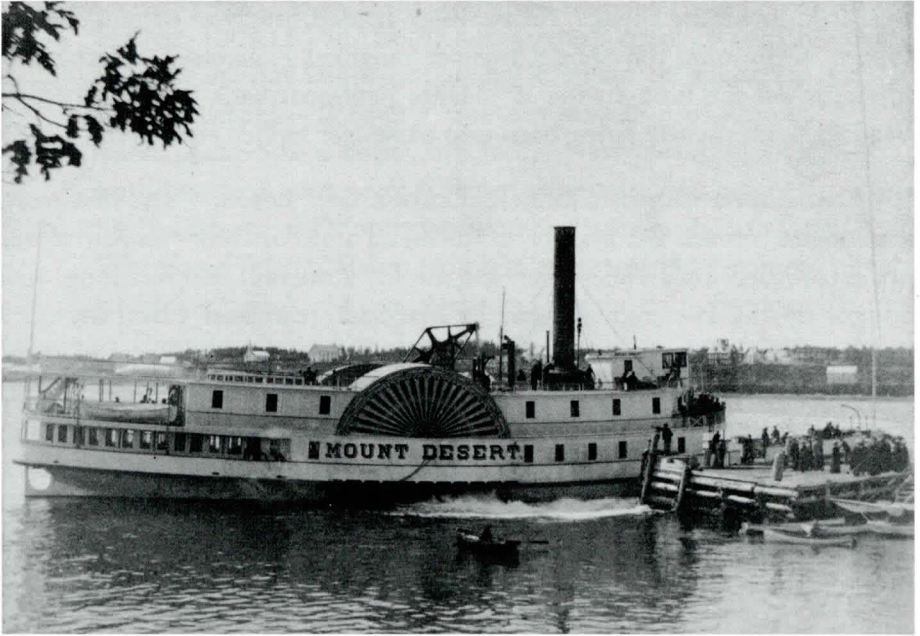
As demand increased in the 1840s, additional steamers were put into service, some featuring more refined accommodations such as private staterooms. Following the discovery of gold in California in 1849, three Maine steamboats, the *W.J. Pease*, the *Senator*, and the *Governor Dana* set out to bring gold-seeking individuals and supplies to California. Although the *W.J. Pease* only got as far as Uruguay, the other two made it all the way around Cape Horn and arrived safely in California.⁵

By the mid 1850s, Mount Desert Island was just beginning to be discovered as a summer resort. Tobias Roberts opened Bar Harbor’s first hotel, the Agamont House, in 1855 and two years later the steamer *Rockland* inaugurated regular passenger service from Rockland. Connecting with the *Daniel Webster*, which ran from Portland to Rockland, the *Rockland* made occasional trips to Mount Desert Island before 1857 and was used

by Charles Tracy and his party during their well-documented vacation to the Island in August 1855.⁶ The Civil War caused an interruption in service along the Maine coast as a number of coastal steamboats were requisitioned. Fourteen boats left Maine for service in the war and five were lost, including the *T.F. Secor*, which landed briefly at Mount Desert Island. Only one, the *Daniel Webster*, renamed *Expounder*, returned to Maine when she brought the 2nd Maine Regiment back to Bangor from Virginia, with the rest going back into passenger service elsewhere.⁷

As maritime historian John Richardson later noted, "The first truly dependable service, Bar Harbor to Rockland and Portland, was, therefore, not established until 1868 when the mighty *Lewiston*, 246 feet long, was bought by the Portland, Bangor & Machias Steamboat Company . . . [landing] at Rockland, Castine, Deer Isle, Sedgwick, Southwest Harbor, Bar Harbor, Millbridge, Jonesport, and Machiasport."⁸ Interestingly, it was this same year that Alpheus Hardy of Boston, who first visited Bar Harbor three years earlier, finished construction on "Birch Point," Bar Harbor's first summer cottage, signaling the start of Bar Harbor as a summer resort. Along with her 900-horsepower engine, the *Lewiston* was also equipped with two gaff-rigged masts, vestiges of an earlier time. Before long, competition arrived in the form of the Rockland, Mt. Desert & Sullivan Steamboat Company's *Ulysses*, which left Rockland Harbor and touched at Mount Desert Island points before stopping at Hancock and Sullivan. According to an advertisement now in a private collection, the *Ulysses* made two trips per week to Mount Desert in 1876, leaving Rockland on Saturdays and Wednesdays at 9:00 in the morning and departing Sullivan for Rockland at 6:00 in the morning on Mondays and Thursdays. The following year, the *Ulysses* ran three trips a week, reflecting the increased interest in vacationing on Mount Desert Island.⁹ Unfortunately, in January of 1878 the *Ulysses* was damaged beyond repair after breaking free from her mooring, forcing the Rockland, Mt. Desert & Sullivan Steamboat Company to construct a replacement, the first boat specifically built to bring passengers to the Mount Desert Island region. The aptly named *Mount Desert* entered service on June 19, 1879 and soon became known affectionately as Ol' Mouny. Her inaugural run was celebrated with parties at Green's Landing, on Deer Isle and at Southwest Harbor, where a lobster feed was given. The *Mount Desert* received an ovation at Bar Harbor and a *grande fête* was held in her honor at Sullivan that night. At 162 feet long, with a 27-foot beam and

a draft of 9 feet, 6 inches, the *Mount Desert* was significantly smaller than her competitor, the *Lewiston*, though her 428-horsepower walking beam engine gave her a faster cruising speed than the larger steamer.



The *Mount Desert* at Southwest Harbor.

Courtesy of the William Otis Sawtelle Collection, Acadia National Park

Over the decades, the *Mount Desert* carried hordes of visitors away from the heat of the city and into the rural comfort of Mount Desert Island. She also carried construction materials—at double the normal freight cost—for many of the new cottages being built on the Island. Among the passengers on the *Mount Desert* was the Strong party, a group of some twenty people that came to Mount Desert Island from Portland in 1884. Taking the steamer *Katahdin* from Portland to Rockland, the party then boarded the *Mount Desert* for the final leg of the journey, the details of which were recorded in a journal entry: “July 20. Seated on the forward deck of the little steamer, *Mount Desert*, all enjoyed the sail out of Rockland Harbor. The fog lifted now and then and showed us glimpses of beautiful islands. The morning passed pleasantly. Southwest Harbor was reached about 10:30. We were safely landed and found a number of the townsmen waiting for us, as the coming of the Strong Party had been announced by the town crier. The motion of the steamer gave place to that

of country wagons and the seven mile ride to Somesville was appreciated by all hands.¹⁰

Although Bar Harbor and Southwest Harbor had long been established as steamer destinations, other Island stopping points were added in the 1880s. A steamboat wharf was built at Try House Point in Bass Harbor over the winter of 1881-82, and the Kimball family built a wharf at Northeast Harbor the following year for the arrival of the steamboat in that village.¹¹ Eventually this wharf, which was in the harbor itself, was replaced by one constructed in 1887 on Smallidge Point by the Western Northeast Harbor Steamboat Company.¹² Seal Harbor's steamboat wharf was inaugurated on August 15, 1882, when three rousing cheers from the dock welcomed the *Mount Desert* to the village. To celebrate the event, James Clement, son of Seal Harbor's first settler, composed and read a poem, a copy of which was given to Captain Robinson of the *Mount Desert* along with a birch bark basket of flowers: "*This is a fine wharf /It stands on a fine spot, /God bless the owners, /And all they have got. /It bears a fine prospect /And stands in from the sea, /The steamers will come in, /With their helms to the lee.*"¹³

Realizing the potential profit to be made through the steamboat industry, the management of the Maine Central Railroad decided to go to sea in 1881, purchasing the Portland, Mount Desert, & Machias line, which owned the *Lewiston* and her running mate, the *City of Richmond*. The *City of Richmond* was replaced in 1892 by the \$175,000 side-wheeler *Frank Jones* which, at 263 feet long, was bigger and more impressive than any other steamer in Maine at the time. The railroad company extended the Waukeag branch of rail to Hancock Point in 1883, naming the new terminus Mount Desert Ferry. At Mount Desert Ferry trains could go onto the pier where a waiting steamboat would take passengers to their final destinations on Mount Desert Island.¹⁴

Maine Central Railroad built a number of boats specifically for this new run, making them especially luxurious for their elite clientele. Soon the *Sebenoa*, *Sorrento*, and *Sappho* were plying the waters off Mount Desert Island, bringing passengers and freight from Mount Desert Ferry to Bar Harbor and other area destinations. Unlike many of the other steamers running to Mount Desert at the time, the new Maine Central Railroad vessels were powered by propellers rather than paddle wheels, making them

less susceptible to the dangers of ice during the winter months. The 140-foot *Sappho* was the best appointed of these new vessels and was given to the exclusive use of President Benjamin Harrison during his visit to Mount Desert Island as the guest of James G. Blaine in August, 1889. As reported in the *Mount Desert Herald*,



The main saloon of the steamer *Sappho*. Courtesy of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission

[The President] was met at the Ferry by Mr. Blaine, and made the trip down the bay under the most favorable circumstances, evidently enjoying that short but delightful voyage to the utmost. The grand saloon of the *Sappho* was elegantly decorated with flowers and flags, and the boat was handsomely dressed out in bunting from stem to stern; but the grand scenery attracted Mr. Harrison's attention far more than floral decorations and, passing quickly through the saloon, he did not leave his stand on the upper deck near the bow of the boat from the time she left Mount Desert Ferry until she was alongside the pier at Bar Harbor. . . . At Bar Harbor an immense crowd had assembled, and, as the steamer approached the pier, a presidential salute of twenty-one guns was fired by the U.S. Revenue cutter *Woodbury*, and several yachts at anchor also saluted. The Bar Harbor Band was stationed on the wharf and played during the landing. . . .¹⁵

Unfortunately, just ten years later, the *Sappho* was at the center of one of the most significant steamer disasters in the Mount Desert Island region. On the morning of August 6, 1899, visitors from all over the state flocked to Mount Desert Ferry to see the warships of the North Atlantic Squadron, which were visiting Bar Harbor. According to one newspaper account, two engines pulled eleven passenger coaches that were so full that people were hanging from the steps and packed tightly in the aisles. It soon became

apparent that the waiting *Sappho* would only be able to accommodate a fraction of the passengers on the train, causing a mad dash for the boat upon the train's arrival on the dock. Four men had been stationed at the head of the slip—the hinged part of the dock that could be raised or lowered to meet the boat depending on the tide—but they were quickly overwhelmed by the masses.

With great shouting and laughing the thousand excursionists piled out of the cars and simultaneously started on a rush for the boat. In a minute the men had been swept aside and darting onward the first of the crowd of men, women and children ran down the slip and crossed the narrow plank on a dead run. Very quickly the passageway became blocked and scores of the more agile were swarming from the wharf, over the sides of the steamer. . . . Suddenly, with no warning whatever, there was a loud report as though of a cannon, and the next instant those who gained the *Sappho* turned to see the long slip, black with people, part in the middle and the struggling crowd fighting and clawing with one another, disappear into the deep water about the piles.

Chaos ensued as onlookers threw loose lumber into the opening, hoping to help keep the trapped victims afloat, but unfortunately, some of the pieces struck individuals, further adding to the *melée*. While some jumped into the water, crewmembers of the *Sappho* and the *Sebenoa* quickly gathered rope ladders to help survivors escape. Despite the efforts of many, “The freight house across the railroad track was opened and on the floor of it the bodies as they were brought up were placed for identification. One of the government divers was secured and this accelerated the grappling very much. Before evening twenty had been taken out, and some scenes occurred in the ill-smelling freight house where the dead lay waiting to be claimed.”¹⁶

Although the majority of steamboat transportation to Mount Desert Island was controlled by the Maine Central Railroad and the Eastern Steamship Lines (successors to the Rockland, Mt. Desert & Sullivan Steamboat Company), other smaller companies also served the Island. These companies often ran seasonal boats such as the *May Field* and

Cimbria, which ran from Bangor to Mount Desert Island. An all-day trip under ideal circumstances, this run was impossible in the winter months when ice stopped vessel traffic on the Penobscot. In addition, some Mount Desert Island residents, both year-round and seasonal, decided to enter the business. In 1892, George Cooksey and other enterprising individuals formed the Island Steamboat Company, which contracted with the Barbour yard in Brewer to build the 75-foot *Golden Rod*. Operated by Captain Crosby, the *Golden Rod* served passengers traveling between Island towns. "To sail to Seal Harbor by the steamer *Golden Rod* leaving Bar Harbor at 10 a.m. enables one to obtain views of coast and mountains that can be seen no other way. Arriving at Seal Harbor one hour later, the visitor has 3 ½ hours before the return of the boat, which may be very pleasantly occupied in seeing the local attractions of the place—Jordan Pond, Ravens Cleft, Ox Hill, the Cliff walk, etc.—with ample time to obtain a good dinner at one of the hotels."¹⁷

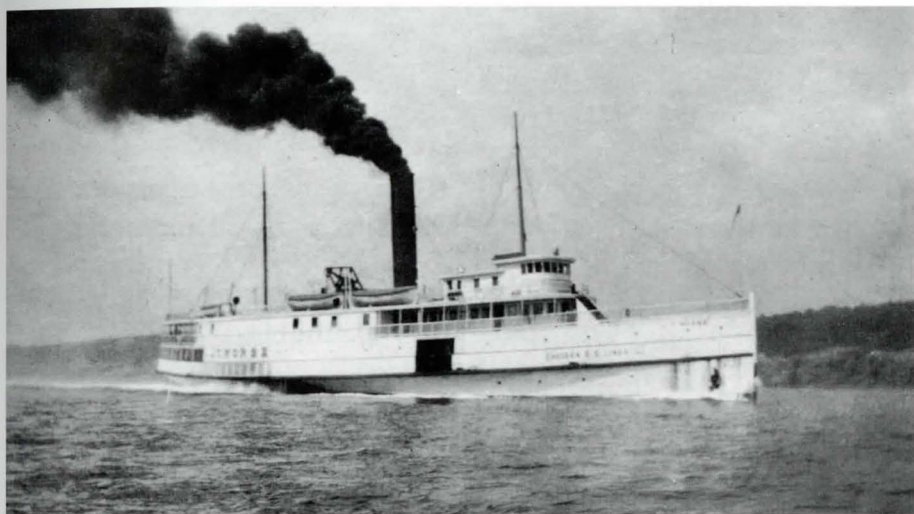
Others, like Captain Gilbert Hadlock of Little Cranberry Island, filled the need of summer residents of the Cranberry Isles and neighboring communities with his small steamboats. Captain Hadlock first operated the steamboat *Florence*, which proved too large, followed by the *Agnes*, which was too small. In 1893 he commissioned the 49-foot *Islesford*, which ran a regular schedule and could also be chartered for private trips.¹⁸ The



The *Islesford* at Boothbay Harbor after the conclusion of her career in the Great Harbor of Mount Desert. Courtesy of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission

Islesford was sold around 1908 and spent the rest of her active life in the Boothbay area. Many local residents, while not necessarily working for the steamboat companies, earned a living from the steamboat industry. "Truck men," workers who loaded and unloaded cargo from the steamboats, were in high demand at each dock, as were freight men, who oversaw the freight deliveries at each wharf. Others worked for express companies that delivered goods and traveling trunks from the steamboat wharves to their final destinations. Privately owned express companies could be found in almost every village: Haynes' Express in Northeast Harbor, E.G. Jordan's Express Company in Seal Harbor, and McQuinn's Express in Bar Harbor, among others.

Of all of the steamboats that served Mount Desert Island, the steamer *J.T. Morse* remains the most beloved; as one admirer later wrote, the *Morse* was "more like a friend than a steamboat."¹⁹ Built as a replacement for the *Mount Desert*, which was sold to become an excursion boat in New York City, the *Morse* was launched in 1904 from the William McKie yard in East Boston. At 214 feet long and 50 feet wide over the paddle guards,



The J. T. Morse. Courtesy of the Great Harbor Maritime Museum

the *J.T. Morse* was capable of carrying 400 passengers and 12 horses. Her 600-horsepower Fletcher simple beam engine had a 9-foot stroke and gave the *Morse* a cruising speed of 15 knots, with her paddle wheels turning at 26 revolutions per minute. Like her predecessor, however, the *Morse* was taken out of commission during the winter months for fear that ice

would ruin her paddle wheels and was replaced by a smaller, propeller-driven boat. Equipped with the *Mount Desert's* whistle and crew, the *Morse* went into service on June 10, 1904. Her nearly 30-year career was marred by a few mishaps including two collisions and a grounding, and on at least one occasion the *Morse* found herself without any deckhands. As the *Bar Harbor Record* reported,

Friday, the deckhands of the J.T. Morse went on strike, leaving the boat at Deer Isle. The mate reports the trouble as arising from the breakfast. It seems that coffee dippers were short and the cook went for some cups to fill out with, and in the meantime the drink became cold. This dampened the ardor of the crew, and they complained of the fare. The meal consisted of fried bacon, tongues and sounds, and fried sausages with corn bread and biscuits and coffee. At any rate they left at Deer Isle and the *Morse* had to discharge her cargo as best she could. The local truck men at Bar Harbor assisted at this end, and on the return to Deer Isle several of the crew returned, asking for their old jobs, which were given them. The remainder of the vacancies was filled and things are moving along again without inconvenience.²⁰

In a time with no electronics to aid in navigation, the *Morse* and other steamers navigated solely on compass headings and local knowledge. On her run between Rockland and Mount Desert, the *J.T. Morse* had sixty-three compass heading changes, of which forty-five were only followed for a few seconds. Because of these constant course changes, it was important for captains to maintain well-calibrated compasses and to keep interfering metal objects at a distance in order to reduce the chances of missing a buoy. When metal did interfere with the compass it was often due to an unknowing lady leaning against the pilothouse; depending on the captain, she might be in for a stern talking to. After all, "didn't she realize that the metal in her damn corset stays would pull the [compass] needle off course?"²¹ In foggy weather, the captain relied on the echo of the steamer's whistle as well as the sound of nearby bell buoys and lighthouse foghorns to help guide him along the way. On days when the sea was completely calm and bell buoys didn't ring, the captain would stop his boat when he

knew he was nearing the bell to allow the waves to travel ahead and ring the bell for him. Each captain was accustomed to his particular vessel's whistle, and it was for that reason that whistles were frequently reused on new boats.²² Steamboat wharves were also equipped with whistles, often hand powered, to help the captain as he drew closer to the wharf. One of these hand- powered foghorns is now in the collection of the Great Harbor Maritime Museum in Northeast Harbor; its small size belies its amazingly powerful tone.

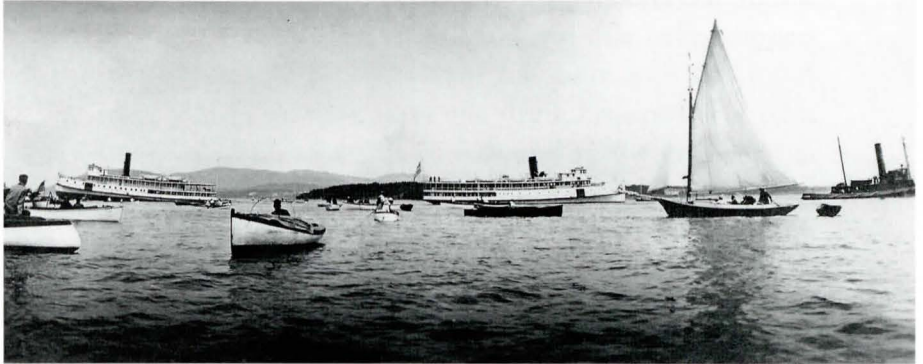


The *Norumbega* aground at Clark Point.

Photo by I. T. Moore, courtesy of the Great Harbor Maritime Museum

Despite every precaution, accidents happened. One such instance was the grounding of the *Norumbega* off Clark Point in Southwest Harbor. Built as one of the luxury steamers for the Maine Central Railroad, the 146-foot-long *Norumbega* was launched at Bath in 1902. During the short trip between Northeast Harbor and Southwest Harbor, the engineer had grown accustomed to banking the engine fires and powering the *Norumbega* on accumulated steam. Unfortunately, heavy fog on the night of August 12, 1912 delayed the *Norumbega*, causing the accumulated steam to run low. Around 11:00 p.m., having nearly arrived in Southwest Harbor, Captain Norton found himself in thick fog with no engine power at all. Before long, the elegant *Norumbega* quietly slid onto the ledges off Clark's Point. Luckily the two passengers on board were uninjured, but the boat had run aground at high tide, making removal efforts especially difficult. Despite attempts to dislodge the boat by towing her off at the following high tide

with the steamer *Moosehead*, the *Norumbega* remained stuck, and a tugboat was called to the scene. Even with the *Norumbega's* engines in full reverse and the constant pulling of the tugboat, the steamer still couldn't break free from her rocky perch. To provide the final lift off the ledges, the brand new steamer *Moosehead* ran by at full speed and the great wake created by the steamer's 2400-horsepower engines finally succeeded in lifting the *Norumbega* free.²³



The *Moosehead* preparing to attempt to pull the *Norumbega* off the ledge at Clark Point.
Photo by I. T. Moore, courtesy of the Great Harbor Maritime Museum

By the beginning of the First World War, the end of the steamboat era was in sight. Automobiles were quickly gaining popularity as a means of transportation to Mount Desert Island as new roads made land travel faster than sea travel. As Northeast Harbor summer resident William S. Lawrence wrote in 1932, "It took twenty hours to get here in 1870; now one can arrive from Boston in a third the time."²⁴ Some of the earlier boats had been retired before the war as stiffening regulations made it difficult to keep them in passenger service. Many were sold out of state and a number ended up in government service as the nation went to war. The *Frank Jones*, known for its luxury accommodations, was requisitioned for war service and ultimately blew up in Virginia's York River carrying ammunition.²⁵

The cover of the *Bar Harbor Times* of May 6, 1931 featured the bold title, "Maine Central Will Discontinue Frenchman's Bay Boat Service." Two hundred individuals attended a meeting at which representatives of the company outlined the details of the unprofitable steamboat service to Mount Desert Island. Rather than continuing its passenger boat service, Maine Central Railroad proposed luxury buses from Ellsworth to Bar

Harbor for passengers and freight. Despite opposition at the meeting, steamer service from Mount Desert Ferry was soon abandoned.²⁶ The Eastern Steamship Lines' *J. T. Morse* ended its last season on September 21, 1931, and over the next two years the smaller steamers *Westport* and *Southport* took over the route before it was abandoned. In a letter dated December 1, 1932 from the Eastern Steamship Lines to Mr. Ernest A. Atwood, Chairman of Mount Desert's Board of Selectmen, the situation was clearly outlined.

Our two lines out of Rockland operating to Bar Harbor and Brooklin, have of late years, been running at an annual loss of between \$20,000 and \$40,000. This loss has been borne by the Boston-Bangor Line. . . . Our present management feels that we have reached a position where these losses must be eliminated.

One of the principal items of expense consists of the maintenance and operation of the Steamer *J. T. Morse*, which runs over \$36,000 a year. It has, therefore, been decided to discontinue operating the *Morse*. . . . With the operation of the *Southport* and *Westport*, it becomes immediately apparent, that an additional and appreciable loss of revenue will result, due to the inability of the smaller vessels to carry automobiles. There would in addition be no stateroom revenue, and greatly reduced dining room revenue.

With every economy figured, we still fall short of breaking even.²⁷

Despite a sentimental attachment felt by many toward the steamboats, the era of steamer transportation was over. By the mid-1930s the wharves began to be removed, as in Northeast Harbor and Little Cranberry Island, or redeveloped. In Seal Harbor, the steamboat wharf was purchased by George R. Hadlock of Islesford and Ellsworth, who named it the Acadia Pier and soon opened the Quarterdeck Restaurant in the former freight buildings. By the end of the Second World War, however, the wharf and buildings needed significant repairs and Hadlock began removing the buildings.²⁸ Eventually the wharf was acquired by the town and redeveloped as the municipal pier. Bar Harbor, which originally had two steamboat wharves

(one for each major company), passed a bond to rebuild the former Eastern Steamship Company's wharf into the municipal pier. At Southwest Harbor the former steamboat wharf became the new Coast Guard Station.

Despite their absence, the nostalgic romance of the steamboats remains in the hearts of many who rode them, a number that grows smaller with each passing year. In the 1980s a group was formed to try to acquire the then dying former Maine Central Railroad steamer *Rangeley* in the hope of restoring her as a tourist attraction for Mount Desert Island. As Peter Bell wrote in 1989, "[The *Rangeley*] sits in the mud in the Hackensack River of New Jersey, the last of her breed and a melancholy reminder of the great fleet that once served Mt. Desert Island."²⁹ Unfortunately the effort to save the *Rangeley* ultimately failed and the steamer was destroyed.

Since the steamers first started working along the coast of Maine, a great deal has changed. As Jesse Parker of Southwest Harbor wrote toward the end of his life, "Before we moved from Southwest Harbor to Danversport, Mass. in the fall of 1894 I had never been more than 22 miles from Southwest Harbor by land. Ellsworth, Maine was the largest town I had ever seen. To the east, by water, I had been as far as Bar Harbor, about twenty miles. To the west as far as Deer Isle and Sargentville on the Bangor [steamboat] line. . . . I had however seen and shaken hands with a President of the United States. He [President Harrison] visited Northeast Harbor and attended services at the Episcopal Church."³⁰

In 1894 Jesse Parker turned thirteen years old, the age of this author in the summer of 2003. By that point, to the north I had been as far as Prince Edward Island, and to the east, Nova Scotia. To the west I'd traveled as far as Monument Valley, Utah and to the south as far as Key West, Florida. Despite the thousands of miles between these destinations and my home in Northeast Harbor, none of the journeys took longer than a day and none was hindered by the threat of fog. One can only wonder what Jesse Parker and Colonel Black would think of these advances in travel and how much we take them for granted.

Those wishing to experience a ride on a steamboat similar to those that once plied the coast can do so at Mystic Seaport, Connecticut, where the

1908 Maine-built *Sabino* takes visitors on tours of the Mystic River during the summer months, and at Greenville, Maine, where the (now diesel-powered) *Katahdin* fills a similar role. In Bangor, the 1911 *Prudence* gives tours along the Penobscot River. Locally, little remains of the steamboat era. The buildings were mostly removed, except for one of the Northeast Harbor freight houses that was repurposed as a summer cottage, and a number of photographs and artifacts, which are now prized by area museums, historical societies, and libraries. At the Great Harbor Maritime Museum in Northeast Harbor, two large-scale models depict the *Rangeley* and the *J. T. Morse*, giving visitors a sense of the grandeur of these once vital vessels.

Notes

- ¹ John M. Richardson, *Steamboat Lore of the Penobscot* (Augusta: Kennebec Journal Print Shop, 1941), 4.
- ² Harry Gratwick, *Stories from the Maine Coast: Skippers, Ships, and Storms* (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), 111.
- ³ Gratwick, *Stories from the Maine Coast*, 113.
- ⁴ The author is indebted to Roz Rea for transcribing and making available the journals of Colonel John Black.
- ⁵ Allie Ryan, *Penobscot Bay, Mount Desert, and Eastport Steamboat Album* (Camden: Down East Enterprise, Inc., 1972), 16.
- ⁶ Anne Mazlish, ed., *Tracy Log Book* (Bar Harbor: Acadia Publishing Company, 1997), 54.
- ⁷ Ryan, *Steamboat Album*, 17.
- ⁸ Richardson, *Steamboat Lore*, 43.
- ⁹ Clara Barnes Martin, *Mount Desert on the Coast of Maine*, 4th Edition (Portland: Loring, Short, and Harmon, 1877), 101.
- ¹⁰ Virginia Somes Sanderson, *The Living Past; Being the Story of Somesville, Mount Desert, Maine and its Relationship with Other Areas of the Island* (Mount Desert: Beech Hill Publishing Company, 1982), 221.
- ¹¹ *Mount Desert Herald*, January 11, 1883; *Mount Desert Herald*, January 21, 1882.
- ¹² *Mount Desert Herald*, March 4, 1887.
- ¹³ Mildred L. Wright, "Seal Harbor," in *Mount Desert: An Informal History*, ed. Gunnar Hansen (Mount Desert: Town of Mount Desert, 1989), 104.
- ¹⁴ Ryan, *Steamboat Album*, 31
- ¹⁵ *Mount Desert Herald*, August 9, 1889.
- ¹⁶ This and the quotation above are from the *Mount Desert Herald*, March 4, 1887.
- ¹⁷ *Bar Harbor Record*, July 1896 (Centennial Souvenir Edition).
- ¹⁸ Hugh L. Dwelley, *A History of Little Cranberry Island, Maine* (Frenchboro: Islandport Press, 2000), 144.
- ¹⁹ Ryan, *Steamboat Album*, 7.
- ²⁰ *Bar Harbor Record*, May 29, 1907.
- ²¹ Ryan, *Steamboat Album*, 45.

²² Ryan, *Steamboat Album*, 6.

²³ Richardson, *Steamboat Lore*, 68.

²⁴ Lydia Vandenberg and Earle G. Shettleworth Jr., *Revisiting Seal Harbor and Acadia National Park* (Dover: Arcadia Publishing, 1997), 93.

²⁵ Richardson, *Steamboat Lore*, 68.

²⁶ *Bar Harbor Times*, May 16, 1931.

²⁷ L.H. Wakefield (Superintendent of Terminals, Eastern Steamship Lines, Inc.) to E.A. Atwood, December 1, 1931.

²⁸ Vandenberg and Shettleworth, *Revisiting Seal Harbor*, 103.

²⁹ Peter B. Bell, "Maritime Transportation," in *Mount Desert: An Informal History*, ed. Gunnar Hansen (Mount Desert: Town of Mount Desert, 1989), 169.

³⁰ Jesse L. Parker, *Recollections of Southwest Harbor, Maine 1885-1894*, eds. John P. and Rebecca D. Burnham (Southwest Harbor, ME: Southwest Harbor Historical Society, 2010), 7.