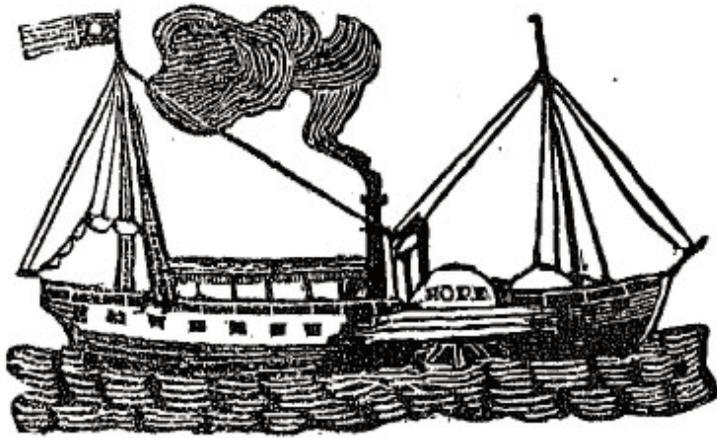


The First Steamboat Race.



Jerry Canavit, ASN

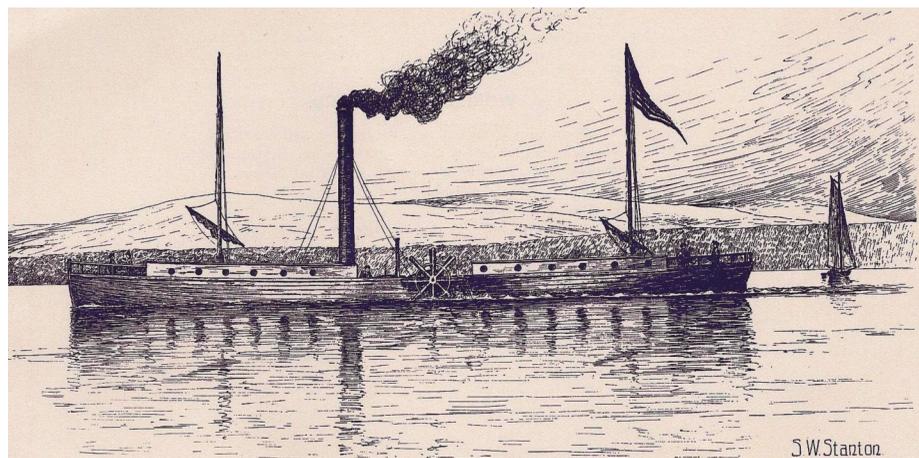
With the success of Robert Fulton's steamboats NORTH RIVER and CAR OF NEPTUNE, Captain Elihu S. Bunker decided he would run an opposition service line on the Hudson River from Albany to New York City. He planned to do this despite the exclusive monopoly held by Messrs. Fulton and Livingston that had been granted by the State of New York.

A group of businessmen from Albany, headed by James Van Ingen, contracted to have two vessels constructed for Capt. Bunker, similar in size and accommodation to Fulton's NORTH RIVER steamboat to compete for a share of this lucrative business. The boats were named HOPE and PERSEVERANCE.

The steamboat HOPE was launched on March 9, 1811 – the PERSEVERANCE followed a few months later. "The HOPE made her maiden voyage out of New York City on June 22, 1811 under the command of Capt. Bunker. Nearly 50 passengers were on board for this initial trip as thousands of spectators were present as the HOPE left for Albany.

The large crowd was present not only to show their support for the new boat's challenge to the "Old Line" in defiance of the present navigation monopoly, but to also witness the very popular Pandean Band, who after the vessel's departure, began playing very popular patriotic music of the day.

Despite a strong headwind, the HOPE arrived at Albany in 38 hours and great satisfaction was expressed by all



The steamboat NORTH RIVER was built by Charles Browne of New York for Fulton and Livingston. She admeasured 182 tons. and her hull measurements were 149' x 17'11" x 7.' She had a copper boiler, an engine by James Watt that generated 20 hp. and three cabins with 52 berths.

of the passengers.

The NORTH RIVER steamboat (often mistakenly referred to as the Clermont) was under the command of Capt. Andrew Bartholomew and was built by shipbuilder Charles Browne of New York City for Fulton and Livingston. She was launched on May 17, 1807 and was the first commercially successful steamboat to operate on the Hudson River (or any other river, for that matter). She measured 133' x 13' x 7', admeasured 182 tons, had a copper boiler, a Watt steam engine (generating 20 hp), and 3 cabins with 52 berths. She was enlarged in 1808 to measure 149' x 17'11" x 7.'

The HOPE was a slightly larger boat, running 280 tons and measuring 149' x 20' x 7'7". She had a steam engine built by Robert McQueen and her accommodations were very similar to those of the NORTH RIVER.

The challenge of the new vessels would eventually have to be addressed in the courts, but before the legal problems could be worked out, the "monopoly" would issue a more immediate challenge to the new upstarts.

On July 27, 1811, the HOPE was challenged to a race by the owners of the steamboat NORTH RIVER.

The Race:

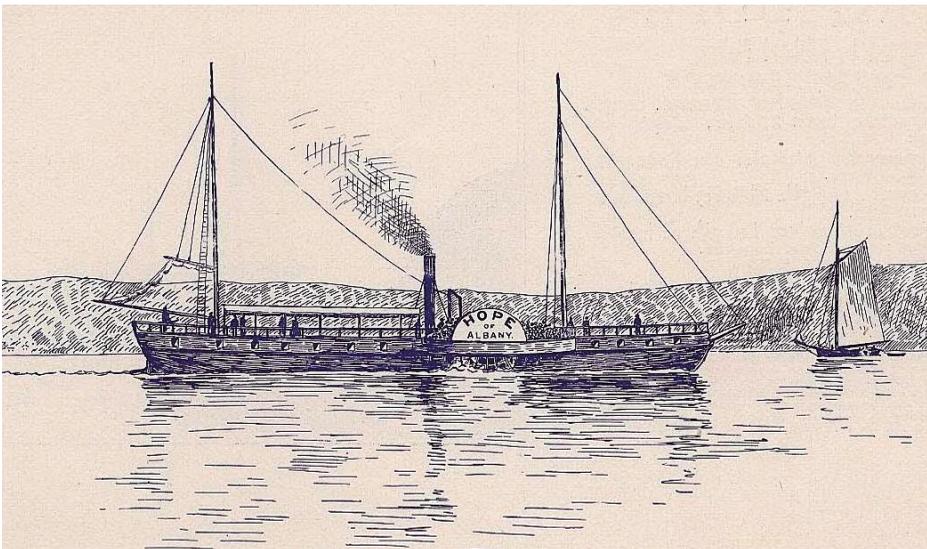
The race would be from Albany to New York. On July 27, the two boats lay side-by-side in their slips at Albany getting up steam in preparation for the contest. Whether the HOPE challenged the NORTH RIVER (James Flexner) or the NORTH RIVER challenged the HOPE (F. Van Loon Ryder) is unclear. The contest was to be settled on the river before it would be settled in the courts.

Both vessels left Albany at 9:00 AM. The HOPE got off to a better start, and kept the center of the narrow channel, blocking every attempt of the NORTH RIVER to pass. With stern and bow so close they seemed almost as one craft traveling together under a single cloud of smoke. The two steamboats pounded down the river at almost 5 miles-per-hour, while spectators crowded the banks to cheer the opponent of “the pernicious monopoly.” As they passed Norman’s Kill, Van Weis Point and Shodack Island, they maintained their positions – with the HOPE in the lead and the NORTH RIVER seemingly glued to her stern. As they passed Coxsackie and the Hudson River Islands they continued to run together as one. When about two miles above the town of Hudson and opposite Stockport

Creek, the NORTH RIVER tried to make use of its lighter draught to pass the HOPE in shallow water. Gradually it pulled abreast of its rival – then there was a resounding crash. The vessels had collided. Although investigation revealed that neither was seriously damaged and no one was injured, the captains called off the race. The first steamboat race in history had ended without a winner.

Later, Capt. Bartholomew of the NORTH RIVER challenged Capt. Bunker to complete the race. The wager was \$2,000 and the distance, any number of miles – at the discretion of Capt. Bunker. However, the race was never held. The HOPE (and sister ship PERSEVERENCE) continued to run throughout the 1811 season with passengers and freight between New York and Albany and enjoyed as much success as did the Fulton boats.

In 1812, the contest continued – this time in the courts. In the case *Livingston vs. Van Ingen*, a New York Chancery Court ruled against Fulton and Livingston. The decision was then appealed to the New York Court of Errors where it was overturned, giving Fulton and Livingston the sole right to “navigate the waters of New York State by boats propelled by fire or steam.”



The steamboat HOPE was built for James Van Ingen in 1811. Her engines were built by Robert McQueen. Elibu S. Bunker was her master. She admeasured 280 tons and her hull measurements were 149' x 20' x 7'7."



The courts had decided that both the HOPE and PERSEVERENCE were operating illegally and ordered the steamboats to cease operating. It is not clear whether the vessels were disassembled by the owners to avoid confiscation, or if they were actually confiscated by Fulton and Livingston and broken up. Other accounts claim that the HOPE was sold to Robert Fulton and the PERSEVERANCE to Aaron Ogden, and the parts were then used in other vessels. Which version is correct is not known to this writer.

Although the NORTH RIVER steamboat did not actually win the first steamboat race in history, she did prevail in the courts. And, who knows, perhaps if the NORTH RIVER had been able to get around the HOPE, she might have won. But she didn't. She won in the courts though, even if it was just a short-term victory – as the monopoly would later be broken by the courts in 1824 (Gibbons vs Ogden).

Other and more famous steamboat races would occur, but the contest on July 27, 1811 was the first – and started it all. The steamboat race would become part of Americana – as stories of the Diana and Baltic, Eclipse and A.L. Shotwell, and Robt. E. Lee and Natchez and others would live on for generations.

Mark Twain once commented “I think the most enjoyable of all races

is a steamboat race. Two red-hot steamboats raging along, neck-and-neck, straining every nerve – every rivet in the boilers – quaking, shaking and groaning from stem to stern, sprouting white steam from the pipes, pouring black smoke from the chimneys, raining down sparks, parting the river into long breaks of hissing foam. This is a sport that makes a body's very liver curl with enjoyment. A horse race is pretty tame in comparison.”

Hope and *Perseverance* would turn out to be not only the names of two important riverboats on the Hudson River, but would be the words that best describe the attitude and spirit of those who would eventually break the navigation monopoly of Fulton and Livingston and open up commerce to the waters and streams of the United States of America.

