

VILLAGE VIEW

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Today the tempo of life may seem faster than that of half-a-century ago. The public need is speed. Five days a week, men and women rush through their breakfasts, hurry to work, complete their assigned tasks, and take the fastest route to return home. Once there, these stalwarts collapse in front of the television, rouse long enough to eat dinner, then resume "relaxing" while the tube takes over their cerebral processes until bedtime.

If people are forced to travel any distance from home, they hop a plane or jump into their cars and drive over the highways as rapidly as the law allows. Even when vacationing, no time is wasted getting to their chosen resorts. What's happened to pleasure travel? Out of style? Or are its charms entirely forgotten?

A generation has grown old since a particularly pleasant mode of travel met financial defeat in the waning days of the Great Depression of the 1930s, but there are those who remember that era and more joyful ways to travel at a slower, but more rewarding pace. Until 1937, when the Old Fall River Line ceased operations, Cape Codders bound for New York City booked passage aboard one of the line's two steamships and cruised to the Big Apple in style.

Nineteenth century steamboat men scorned the railroads, considering them nothing more than "feeders," and even when through trains ran along the shore from Boston to New York, taking the boat was the method of choice among those who appreciated travel at its best.

Those too young to remember partaking of a superb dinner while steaming down Narragansett Bay, past Newport, around Point Judith, and through the Race into the protected waters of Long Island Sound, have been deprived of a heady experience.

Lulled to sleep by the ship's motion, and invigorated by sea air that poured through the comfortable well-appointed cabins, passengers woke to peer through their portholes as the steamer slipped under Hell Gate Bridge. While all aboard enjoyed hearty breakfasts, the ship steamed around the Battery to her Hudson River berth. There, at the foot of the gang-plank, lay New York City.

In addition to the Fall River boats, there were passenger steamers sailing between New York and Providence, New Bedford, New London, Hartford, and New Haven. Although originally the lines were separate companies, most eventually came under the control of the New Haven Railroad. J.P. Morgan and, for a short time, James Fisk, controlled the New Haven.

The Fall River Line's first vessel, **Bay State**, with a length of 300 feet and a beam of 40, was famous for her fifty cent ground table d'hote dinners which were served at long candlelit tables. After the Captain and his guests had taken their places, in the grand manner of trans-Atlantic passages, the passengers were permitted to enter the dining salon and take their places.

The names of the vessels comprising the great white fleet that plied Long Island Sound evoke memories of deep-carpeted salons peopled with men of property, traveling salesmen, and, occasionally, flashy women. At one time or another, nearly all the Presidents and most of the famous men and women of the period sailed aboard the Old Fall River Line.

The second half of the 19th century was a colorful era; the dollar was king, and a man who made money could keep every cent. Income taxes hadn't been dreamed of, social programs were yet to be conceived, and the wealthy indulged themselves without stint. Financier Jim Fisk was no exception.

A Vermonter, Fisk rose to his partnership with Morgan after starting his career as a trans-Atlantic peddler. In 1866, at the age of 32, aided by Daniel Drew, he founded the New York brokerage house of Fisk & Belden. Drawn into Erie affairs, he made a fortune in wrecking the Erie Railroad before cooperating with Drew and Jay Gould to raise the price of gold (1868), reaping fortunes for themselves, but causing nationwide depression and losses of millions of dollars to other people. On Black Friday, 1869, Drew and Fisk attempted to corner the gold market, but failed when President Grant released government gold to thwart the scheme. Fisk then

repudiated his partner's contracts, for which he was also liable, and cast his lot with financier Morgan, at that time a member of the firm of Dabney, Morgan & Co.

While still associated with Drew, Fisk acquired from him control of the steamships **Bristol** and **Providence**, both 3,000-ton walk-beam steamers, and each capable of accommodating 800 passengers in unparalleled luxury. Fisk fitted out his ships with the finest in furniture and fixtures, employed bands to serenade the passengers, and had cages of canaries, 250 for each ship, swinging in the salons and commonrooms.

Competition was keen, and conspicuous consumption the order of the day. When a Vanderbilt was named Commodore, Fisk declared himself an admiral. Leaving his wife to pine in their luxurious Boston home, he lived openly with his New York City mistress. He bought himself an admiral's uniform and had another, of feminine design, made for her. Together they appeared frequently, attired in their regalia, aboard the **Bristol** or the **Providence**, strolling arm-in-arm among the passengers, greetings friends and acquaintances, and Fisk, the admiral, issuing orders in a loud voice. After the ship had passed the Battery, a pilot boat returned the pair to New York City.

In 1872, when Fisk was 38, he met an untimely end after being shot with a pistol wielded by Edward S. Stokes, a rival for his mistress. The attack came on the stairs of New York's Grand Central Hotel, and Fisk died of the wound the following day. His boatline passed into the ownership of the Old Colony Steamboat Company, controlled by the Old Colony Railroad, controlled, in turn, by Morgan.

Competition was as keen between steamship lines as between the flamboyant men who ran them. With the opening in 1914 of the Cape Cod Canal, The Old Colony and Eastern Steamship Lines became business rivals. Railroads offering low-cost transportation cut into shipping revenues. The growing popularity of private automobiles brought steep losses in steamboat passenger transport. By the mid-1930s, only the Fall River Line still operated among the once far-flung New Haven Railroad's shipping network.

Business had begun picking up again by 1937, but crews of Fall River Line's two ships, the **Commonwealth**, built in 1908, and the **Priscilla**, launched in 1893, were fired by early New Deal labor disputes and went on a sit-down strike without warning. Each ship, one at her pier in New York, the other at Fall River's waterfront, was making ready to get underway when the crews halted work. No persuasion, no threat prevailed.

With equal suddenness, company spokesmen appeared on the docks to announce to passengers and crews that the line was out of business, finished, forever. Sailor and traveler were left high and dry, astonished and unbelieving. An era of gracious living and swashbuckling millionaires came to an abrupt and ignominious end. Both ships, sold for scrap, brought \$80,000, although more than \$6 billion had been invested in them. Lost, too, and widely mourned, was the tradition of steamboating along the New England coastline.

Only in the memories of a generation gone gray do the steamboats of the Old Fall River Line still cast off their lines and sail down Narragansett Bay, bound for New York City.