



ICE-BOATS ON THE HUDSON.

Hudson River Maritime
Museum
Pilot Log 2007

THE HAZARDS OF THE RIVER

by William duBarry Thomas

Since the Hudson River was first navigated by steamboats in 1807, there have been hazards—natural and man-made—that have plagued the captains and pilots of these vessels. Fog, low water level, treacherous currents and ice have all taken their toll over the years, as have the occasional cases of inattention to duty, confusing or misunderstood whistle signals between steamers—not to mention fires, boiler explosions or mechanical failure of engine or steering gear.

Some of these accidents are well known, such as the loss of the steamer *Thomas Cornell* when she ran up in Danskammer Point, north of Newburgh, in the fog on 27 March 1882 as she was making her regular trip from Rondout to New York.

Many years later, the Hudson River Day Line's flagship *Washington Irving* was lost as a result of a collision just after she left her pier in New York on 1 June 1926. She was struck on the port side by an oil barge in tow of the tug *Thomas E. Moran* and sank after she was hurriedly run across the river to shallower water on the New Jersey side.

Most of the accidents or incidents have never had the dramatic impact of losses such as that of *Thomas Cornell* or *Washington Irving*. Many of them didn't result in the loss of the vessel. The Cornell tug *G. W. Decker* was an example. This small tug was for many years employed as a "helper" tug on Cornell's tows—picking up or



The steamer *Point Comfort* aground at Esopus Island, September 1918.

dropping off individual barges at intermediate points on the journey to or from New York. Many years ago, the many brickyards at Haverstraw sent their production to New York on barges, with the helper tug shuttling between the brickyard wharves and the tow. The depth of the river at Haverstraw Bay is not particularly deep, and the fact that the *Decker's* bottom plates were eventually found to be very thin was ascribed—in part at least—to the cumulative abrasive action of Haverstraw Bay sand on her bottom. We shall never know for sure, but it is a reasonable theory.

The river's depth is very shallow on the wide reaches of Haverstraw Bay outside of the main channel, and on the upper river where dredging had to be accomplished to allow ships to reach the port of Albany. In March 1910, long before the upper river was dredged, the very large and powerful steel-hulled Cornell tug named *Cornell*—accompanied by her helper *Rob*—was sent to Albany to break up an enormous ice jam in order that the river might be opened for traffic. It was found that her draft was so great that she grounded from time to time on the northbound trip, but she eventually accomplished her task with no small measure of hazard to *Cornell* and her crew. It was never attempted again.

Over most of the river's course from New York to the start of the dredged channel north of Hudson the channel is of moderate depth, but in the Highlands—from Peekskill north to Cornwall—there is a lot of water, sometimes extending almost to the shoreline because of the mountainous nature of the area. At Anthony's Nose, the depth reaches about 90 feet, and under the Bear Mountain Bridge we may find

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nearly 130 feet of depth.

In the region around West Point is where we find the deepest point on the entire river. Between West Point and Constitution Island, in that part of the river called World's End, a depth of 202 feet was recorded during one survey many years ago—and that is at mean low water during the lowest river stages.

A small steamboat—or “steam yacht” in river parlance—named *Carrie A. Ward*, built in New Baltimore in 1878, maintained a local service between Newburgh and Peekskill during the 1880s. In late July of 1882, she sank near Cold Spring and was raised. On Saturday, 29 July, she sank for a second time for reasons thus far unknown, again in the vicinity of Cold Spring. By Tuesday, 1 August, she had not been located. The *Newburgh Daily Journal* reported on that day under the headline “Is She Gone For Good?”:

“It is said that the river bed consists of rocks in the locality where she went down, and that the water is of varying depth. It may be fifty [feet] deep in one spot, and nearly twice that a few yards off. Some boatmen have doubts if the *Carrie* will ever be found. They say she may have settled into a hollow between some of the rocks and her presence may never by discovered.”

The situation was not quite as dire as the boatmen predicted. By the next day, she had been located in 60 feet of water. The *Journal* remarked, “Arrangements are under way to have the yacht raised again.” The Baxter Wrecking Company brought in their divers and equipment on 5 August, and in a short time, *Carrie A. Ward* had been raised, repaired and back in service.

The Hudson hasn't always been that kind to its vessels. There have been scores of sail and steamboats, barges and other craft that have sunk in the river never to be raised. We shall unfortunately never know the tales told by their crews.



Passenger steamer *Thomas Cornell* wrecked on Danskammer Point, Roseton after running aground in a fog, March 24, 1882. Photo -Jack Matthews