

PILOT LOG 2002

The Towboats

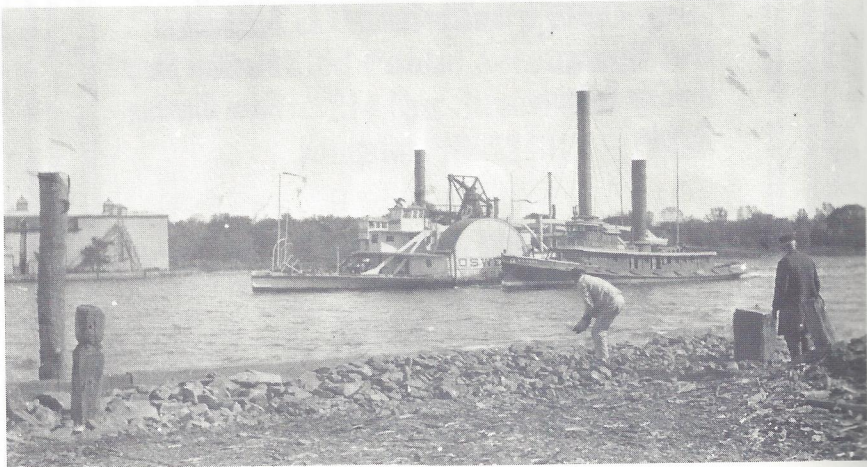
After the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, the Hudson River-Erie Canal corridor immediately became one of the leading access routes to the mid-west. In addition to the movement of people, the transportation of freight and agricultural products in substantial quantities took place in both directions. It was a new and relatively easy method for the products of the west to reach the northeast coast of the young country.

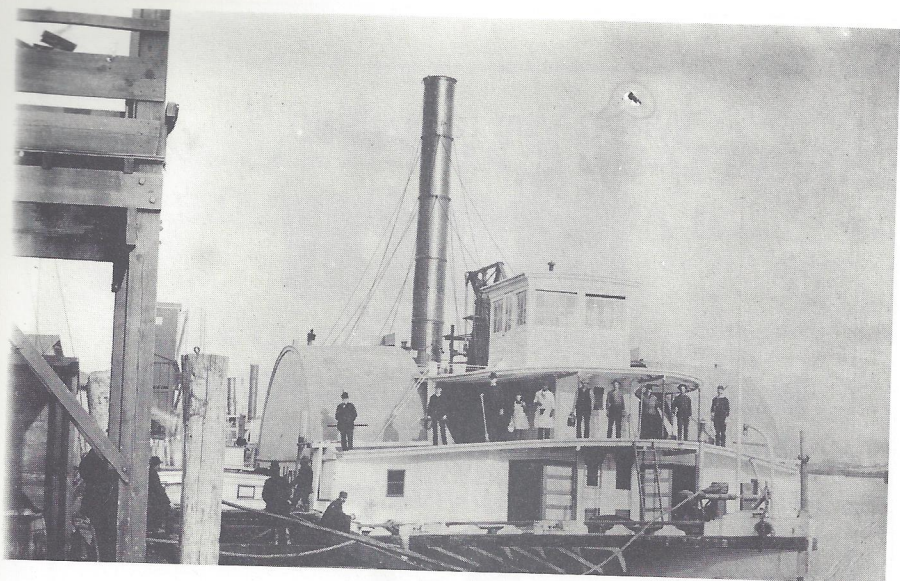
At first the early steamboats provided the principal means of transportation on the river for both people and freight. However, as the variety and quantity of the freight products increased, barges began to be used. At times they were lashed alongside of the steamboat or towed singly astern. This method obviously slowed the passage of the steamer and barges in tows behind a towing vessel became the general practise.

Early Albany entrepreneurs who recognized the monetary returns to be gained from towing were "Commodore" Alfred Van Santvoord, Samuel Schuyler with his Albany and Canal Towing Line, and Jerry Austin. All three used older side wheel steamboats that had lost their appeal to the traveling public but still possessed serviceable engines and boilers. These were converted to towing vessels by the removal of most of their superstructure and the installation of towing bits and winches. The barge tows of the Albany trio traversed the entire length of the river and the competition was spirited.

It would appear that Alfred Van Santvoord was perhaps the most foresighted of the Albany towing operators. In any event, in 1848 he undertook the construction of a side-wheel steamboat designed solely for use as a towboat. She was named "Oswego" and was the first of seven such vessels to be built for the towing of large barge tows on the Hudson River. In 1849, Van Santvoord followed with "Cayuga", Samuel Schuyler in 1852 followed with "America", and in 1853 Jerry Austin added "Austin". All were 200' to 213' in length. "Anna", the smallest of the seven, was built in 1854 for Van Santvoord, and "Syracuse" in 1857, at 218' the largest, for Austin. To complete the septet, the "Geo. A. Hoyt" was built in 1873 for Thomas Cornell.

The famous towboat "Oswego" pulling a Cornell tug and another unidentified tugboat





The towboat "George A Hoyt tied up to a canal barge

During the latter half of the 19th century, the steamboat operators traded vessels, somewhat like major league baseball teams trade players today. For example, in 1868 Van Santvoord traded the towboats "Oswego", "Cayuga" and "New York" to Thomas Cornell for the passenger steamer "Mary Powell".

During the decade preceding the Van Santvoord-Cornell trade of vessels, Van Santvoord had become more and more involved in the operation of passenger steamboats. With the completion of the trade, Van Santvoord got out of the business of towing entirely and devoted his efforts solely to that of passenger steamers, which in time became the famous Hudson River Day Line. Thomas Cornell, whose towing operations had been centered on the lower river south of Rondout, gained access to the upper river and the operation of towing over the river's entire length.

Thomas Cornell and his son-in-law, S.D. Coykendall were extremely aggressive competitors. By the last decade of the 19th century, their Cornell Steamboat Company had fashioned a virtual monopoly of towing on the Hudson River and their fleet of towing vessels was the largest in the nation.

Steamboats, like people, during their life time achieve minor claims to fame. "Oswego", the first of the seven built, lasted the longest and out lived all of her successors. She made her last trip in September 1918, 70 years after her launching. "Syracuse", the largest of the group, was generally considered by boatmen to be the best looking of all the towboats that saw service on the river. "America", perhaps because of her name, was the subject of more paintings by the famed maritime artist James Bard than any other vessel.

The towboats were big and probably had generous accommodations for their crew. However, they were also cumbersome and in time were succeeded by the smaller, but more efficient and maneuverable screw-propelled tugboats. By the early years of the 20th century the towboats were history. They were, however, an important part of the maritime saga of the Hudson River and deserve to be remembered for the role they played in it.