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*Francis Russell Hart Nautical Museum*

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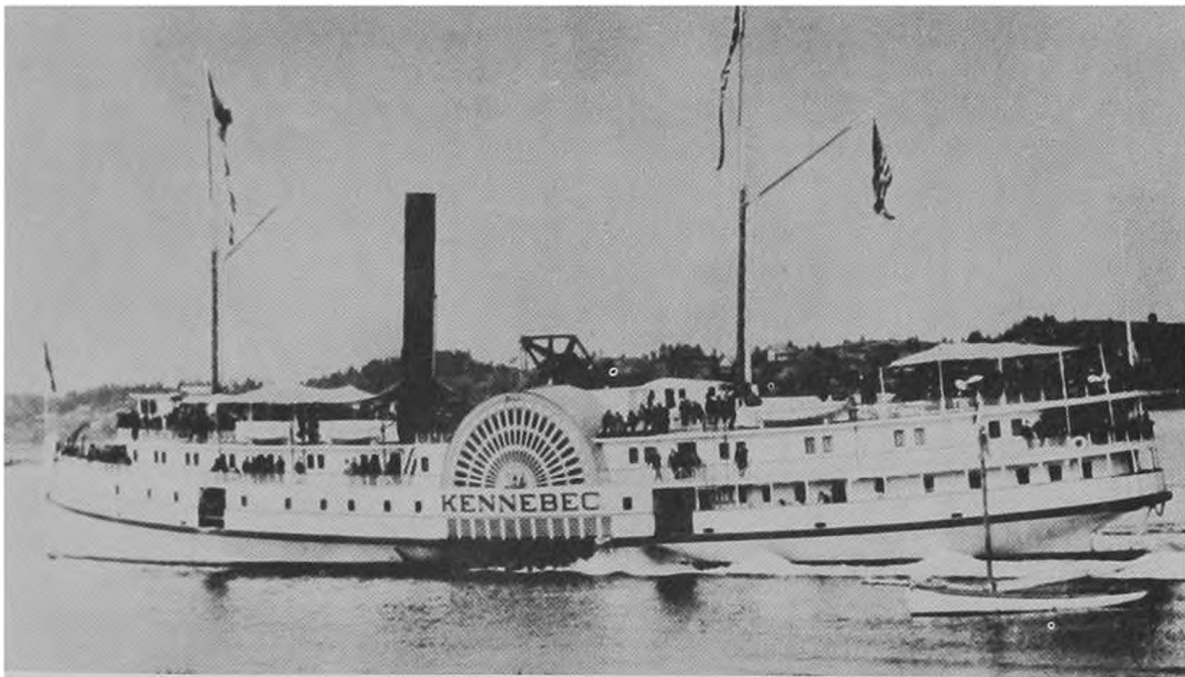
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THE BOSTON BOATS -- FROM SAIL TO STEAM  
(Part II)

by William A. Baker  
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The first steam-propelled boat to operate in commercial service on the Kennebec arrived off the mouth of the river in 1818 at the end of a Boston sailing packet's towline; she proceeded up the river to Bath under her own power. This was the first *Tom Thumb* which was employed mainly for excursions. She was said to have been about 30 feet long which made her only slightly longer than the lifeboats on the last of the Boston steamers. The exploits of a second *Tom Thumb* are often attributed to this little steamboat.

In 1822 Seward Porter of Bath put a steam engine and paddle wheels on a scow and named the makeshift craft the *Kennebec*. Apparently unable to stem the currents in the river for which she was named the *Kennebec* was taken to Portland where on 13 August 1822 the first advertisement of a steamboat in Maine was published. She was to go to North



*KENNEBEC III* (Built in 1889 at Bath, Maine)  
Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Salem

Yarmouth for the day leaving at 4:00 A.M.; later in the week she would take passengers to Commencement at Brunswick.

In 1823 Porter built the *Waterville*, the first real steamboat on the Kennebec, and about the same time formed the Kennebec Steam Navigation Company, which purchased the 80-foot steamer *Patent* at New York. She arrived at Bath on 7 August 1823 after calling at Boston and Portland enroute, and went into a weekly service between the three cities. The *Waterville* connected with the *Patent* at Bath and provided service to Augusta and intermediate ports on the river.

Early in 1824 the Kennebec Steam Navigation Company put another boat into operation and extended its service to the eastward. The new boat was the 83-foot *Maine* which was some sort of a catamaran assembled from the hulls of two schooners; her single paddle-wheel worked between the hulls. The *Maine* originally ran between Bath and Bangor but the early steamboat services along the coast of Maine were changed frequently as the operators sought the most profitable routes. By August 1824, the *Patent* was maintaining her weekly trips between Boston, Portland, and Bath while the *Maine* was on a weekly run from Portland to Bangor. The *Waterville* made two weekly trips on the Kennebec, one met the *Patent* at Bath while the second left passengers for the *Maine* on Pond Island at the mouth of the river.

The Kennebec Steam Navigation Company increased its capital in 1826 and purchased a third steamer at New York, the 170-ton *Legislator* which during 1827 ran two trips a week from Boston, one to Bath via Portland and the second to Portland only. The upriver service from Bath to Augusta was provided by the *Experiment*. An important feature of this boat was the bar with as good liquors as could be obtained at Augusta, Hallowell, or Bath. The fare from Bath to Gardiner, Hallowell, or Augusta was \$1; meals were available at 25¢ each.

There seems to have been no steamboat service south from Bath in 1828. Passengers from Augusta for Boston took the river steamer to Bath, and the stage from there to Portland where they went on board the *Legislator* for the final leg to Boston. We can see why the sailing packets were still popular.

The Kennebec Steam Navigation Company went out of business in 1828 succumbing to a general business depression that affected the country from the end of 1825 to 1830. These early steamboat operations along the New England coast were marginal as the boats were small and the cordwood fuel left little room for revenue producing freight and passengers.

From 1829 to 1835 steamboat service between Boston and the Kennebec was rather erratic. Captain Seward Porter had

the *Connecticut* on the run until 1832; she was an old boat built in 1816 but was considerably larger than her predecessors being 150 feet long. Others on the run for a year or two were the *Victory* and *McDonough*. Because of space limitations we can only mention the major steamers from here on.

In 1835 a new company, the Kennebec & Boston Steam Navigation Company capitalized at \$40,000, was formed to operate steamboats between Gardiner and Boston; it was part of the operations of Captain Menemon Sanford who dominated the steamboat business from Boston to Maine until his death in 1852. The 173-foot *New England*, built at New York in 1833, was the new company's first boat. We might note here that the *Patent*, the *Legislator*, and the *New England* suffered boiler explosions before serving on the Boston-Kennebec run. Beginning in 1836 the *New England* made two trips a week between Gardiner and Boston, and the *McDonough* ran for a year or two from Hallowell to Portland connecting there with boats for Boston.

On 31 May 1838 the *New England* was lost in a collision with the schooner *Curlew* a few miles off Boon Island; one passenger lost his life trying to leap from the sinking steamer to the *Curlew*. The steamer's master, Captain Nathaniel Kimball, and 12 of her crew managed to save an assortment of articles including \$50,000 from the clerk's safe.

"The superior Steam Packet" *Huntress* replaced the *New England* on the Gardiner-Boston run. In opposition on the Hallowell-Portland route was the *Clifton* of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt who soon put the newly-built *Augusta* in the Hallowell-Boston service. She proved no match for the *Huntress* and the *Vanderbilt* from Boston to the Kennebec. The *Vanderbilt* started first but the *Huntress* had landed at King's Wharf, Bath, before the former came out of Fiddlers Reach. Following some of Vanderbilt's famous financial shenanigans, the Gardiner-based company found itself at the beginning of 1839 owner of the *Huntress* with no opposition on the river.

Several small steamers appeared on the Kennebec during 1838 and 1839. One was the 54-ton *Minerva* built at Vassalboro for the Augusta-Waterville service. During low water in the summer of 1838 she ran between Augusta and Bath. She was nicknamed the *Great Western* and was remarkable for her speed. On one trip up the river it was said that she undertook a race with one of the many steam saw mills on the bank of the river and was fairly beaten by the mill.

In 1840 a crack boat from Long Island Sound replaced the *Huntress* on the Hallowell-Boston run. She was the *John W.*

*Richmond*, the largest and most able steamboat on the coast of Maine during the period, which remained on the route until 30 September 1843 when she was destroyed by fire at her wharf at Hallowell. From 1844 through 1848 she was followed by the *Penobscot*, the *Kennebec*, and the *Admiral*. During the 1840's the Boston Railroad was creeping northward from Boston. By 1841 it had reached Portsmouth and the *M.Y. Beach* provided a connection from there to Portland; after the railroad reached Portland in 1842 the *Beach* ran from that city to the Kennebec. Rail service from Bath to Boston became a reality in July 1849 and the steamboat *Ocean*, new that year, was the first steamer to face that competition. The *Ocean* made two round trips per week between the Kennebec and Boston until 24 November 1854 when she was struck in Boston Harbor by the Cunard liner *Canada*. Stoves and lamps on the *Ocean* were upset and she began to burn and sink at the same time. During 1854 the propeller-driven *Eastern State* gave opposition in the form of one weekly trip between Bath and Boston.

The steamboat *Governor* replaced the *Ocean* and served until the arrival of the *Eastern Queen* in 1854. Specially built for the Kennebec-Boston run she was 220 feet long and measured 700 tons. While undergoing repairs at Wiscasset in 1860 she was set on fire by an arsonist and badly damaged but was repaired at Bath and returned to service. The *Eastern Queen* was purchased by the federal government in 1862 for war service. From 1857 to 1862 the *T.F. Secor* made three round trips from the Kennebec to Portland connecting there with the Boston boat. She, too, went to the federal government in 1862 and there was no Kennebec-Boston service for a few years.

During 1857 the *Governor* was operated as an opposition boat between Gardiner and Boston. Every cut in the freight rates and passenger fares made by the *Governor's* owners was met by the regular line until one could travel from Gardiner to Boston for 12 1/2 cents.

It was about this time that a Boston paper reported that on a Boston bound steamer an elderly gentleman who wished to retire discovered that his berth was not only occupied but contained two persons, rather a liberal supply for a steamboat berth. He made application at the clerk's office for the expulsion of the intruders. The request was promptly attended to and lo! the occupants were Jonathan and his wife from way down east. The lady was shown to the Ladies Cabin, closely followed by her spouse who, true to his marital rights, also entered the bower of beauty and commenced preparations for retiring. His operations were speedily put a stop to by an expulsion from the room.

The Kennebec Steamboat Company was organized after the Civil War and had the well known *Star of the East* built at New York in 1866. She was a fine steamboat, 244 feet long, and although she was intended to run to Hallowell the clearances through the Gardiner-Randolph bridge were so small that after a few trips Gardiner became the upper terminus. The *Eastern Queen* came back to the company in 1866 and did run to Hallowell until 1870. Through 1866 and 1867 the Kennebec Steamboat Company had severe opposition from the Boston-based Kennebec Steam Ship Company which ran the *Daniel Webster* and the *Eastern City* but after the usual rate war this company was practically bankrupt and owners of the *Star of the East* had no further competition.

It has been said that the *Star of the East* ran during the next 20 years without incident until rebuilt and renamed the *Sagadahoc* in 1889. She did, however, do a few mischievous things such as striking a schooner, hitting a rock, or upsetting a gondola. In the latter incident, the gondola was upset in Merrymeeting Bay by the wave from her paddle wheel and she slowed until the crew of the gondola were seen swimming safely when she resumed speed down the river. Apparently no one thought of picking up the swimmers.

James B. Drake of Bath became president of the Kennebec Steamboat Company about 1888 and thought of providing daily instead of thrice weekly service between the Kennebec and Boston; the company soon thereafter contracted for a new steamer. This was the *Kennebec* built by the New England Company of Bath and launched in 1889; she was 12 feet longer and 2 1/2 feet wider than her running mate. After the *Kennebec* came on this route the company scheduled three trips a week in the spring and fall, daily service during the summer, and no service during the winter. In the middle 1890's it appeared that it might be profitable to run a boat between Bath and Boston during winter months and the Kennebec Steamboat Company built its only propeller-driven steamer. She was 203 foot twin-screw *Lincoln* constructed by the New England Company at Bath in 1897. After two seasons that did not prove profitable and an attempt to establish a Boston-Boothbay Harbor service she was sold south.

The last steamboat built for the Kennebec Steamboat Company, the 277-foot *Ransom B. Fuller*, was delivered in 1902 just after the company became the nucleus of the Eastern Steamship Company headed by Charles W. Morse, the Ice King, which soon controlled all the New England steamboat services. The *Fuller* ran only a few years from the Kennebec. Under the new management boats were transferred from line to line to

suit conditions and following the building of the *Camden* and *Belfast* in 1907 and 1909 for the Boston-Bangor run several steamers maintained the Kennebec service including the *Penobscot*, the *City of Bangor*, and the *City of Rockland* originally built for the Bangor line.

The New England steamboat services were considerably disrupted during the first World War and the Eastern Steamship Company abandoned the Kennebec line in 1917. In 1920, however, other interests formed the Kennebec Steamship Company which purchased and ran the *City of Rockland* until her stranding. Gone now are all the big white steamboats from the Kennebec and all the small ones too. One former Kennebec steamer still lives - the little *Sabino* that once carried the summer traffic from Bath to Popham Beach. Carefully restored she now carries steamboat enthusiasts on the Merrimac.

WRITINGS IN MAINE HISTORY  
*Books*

Hunt, H. Draper. *Hannibal Hamlin of Maine, Lincoln's First Vice President*. Syracuse University Press, 1969.

Hannibal Hamlin of Paris Hill and Hampden will always be remembered in Maine as Lincoln's first vice president. Now Dr. H. Draper Hunt of the University of Maine, Portland, provides us with a modern, well researched biography. It re-enforces Hamlin's claim to rank with Blaine, Reed, and Fessenden as a Maine politician of national stature.

Born into a good family in Oxford County, Hamlin early broke the family's Adams-Whig pattern and became a Jacksonian. By 1835 he was in the Legislature and like many lawyers lost interest in the law when his political career blossomed. In principle he hated special privilege but not so dogmatically as to oppose subsidies for fishing and shipbuilding or import duties on potatoes and lumber. A professed 'hard money' man he was flexible enough during the Panic of 1837 to support limited paper issues. From a distance, he seems more a Conservative Democrat than a genuine Jacksonian.

While a young man, Hamlin was exposed to abolitionism when reading law in Samuel Fessenden's Portland Office. As a result he developed a disliking for the 'peculiar institution' but he rejected the aggressive approach of the