
From Sail to Steam to Diesel

James P. Warbasse, Jr.

Ferry service for travelers to and from Woods Hole dates back almost 300 years. Travel by water was at first on the "packets," relatively fast sloops or schooners. Their various routes included stops at New Bedford, Woods Hole and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. At Woods Hole, the early packets and the first few steamers used Little Harbor, as it was better protected from wind and tide than Great Harbor. Boats traveling to or from New Bedford usually went by way of Quicks's Hole at the west end of Naushon to avoid the swift tidal currents in Woods Hole passage. The use of steam-powered ferries, which began in the early 1800s, had a significant effect on Woods Hole and its inhabitants over the years.

The first settlers in Woods Hole came from Falmouth in 1677. A few years later one of them, Jonathan Hatch, bought the land then known as Great Neck from Job Notantico, an Indian. Great Neck, which bends around to form Woods Hole's Great Harbor, later came to be known as Penzance Point. Little did either of them know that many years later travelers between Woods Hole and New Bedford would be passing the tip of the point on paddlewheel steamers, followed by propeller driven steamers and later by diesel powered boats. What was at first a haphazard undertaking by several companies eventually developed into a steady, reliable ferry service operated by a state authority.

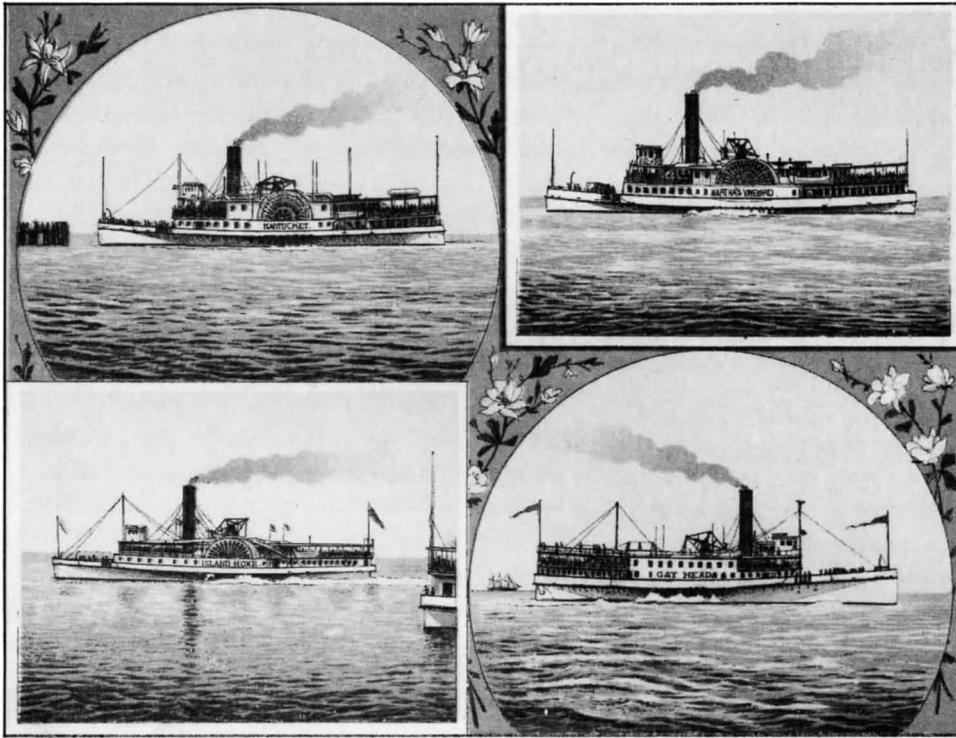
The first European settlers to arrive on Martha's Vineyard were Thomas Mayhew and his family, in

1642. Beyond the Vineyard, too far off to be visible from Woods Hole, is Nantucket, an Indian word meaning "Land Far Out to Sea." The first Europeans settled there in 1659. (Four years later came Peter Folger, who was Benjamin Franklin's grandfather and my great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather.)

By 1790 Woods Hole had 10 houses and a population of 74. It was a growing hamlet.

In 1807 Robert Fulton introduced his first steamboat, the side-wheeler *North River* (dubbed *Fulton's Folly* by some members of the doubting public). In 1809, renamed *Clermont*, she was put into regular passenger and freight service between New York and Albany on the Hudson River—a harbinger of things to come to Woods Hole.

In the summer of 1818 the first steamer service between New Bedford and Nantucket was tried with the 90-foot side-wheeler *Eagle*. She was the first steamboat to cross Buzzards Bay and the Sounds carrying passengers. The service failed after three months from lack of patronage. In 1824 it was tried again with the *Connecticut* under the command of Captain R.S. Bunker of Nantucket. Again the service failed after only two months. The islanders, so long accustomed to sail, did not take well to this strange new mode of travel—they preferred the packets.



Excursion steamers
Nantucket, Martha's
Vineyard, Island
Home and Gay Head,
from *Souvenir of
Martha's Vineyard*,
1892-1893.
Courtesy WHHC.

The first steamer reported as stopping in Woods Hole was four years later. Barney Corey and James Hathaway of New Bedford introduced the side-wheeler *Hamilton* in May of 1828. She was put on a New Bedford - Woods Hole - Holmes Hole - Nantucket route under the command of Captain Luce of Holmes Hole. Considerably under-powered, she had a hard time bucking the tide of Brant's Point or the strong currents entering Woods Hole. Brant's Point is at the entrance to Nantucket Harbor. The *Hamilton* ceased service after about two months because she was losing money.

Over the ensuing years, further attempts were made to establish steady service with a succession of side-wheelers. Most of them also failed after a few months: the *Marco Bozzaris*—1829, the *Naushon*—1846 (the first of the steamers to bear that name), the *Canonicus* in 1851, the *George Law*—1854 (under charter for a month), and the *Metacomet*—1854, among

others. One successful steamer was the 100-foot *Telegraph* which started service in 1832 under the command of Captain Edward Barker of Nantucket. She was to function in the area for the next 26 years. After 10 years she was joined by the *Massachusetts* under the command of Captain Lot Phinney. The two boats were on the New Bedford - Woods Hole - Vineyard - Nantucket run. Woods Hole had grown to 54 houses and a population of 200 by 1851. Nevertheless, when the Old Colony Railroad extended a line to Hyannis in early 1854, the two vessels ran directly between Hyannis and Nantucket, dropping the other ports. In 1855 they were succeeded by the *Island Home*, built specifically for service in Nantucket Sound. She was first commanded by Captain Thomas Brown, later by Captain Nathan Manter of Nantucket who had an earring in his left ear and was known to wear a top hat or a derby on the job.

The *Metacomet* was the last local steamer built with an A- frame or gallows-frame, an arrangement with two heavy steel parallel structures running fore and aft, connected at their tops by a strong transverse bar. On the inner side of each "A" there was a vertical track to guide the extreme ends of the heavy crosshead as it moved up and down with each stroke of the engine's piston rod. The upper end of the piston rod was attached to the center of the crosshead forming a "T." Near each end of the crosshead were fastened the connecting rods which extended down to the paddlewheel crankshafts.

In the newer "walking beam" or "vertical-beam" arrangement, the engine was located forward of the centerline between the paddle wheels. The walking beam was mounted on a transverse axle midway between the engine and the paddle wheels. The forward end was attached to the piston rod via connecting rods

and crosshead, and the after end to a single crankshaft which turned both wheels. The walking beam rocked with the up and down motion of the piston rod, moving about 10 feet at each stroke. The distinctive shape of the walking beam was seen in the Woods Hole area for about 74 years, beginning with the *George Law* and ending in 1928 with the first *Uncatena*.

After the *Telegraph* and *Massachusetts* began using Hyannis as a mainland port, they came under the ownership of the newly-formed Nantucket and Cape Cod Steamboat Co. To serve Woods Hole and the Vineyard, the New Bedford, Vineyard and Nantucket Steamboat Co. was formed and brought the new side-wheeler *Eagle's Wing* into service in the fall of 1854 under Captain James Barker. Captain Barker was popular with the traveling public, but when he was succeeded by Captain Benjamin Cromwell, Nantucket passengers began to shift their allegiance to the *Island*

Steamers
Monohansett and
Martha's Vineyard
at railroad wharf,
Woods Hole, 1895.
Photo by Baldwin
Coolidge. Courtesy
WHHC.



Home on the more direct Hyannis line. The *Eagle's Wing*, operating at a loss, dropped New Bedford and Nantucket and ran only between Woods Hole and the Vineyard. In the summer of 1861, en route to Providence to pick up some excursionists, she caught fire and was destroyed. Woods Hole was again without steamer service, but not for long, as the engine and shaft of the *Eagle's Wing* were salvaged and used in the new *Monohansett*.

Named for an islet in Lackey's Bay on the south side of Naushon, the *Monohansett* started service connecting New Bedford, Woods Hole and Edgartown in May, 1862, when the Civil War was in full swing. Steamers of any sort were sorely needed by the Union and the *Monohansett* served briefly as a troop carrier that summer but was back on her regular route by October. The next summer she was chartered again and was used by General U.S. Grant as a despatch boat on the Potomac River and around Cape Hatteras. At the end of the war she returned to her home waters and resumed service in July, 1865, and served continuously on her island route until retired in 1902.

Woods Hole was growing. As late as 1862, the Vineyard boat line was using a pier in Little Harbor, just south of the pier put up in 1857 when the Lighthouse Service supply depot was established in Woods Hole. Little Harbor was the original center and for a long time the focus of village activity. When the Pacific Guano Company put up its buildings where Great Neck, now Penzance Point, began and started business in 1863 activity began to shift toward Great Harbor. By 1870, the *Monohansett* was using a pier facing Great Harbor, about where the present Steamship Authority building is located. In early 1872, at the urging of the guano company and others, the railroad extended a line from Monument Beach down to Woods Hole and service started in July. Travelers to Woods Hole no longer had to rely on the daily stagecoach from Boston, the guano company was better able to ship its products and the boatline benefited from improved passenger connections. In New

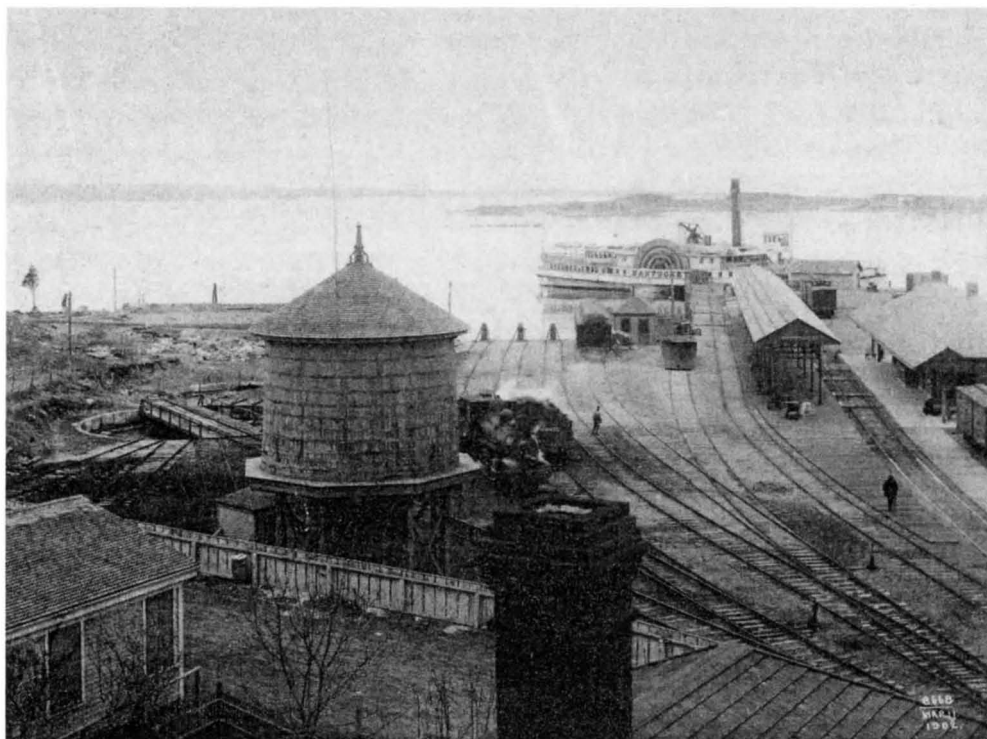
Bedford the next year the Old Colony Railroad extended its line about a mile, from the railroad station to Steamship Pier. Things were indeed improving.

With increasing demand for passenger service to the islands, the New Bedford, Vineyard and Nantucket Steamboat Co. in 1871 purchased the *River Queen* and built the *Martha's Vineyard* to run with the *Monohansett*. At the end of one season, however, the *River Queen* was sold to the Nantucket and Cape Cod Steamboat Co. to serve along with the *Island Home*.

The Old Colony Railroad chartered the *Monohansett* for a short time in 1873, then later chartered both the *River Queen* and the *Island Home* to cover a Woods Hole - Oak Bluffs - Nantucket run. The Vineyard boat line ran a Woods Hole - Vineyard Haven - Edgartown route, extended in 1879 to New Bedford. By this time Woods Hole had a population of 500 and was still gradually growing.

The first or tentative phase of steamer service lasted from 1818 through the Civil War. The second phase included the establishment of steady service between New Bedford and the islands by way of Woods Hole. Beginning with the *Canonicus* almost all the steamers for half a century were of the same general design: relatively long, somewhat broad and squat, two-decker, walking beam side-wheelers, sturdy and reliable. Exceptions were the A-frame *Metacomet* and the propeller driven *Helen Augusta*.

In 1886, the Nantucket and Cape Cod Steamboat Co. was absorbed by the New Bedford, Vineyard and Nantucket Steamboat Co. The line continued operation under the same name for fifty-nine years. Also in 1886, the first steamer *Nantucket* was built to replace the *River Queen*, which was chartered to New York interests. Two of the line's four ships, the *Island Queen* and the *Nantucket*, ran down to the "Far Away Island" while the *Monohansett* and the *Martha's Vineyard* served the Vineyard. All four stopped at Woods Hole, by then a hub of steamer activity.



Steamer *Nantucket* at railroad wharf, Woods Hole—train, water tower and turntable on left, 1902.

Photo by Baldwin Coolidge. Courtesy WHHC.

Four years later the *Gay Head*, largest of the side-wheelers, was built to replace the *Island Home*. For thirty years the *Gay Head* made the morning run from Nantucket, connecting at Woods Hole with the morning train to Boston. Returning each afternoon she picked up island-bound passengers from the afternoon train from Boston, especially “week-enders” on Fridays.

The guano company met with financial reverses and went out of business in 1889. The buildings were torn down in 1892 and summer homes began to appear on the renamed Penzance Point. By 1895 there were five—the Jewett, Wilbur, Harding and Hibbard houses and, farther out on the point, the Anchorage, home of my grandfather Dyer.

The first *Uncatena* was added to the fleet in 1902, replacing the aging *Monohansett*. The *Monohansett* was sold to North Shore interests and met her doom in 1904 on the rocks off Misery Island at the entrance to

Salem Harbor. The *Uncatena* was the first steel-hulled vessel to be built for the line, the first with electricity, and the last of the walking beam side-wheelers. Occasionally one would see the *Uncatena* gingerly nosing up to the small pier built by the Forbeses on the south side of the island for which she was named, but only at high tide. There she would unload building materials, lumber and other freight that would have been too much for the Forbes family’s little steam ferry *Coryell* which shuttled between Hadley Harbor and the private Forbes pier off Railroad Avenue in Woods Hole. The deeper-draft ferries of today could never get in to that pier on *Uncatena*.

Those husky, serviceable side-wheelers, so familiar in those days to Woods Hole, had able and considerate skippers. I recall an occasion back in the late teens when a good-sized sloop, without an engine, was tacking back and forth in Woods Hole passage, trying to make headway against a strong east tide and

Steamer *Sankaty*
at Woods Hole
railroad terminal
wharf, Fisheries
building in
background on
left, ca. 1910.
Courtesy SPNEA.



unfavorable southwest wind. She had reached the narrow place between Red Ledge on the south and Grassy Island on the north when the *Uncatena* appeared from New Bedford. Seeing a problem in the making, the skipper of the *Uncatena* turned his ship sharply to starboard on reaching the #3 black can and headed southeast through Broadway. She rounded Red Ledge, swung back to port as if coming in from the Vineyard, and pulled in to the Woods Hole pier, leaving those on the sloop thankful, relieved and undisturbed as they finally made their way into Buzzards Bay.

A new breed of steamer, the propeller-driven *Sankaty*, joined the old regulars in May, 1911. She replaced the *Martha's Vineyard* on the morning run from New Bedford to Nantucket, returning in the afternoon. The *Sankaty* alternated with the *Gay Head*, while the *Uncatena* made two round trips a day connecting New Bedford, Woods Hole and the Vineyard.

The side-wheeler era was coming to an end. By late 1910 the first *Martha's Vineyard* and the first *Nantucket* were retired, leaving only the *Gay Head* and the *Uncatena*. With the *Sankaty*, they maintained ferry service in Woods Hole. One or another of them could be seen, eight times a day, passing the tip of Penzance Point where my parents had built their own home, first occupied in the summer of 1913. It was not too difficult to estimate the time of day from the location of the ferries. They could be spotted, in the Bay or the Sound, for about half an hour after leaving, or before coming in to the Woods Hole pier with alerting "long and two short" whistle blasts. Family activities seemed to revolve around the boat schedules: the toot of a whistle or a ferry passing a particular point might indicate "It's time to get up" or "time to get the mail," "after-lunch rest-time is over," or "time to head home for supper" if out sailing. The boats were a pretty good substitute for a watch.

The *Sankaty's* Saturday morning run was a trip of particular significance to our family. My father was chief surgeon at one Brooklyn hospital and attending surgeon at another; as he had assistants to cover, he was in a position to take the weekends off. On Friday evening in New York he would board the *Maine*, the *City of Lowell* or the *Chester W. Chapin* of the New Bedford Line. He was landed in New Bedford Saturday morning in time to take the *Sankaty* to Woods Hole, waving to his family as the boat passed Penzance Point. On Sunday afternoon he would reverse the process, taking the *Sankaty* back to New Bedford and then on to New York. But he would return the next weekend! After he retired, he was with us all summer.

The first *Islander* (later the second *Martha's Vineyard*) was built at the Bath Iron Works in Maine and was put into service in the late summer of 1925, replacing the *Gay Head*.

Disaster befell the *Sankaty* the following June while she was tied to the Steamboat Pier in New Bedford. Some hay and barrels of oil on the pier caught fire and flames soon engulfed the entire starboard side of the vessel. Her mooring lines burned through and she was carried across the harbor by the wind. She finally sank next to a Fairhaven pier, filled with the water which was poured into her to douse the fire, and was declared a total loss. She was sold "where is, as is," resurrected, taken to

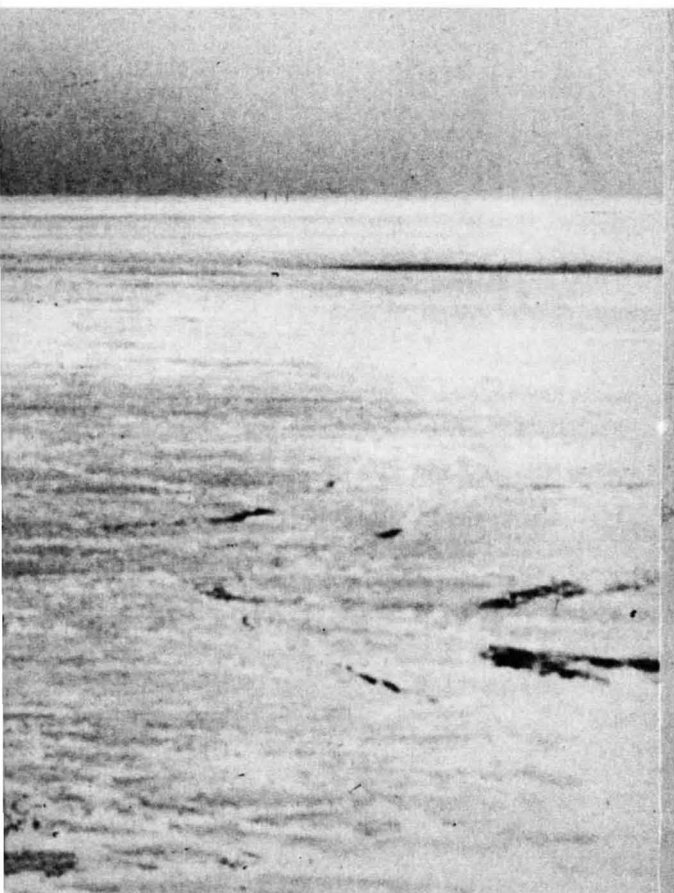


Maine, used as a car ferry for many years, and finally lost in a storm off Nova Scotia in 1964.

The *Sankaty's* schedule was run for the remainder of the summer by the side-wheeler *South Shore*, chartered from Boston interests. That winter the line had a replacement built on the lines of the successful *Islander*. This new boat, the *Nobska*, went into service in April, 1925, and served until 1973, the longest tour of duty of any of the Woods Hole boats. On more than one occasion, the ever-popular *Nobska* came to Nantucket's rescue by plowing through the ice when the island was frozen in, as in the winter of 1959. She was also the last boat in the line to sail from New Bedford, ending

115 years of ferry service with the scheduled run on December 31, 1960.

The next boat to join the "White Fleet," as it was then called, was the *New Bedford*, built at Quincy in 1928 to the same lines as the *Islander* and the *Nobska*. At this point the *Islander* was renamed *Martha's Vineyard* and the *Nobska* became the *Nantucket*—the second of the name in each case. The line was doing well and the three boats could not handle the increased passenger traffic. Thus the second *Naushon* was built and joined the fleet in June, 1929. She was the largest of the four, the first twin-screw boat on the line. This was the heyday of the island line as the four big steamers



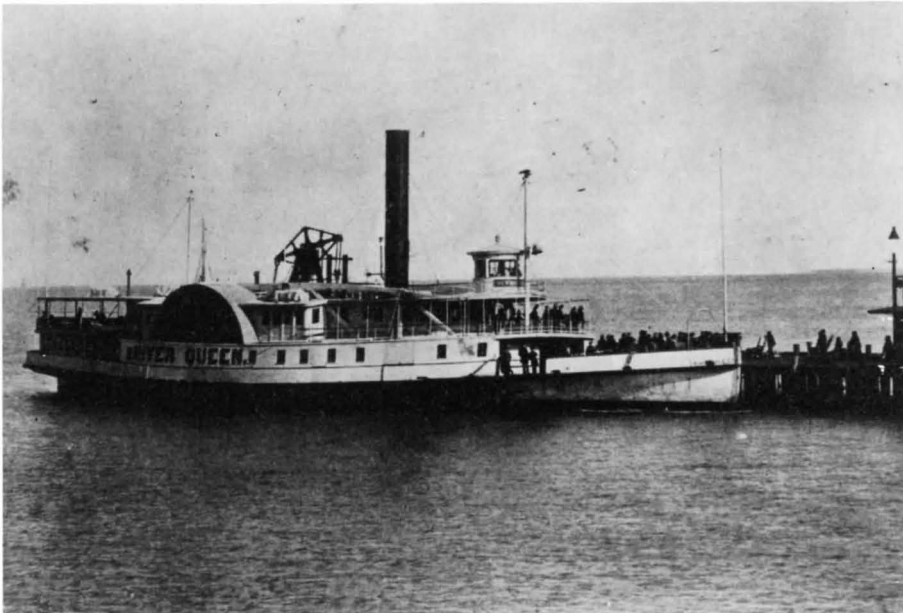
Nobska breaks her way through the ice with supplies for Nantucket Island during the freeze-up of 1961. Courtesy Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Steamship Authority.

shuttled back and forth across the Bay and Sound, in and out of Woods Hole.

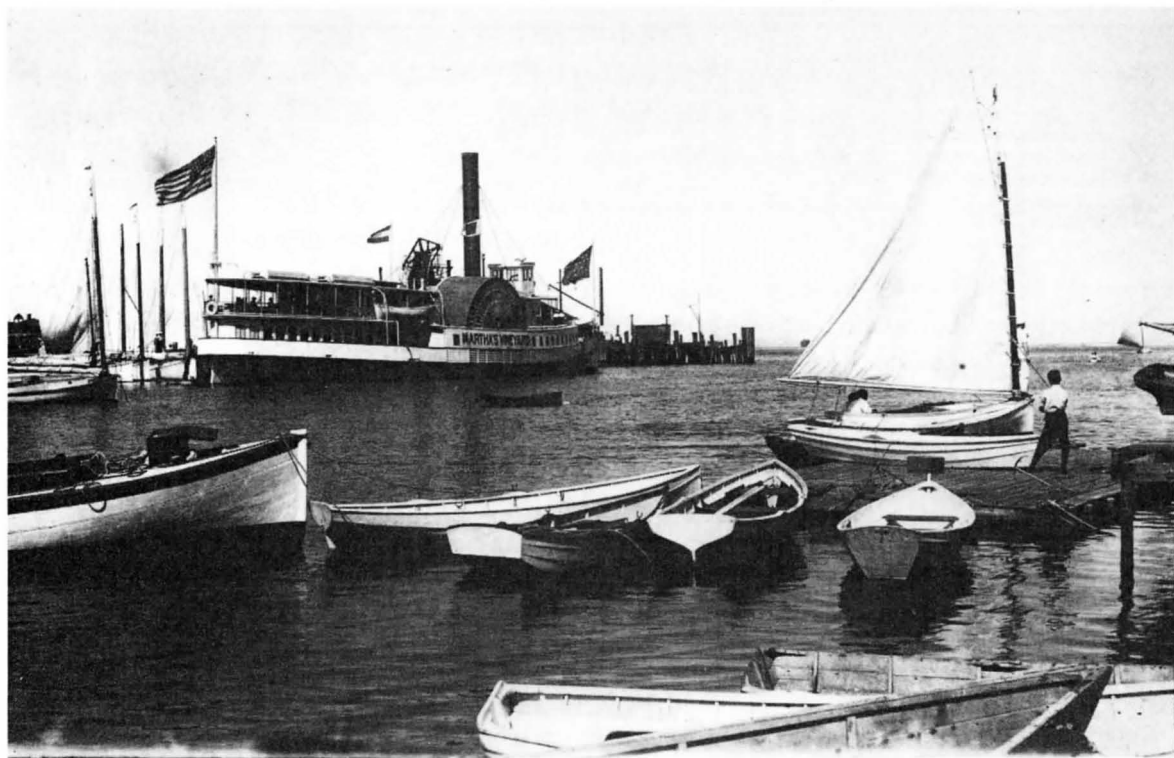
For some time the islands had been gaining recognition as delightful places for a vacation or even a weekend of sun, sand and sea, and the boat from Woods Hole was the way to get there. There was so much traffic that the line chartered a New York ferryboat, the *Gannett*, to deal with the backlog of cars trying to leave the Vineyard at the end of the summer of 1929. However, business declined during the Depression. As an economy measure, Edgartown was dropped from the schedule in 1934. That September, the *New Bedford* strayed off course and hit Weepecket Rock while crossing the Bay. Leaking badly, she was saved from sinking only by the alert action of Captain Negus who ran her aground on the north shore of nearby Uncatena. The first of the boats to be equipped with wireless, she was able to radio promptly for assistance. She was hauled off and repaired and returned to service.

In 1937 a strike by deckhands tied up the line, which was by then a division of the New England Steamship Co. and a subsidiary of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad, which was financially ailing and weakened both by the Depression and by increasing freight competition by trucks. In a sympathy strike, the deckhands walked off the job at the Fall River Line, another subsidiary. It was the last straw. The railroad promptly closed down the Fall River Line, ending the careers of its famous foursome, the *Commonwealth*, the *Puritan*, the *Plymouth* and the *Priscilla*. When the strike ended and the Woods Hole boats went back in service, they were all that remained of the once bustling New England Steamship Co. It was a sad time, made harder by the coming of World War II.

With the war overseas worsening, the U.S. government took over the *Naushon* and *New Bedford* in 1942 and sent them to England as hospital ships. On their return they were engaged in service elsewhere; the *Naushon* was scrapped in Baltimore in 1974 and the *New Bedford* became a rusting hulk in a New Jersey shipyard.



The *River Queen* tied up at Highlands Wharf, Oak Bluffs. The *River Queen* figured prominently in Civil War history as General Grant's personal despatch boat and as Abraham Lincoln's favorite mode of transportation. Lincoln was aboard the *River Queen* just 48 hours before his assassination. Courtesy Dick Sherman.



Railroad service to Woods Hole was discontinued in March, 1965, for lack of business. However, the improved highways and growing truck service which did in the railroad brought boom not bust to the boatline. In June, 1965, the diesel powered *Uncatena* (number 2) joined the fleet. She was planned as an alternate for the other boats but demand was so heavy that she was pressed into full time service, for which she proved inadequate. In 1971 she was remodeled: she was cut in half, a new 52-foot section was fitted between the two ends, and she resumed service as a more seaworthy, satisfactory, comfortable and capable 202-footer. The *Nobska* and *Naushon* covered the Woods Hole - Nantucket run and the *Islander* and *Uncatena* handled Woods Hole - Vineyard, with the *Uncatena* occasionally making a run to Nantucket.

The *Martha's Vineyard* at Nantucket wharf at the turn of the century. Photo from glass plate negative. Courtesy Dick Sherman.

When the *Nobska* was retired in 1973, she was replaced by a new *Nantucket*, the fourth to bear the name. The new ship had the same sort of power plant as the 1950 *Islander*, with access doors bow and stern, and proved an able vessel. Put on the Woods Hole - Nantucket run, she carried freight, cars and trucks and had ample room for passengers. The newer boats, alas, lacked the finer touches of the "old timers"—no more gold trimmed interior finishing; no more rich mahogany, cherry, black walnut or other hardwoods; nor any richly carved staircases leading up to the lounge. In keeping with the times, functional adequacy was the prime requisite.

Chronology of the Ferries

KEY:

NB, New Bedford; Nan, Nantucket; WH, Woods Hole; HH, Holmes Hole; MV, Martha's Vineyard; Edgt, Edgartown; OB, Oak Bluffs; VH, Vineyard Haven; Hy, Hyannis
 SW, Side wheeler; WB, Walking beam; AF, A frame; VB, Vertical Beam; Prop, Propeller

Eagle (SW), 1818 (3 months). NB-Nan. Broken up.
Connecticut, 1824 (2 months). NB-Nan. Sold.
Hamilton (SW), 1828 (2 months). NB-WH-HH-Nan. Broken up.
Marco Bozzaris (SW), 1829-1832. NB-Nan-Edgt-HY. Stranded.
Telegraph (SW), 1832-1858. NB-WH-MV-Nan (1854, HY-Nan). Sold.
Massachusetts (SW), 1842-1858. NB-WH-MV-Nan (1854, HY-Nan). Scrapped.
Naushon (1) (AF), 1846-1848. NB-Nan-Edgt. Scrapped.
Canonicus (VB), 1851-1861. Burned.
George Law (WB), 1854 (charter, 1 month). Burned.
Metacomet (AF), 1854.
Eagle's Wing (WB), 1854-1861. NB-Nan-Edgt. Burned.
Island Home (WB), 1855-1890. Converted to coal barge, sunk.
Sarah Stevens, 1860. NB-WH-MV-Nan (later, WH-MV).
Monohansett, (WB), 1862-1902. Wrecked.
Martha's Vineyard (1) (WB), 1871-1910. 1873 WH-OB-Nan, NB- OB; 1879 WH-VH-Edgt-Nan. Sunk.
River Queen (WB), 1871. Burned.
Helen Augusta (Prop), 1865-1866. WH-VH-Edgt-Nan. Sold.
Nantucket (1) (WB), 1886-1910. WH-Nan. Wrecked.
Gay Head (1) (WB), 1891-1924. WH-Nan (NB, MV). Scrapped.
Uncatena (1) (WB), 1902-1928. WH-Nan (NB, MV). Broken up.
Sankaty (Prop), 1911-1924. WH-NB, (MV, Nan). Lost in tow.
Frances, 1920 (charter).
Miramar, 1921-1922 (charter).
Naugatuck, 1924 (charter).
Myles Standish, 1924 (charter).
Islander (1), later *Martha's Vineyard* (2) (Diesel, bow thruster), 1923-1959. Sold.
Nobska (1), later *Nantucket* (2), later (1956) *Nobska*, 1925-1973. Sold.
South Shore, 1924 (charter). Foundered.
New Bedford, 1928-1942. Scrapped.
Naushon (2) (twin screw), 1929-1942. Sold for scrap.
Gannet, 1929 (charter).
Hackensack, later *Islander* (2), 1948.
Islander (3) (Diesel, double-ended), 1950. WH-VH.
Nantucket (3), 1956-1987. Became *Naushon* (3) in 1974. Sold.
Uncatena (2) (Diesel), 1965. Lengthened 1972. WH-Nan.
Nantucket (4) (Diesel), 1974. WH-Nan.

Auriga (Diesel), 1973-1989. WH and the Islands. Sold.

Katama (Diesel), 1982. WH and the Islands.

Gay Head (2) (Diesel), 1982. WH and the Islands.

Eagle (2) (Diesel), 1987.

Compiled from Morris, Paul C. and Joseph F. Morin. *The Island Steamers*. Nantucket Nautical Publishers. 1977.

Operating Companies

1833-1855. Nantucket Steamboat Company, later became Nantucket and Cape Cod Steamboat Company

1848. New Bedford and Martha's Vineyard Steamboat Company

1854. New Bedford and Nantucket Steamboat Company

1865. Martha's Vineyard Steamboat Company

1886. New Bedford, Vineyard and Nantucket Steamboat Company; later consolidated with Nantucket and Cape Cod Steamboat Company as New Bedford, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Steamboat Company

1911. Service taken over by New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad as the New England Steamship Company

1922. New Bedford, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Branch of the New England Steamboat Company

1945. New England Steamboat Company's stock sold to Massachusetts Steamship Line

1949. New Bedford, Woods Hole, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Steamship Authority established.

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