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Steamboats – Increased Security to Life and Property from the Introduction of Steam Navigation. – Since the first practical introduction of steam navigation, by Fulton, thirty-four years ago, more than two thousand steam vessels have been built in the United States, of which about three hundred have been worn out in service, four hundred have been destroyed by various accidents, and the remainder are in active employment. In Great Britain, the first steamboat fit for actual service was launched on the Clyde in 1811; and from a return recently presented to Parliament, it appears that the steam marine of England, Ireland and Scotland, at the commencement of 1839, was seven hundred and sixty-six, with a computed tonnage of 141,718 and 56,490 horse power. Of the total number of steam vessels, 484 were river boats and small coasters, and 282 large coasters and sea-going ships. In this country, the fatherland of steam navigation, its progress has been much more rapid than in England. The Hudson, the Western Lakes, and the Mississippi, afforded a splendid scene for the introduction of steam vessels, and those built here have very much surpassed those of Europe in lightness and elegance, as well as speed. We have never, however, equaled some of the *colossi* that have lately been constructed for the Atlantic service, though some of the vessels on the Erie and the Ontario are little inferior to them in strength or capacity. We gather some interesting particulars of the state and influence of steam navigation in Great Britain from a recent number of the London 'Monthly Chronicle,' and, in this country, from a memorial lately presented to Congress from the owners of steamboats in this and other cities, asking a review of certain portions of the existing steamboat law.

Not the least remarkable fact connected with the rapid growth of steam navigation, has been the undiminished activity of the foreign and coasting trades carried on by the regular shipping of Great Britain and this country, which is estimated to be greater now than during the most active year of the last war. The extent to which the trade and intercourse between England and Ireland have been augmented since the introduction of steam, is almost incredible. Previously to this period, the trade was comparatively insignificant; while in 1837, the value of live cattle and agricultural produce imported into Liverpool amounted to £3,397,760, or \$15,086,054 40. After entering into these and other details of great interest, which we have not room particularly to notice, the writer of the article in the 'Chronicle,' to which we have referred, proceeds to remark that, in order fully to estimate the benefits which we owe to the introduction of steam navigation, it will be necessary to institute some comparison between the loss of life occasioned by steamboats and sailing vessels. The popular prejudice against steamboats, fostered as it had long been by the ignorant, the interested, and the envious, led, in the early part of last year, to the appointment of a Commission by the British Government, charged with the investigation of the number and nature of the accidents that had occurred to, or been occasioned by, steamboats, and with the task of suggesting means for preventing the recurrence of similar misfortunes. From the report and tabular statements presented

by the Commissioners, it appears that during the period of twenty-two years, comprised within the range of their investigation, the number of accidents to steam vessels had been 92, and the total number of lives lost 634. "When it is borne in mind," observes the writer in the 'Monthly Chronicle,' "that Great Britain and Ireland had no less than 766 steamboats in full activity last year, and that these steamers performed at least 30,000 coasting and foreign voyages, without including the daily trips of passenger vessels up and down our rivers, we really think that a more triumphant case in favor of the superior security of steam navigation could scarcely be presented." This conclusion is made apparent from the evidence collected by the Select Committee of the House of Commons, appointed, in 1836, to inquire into the causes of the increased number of shipwrecks, with a view to the introduction of measures for their diminution and prevention. By a return made to the Committee by Lloyd's books, it appears that in the years 1833, 1834 and 1835, the number of sailing vessels wrecked and missing amounted to 1,702, which at the assured value of £5,000 for each ship and cargo, the loss of property occasioned by these wrecks, would amount to upwards of eight millions sterling. The vessels wrecked during the three years specified, of which the entire crews were drowned, amounted to 81, causing a loss of nearly 2,000 lives. The report sums up by estimating the annual loss of British property by shipwrecks at three millions sterling, and the loss of life at not less than one thousand persons each year. When, therefore, it was found that \$13,320,000 of property, and 1000 lives were estimated to be annually lost by shipwreck, the country might be fairly congratulated on the great comparative security of steam navigation. The losses of life and property have, however, been much greater by steam vessels in this country than in England, though the proportion of disasters incident to the two systems of navigation may not be essentially different. Including in an estimate the immense number of losses sustained on the New-England coast last fall, it would doubtless be found that more lives have been lost on American waters within a year past by ship than by steam navigation, notwithstanding the great difference, in the number of passengers, in favor of steam vessels.

The memorial of the steamboat owners in this country, which we have mentioned, was drawn up by Mr. Redfield, the well-known writer on meteorology; and it will surprise the reader to learn that the result of his investigations shows that, during the last five years, the number of lives lost, to the whole number of passengers, was only one to nearly two millions. It appears from Mr. R's schedule, that the number of miles navigated by steam vessels connected with the port of New-York, in five years, ending December, 1824, was about 2,827,750, with an aggregate of 4,796,000 passengers, of whom 38, or 1 in 126,211 lost their lives. Twelve accidents occurred. During the five years ending at the close of 1833, the estimated number of miles run was 4,216,200, with an aggregate of 9,419,700 passengers. Number of accidents 9 — lives lost 62, or 1 to 151,931. During the five years ending the 31st Dec. 1838, the estimated number of miles run was 5,467,450; aggregate number of passengers, 15,886,300; number of accidents, 2; lives lost 8, or 1 in 1,925,783. The average number of miles to each explosion, in the first of the above periods, was 235,646; in the second, 843,220; and in the third, 2,783,725.

In noticing the regulations recommended by the British Commission (somewhat similar to those adopted by Congress in our own steamboat law) for diminishing the number of accidents, the writer of the 'Monthly Chronicle' says: — "There ought to be as little interference as possible, for unnecessary regulations operate injuriously upon

every description of manufacture; and it may safely be assumed, that the rapid progress which steam navigation has already made has partly been owing to the freedom from restraint which this branch of industry has hitherto enjoyed. Nevertheless, there are cases in which interference becomes necessary. The passengers are seldom qualified to judge of the seaworthiness of the vessel they are about to embark in; and whenever there are good grounds for distrusting a vessel, Government is bound to interfere for the protection of those about to confide their lives to a steamboat or to any other vessel. Such interference, however, as we have already seen, is, in reality, less frequently required for steamboats than for sailing vessels; and on this ground we shall ever protest against an attempt to subject the former to a system of interference, which has never been deemed necessary with respect to the latter. No system of regulations will ever secure us against the occasional recurrence of calamities, the result of culpable carelessness on the part of captains or engineers; not will it ever be possible to suggest any mode of construction that shall prevent bad vessels from being built. Hitherto, we firmly maintain it, steamboat accidents have been of remarkably rare occurrence; and if ships notoriously unfit for sea are not allowed to leave their moorings till they have been properly inspected, those accidents will become even less frequent than they are now. The real security of the public will ever be found in the respectability of the several companies whose character and capital are engaged in these gigantic enterprises, and who must look for certain ruin if their vessels are allowed to get a bad name."

In America we are more reckless of life than in England. We doubt very much whether the culpable carelessness which induced the loss of the Lexington last winter seriously affects the interests of the proprietors six months afterward.



[-The illustration was not in the New-Yorker article. See footnote.]

Here our safety must be found in the rigorous enforcement of special laws, administered by competent Commissioners. We believe that steam navigation is more safe, even when not regulated by statutes and provisions, than any other; and it can be rendered almost perfectly free from danger by a proper attention to the construction of engines and the prohibition of trials of speed. We have had no serious steamboat accidents thus far this season.

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Footnote and acknowledgment of the Currier & Ives print of the “Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat “Lexington” in Long Island Sound” (Plate 21) from Harry T. Peters, *Currier and Ives, Printmakers to the American People*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1962).

For the “Story behind the Illustration” [*ibid.*, pp. 1-2]:

“On the evening of January 13, 1840, the steamboat *Lexington*, bound from New York for Stonington, Connecticut, with a crew of forty and nearly one hundred passengers, caught fire on Long Island Sound. The wooden vessel burned like tinder, the lifeboats, badly handled, capsized on being launched, and the pilot’s effort to run the ship ashore failed when the engines stopped two miles from the coast. Occupants of the vessel had to choose between burning to death and drowning in frigid water. Only a handful survived.

Three days later, when New York was still humming with conflicting tales of the disaster, there appeared what was perhaps the first illustrated extra in history. Headed “The Extra Sun,” it bears a finely drawn and violently realistic picture of the flaming vessel. Figures can be seen lining the rails fore and aft and leaping into the water while a starboard lifeboat spills its occupants into the sea after a clumsy launching. In the foreground frenzied women and men in stovepipe hats take a precarious refuge on the cotton bales that were the ship’s chief cargo and cling desperately to bits of debris. The print, which is followed by seven solid columns of letterpress describing the holocaust, is captioned “Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat ‘Lexington’ in long Island Sound on Monday Eveng. Jany. 13th 1840, by which melancholy occurrence over 100 persons perished.” In small letters at the lower left-hand corner of the print are the words “Drawn by W. K. Hewitt,” and at the right, “N. Currier, Lith. & Pub. 2 Spruce St. N.Y.”

“The Extra Sun” was a sensation. It received columns of newspaper notices. Newsboys hawked it in the streets. The presses ran night and day to supply the demand. Copies were shipped to other cities, and overnight N. Currier became a national institution. The *Lexington* print, the first great Currier best seller, is typical of the work of a firm that for over fifty years combined artistic talent, skilled craftsmanship, and merchandising acumen with the keenest news sense of the day. It revealed the tremendous sales potentialities of newsworthy pictures at a time when the various processes now in common use for the swift and accurate reproduction of drawings and photographs were mostly unknown. For the youthful firm of N. Currier it opened up a new line of “rush stock,” depicting events and persons in the news which, with the small “stock prints,” was to prove its chief source of income. It launched the firm on a half-century of prosperity as “Printmakers to the American

People.” during which time it depicted with fidelity and endless imagination every phase of life in a country that was growing from adolescence to maturity.”