

THE WATER LEVEL ROUTE TAKES TO THE WATER: NYC MARINE OPERATIONS IN NEW YORK HARBOR

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(PHOTO CAPTIONS BY THE EDITOR)

Part 6 – Ferry Service

The New York Central Railroad didn't need ferry service originally; it came right down the Hudson River to Manhattan, delivering its passengers to the grandest station in the region, right in midtown. Yet in the 1880s (as we detailed in Part 3 of this series) it did acquire a ferry service along with the line along the west shore of the Hudson River. For the commuters on that line, the ferry service from Weehawken delivered them either to 42nd Street, a few blocks west of Grand Central Terminal, or all the way down to the financial district at Cortlandt Street, giving them one of the longest (and most scenic) ferry rides of any railroad. It may well have been quicker and more convenient to commute to Wall Street by living on the

west side of the river in Bergen County and taking the West Shore and the Cortlandt Street ferry than living in upstate New York and having to take a subway or taxi from Grand Central down to Wall Street.

When the terminal started operating in 1884 (prior to its acquisition by the Central), it had some old boats and four new ones, built in 1883. The latter were the *Albany*, *Kingston*, *Newburgh*, and *Oswego*. These all had iron hulls and were powered by a vertical-beam engine of 800 HP which drove paddlewheels. Their registered length was 193 feet between endposts, and their overall length was 205 feet. These ferries continued in service when the New York Central took over the West Shore in 1885. A dozen years later, the Central ordered an additional ferry: the *Buffalo*, built



With architectural motifs that were common to many West Short Railroad structures, the Weehawken Terminal and Ferry Station was built in 1883. This June 12, 1956 view focuses on the Ferry House at the south end of the terminal complex. The vehicular entrance to the ferries is to the left of the Ferry House. NYC Neg. 10952-3, NYCSHS Collection.

in Wilmington, Delaware, rather than in Newburgh where the previous ferries had been built. But it had the same type of propulsion system, and was single-decked. That is considered surprising by marine historians, because by this time the screw-propeller system of propulsion, pioneered by the ferry *Bergen*, built in 1888 for the company that served the Lackawanna Railroad's Hoboken Terminal, had proved its superiority over the paddlewheel system. In fact, the *Buffalo* was the last paddle wheel/vertical beam ferry built for service in the region.

With the turn of the century in 1900, the New York Central caught up. It ordered a new ferry, the *West Point*, from the same builder that had built the *Bergen*, namely T.S. Marvel of Newburgh, New York. This new one was screw driven, double decked, and double ended. Another change: in 1902 the ferries were painted in an olive drab color instead of the traditional white. Several more steam ferries of the new pattern were built for the service in the next fifteen years, as the ones inherited from the NYO&W were taken out of service (see roster).

In 1925 the last remaining sidewheel ferry, the *Buffalo*, was taken out of service. The 2nd *Albany* was delivered, built by a different builder than used in the past: the Staten Island Shipbuilding Co. of Mariners Harbor, New York. She was powered by the last double-compound steam engine built by the famous builder W.A. Fletcher & Co. of Hoboken. And she was the last ferry to be built for the Central.

The New York Central's ferries were converted to burn oil instead of coal at an early date, unlike the other railroads crossing the Hudson, which, unlike the Central, all had major coal traffic. The fuel was a heavy, black oil known as "Bunker C," which was pumped aboard from a large hose which hung at the end of the ferry bridges in Weehawken. The oil came from an oil barge tied up to the dock at the north end of the terminal.

Mishaps

The crossings of New York Central's ferries, in spite of occasional heavy fog, were remarkably free of mishaps, but on occasion something went wrong. The

(Continued on following page)



Seen in another 1956 company photograph, this is the interior of the main waiting room of the terminal, looking north past the newsstand toward the train gates and stub-end terminal tracks. In earlier times, when there were more long-distance trains on the West Shore Railroad, there were numerous benches for waiting passengers in this open area. A much higher ceiling, unsupported by the steelwork seen here, vaulted overhead. NYC Neg. 10952-7, NYCSHS Collection.

New York Harbor... (Continued from page 31)

following incident was reported in the *New York Times* of October 7, 1907:

NO PILOT AT WHEEL, FERRYBOAT IN CRASH

Starts Unguided on River Trip from Weehawken
and Hits Barge on This Side.

ONE MAN IS BADLY HURT

Leaving Weehawken about 8 o'clock last night with fifty passengers aboard, the ferryboat Rochester of the West Shore line headed across the river apparently without a pilot at the wheel and crashed into a hay barge when near this side. Capt. Brannigan admitted he was not on board during the collision. The assistant wheelman, George Morgan, disappeared after the accident. As she neared the New York shore her steering gear became deranged and the boat started on a zig-zag course.

She almost side-swiped the end of the Pennsylvania Railroad pier at Thirty-seventh Street and then crashed into the hay barge Castleton, tied up at the New York City pier at the foot of Thirty-sixth Street.

Her engines going at almost full speed, the big screw ferryboat plowed into the hay barge with such power that she buried her nose well under the barge, lifted her fair out of the water, so much that the major part of the barge from forward of amidships was thrust in on the deck of the Rochester.

The heavy steel beams supporting the forward structure of the upper deck of the ferryboat were torn away. Ulysses Bornini, a tobacco merchant of 1391 Myrtle Avenue, Brooklyn, was standing by one of the iron posts that guard the passageway to the women's cabin from the gangway for teams, and was caught under the wreckage.

The ferryboat rebounded after the initial crash, and then, with the full power of her engines, shot forward again and lifted the craft still further up on her deck. It took almost an hour for the firemen of Truck No. 21, stationed in Thirty-sixth Street, to cut and hack away the wreckage, so that Bornini could be taken to Roosevelt Hospital, in all probability fatally injured. He was terribly injured about the legs, arm, and body, but still preserved consciousness

(Continued on page 34)



The *West Point*, first of the West Shore Railroad's screw-driven, double-deck ferries, was rammed amidships off the 42nd Street Slip on the night of December 28, 1929. Water flooded the engine room, and the vessel began to list. The *West Point* was carrying about 700 passengers, including about 200 immigrants from Ellis Island. The *New York Times* reported the next day that the immigrants at first took the accident "with complete calm, seemingly thinking that it was the usual thing for ferryboats to bump into other craft on their way across the river." But when regular passengers motioned to them to put on life preservers, they became hysterical. Three other ferries and New York Central's Tugboat 32 took passengers off, and everyone was rescued with only three passengers slightly hurt. Collection of Michael Igoe.



The *Albany* was the last ferry built for the West Shore Railroad, replacing the sole remaining sidewheel ferry, the *Buffalo*, in 1925. She was different in appearance from the West Shore's other ferries then in service, with pilot houses above the top deck and a different seating arrangement on the lower deck. Here she is at an early date in her career, leaving 42nd Street. NYC Neg. 9161, NYC SHS Collection.



This 1956 overall view of the Weehawken Terminal shows the relationship of the various facilities. The only locomotive in evidence is a single diesel switcher; the last steam locomotive departed Weehawken on July 16, 1952. A roundhouse and turntable originally occupied the area in the lower-right corner of the photograph. After its removal, locomotives were serviced in North Bergen, New Jersey, requiring light movements through the 4,225-foot tunnel under Bergen Hill. The Ferry House is seen just to the right of center, with float bridges on the far left. NYC Neg. 10952-2, NYC SHS Collection.

New York Harbor... (Continued from page 32)

and gave directions to the firemen as to how to reach him. No one else, as far as it appears, was injured. The skipper of the hay barge and his wife scurried to the wharf in time to avoid being crushed.

Most of the passengers in the women's cabin, as well as in the men's, were in the forward part of the cabins of the Rochester. They ran to the stern, screaming in fright as the big boat hit and rebounded, tilted over on her side, and then rose at the stern so that her after screw was almost out of the water. The hull of the hay barge had come in through the lower cabins of the Rochester while her superstructure had crashed into the upper cabins. With a wild rush the women made for life preservers, strapping them on in all sorts of ridiculous fashions, and all threatened to jump into the water. They were restrained by the cooler heads.

The boat whistled for help. Tugs 22 and 23, belonging to the New York Central lines, hurried to the foot of Thirty-sixth Street. After much difficulty the ferryboat and barge were worked in between piers of the Pennsylvania and New York Central Railroads. The passengers, still badly frightened, stripped off their life preservers, and climbed to the pier. Bornini, when taken from the wreckage, was

examined by Dr. Sutton. He said that his back, side, and abdomen were badly lacerated, and that he was probably severely injured internally.

During the stress one of the crew telephoned over to Weehawken about the collision and Capt. Brannigan was hurried over in a tug. He said he didn't know how the collision occurred. He declared he was not in the pilot house at the time of the collision or on the boat.

"I left the boat and went into the Superintendent's office on business while we were tied up in Weehawken," he said. "When I came outside I saw the boat pulling out."

"Who was in charge of the boat in your absence?"

"George Morgan, the wheelman. The next I knew was that my boat had been in a collision."

Walter B. Pollock of the Marine Equipment of the New York Central which controls the West Shore; Fred Pollock, Superintendent of Ferries, and George Eiseman, Superintendent of the Marine Force, made an investigation. Walter Pollock said there would be an investigation today. He said Capt. Brannigan had left the Rochester to go into the Superintendent's office, leaving Morgan in the shore end of the pilothouse. He declared Morgan gave the signal to cast off, and that the boat started out without Brannigan, the evident



The ferries *Weehawken*, *Niagara*, and *Utica* occupy slips 1, 2, and 5 at Weehawken on a cold February 12, 1947, with plenty of ice on the river. Note the position of the pilot houses on these "standard" NYC ferries as compared with those of the later *Albany*. The concrete arch on the extreme left side of the photo marks a cut in the bluff through which the trains of the Guttenberg Steam Road once passed. The line, which opened in 1892, crossed a spindly viaduct to a point 148 feet above ground at the south end of the West Shore passenger station, where three large and lavishly appointed elevators whisked riders and pedestrians to and from ground level in 45 seconds. The viaduct and elevators were dismantled in 1897, with electric trolleys providing service to the terminal and ferries via a private right-of-way adjacent to Pershing Road. NYC Neg. 7606, NYCSHS Collection.

impression in Morgan's mind being that Brannigan was in the forward pilothouse.

Mr. Morgan [*sic*] declared that there was no exception to the marine regulations which require two men to be in the pilothouse and that Morgan ought to have gone forward at once when he had cleared the ship. He evidently did not do that, Pollock said and the result was that the boat went on her course without any one in the pilothouse.

"I understand that Morgan has disappeared," said Mr. Pollock, "as we have been unable to find him."

Ferry Crews

In addition to the captain in the wheelhouse, there was an engine room crew that consisted of an engi-

neer who was in charge, plus an oiler who assisted the engineer in the engineroom, and a fireman who attended the two scotch boilers. The engineer handled the engine: changing speed, direction, etc. as ordered by the captain in the wheelhouse. The oiler tended the moving parts such as the air pump, condenser, generators, etc., keeping them oiled and greased. The fireman on an oil-powered boat handled the lighting and cleaning of the oil burners.

Service over the Years

In 1923, these were the service conditions: the ferry to 42nd St. traveled 8/10 of a mile each way, and

(Continued on following page)

All-time New York Central Ferryboat Roster

NAME	Official Hull Number	TYPE	DIMENSIONS	BUILT	WHERE BUILT	Notes and Fate
<i>Albany I</i>	106246	sidewheeler	193 36x13	1883	Newburgh, NY	Purchased from NYO&W in 1883; sold to Carteret Ferry Co. in 1917
<i>Kingston</i>	14420	sidewheeler	193x36x13	1883	Newburgh, NY	Purchased from NYO&W in 1883; sold to Chesapeake Ferry in 1917
<i>Newburgh</i>	130262	sidewheeler	193x36x13	1883	Newburgh, NY	Purchased from NYO&W in 1883; sold to Pavonia Ferry (Erie Railroad) in 1916
<i>Oswego</i>	155090	sidewheeler	193x36x13	1883	Newburgh, NY	Purchased from NYO&W in 1883; sold to Chesapeake Ferry in 1917 (renamed <i>Passaic</i> ; scrapped 1936)
<i>Buffalo</i>	3704	sidewheeler	unknown	1897	Wilmington, DE	Built for W.S., last sidewheeler; sold 1925 to Chesapeake Ferry
<i>West Point</i>	81737	propeller, steel	192x40x16	1900	Newburgh, NY	Sold 1941 to Norfolk Ferry Co.
<i>Syracuse</i>	117261	propeller, steel	193x40x17	1903	Newburgh, NY	Scrapped 1959 by Mowbray at Black Tom
<i>Rochester</i>	202712	propeller, steel	193x40x17	1905	Newburgh, NY	Scrapped 1959 by Mowbray at Black Tom
<i>Utica</i>	207842	propeller, steel	182x40x16	1910	Newburgh, NY	Sold 1959, dismantled at Wildwood, NJ in 1970s
<i>Niagara</i>	210464	propeller, steel	183x40x17	1912	Newburgh, NY	Sold 1959 to PSE&G (electric co.) for floating workshop
<i>Weehawken</i>	212806	propeller, steel	187x38x16	1914	Wilmington, DE	Sold 1959; sat at Black Tom until scrapped in 1970s
<i>Catskill</i>	212027	propeller, steel	184x39x16	1914	Newburgh, NY	Burned July 1952 at Roderman's Yard, J.C.; scrapped
<i>Stony Point</i>	215069	propeller, steel	197x39x16	1917	Wilmington, DE	Sold 1959; sank in Florida
<i>Albany II</i>	225146	propeller, steel	203x45x16	1925	Mariners Harbor, S.I.	Scrapped 1959

The information for this summary of the New York Central's ferry service from the West Shore's Weehawken Terminal comes from a number of sources; the prime one is: *Railroad Ferries of the Hudson, and the Stories of a Deckhand*, by Raymond J. Baxter & Arthur G. Adams, pub. 1987 by Lind Publications, Woodcliff Lake, NJ.

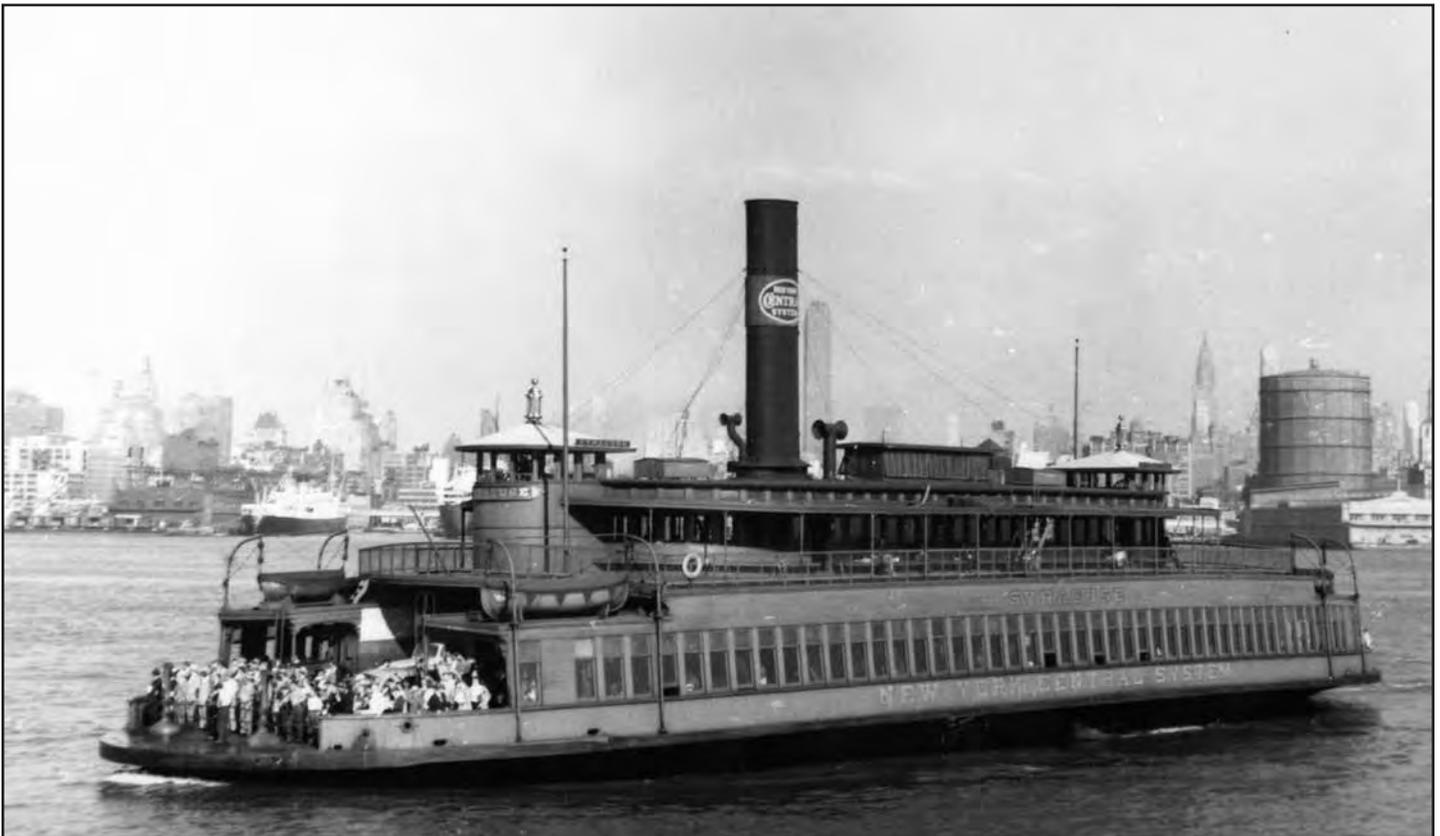
New York Harbor... (Continued from page 35)

left every 10 min. during the work day, a little more often during rush hours; and every 15 minutes in the evenings, until 3 a.m. After then you had to make do with 30 minute intervals from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. (this is the city that never sleeps). Fare was 4 cents, and the trip lasted 6 minutes. The ferry to downtown Cortlandt Street was less frequent: every 15 minutes in the rush hours, every 20 minutes during the day, and no service after 6:20 p.m. The fare was 6 cents and the trip lasted 25 minutes, covering 4.2 miles.

According to the railroad's own figures, the number of passengers carried in 1927 was 27 million. That was probably the zenith – the Holland Tunnel opened in 1927, the stock market crashed in 1929, probably reducing the numbers of both commuters and tourists, and the George Washington Bridge opened in 1931. People by then had the choice of taking a bus into Manhattan, and the competition got even closer with the opening of the Lincoln Tunnel in 1937, with its entrances near the ferry terminals on each side of the Hudson. At this time, ferry service to Cortlandt Street was cut back to rush hour only, and remained that way until the end of service. The ferry service didn't last as long

as the railroad's other marine services; the Central wanted out in the 1950s, got permission, and ended the service on both routes in 1959. Of course the ending of ferry service greatly reduced passenger traffic on the West Shore Railroad, so it was followed shortly by the termination of all passenger service on the line. Given the unprofitability of rail passenger service in general at this time, especially commuter service, the railroad no doubt was happy to end the ferry service first, so as to hasten the end of the West Shore line's commuter service.

But there was an unexpected sequel: in the 1970s the Weehawken yards became superfluous to Conrail, and it sold them off to Arcorp Properties, a company that ironically had made its money in the trucking business. The head of the company, Arthur Imperatore, surprised us. He started New York Waterway in 1985, using the fast boat *Port Imperial*, to provide direct service from the Weehawken property that was now going to become a residential area; they chose the West Shore's old route from Weehawken to 42nd St. And Arcorp made it work; it didn't lose money, in fact it even made some profit, for a time. The boats in service do not much resemble a classic double-ended ferryboat (of the type still in use on the S.I. ferry), they are much smaller and they



Syracuse, the second of the West Shore's screw-driven ferries, approaches a slip at Weehawken on a hot summer day, probably ending a 25-minute trip from Cortlandt Street, and probably in the late 1950s. As soon as she is fast and the gates go up, there will be a mad dash for the waiting commuter trains. Only a handful of passengers, probably not regular commuters, remain seated on the upper deck. Edward L. May Memorial Collection.

go only in one direction, turning around as necessary. But they do provide a functional alternative to the overcrowded tunnels under the Hudson: NY Waterway's service has been expanded since then to include other routes from Hoboken and Jersey City to Manhattan. A ride on the Weehawken ferry, with its river view in both directions nicely recalls what the West Shore commuters experienced. And when you arrive at the terminus in Weehawken (now called Port Imperial) you can transfer to a train (well, okay, a trolley) right through the old West Shore Weehawken tunnel again, or go south along what was the Central's New Jersey Junction Railroad. It is ironic; the only vestige of the New York Central's former rail marine services that is still in service is a revived passenger ferry service that the West Shore found very unprofitable and had dropped several years before it ended its marine freight services.



The *Weehawken* departs from 42nd Street, perhaps in the 1940s, given that most of the gentlemen aboard are suited and are wearing hats. The photo is a bit of a mystery, however, in that there are almost no women aboard, that so many men are looking back to the slip from the top deck, and that there appear to be many passengers inside the "No Smoking" section on the right. The vessel even appears to be listing in that direction. This does not look like a regular commuter trip and may be some sort of special occasion. Any information would be most welcome. NYC Neg. 9811, NYCSHS Collection.



During the war years, New York Central ferries often saw government service transporting troops around the harbor. The West Shore Railroad was a vital link in military movements during both world wars. In World War I, a spur was laid across private properties from the yard at Dumont, New Jersey to nearby Camp Merritt, and in World War II, Camp Shanks was located on the River Division at Orangeburg, New York. Here helmeted and probably outbound doughboys get a view of New York Harbor aboard a New York Central ferry during World War II. Collection of Michael Igoe.



And great was the celebration when they came home, the fighting ended, the battle won. In a period illustration signed "Kenyon," returning heroes transfer from a great liner that was converted for troop transport to a welcoming New York Central ferry, while NYC Tug 3 toots a joyful greeting. NYCSHS Collection.