

The First, in the Tale of Two Ships Named CRANFORD

By Bill Curtis



It wasn't unusual for the Central Rail Road of NJ and other RR's to name their Ferryboats after the towns they serviced. A double launching was scheduled November 11, 1905 in Wilmington Delaware. The ferries Cranford and the Somerville were to go down the ways that day and would bring to 10 the number of ferries named after towns with station stops along the Central RR route.

The Ferryboat Cranford would be the first step in our town having two ships named Cranford.

The christening of the Ferryboats was a major event that was extended to about 40 prominent citizens of each town. Some of the Cranford guests were: Mr. Rankin, Mr. Woodling, Mr. Hall, Mr. Denman, Mr. Swackhamer, Mr. Merriam, Mr. Doering, Mr. Sperry, and others. The invited guests traveled in a special train, a smoker, two Pullman cars, and the private car Atlas, carrying the young ladies that were to christen the ferries. Our Cranford was sent down the ways by Miss Gladys Hall who chopped the rope, while Lucille Woodling smashed the champagne bottle on the bow. Thus began the FB Cranford's 60 years of service plying the Hudson River day and night in every weather imaginable.

The mighty Hudson River was a hotbed of traffic. RR cars full of Pennsylvania coal, RR freight cars from all over the country, most everything traveled by railroad freight cars. The cars left NJ for NY on railroad barges moved by tugboats. Many small freighters were coming and going. Other NJ railroads were running ferries to and from NY City. All this river traffic ran regardless of weather. There was no radar, GPS, essentially nothing other than foghorns, bells, compass and the skill of the Ferry's Captain who in zero visibility navigated by compass and the seat of his pants. Piloting a 207-foot Ferry built to accommodate 600 passengers in a congested river whose tides run in and out every 6 hours while each tides intensity changed during the period of that tide all this while being unable to see his target was a skill honed from years of experience. At the Central RR's peak in the 1920's the ferries handled over 50,000 passengers a day.



There were mishaps of course. Similar to automobiles operating when power outages shut down traffic signals. Most accidents were caused by not following the signals that the ships made with their horns. The signals were standardized among shipping in all the waters of the world. But as they say stuff happens. The accidents generally resulted in minor damage to the Cranford, but injuries often occurred among passengers standing in the bow wanting to be first off. Standing shoulder to shoulder, women on the women's side and men on the other a severe jolt usually resulted in some injury claims. And yes, the ferry passengers were segregated. The men's side, and the women's side, the sign said so.



Everything has an end, and the ferry Cranford was no exception. She was removed from service in 1965 after 60 years of faithful service. Was purchased and towed to the Manasquan River, but in trying to pass the opened RR bridge, struck it and shut down all train traffic for several days inconveniencing thousands of commuters. She was moored in place and converted to a restaurant that prospered until in 1979 the owners decided to move her. But permits to move her were denied because of her previous fiasco with the RR Bridge. So the Cranford lay unused till 1982 when the owners found a buyer who bought her for a dollar. The new owner removed the upper works, exposed her engines and machinery that they sold for their scrap value. She now looked like a steel barge and was towed out into the ocean to become part of the Sea Girt Artificial Reef. So she is still at sea, but on the bottom, only to be visited by Scuba Divers and fish from the reef.