

NAVIGATION ON THE HOUSATONIC

By Morgan Bulkeley

NAVIGATION sounds like a big word to impose on our little river. Actually, the Housatonic was known as the Great River to the early colonists, who settled by its mouth at Stratford and Milford in 1639. Boating became lively upon the 14 miles of tidewater that ran 10 feet deep up to Paugasset (now Derby), where a trading post was established at the confluence with the Naugatuck River in 1642.

After early exploring sailors, the first river boatman was Moses Wheeler, who commenced a regular ferry from Stratford to Milford in 1648. He was a legendary giant who rowed man and horse or several passengers together on his flat-boat raft. When he died in 1698, he was acclaimed as the first white centenarian in the new land. But his ferry did not completely replace the old ways because in 1649 a Milford man escaped a public lashing imposed for kissing his wife on the Sabbath by swimming the Housatonic.

Shipbuilding began at Derby Landing about 1660 and flourished there for 200 years. The nearly two-fathom depth all the way to the Sound was adequate for 80-ton vessels, but heavy boating seems to have developed slowly, because in 1673 canoes and poled rafts were still transporting settling families upriver.

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CAPT. KIDD twice anchored at the mouth of the Housatonic and is said to have buried treasure on Milford Island--a legend given some support by a 1699 letter from Patience Tuttle to her cousin, Thankful, saying: "Capt. Kidd sat all the night by the fire carrying himself

in an uncivil and bold manner . . . when he came in the room he put his arms around my waiste, and kyssed me wh. made Jacobeth laugh and Tomas Welsh cough . . . I over heard Jacobeth say that Kidd was going on a long cruise, and that he had left some things with him. I am going to tell Aunt Prudence all about it, and find out what they are . . ."

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THE FIRST BRIDGE ever built across the Housatonic was a long covered bridge completed in July 1737, at New Milford. This bridge remained in service until carried away by the flood of 1802. Nevertheless, Washington, on his way to take command of the Continental Army in 1775, was rowed across the Housatonic at Wheeler's old ferry crossing, recording in his diary: "near half a mile, and sometimes much incommoded by winds and crosstides."

Derby sloops carried on a thriving trade with the West Indies during the 18th century, exporting Housatonic shad, shellfish, livestock, timber and manufactured goods, while importing French, Dutch and Spanish products along with large numbers of slaves. In 1800 the annual "Negro Election," formerly held in Hartford, was moved to Derby. Negroes gathered from all parts of the state to elect a "governor" who generally claimed direct descent from an African king. Elected amidst pomp, feasting, singing and dancing, he was his people's authority who imposed fines, punished misconduct and settled disputes.

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SOON AFTER 1800, the farms, paper and textile mills, quarries and iron industries of Berkshire and Litchfield Counties began clamoring for water transportation for their heavy products, so long hauled by oxcart to the Hudson. In 1808, Berkshire petitioned for a canal

from Boston to Albany, but the Assembly voted it down.

In 1822 the Connecticut General Assembly granted a charter to The Housatonic Canal Co. for a navigable canal all the way to Canaan. A civil engineer estimated that a ditch could be dug parallel to the Housatonic from Derby to the Massachusetts line for less than \$6,000 a mile. The Massachusetts Assembly responded by chartering a company to extend the proposed canal north at least to Stockbridge Center when the Connecticut project was completed. But the thrifty farmers up and down the valley were skeptical in spite of Elkanah Watson's urging and the already demonstrated usefulness of the new Erie Canal. The widely advertised stock issue of half a million dollars for the hundred-mile canal gained no support, and the charter expired under its 10-year limitation. The valley, so rich in ingenuity and natural resources, came this close to becoming a string of Lawrences and Lowells.