

THE FORGOTTEN ERA

Old Home Prize Essay

Number 24

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Beneath the muddy waters of the Manokin River lies the history of a fascinating and colorful age. There, a few hundred yards from the present steamboat wharf, rests the old steamboat, Florence, covered with the mud of half a century. Once she was the pride of Princess Anne; now few but the old-timers know she even existed.

Yes, like many other river-side towns, Princess Anne passed through a steamboat era. Unfortunately, this small bit of her past has been repeatedly omitted from the chronicles of the town's history. This essay is an attempt to recover the forgotten history of the Princess Anne steamboat days.

Somerset County transportation in the latter part of the 19th century was far from the modern conception of convenience. Farmers who lived in the outlying districts of Princess Anne were forced to carry their produce to town in large awkward wagons pulled by horses or oxen, over many miles of rough and often muddy road. Although they could meet the train upon reaching Princess Anne, the trip there was always a hard and very tiring one.

Therefore, in the late 1860's, when the steamboats from Baltimore began stopping at Deal's Island, the farmers began to devise a way to transport their goods down the Manokin to meet these Baltimore boats. Most of the farms were located on or near the river, making this idea of transportation feasible.

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Consequently, about the year 1887, a small steampowered vessel named the Port Deposit began making regular trips between Princess and Deal's Island, stopping at all the farms along the route to pick up farm products. The Port Deposit was not a sidewheeler and was only sixty or seventy feet long, therefore having a very limited cargo capacity. However, she proved a definite asset to the farmers by providing a much faster and easier means of transporting their goods to market.

Soon, as more and more farmers began taking advantage of the Port Deposit's services, the demand for a larger steamboat developed. However, the Manokin, though deeper than the present day river, wasn't deep enough for a larger boat than the Port Deposit to navigate.

At this time, a local citizen, Hampden Polk Dashiell, became very interested in the farmers' plight. It came as no surprise to the citizens of Princess Anne that Mr. Dashiell was interested in helping secure a larger steamboat service to Princess Anne, for his father had also shown a great love for boats. In fact, when he was young, Mr. Hampden Haynie Dashiell constructed one of the largest sailing vessels on the Chesapeake Bay. Later he took an active part in the organization of the Wilson-Small Steamboat Company, of which he was an owner and director. (This company later merged into the Maryland Steamboat Company.)

In 1888, due to the persistency of Hampden Polk Dashiell, Congress finally consented to pass a bill providing for the dredging of the Manokin River and appropriating \$25,000 for the

project.

In a short time the job was completed and the Manokin was deep enough for a larger steamboat. More delay was yet to come, though, as it was discovered, much to the dismay of all involved, that although the boat could now get up the river, there wasn't enough room for her to turn around.

The people of Princess Anne were determined not to be discouraged. They met their problem with typical Somerset County ingenuity. On low tides, a group of men, headed by a Mr. Slemmons, dug out parts of the marsh using only their bare hands, wheelbarrows, and shovels. By this method they formed an inlet wide enough for a steamboat to turn around.

After completing this tedious preparation, Hampden Polk Dashiell formed the Manokin Steamboat Company to finance the boat. He then purchased a larger steamboat, the Florence, to make the Princess Anne-Deal's Island run. In 1891, having run only two or three years, the Port Deposit surrendered her business to her successor, the Florence.

The Florence was already twenty-five years old when she was purchased by the Manokin Steamboat Company. She was built in Westerly, Rhode Island in 1866 and was registered in the Crisfield Port of Customs while serving the Princess Anne area.

The Florence was quite a bit larger than the Port Deposit. She was one-hundred ten and one tenth feet long, sixteen and two tenths feet wide, and had a depth of four and eight tenths feet. Her gross tonnage was one-hundred one and her Net Tonnage seventy-nine. Her official number was 9542. She ran approxi-

mately twelve miles an hour.

The Florence resembled the famous Mississippi steamboats much more than did the Port Deposit. Her decks were painted a glistening white. Like her celebrated Mississippi cousins, she was equipped with a large sidewheel. Although she did not have accommodations for overnight passengers, she did have a captain's quarters and staterooms for the crew. The hold was used entirely for cargo. Passengers rode on the main deck. Upon boarding the passenger entered a long narrow cabin which comprised the whole area of the first deck. Long rows of seats, facing each other, ran the entire length of the cabin, providing the only means of comfort.

As was previously mentioned, the steamboat did not dock at the site of the present steamboat wharf, but a few hundred yards around a bend to the south. When the Florence stopped running this area soon filled with mud, making the construction of the present wharf necessary. The sides of the original wharf were hand-made of roughly hewn logs. The space between the sides was filled with oyster shells and dirt. It was a very crude pier, containing no wood and having no structures on it. The pier had two main sections; one running east to west, and one running north to south. The Florence tied up at the longer east to west pier with her bow pointing to the east.

The Florence operated on a very erratic schedule. She was scheduled to make the trip from Princess Anne to Deal's Island every other day; a round trip taking two days. Often though, her engine would not function properly and she would have to be repaired before continuing her journey. It was

down as she neared his farm. Most of the farmers built long docks protruding over the river for this purpose. Farmers who didn't live directly on the Manokin but on smaller tributaries often loaded their goods on large log canoes and met the steamboat at one of these farms.

One of the most frequent farm stops was the Fitzgerald Farm, now known as the Gildcrest Farm, outside Princess Anne. Other farm stops were the Gelder Farm, Brownstone Farm, and Revell's Neck. The Florence made her first regular stop at Locust Point near Oriole, where she loaded grain and oysters. After stopping at Fishing Island near Upper Fairmount, the Florence stopped at the little village of Broad Creek, now known as the Busby Hunting Lodge, between Dames Quarter and St. Stephens. This small community claimed eight or ten homes and one general store, managed by Mr. Will Muir. Here the Florence often picked up large loads of watermelons. The Florence's last stop before reaching Deal's Island was Wenona. (Potatoes constituted the major portion of the cargo but the Florence also carried onions, tomatoes, hay, strawberries, and other local agricultural products.)

Finally the Florence reached Deal's Island. Here she met the larger steamboat, the Virginia, which carried the passengers and produce on to Baltimore. The Florence, which seemed colossal to the Princess Anne residents, was a mere dwarf beside the huge Virginia. It is said that the captains of the big Bay boats frequently made fun of the smaller river boat. One of their favorite jokes was to say that the

Florence had such little power that she had to stop moving in order to get up enough steam to blow her whistle!

The greatest Sunday afternoon entertainment for the younger generation of this time was to take a walk down to the steamboat wharf. Many times the captain would take these young people on excursions. They would pack a lunch and enjoy an afternoon sightseeing on their own little steamboat. This trip was most enjoyable, especially in the spring, due to the beauty of the large estates such as Almodington, Elmwood, The Speights Estate, and the Sam Sudler Farm, which bordered the river.

Most of the information concerning the crew of the boat has been lost through the years. However, one of the last captains was Mr. Bill Price from Dames Quarter. Mr. Will Dashiell held the position of purser at this time and later became the last captain of the Florence.

The Florence continued her busy schedule for only eleven or twelve years. Then, in 1901, the consolidation of other steamboat companies into the Baltimore, Chesapeake, and Atlantic Railway Company forced Mr. Hampden Polk Dashiell and the Florence out of business. A glorious portion of Princess Anne's history had come to an end.

The faithful old ship was never resold after the dissolution of the Manokin Steamboat Company. Instead she remained tied at her dock as if waiting for another trip. People seemed to forget she existed and she was left to rot. For several years the only friends she had were the boys who used to explore her and dive from her decks when they went

swimming in the summer.

In 1902 a junk dealer from Philadelphia came to Princess Anne wishing to purchase the Florence's machinery for scrap. It is believed that a transaction was completed ~~was completed~~ and the machinery was removed, although there is no official record.

Shortly thereafter the Florence's hold began to fill with water. As the months passed she filled more and more until she finally sank out of sight, with the major part of her still intact. It is believed that if the Manokin is ever dredged again most of the Florence would be found, for mud is a good preserver. The Mariners Museum in Newport News has requested any portions of her that might be located.

And so Princess Anne of 1962 rushes on, oblivious of what lies in her past. Her citizens are far too busy with the fast-moving, tumultuous world of today to remember that at one time Princess Anne enjoyed the graciousness of the old South and the excitement of the large cities, for she had something in common with the best of them - her own steamboat, the Florence!

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