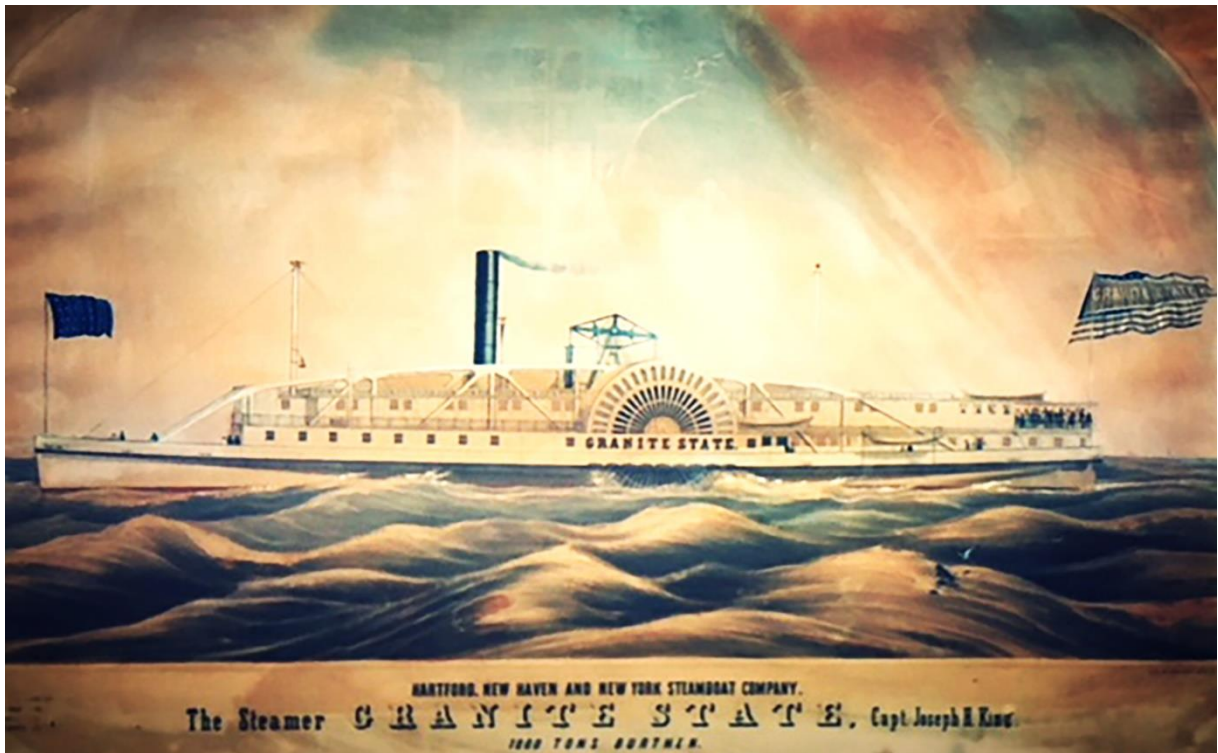


The End of an Era

William Goodspeed and the Hartford to New York Steamers

(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS August, 2022)

The remains of the luxurious steamship *Granite State* lie in shallow water at the entrance to Old Saybrook's North Cove. What's left of the hull has been submerged in the shallow water of the Connecticut River for almost 140 years. The demise of the *Granite State* not only symbolized the end of William Henry Goodspeed's life but also the age of the elegant Hartford to New York steamers.

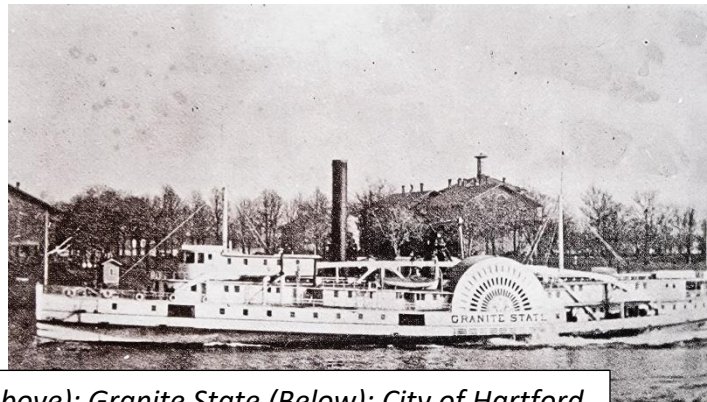


The *Granite State* did not sink there. The wooden hull was towed to the location in 1884 after the steamer had burned upriver in East Haddam the year before. The burned hull was supposedly placed there as a North Cove breakwater. Presumably the hull extended above the water at that time, but winter ice and rot has reduced it to an underwater fixture. It is also theorized that the hull was to help slow the silting of North Cove which had been a growing problem after the railroad had sealed off much of the cove from tidal currents to build the tracks to Saybrook Point and Fenwick.

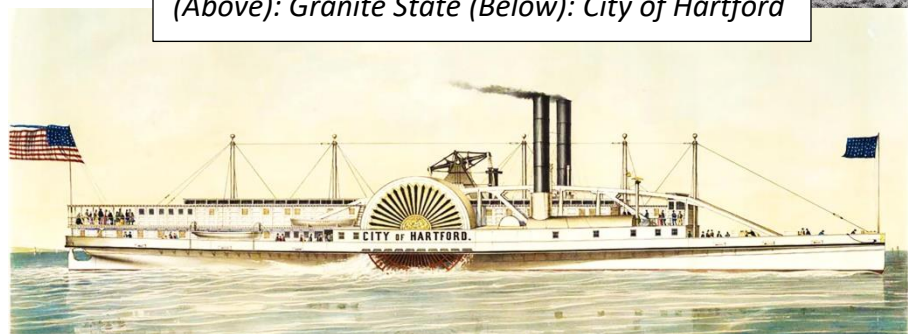


The Hartford and New York Steamboat Company's three luxury steamers

The *Granite State* was the last of the three top-of-the-line steamers to join the Hartford and New York Steamboat Company, headed by William Henry Goodspeed. It was made of wood and at 270 feet, almost as long as a football field. Goodspeed paired it with his line's first steamer, the *City of Hartford*, also made of wood and just three feet longer. The two were said to be rivals in luxury.

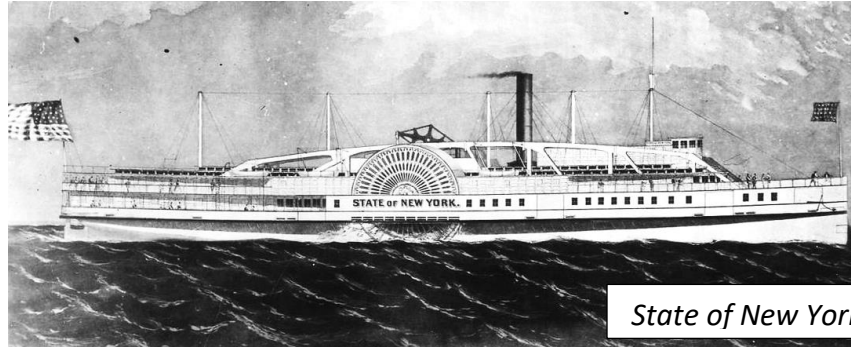


(Above): *Granite State* (Below): *City of Hartford*



They would leave Hartford and New York each day at 4 PM, pass each other during the night on Long Island Sound, usually with a salutary blast from their steam whistles, and dock at Hartford at 7 AM and in New York at 5 AM. They were among the many “night boats” between the cities.

Goodspeed’s second luxury steamer was the *State of New York*, also made of wood and 268 feet in length. She was later renamed *City of Springfield* and



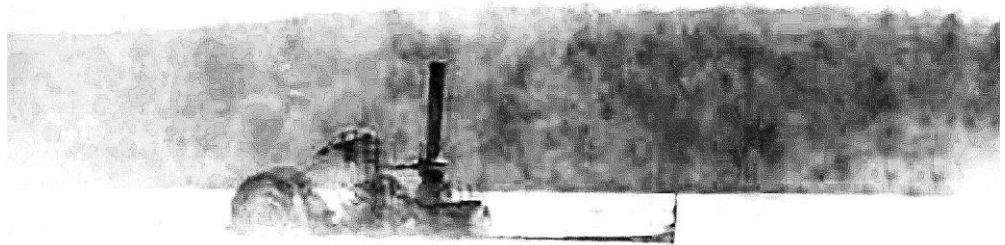
in 1880 left the Connecticut River and started running from Stonington to New York. All three steamers met their end after William Henry Goodspeed died in 1882. According to his East Haddam tombstone in the River View Cemetery, 66-year old William Goodspeed died on New Year’s Day, 1882. The *Granite State* burned in East Haddam the next year at his Goodspeed Landing on May 18, 1883.

The end of the *Granite State*

The steamer was built in 1853 across the sound in Greenport, NY. It is reported that she had a varied career, including service in the Civil War. After the war she was wrecked while serving as an excursion boat on the Hudson River. One report claims she was then purchased and overhauled by the Hartford and New York Steamboat Company. Another report claims she was purchased from Vanderbilt’s old New Haven Line. Regardless of her ownership origins, she was ultimately made part of William Henry Goodspeed’s luxury steamboat fleet.

Early in the dawn of May 18, 1883 the aging *Granite State*, now 30-years old, was returning with her sleeping passengers from her New York night run. A fire in the forward portion of the steamboat was discovered as she was approaching the Goodspeed Landing. The captain headed for the landing to dock and allow some passengers to escape. The steamer was headed into both the wind and the current and the flames quickly spread back across the ship. At some point the steamer broke from the landing and drifted out across the river. Some passengers jumped into the river and swam to shore. Others were rescued from the water by local boats. Still aflame, the steamer drifted downriver with the current and grounded on Lord Island, about a mile south of Goodspeed Landing.

The steamer burned to the waterline. Luckily, only four lives were lost. Salvage efforts later removed her engine and boiler but the steamer was unredeemable. The next year she was towed to Old Saybrook and grounded off the entrance to North Cove as a channel breakwater. She is still visible at low tide.



1883 photo showing remains of one side wheel, boiler and stack of the Granite State after burning. She is aground on the sand on Lord Island.

Steamboats on the Connecticut River

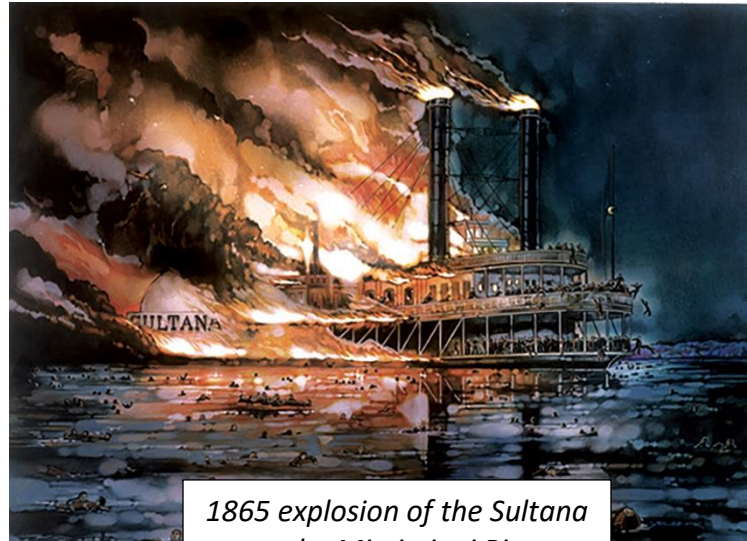
The popularity of steamboats over sail-powered vessels grew quickly in the early 1800s. When the Fulton-Livingston monopoly was ended, commercial steamboat traffic on the Connecticut River was finally allowed. It began in 1827 when the 127-foot side-wheeler *Oliver Cromwell* began regular service between Hartford and New York. Competition for this route rose exponentially from that year onward.



Artist John Stobart's 1929 lithograph of the Hartford waterfront in the 1870s. In the lower left corner he shows the steamer Granite State

The early steamboats were inherently dangerous due to sporadic explosions of their steam boilers. These explosions were often catastrophic in terms of loss of life. The Steamboat Act of 1852 finally required stricter construction standards, inspections, and measures to prevent fire and collisions. By the end of the Civil War in 1865, steamboats were demonstrably safer.

In 1866 insurance companies like The Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company were being formed and they concentrated on insuring the growing number of very large, luxury steamboats being constructed after the Civil War. The Hartford Steam Boiler Company was the pre-eminent insurance company for steamboats and “Hartford Standards” quickly became the specifications for boiler design, manufacture and maintenance.



1865 explosion of the Sultana on the Mississippi River

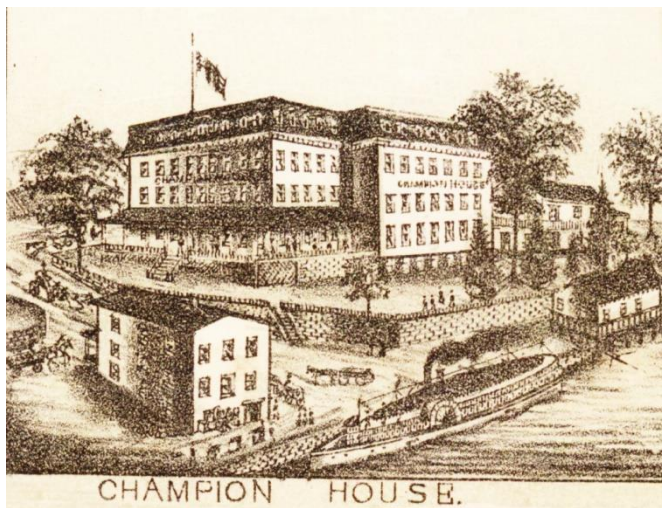
The rise of William Henry Goodspeed

During all this time the Goodspeed family was making its mark in the small river village of East Haddam on the Connecticut River.



Bird's eye depiction of 1880 East Haddam showing the Upper Landing (left) and Goodspeed's Lower Landing (right)

East Haddam by 1865 was a bustling river port and was noted along the river for the Maplewood Music Seminary. It was described as follows: *A posh music school for young ladies, nestled in the hillside above the Upper Landing. Here were performed light opera, plays and various pageants before elegant crowds, many arriving at the Upper Landing with the splash of the paddlewheel steamers.* The Upper Landing was adjacent to the



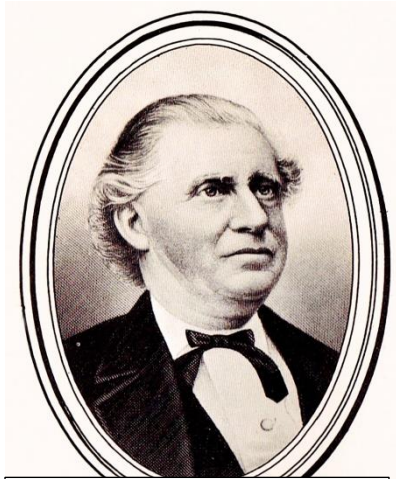
Steamboat Hotel, later renamed the Champion House. Patrons would arrive there in order to attend the annual spring commencement ceremony at the Maplewood Seminary, the social event of the season. *Never has East Haddam seen such opulence and splendor. Long lines of carriages were standing in the streets, elegantly dressed ladies seemed to be out in full force, and locals of rustic*

loveliness were arriving from the back towns. The annual opera is looked forward to for months before its advent, and its departed glories stand long after the pomp and pageantry have passed before the footlights.

A mile downriver from the Upper Landing was the lower steamboat wharf known as Goodspeed's Landing.

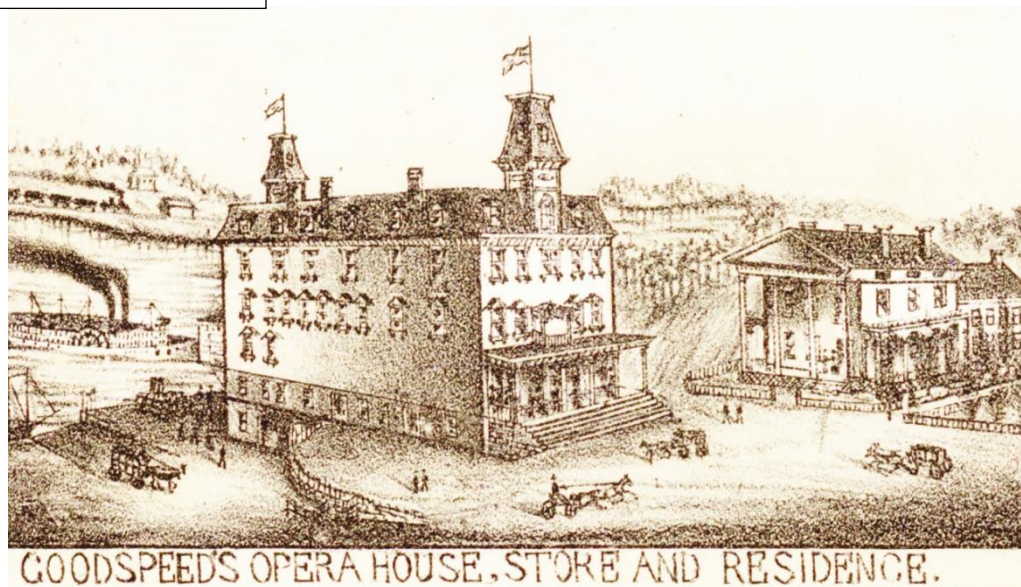


William Goodspeed and his brother George had inherited their father's property along the river in 1848. It consisted of a very successful shipyard, a dry goods store, and the steamboat landing and it afforded William considerable wealth. He used that wealth to partner with the Gelston brothers to build the Gelston House in 1853 to compete with the upriver Champion House for summer tourists.



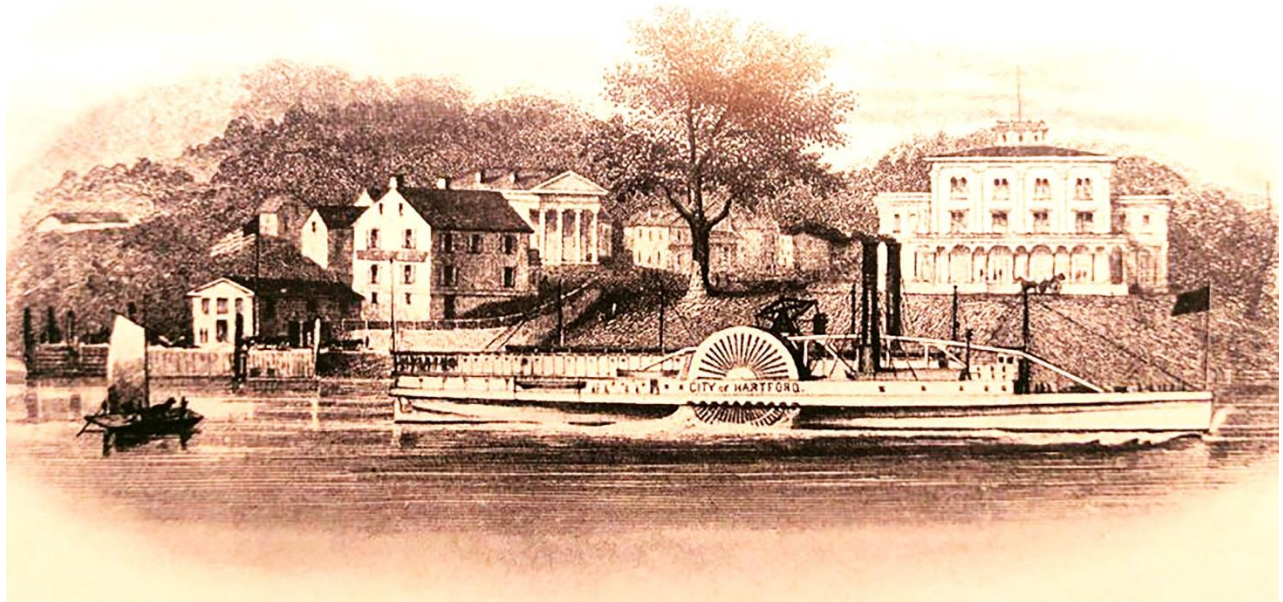
William Henry Goodspeed

In 1876 he started construction of his famous Goodspeed's Hall, as his opera house was first known, where his father's store had been. William had purchased a small steamboat in 1845 which he later used to ferry Valley Shore Railroad passengers across the river to his Opera House. The house opened on October 27, 1877 and it featured lighter, more popular entertainment than the formal, operatic performances upriver at the Upper Landing. In the beginning it was quite successful. Goodspeed proved to be somewhat of a local showman and promoter.



Goodspeed's mistake was his steamboat company. Some years before building his opera house and entering "showbiz," he had become a partner in the Hartford and New York Steamboat Company. Unfortunately, this was the beginning of William Henry Goodspeed's financial downfall.

Depiction of Goodspeed's Landing and the steamer, City of Hartford

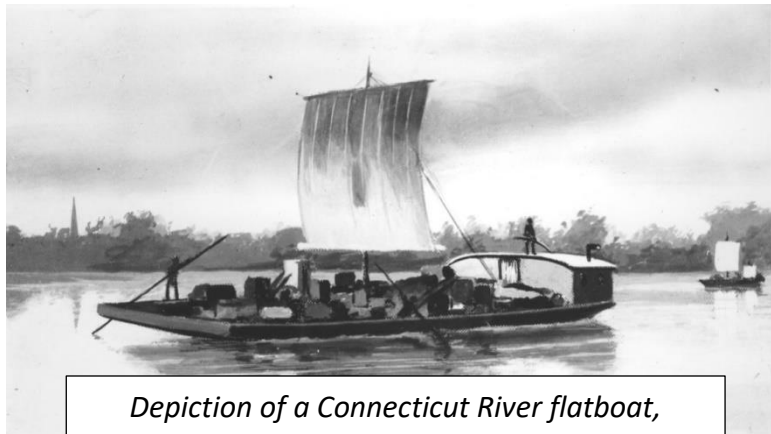


William Goodspeed's troubled steamboat company

The odds of success for his steamboat company were overwhelmingly negative. Goodspeed's first challenge was the great financial panic of 1873. This was a financial crisis that triggered an economic depression in Europe and North America that lasted from 1873 till 1877. In the United States, the Panic was known as the Great Depression (until the events of 1929 and the early 1930's set a new standard). Jay Cooke & Company, the prominent investment house that had essentially financed the Civil War, had a cash crunch because of the bankruptcy of the Northern Pacific Railroad. The firm realized it had overextended itself and declared bankruptcy. Mirroring the firm's collapse, many other banking firms and industries did the same. This collapse was disastrous for the nation's economy. A startling 89 of the country's 364 railroads crashed into bankruptcy. A total of 18,000 businesses failed in a mere two years. By 1876, the country's unemployment had risen to a frightening 14 percent. That was the year Goodspeed built his opera house.

The depression greatly impacted the steamboat lines on the Connecticut River. Although the number of steamboat companies on the Connecticut River had been increasing, their passenger and freight business was shrinking due to the depression. To stay competitive they were all forced to drastically reduce fares. It was reported that at least six different lines had quickly formed in Connecticut, with vessels sailing to New York from not only Hartford but also Bridgeport, Norwalk, New Haven, Norwich, Stonington and Stamford. Fierce competition over routes, rates, and schedules drove the fare from Hartford to New York down to 25 cents, meals included.

Compounding the problem of low fares and meager profits was an increase in wages, and it started with Goodspeed's steamship company. In the summer of 1879 the Connecticut River's level was so low the large steamers could not



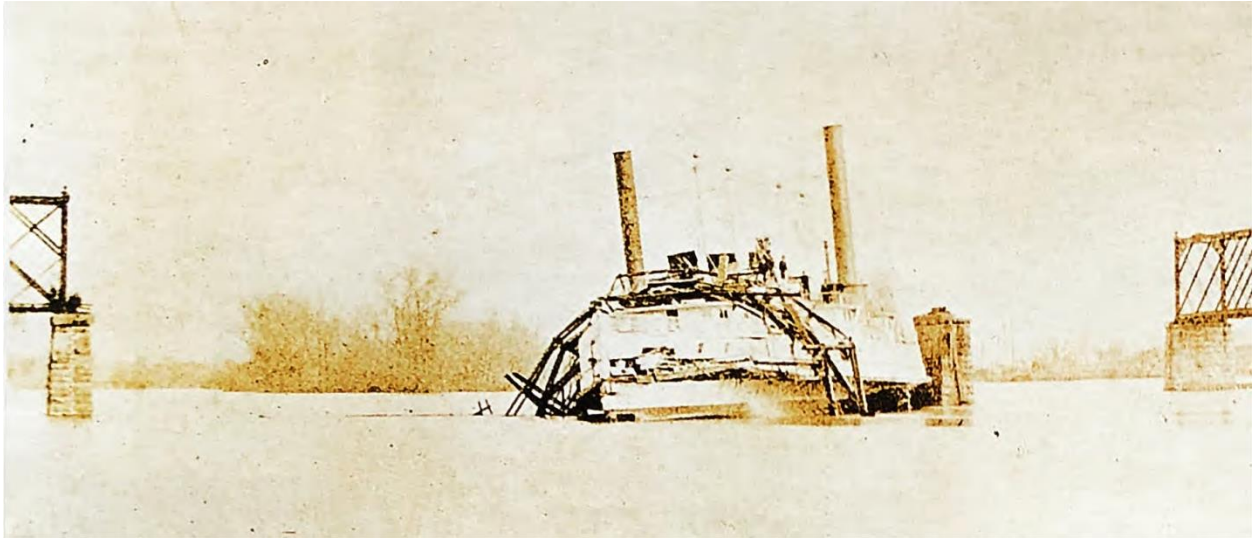
Depiction of a Connecticut River flatboat, often pulled upriver by steam tugs

travel past Middletown to Hartford. Cargo had to be placed on flatboats to travel to Hartford. This meant that the freight handlers' work would double, since they had to unload each steamer and reload onto the flat boats. Workers on the *State of New York* went on strike for higher wages and Goodspeed refused their demands. The freight handlers as well as the firemen working the engine room all walked off the steamer and Goodspeed fired them all. Unfortunately for Goodspeed, he could find no replacements. He had to give in to their higher wage demands and the movement quickly spread to workers on the competitive New Haven Line and then all the way down Long Island Sound to New York and up the Hudson River. Lower fares and higher wages became the industry norm after that time. Profits margins were slim for the owners and investors.

Unfortunately for Goodspeed his major competition between Hartford and New York was from lines owned and financed by the likes of Vanderbilt and Morgan, both of whom who could far better withstand the tight profit margins. They also had the advantage of owning complementary railroads. It would be the railroads that would eventually end the steamboat era, but additional suffering would precede the end of Goodspeed's steamboat company.

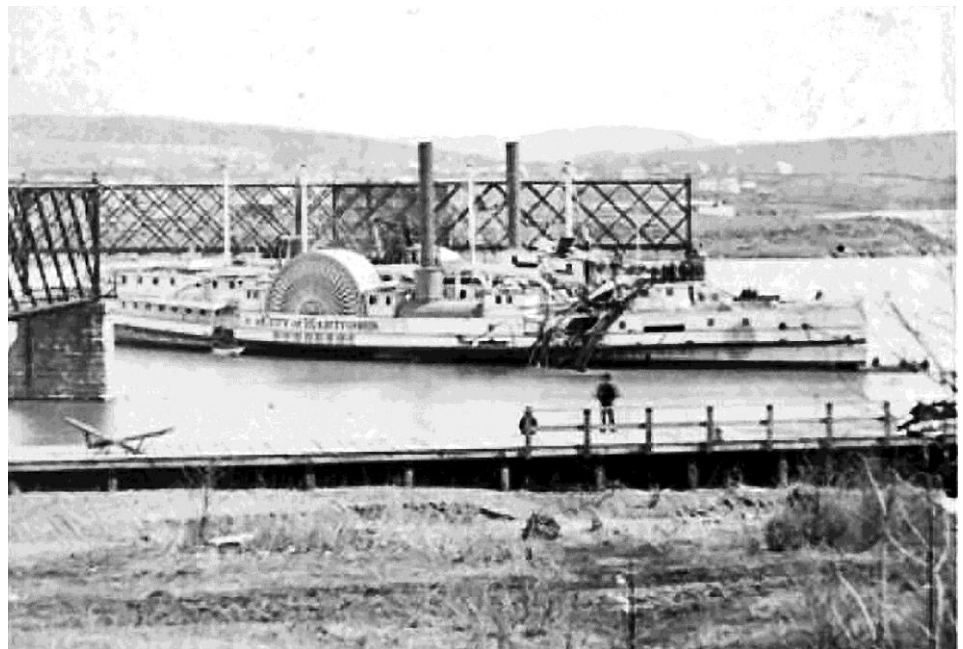
Disaster strikes Goodspeed's steamboat company

Low fares, high wages, marginal profits, punishing competition from wealthy industrialists like Vanderbilt and Morgan and their railroads, plus an aging fleet of luxury steamboats were problems enough. It got even worse when in 1876 disaster struck Goodspeed's prized *City of Hartford*.



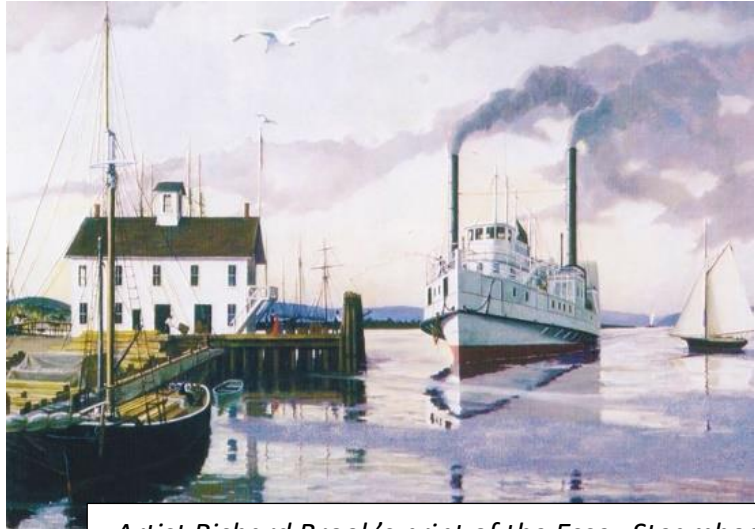
It was late March, cold, dark and with a strong current when the *City of Hartford* departed Hartford for her evening run to New York. Steaming downriver, she misjudged the Air Line Railroad's drawbridge at Middletown, apparently mistaking the lights on the shore for those marking the open passage through the bridge. The vessel plowed through one of the fixed bridge spans,

which then collapsed and draped over the bow of the steamer. It took four days of work to remove the tangle of iron and wood and tow the steamer away for repairs. The *City of Hartford* was rebuilt and renamed the *Capitol City*. It went back to its Hartford to New York run.



This was the second mishap for the luxury steamer. Seven years earlier the vessel struck a submerged log running downriver and stove in her hull. The captain headed for shallow water to avoid sinking. The passengers were taken back to Hartford where they took the midnight train to New York.

Goodspeed's troubles continued. In 1881 the *State of New York* struck a hidden river snag off Salmon Cove, tearing a six-foot gash in her bottom. The captain decided to beach the steamer and drove her up on the west riverbank opposite Goodspeed Landing. Her bow rode up on the bank and her stern sank in deep water. Repairs were time-consuming and costly. It's reported that Goodspeed tried to make the most of this mishap by offering a tour of the wreck across the river to all ticket holders of his current play *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, at his opera house.



Artist Richard Brook's print of the *Essex Steamboat Dock* in 1881, featuring the approaching *City of Hartford*. (Published by the CT River Museum)

This was at least the fifth accident for the vessel and after being repaired she was renamed, *City of Springfield*. Shortly thereafter she was chartered to the Cornell Steamboat Company and began service on the Hudson River.

William Henry Goodspeed's steamboat company was now near bankruptcy and his former wealth had been depleted. He would die broke, a few years later in 1882, just before the burning of the *Granite State*.



The Goodspeed Opera House today

Photo: © Julia Balfour

The end of an era

The Hartford to New York steamboat route was always too competitive to be very profitable. When the railroad bridge across the Thames River in New London was completed in 1889, a direct and shorter coastal rail line finally existed between New York and Boston. More and more there were faster, less expensive options for coastal commerce and passenger travel along Long Island Sound. The appeal of slow, luxurious overnight travel on gracious steamboats was fading. Their limited and often unreliable schedules compared unfavorably with superior, faster, less expensive rail connections everywhere.



Typical Grand Salon of the Connecticut River steamers

By the early 1900s the age of steamers on the Connecticut River was concluding. William Henry Goodspeed was dead, his Steamboat company was bankrupt, his opera house in disrepair, and his luxurious *Granite State* an unmarked underwater wreck lying outside Old Saybrook's North Cove.

Epilog

The *City of Hartford*, renamed *Capitol City*, continued linking Hartford and New York until late March 1886, almost 10 years to the day of the bridge collision, when she was wrecked in bad weather off Rye, NY. William Goodspeed had died four years earlier. The *State of New York*, renamed *City of Springfield*, remained in commission until 1895 when she was converted into a coal barge named the *Jimmy Hughes*. She sank in a storm off the Jersey coast.

Acknowledgement:

Many historical facts in this article were researched and authenticated by local author and maritime historian Erik Hesselberg who has been writing about the Connecticut River for over 20 years.