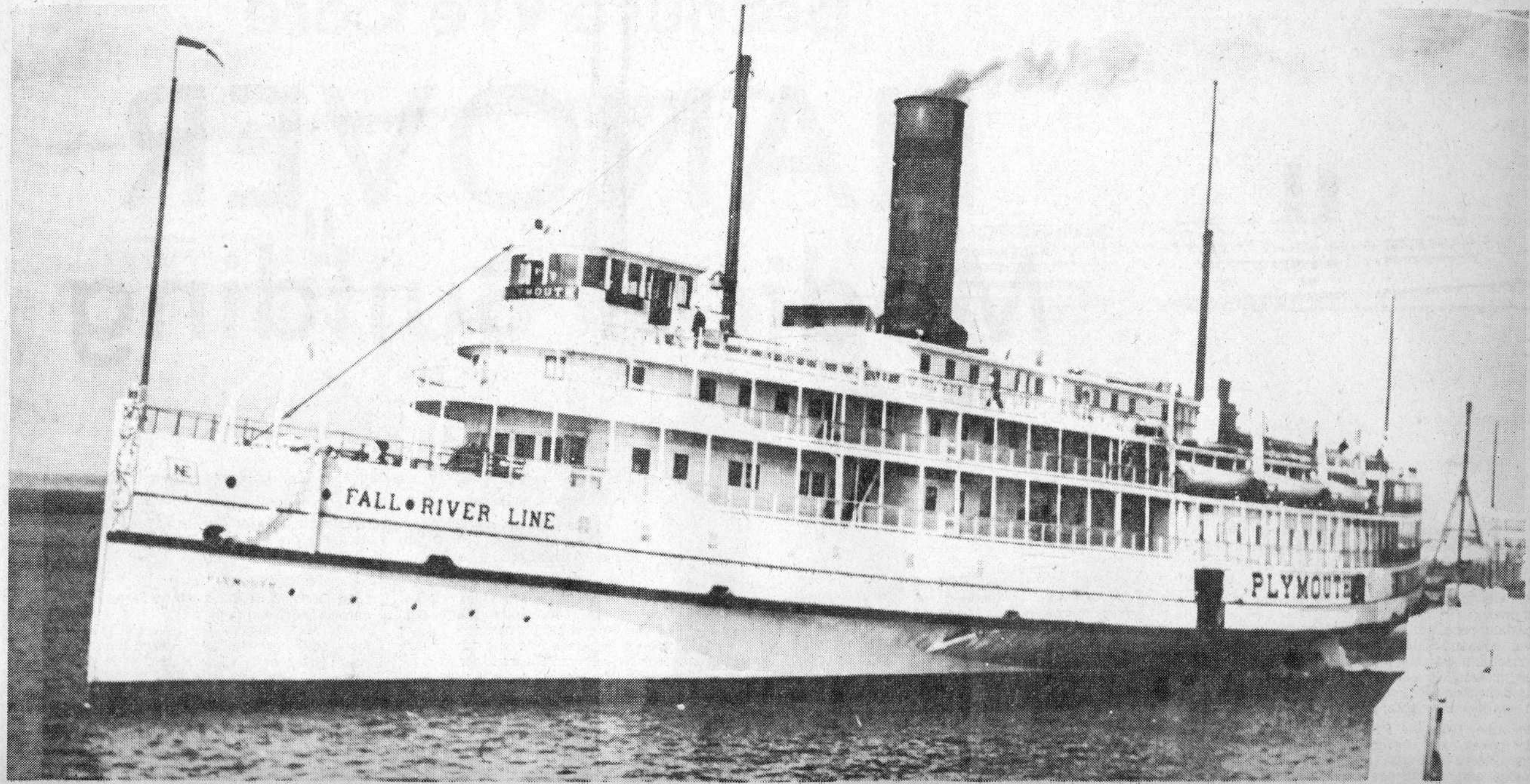


# Fall River Line Had a Style All Its Own



The steamship Plymouth, propelled by hidden paddle wheels, leaves the dock at Newport in November, 1936, when the 90-year history of the Fall River Line was nearing its close. The Plymouth, smaller than the Pilgrim and the Puritan, was designed for winter use and launched in 1890. The steamers of the line, celebrated throughout the world,

set standards for speed, efficiency, safety, dependability, and beauty. They were linked to Boston by the famous boat train, which landed passengers on the dock at the foot of Central Street. Celebrities and millworkers, immigrants and foreign dignitaries, presidents and robber barons, honeymooners and cotton brokers, shared the elegant din-

ing rooms and opulent saloons. The ships were also commercial vehicles, transporting raw cotton and finished goods between the markets and manufacturers. The glittering era of the Fall River Line corresponded with the days of the city's textile hegemony. For many area residents, nostalgia still runs high.

## Reminiscences

"Reward is sure to follow the enterprise of any company catering to first class travel which honestly and systematically adopts the best methods and latest devices for the convenience, comfort and safety of its patrons.

"The Fall River Line has done this, fully appreciating the fact that the best is only just good enough for the American people; and, per consequence, this route enjoys the public confidence to an unprecedented degree.

"This well-earned and reliable support at the hands of the traveling class has enabled the company to create a fleet of vessels peerless among the marine architectural triumphs of the world.

"The old reliable Fall River Line to Boston is patronized by all who wish to go to the East by the most comfortable, safest, and cheapest way. . . . The attendants are courteous, the table first class, and the staterooms, lighted by electricity, are elegant and commodious. There is no waking in the middle of the night to take a train, but a full night's rest is obtained. Notwithstanding these advantages, the fare is as low as by any other line."

All the above, with its measured phrases and appealing images, is advertising, lifted from the pages of the Fall River Line Journal of June 14, 1886. But nearly a century, and countless nostalgic encomiums, later, the general consensus affirms: it was true.

The 90-year history of the Fall River Line spans

an irrevocable era in American life. From 1847 to 1937 the steamship company set a world record of inland service, connecting the textile capital of the world with the thriving metropolis of New York. In those days, people weren't worried about the decline of cities, big or small.

The Bay State, Empire State, State of Maine, Metropolis, Old Colony, Newport, Bristol, Pilgrim, Puritan, Priscilla, the two Providences, the Plymouth and the Commonwealth chalked up a history of skillful navigation, advanced safety precautions, brilliant steamship engineering, opulent settings, and elegant cuisine.

The history of the line has been well-documented, and often recapitulated, perhaps most engagingly in Roger William McAdam's lavish compendium, "Floating Palaces," published by the Mowbray Co. of Providence in 1972. It is available at the Marine Museum, along with a visual feast of documents, artifacts, furnishings, gimcracks, and models of Fall River Liners.

Since a volume of historical material, recounting the development and demise of the vast enterprise, is now available, it may be more entertaining, in the city's 175th year, to snap up some unconsidered trifles, anecdotes, program notes, and chance remembrances, recalling the days when everyone from Fall River could travel in style.

The flamboyant machinations of Jim Fisk and Jay Gould lent a gaudy glamor to leisurely Long Island Sound travel. Fisk moved from control of the Bristol Line to the Fall River Line, and transferred his flagship, the Bristol, to his new enterprise.

Terming himself an "admiral," Fisk warred



against the railroad empire of Commodore Cronelius Vanderbilt, and, in company with his mistress, actress Josie Mansfield, issued orders from the pilothouse. Aboard the Providence, Jay Gould inveigled President Grant into the gold-manipulation scheme that culminated in Black Friday, Sept. 24, 1869, when banks failed and countless fortunes fell.

Builders of the Newport mansions, the Vanderbilts, Astors, Belmonts, Berwinds and Rockefellers were often passengers to the port of the "summer cottages" on the Cliff Walk.

Boat train conductor Asa R. Porter wore a flower in his lapel as he greeted Presidents Grant, Arthur, Cleveland and Harrison. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung traveled together on the line to a psychiatric conference at Clark University in Worcester. Henry James recounts a voyage on one of the big boats in "An International Episode." Harry Von Tilzer set the theme to music in a popular song celebrating mooning, spooning and shipboard romance.

Along with statesmen, celebrities, robber barons and attending social climbers, traveled countless honeymooners, immigrants, escapists and "ordinary people."

Visitors to the Marine Museum often share lively anecdotes with curator John Gosson. For example, during a slide show for a senior group, a lady confided that she still bears a scar from the Fall River Line, received when a commode, on which she was perched, collapsed, causing the chamber pot to break. As she descended, a splinter of the pot lodged in her lower backside, requiring emergency

first aid from the captain and a mate. The impromptu surgery succeeded, but the scar remains.

A master key to the staterooms on the Commonwealth was donated by another visitor, who, many years ago, honeymooned on that ship with the man she had met when she took a header down the stairway of the grand saloon, and he, about to ascend the stairs, was there to catch her.

Some years later, the couple's best man gave them a Commonwealth voyage as an anniversary present. When the line was dismantled in 1937, the best man obtained the master key as a souvenir and presented it to the pair, for old time's sake.

The couple cherished the key, but, since their friend was known for his prankish tendencies, were not sure that it was indeed a master key. When the wife brought it to the museum, Gosson tried it in the locks of two stateroom doors, salvaged from the Commonwealth. The key worked in both.

A collection of Gorham door-knobs, executed in various ornate period styles, was given to the museum by the late George Houkier Sr., an officer in the Fall River Police Department, who, after the Commonwealth's dismantling, had installed them on his home doors. The gift was approved by his son, George Houkier Jr., currently a city police officer.

And then there was the famous cat, named Minnie, who was born on the Commonwealth and lived aboard for two years. When the ship docked, she wandered about the wharves for a day; when the departing whistle blew, Minnie scampered up the gangplank, never missing the boat. She was known as "the cat who was never AWOL." Her picture, and that of the person who gave her a home in 1937, Miss Claytie Carter, are in the Marine Museum.

Also on the museum's wall, its fragile antennae still intact, is a directional finder from the radio room of the Priscilla. The late John Paiva, first mate on the ship, used to recall that he would use the apparatus to catch the voice of Kate Smith as he steamed up the sound to Newport.

The floating palaces are gone, but souvenirs — even a casefull of finely-molded plaster rubble, stained glass windows, bells and books, silver and crockery, instruments and plush furniture, pillars and newell posts, hardware and uniforms, remain in the Marine Museum's well-displayed collection. Their graudeur is captured in several outstanding marine paintings.

The museum has become, in fact, a shrine of memories of the Fall River Line. New donations of artifacts, large and small, keep arriving. Gosson welcomes both the souvenirs and the shared recollections.

## The Grandeur of the Ships

The heyday of boatbuilding in the expanding enterprise of the Fall River Line occurred in three decades following 1880. The Pilgrim, 1883, was the first Long Island Sound paddle-wheeler to be constructed of iron. Her double hull was divided into 96 watertight compartments.

The Puritan joined the fleet in 1889, and she was termed "artistic as well a seaworthy." George Pierce supervised every detail of her design.

The Plymouth, sister ship of the Puritan, made her debut in 1890, but was burned at the dock in Newport in 1893. She was replaced by a new namesake in 1907.

The Priscilla, faster and larger than the Puritan, cost \$1.5 million. She was hailed as the new "Queen of the Sound," and she was a beauty. Some details: on the quarter deck was a dado three feet high; above it, panels in bas-relief, portraying Commerce, Machinery, Architecture, Electricity, Music, Dancing, the Arts, Painting, and, as a final touch, a figure of Priscilla Alden at her spinning wheel, epitomizing Home Industry. All the decorative sculpture was worked in mahogany.

The dining saloon on the Priscilla's main deck, with its silver table service, accommodated over 300 persons who could view the sound's panorama through broad windows.

The prominent feature of the Priscilla's grand

*Long Island Sound Company.*

*(Fall River Line)*

*Service of your company is requested*

*on the trial trip of the*

*New Steel Steamer*

*Priscilla,*

*Tuesday, June 19<sup>th</sup> 1894.*

*Train will leave Boston for Fall River*

*& Squamscott Station of the New York,*

*and Hartford Railroad at 9:00 A.M.*

*Will arrive in Boston about 4:30 P.M.*

*Reply of an early reply is requested.*

*Number of guests will be limited.*

*Yours truly,*

*J. R. Hendrick,*

*President.*

*Station Boston.*

document, a private invitation to the the new steel steamer, Priscilla, recalls River Line's most beautiful engineering feats. Issued in 1894, the invitation in special train ride from Boston to this city.

saloon was the splendid staircase leading to the upper deck.

McAdam recalled, "Seven different colors and several thousand dollars worth of gold leaf adorned the Priscilla's spacious Italian Renaissance Grand Saloon, crowned by a leaded glass electrolier seven feet in diameter. Her main deck mahogany dining room was done in oriental style.

In June, 1905, the Providence, with enclosed paddle boxes, was the crowning achievement of George Pierce's genius. Each stateroom had a telephone and a thermostat with a built-in fire alarm. A complete circuit of her seven decks and lavish saloons was a mile's walk.

The beauty and luxury of the great ships so increased passenger traffic, that another floating palace was constructed in 1908 — the Commonwealth. Her interior, designed in a combination of several period styles, was, in the phrase of the times, comparable to "the most palatial residence."

The last and largest of the Fall River Liners, the Commonwealth had a dining room 50 feet above the water on the dome deck. McAdam wrote in 1956, in the quarterly, "Ships and the Sea," that "the entrance lobby was modern English, the main saloon Venetian gothic, the dining room Louis XVI. There was an Adam room, a Parisian cafe and an upper-deck Italian Renaissance grill room."

## *Dinner, Music, Sweet Dreams*

The magnificent tiered paddlewheelers of the Fall River Line left this city at 7:40 every night and arrived at New York City's celebrated Pier 14 about 12 hours later. The west-bound boats left New York at 5 p.m., allowing for time to cross the treacherous Hell Gate Channel in daylight. They docked at the Fall River Pier about 5 a.m., sending forth their familiar dawn whistle.

Dinner aboard was a leisurely two-and-a-half hour ritual. After that, a cold supper was served until 10 p.m.

Today, the menus are mouth-watering, and the prices, even more so. Voyagers could order special dinners, ranging from \$1.20 for broiled sea bass to \$1.50 for sirloin steak, and including, for instance, half a cantaloupe, clam chowder, creamed spinach, mashed or french fried potatoes, lettuce and tomato, apple or lemon meringue pie, corn bread, coffee, and dinner mints.

From the same special dinner menu, a traveler might choose braised Virginia ham, broiled lamb chops, half a roast chicken or half a cold boiled lobster, with, for instance, iced celery, hot or chilled consommé, julienne string beans, frozen pudding ice cream and cheese (cheddar, gorgonzola or roquefort) with crackers, and tea.

However, a more particular or diet-conscious diner could order a la carte, selecting, perhaps, a whole broiled lobster, \$1.85; cherrystones on the half shell, 35 cents; a relish of French boneless

sardines, 50 cents, or queen olives, 25 cents; succotash, delmonico potatoes, a butterscotch sundae, or roquefort and crackers, each costing a quarter.

Incidental items offered for the more delicate gourmet included chicken soup with rice, 25 cents; half a grapefruit, 20 cents; omelet, 35 cents; fresh green peas, 25 cents; Boston brown bread, 15 cents; preserved figs, 20 cents; demi-tasse, 10 cents; malted milk or Postum, 15 cents.

Breakfasts, which could be ordered the night before and served "at the desired time," ranged from 20 cents to 60 cents, the latter offering a choice of cantaloupe, grapefruit, stewed prunes, orange or tomato juice, cereal with cream; omelet with a rasher of bacon; sugar-cured ham or bacon with eggs; or wheat cakes with maple syrup, marmalade, doughnuts, bran muffins, corn sticks, rolls, coffee, tea, chocolate, or milk.

"Reasonable time should be allowed for cooking; please summon the steward if service is unsatisfactory," the menu advised.

Cigarettes were 15 cents per pack; pipe tobacco 15 cents per tin; corona perfectos 3 for 50 cents; Cremo cigars, 3 for 10 cents.

And now, for those who haven't sunk beneath the waves of sybaritic fantasy, a look at the wine list:

Champagnes begin with G. H. Mumm's Cordon Rouge 1928, \$7 per bottle, for the big spenders; French burgundies, bordeaux, chablis, sauternes, averaging \$2.50; domestic red and white wine, 15 cents per glass; sherries and ports; rye, bourbon, and scotch, from 35 to 60 cents; a pony of Courvoisier VO for 30 cents. Booth's Old Tom Gin, 35 cents; martinis, 25 cents; bacardis, 40 cents; stingers, 50 cents; and a sparkling selection of beer, ale, stout, mineral water, lemonade, Celestins Vichy, and sarsaparilla.

The list ends accommodately with Bromo Seltzer and Alka Seltzer, 15 cents per individual bottle.

In the halcyon days, live orchestras provided afternoon and evening concerts, featuring everything from the Daisy Rag to the Marriage of Figaro, with vocalists and instrumental soloists. Many dreamy waltzes wafted over the sound, as sweethearts and honeymooners scanned the moon-drenched waters.

Among the most popular orchestras were those of Edward L. Ney, Charles E. Hooper and Stannis Hoppe.

The musical fare often attracted short-term voyagers, who would take the boat to Newport from Fall River just to enjoy the concert.

Stateroom rates ranged from \$1 to \$7, and most of them were in the lower range.

## *The End of the Line*

By Nov. 23, 1937, the once proud Commonwealth, flagship of the line, rested desolate at the city pier, her engines silent, her furnishings shrouded.

She had become the prey of curiosity seekers



and sentimentalists, in search of souvenirs — pilot wheels, lights, silverware, tablecloths, linens and blankets woven with the company's name.

Much of the china, glass and flat silver had been taken by the New Haven Railroad for its dining car department. Many of the old red plush and black walnut saloon furnishings were already gone, having been thrown out in a modernization move about 1935. Practically everything movable was for sale. Components attached to the ship, such as bunks and electric fixtures, were retained aboard for the time that the ship was to be sold for junk.

About \$55,000 was raised from public sale of the furnishings. The Union Shipbuilding Co. of Baltimore paid \$88,000 for the Commonwealth, Providence, Priscilla and Plymouth for the privilege of breaking them up for junk.

An analysis of the complex factors leading to the fall of the Fall River line is made by Richard K. Lincoln, in a monograph preserved The Herald News files.

Lincoln notes that, in the course of nearly a century, the line had three different owners: first, the Bay State Steamship Co., which sold the line in 1874 to the Old Colony Steamship Co., which controlled the railroad, or "boat train" between this city and Boston. In 1894, the line was sold to the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad. The company name was changed to the New England Navigation Co., and later to the New England Steamship Co. The New Haven Railroad controlled the Fall River Line and some 15 other steamship lines.

The Panama Canal Act of 1912, requiring the release of all railroad-controlled steamship lines, was followed by trust-busting onslaughts of the federal government. The New Haven Railroad was charged with a conspiracy to monopolize transportation in New England. In 1914 it was forced to dissolve its holdings of several transportation companies, though it retained the right to operate the Fall River Line. A separated company, the Boston

Line Division of the Eastern Steamship Co., became a sharp competitor.

In 1916, the opening of the Cape Cod Canal fostered the growth of the Boston Line. Passengers could go direct by water from Boston to New York. When the "Boston" and "New York" went into service in 1924, the Fall River Line lost a yearly total of 30,000 passengers.

Freight too, was increasingly loaded on the Boston Line ships, avoiding the cumbersome reloading from train to boat. "The Fall River Line ships were capable of carrying 800 tons of freight per boat, but many of them sailed with empty holds."

Lincoln points out that, in its prosperous days, a good share of the Fall River Line's revenue came from freight service.

The boats brought bales of cotton to the textile city, and bolts of finished cloth back to New York markets, but when the textile mills began to fail, a major source of freight profits dried up. Then came the crash of 1929; fewer people could afford to travel.

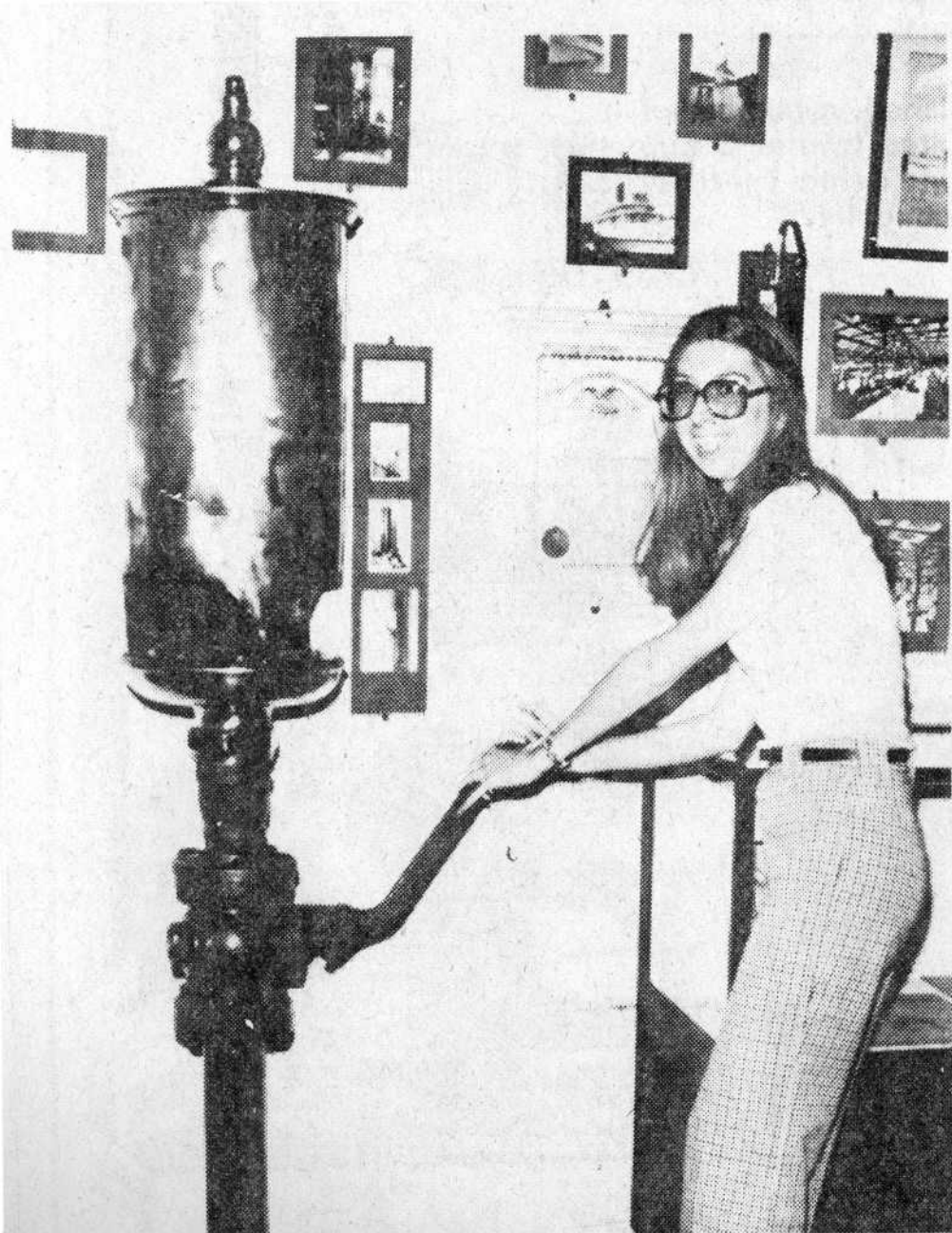
In 1935, the New Haven Railroad went into bankruptcy, and the court permitted it to suspend rental payments to the Old Colony Railroad and the Fall River Line.

By decree of the Interstate Commerce Commission, the railroad cut its coach fares to 2 cents per mile. Travelers flocked to its newly-added air-conditioned, streamlined cars.

In 1937, the New Haven, faced with competition from the Old Colony, petitioned the Federal District Court to abandon service on the Fall River Line and to sell its ships.

On June 30, 1937, the crew of the Commonwealth and the Priscilla went on strike; neither ship would sail the Sound again.

On Sunday, July 18, a judge in New Haven pronounced the fatal words: "I grant the petition forthwith."



The whistle of the steamship Priscilla is preserved at the Marine Museum. Staff member Deborah Smith shows how to make it work, but it is deliberately left without a power system, for fear of breaking most of the glass in the museum with its piercing blast. The whistle was originally steam-powered.

*Old Colony Steamboat Company.*  
*(Fall River Line)*

*The pleasure of your company is requested  
on the trial trip of the  
New Steel Steamer*

*Priscilla,*

*on Tuesday, June 19<sup>th</sup> 1894.*

*A special train will leave Boston for Fall River  
from the Park Square Station of the New York,  
New Haven and Hartford Railroad at 9.00 A. M.;  
returning, will arrive in Boston about 4.30 P. M.*

*The courtesy of an early reply is requested,  
as the number of guests will be limited.*

*Yours truly,*

*J. R. Hendrick,*

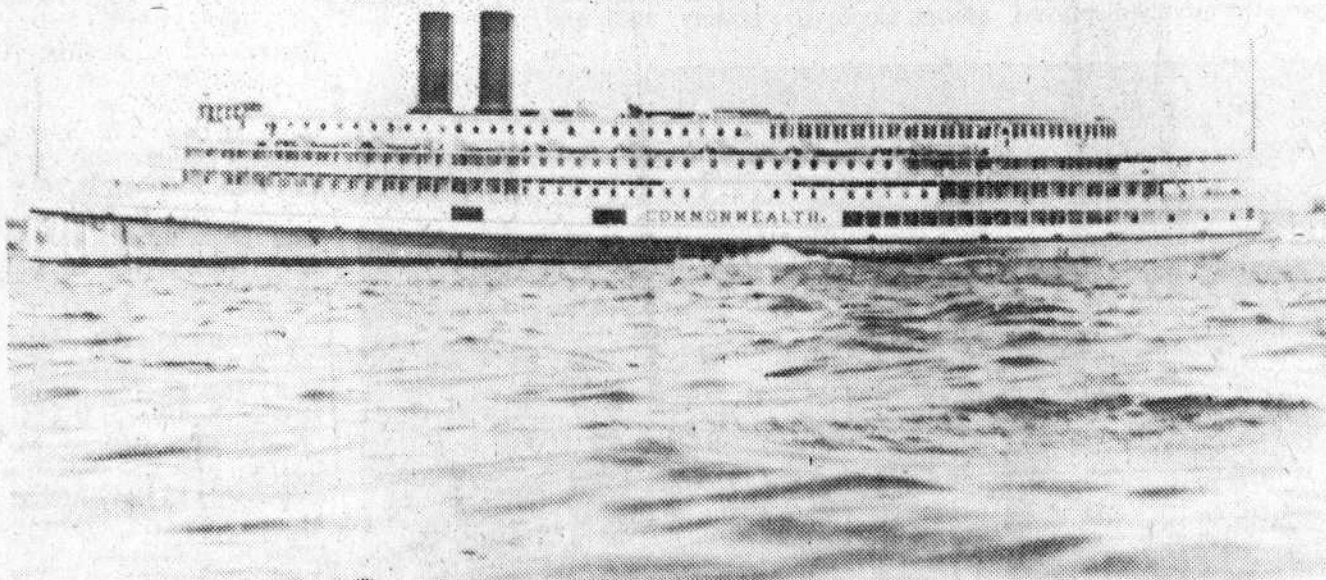
*President.*

*Please address reply to*

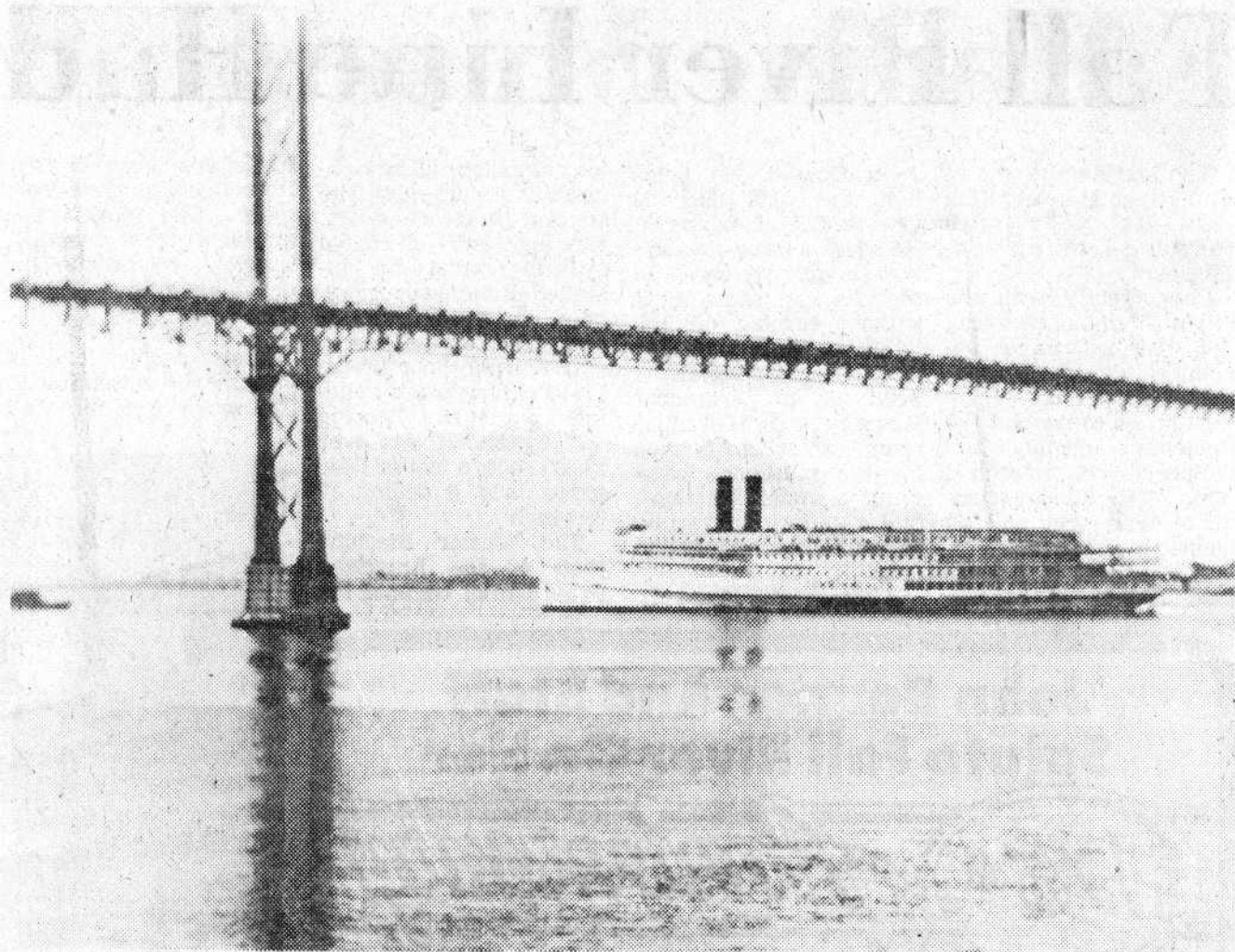
*Park Square Station Boston.*

A rare document, a private invitation to the trial trip of the new steel steamer, Priscilla, recalls one of Fall River Line's most beautiful engineering achievements. Issued in 1894, the invitation included a special train ride from Boston to this city.

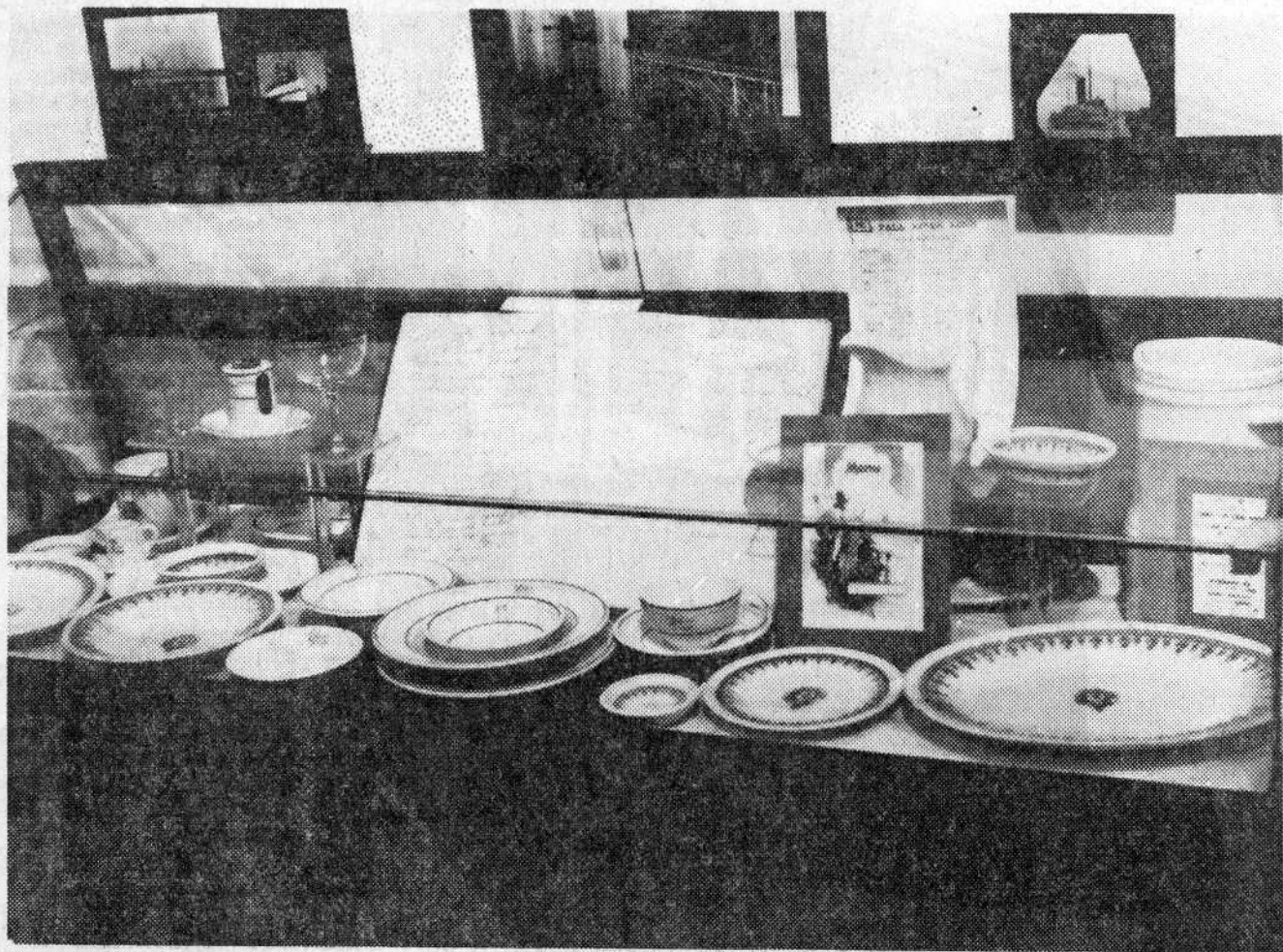




The Commonwealth, launched in 1908, was in many ways the culmination of the Fall River Line. She was 456 feet long; her interior boasted seven architectural styles. Here she is ploughing the sound in her heyday.

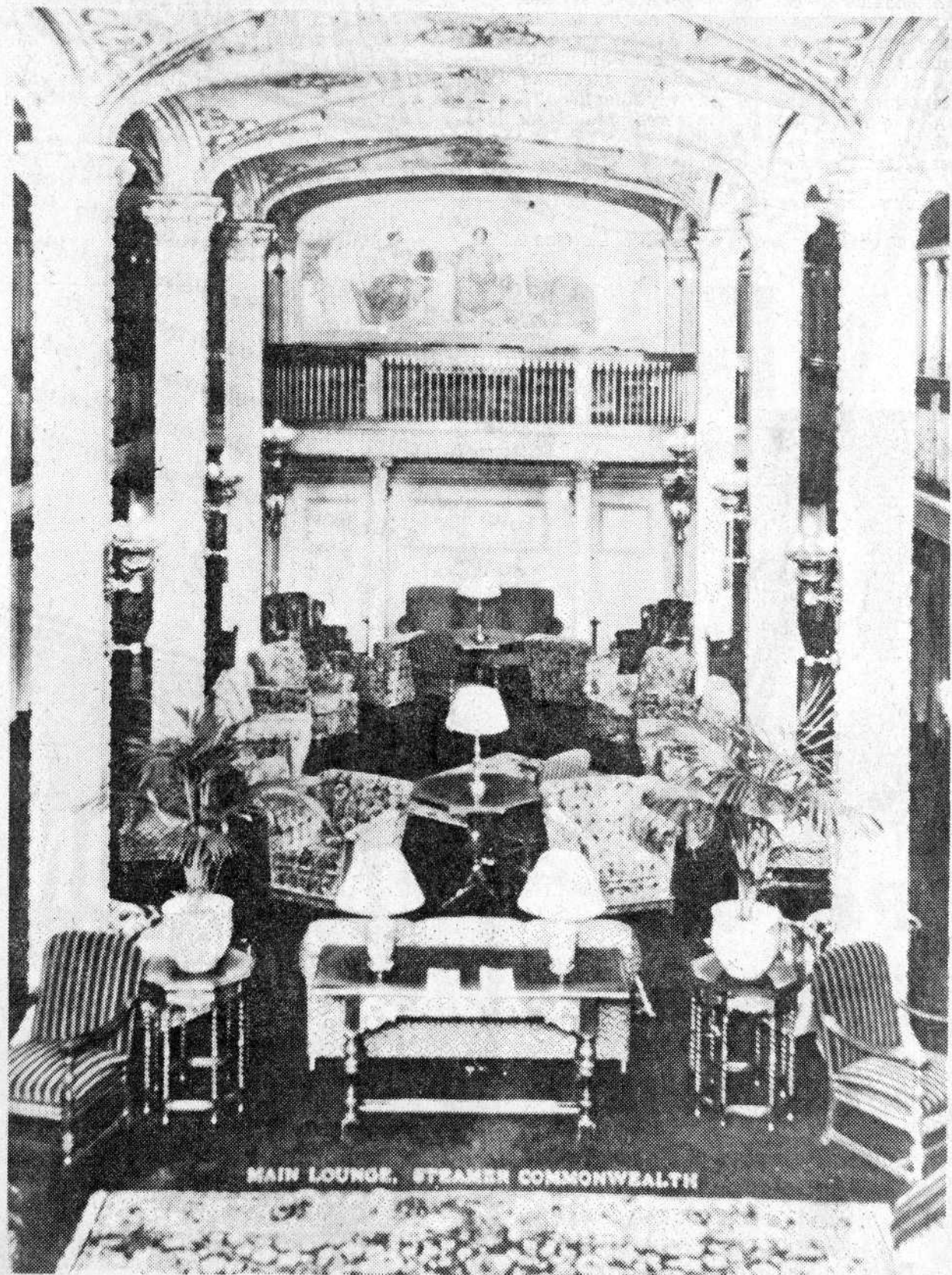


In her final sad voyage, the Commonwealth, largest and last of the Fall River Line fleet, is towed by a tug under the Mount Hope Bridge, bound for the wrecking yard.



Tableware from the dining saloons of the Fall River Liners evokes an age of elegant shipboard cuisine. In the center is a chef's recipe book from the Priscilla, with directions for making sandwiches: oyster, lobster, German Style, and Windsor (chopped ham and chicken in creamed butter.)





MAIN LOUNGE, STEAMER COMMONWEALTH

The main lounge of the Commonwealth in her latter days was furnished in contemporary style, while the Venetian gothic decor of its ceilings and columns made it a showplace for travelers.