LEXINGTON

"Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat *Lexington*". The Library of Congress, Popular Graphic Arts Collection, Currier and Ives [1840].

Part I

Samuel Hutchinson received the awful news, as did others, on that chilly night in January 1840. A steamboat had caught fire in the Sound near Smithtown, New York, off the northern coast of Long Island. Word was spreading quickly and speculation was running rampant as to which boat that left port that night was in peril and who was on board.

Hutchinson, who lived in nearby Riverhead, was asked to help. "Be on the lookout for debris, or worse yet, bodies that might drift in with the surf," he was told. Several locals had already found a battered lifeboat washed up on shore. No one was on it, but there was a coat in her with a letter addressed to a Mr. or Captain Manchester.

Somewhere out on the Sound, a boat was indeed burning. Second Mate David Crowley was among the first to notice the flames. He organized a bucket brigade to help quell the blaze, only to find out but quickly that they were short on buckets. Then he spotted several wooden crates that were used to carry silver in coins from the Merchant Bank. Dumping the coins onto the deck, he began filling the empty crates with water. The money was of no concern now. "Save the boat and you save lives," was Crowley's thinking.

A few lifeboats were launched, but to little avail. The ship was still moving at a rapid pace, and lowering the boats safely into the

water was nearly impossible. Crowley knew the end was near. Even the captain had abandoned ship. For nearly all of the passengers, jumping overboard was the only recourse and Crowley watched as they fell helplessly one by one into the frigid water. Dear God, he thought to himself, it was every man, woman, and child for themselves now.

Nearly two days later, at Samuel Hutchinson's father's house, there was an unexpected knock at the door. "A young man came to my father's in a very exhausted condition," Hutchinson described in a letter he wrote to a local newspaper. "His feet and hands were frozen stiff like marble and he was without coat or hat."

In a feeble voice, the man said he was from Providence, and that he was the second mate of the steamer *Lexington*. The boat had burned and the hull had sunk. He had managed to jump into the water and had floated ashore opposite the house, on a bale of cotton.

By now it was Wednesday. The boat had gone down late Monday night. The exhausted man had been in the water for nearly two full days and drifted at least 50 miles before finally landing against an ice pack. From there, he spotted a house nearly a mile away. He crawled across the ice and stumbled over land until he reached the front door.

Hutchinson's father, Matthias, led the hapless victim inside. Setting him near the fireplace, he cut off his boots and immersed his feet in lukewarm water. "We have taken the best care we could of him," Hutchinson continued, "but his feet are very much swollen, and what the result will be is somewhat doubtful."

The second mate's next words, however, chilled them all to the bone.

"He is of the opinion that very few passengers or crewmembers are saved," Hutchinson wrote, then concluded the letter ominously: "…or perhaps none but himself."

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As perfect an engine as I had ever seen

On January 13, 1840, the *Lexington* steamed out of port in New York City's Upper Bay, continued up the East River around Rikers Island, and followed the north shore of the Long Island Sound bound for Stonington, Connecticut, a small coastal village where passengers destined for Boston could board a train for the remainder of the trip inland. Although by today's standards the 140-mile trip would be considered a relatively short commute, battling the rough coastline waters that acted like a speed bump to a heavy paddle wheeler still took the better part of a day. On this particular evening, however, the *Lexington,* packed with commuters, would only make it halfway.

It was a frigid night on the East Coast. By the time the boat slid from its mooring, the temperature was expected to drop several degrees below zero. Normally, despite the bitter cold, some of an estimated 144 people aboard would venture outside to the deck rails to witness the grand sight of the harbor lights fading in the distance. But this was January in New York and few took the luxury of spending even mere minutes on the outside before the bite of winter forced them back in. However, the sub-zero weather meant something else for the ship's crew: the threat of seawater ice. Captain George Child, a cautious skipper, warned his pilot that he could encounter the floating ice packs before reaching Stoning

ton. The man at the wheel, Stephen Manchester, a captain himself, but on this night serving as the steersman, agreed.

Directly below Manchester in the pilothouse was the *Lexington's* largest passenger by volume: 150 bales of cotton, packed so tightly that one column was supported against the casing of the smokestack. The rest of the cargo, mostly passengers' belongings, was stacked around the engine shields and tied together so they wouldn't shift even if the boat encountered heavy waves.

The winter sun had just dipped below Manhattan Island, and the shadows cast by its glow were fading. The sky was darkening and the waters were turning black with the night. The concern now for the captain was a simple one: make sure the passengers enjoyed the trip. The *Lexington* was a solidly built boat and one of the fastest on the Sound. It was also one of the most luxurious.

Luxury was no doubt the intention of its owner, Cornelius Vanderbilt, the wealthy shipping and railroad magnate. A figure certainly not lost to time, Vanderbilt was nevertheless a somewhat elusive man in private. His business dealings are mostly on record, so it's possible to establish what the man did and when he did it. But more personal detail of how he did it and why is what biographers crave. Even author T.J. Stiles, who wrote a 600-plus-page book about Vanderbilt titled *The First Tycoon,* admits his project was "a test of wills." Here's what is known: Vanderbilt made a fortune in shipping, both by land and sea. Today, many associate his name with the railroads since they eclipsed the steamboat industry in importance and historical significance, but his shrewd and effective stronghold of river traffic on the Hudson River and Long Island Sound is where he got his start.

In the mid-1800s, Vanderbilt managed several ship lines between New York and Albany, each one meant to compete with the powerful lobby of the Hudson River Steamboat Association, which monopolized the market by either buying or forcing smaller lines out of business. But Vanderbilt played his hand carefully. He continued to strengthen his own armada of ships and, by keeping fares low, threatened the Steamboat Transportation Company into extinction.

Until then, Vanderbilt resisted offers to sell, but he was a businessman first and a public advocate second. He always waited until the time was right, and in the spring of 1835, the time was right. When the frozen and choked Hudson was once again reopened to riverboat traffic, the boats owned by Vanderbilt were conspicuously missing. The public was dumbfounded. What happened to their cheap fares? In brief, their man had sold out. Vanderbilt had forced the monopoly to pay him an astronomical $100,000 to leave and another $5,000 annually to stay away. By waiting and holding a strong hand, Vanderbilt set a precedent that would continue throughout the rest of his life. He was off the Hudson for now, and on to the Sound. This time, there was more at stake.

A conglomerate of New York businessmen had organized the first of what would be three railway lines that connected passengers and freight between Boston and Rhode Island. Construction of a continuous rail line proved too costly, but a relatively short land-sea route would be more efficient. Steamboats would carry passengers between New York and the New England ports and rail cars would take them the rest of the way inland. So, Vanderbilt built the *Lexington* to compete with the other boats. The boat was necessary to carry cotton, he explained, a claim which came with some merit. Cotton, a commodity in high demand in Britain, was exported from the South to New York either by boat or rail and shipped overseas. These same ships, in return, carried goods back to the United States. New York financiers profited handsomely for the privilege to transport cotton on their boats, but not all ship owners wanted to cross the Atlantic. The water wheel mills in New England needed cotton too, and the fabrics made in these factories then came back to New York workshops to be transformed into fine clothing.

"Make her as strong as possible," Vanderbilt instructed.

The demand for more speed was a challenge. *How do you make a paddle wheeler go faster?* Vanderbilt's plan was simple, yet ingenious. The twin paddles would be built larger than most. The engine, even a single one, could be produced that nearly doubled the speed of the fastest boat of its time, the *North America,* which ran at an unprecedented 384 feet per minute or 4.3 miles per hour.

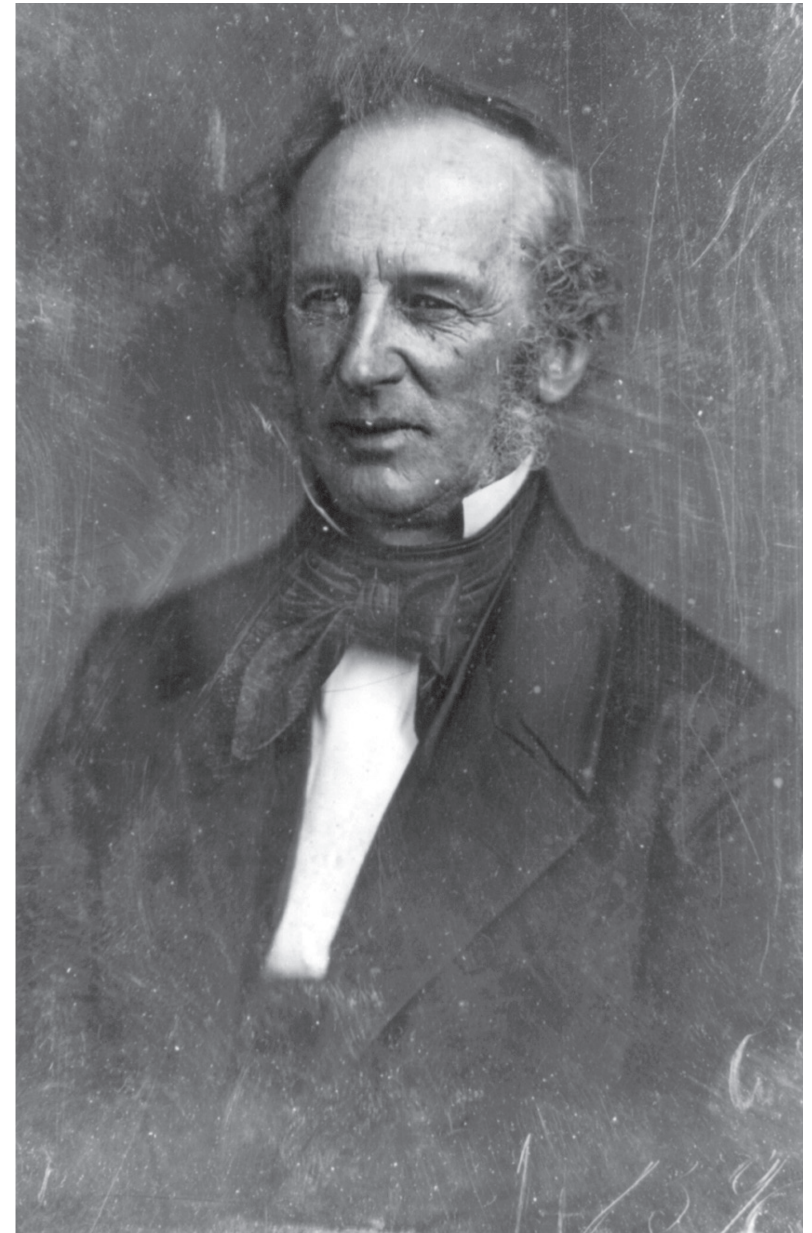
Vanderbilt wanted his boat to go double that, and the bigger paddlewheels would certainly help. Moreover, since they would take fewer revolutions to generate more power, they would save on fuel as well. For more efficiency, the hull was built long and narrow. Although this posed a structural issue called "hogging," or sagging in the middle due to weight, Vanderbilt corrected the problem by calling for an arched deck, similar to a bridge design, which would shift the pressure outward.

Joseph Bishop and Charles Simonson were called upon to construct it. As two of New York's finest shipbuilders, they had built dozens of ships for various owners, but even their expertise and experience were tested by Vanderbilt's ambitious design. Referring to just the plans alone, both men admitted they had never seen anything like it. Vanderbilt, however, had both a solid reputation built on several decades in the steamboat industry and the money to back up his words. Although faced with a daunting task, Bishop and Simonson were on board 100 percent.

Vanderbilt spared no expense on the inside either, choosing the finest material and fabrics to complete his floating palace. He named it *Lexington,* after the start of the Revolutionary War. A fitting name, given that the boat itself was indeed revolutionary, especially its steam power source, which as Vanderbilt boasted was "as perfect an engine as I had ever seen." In April of 1835, Vanderbilt proudly watched the *Lexington* launched to great fanfare from the East River.

Vanderbilt's builders had faithfully carried out their mission and created the nation's most opulent passenger ship. The biggest test, however, would come when the world saw how fast it actually made it to Rhode Island, a 210-mile voyage that normally took 18 hours or more. When it finally arrived in Providence, word was sent back. His exultations that day were warranted: the *Lexington* had made it in 12 hours! The rival steamboat company could only watch in astonishment.

The influential business-types quickly countered with plans to build boats of their own with as much, if not more, firepower than Vanderbilt's dream machine. Vanderbilt, however, anticipating such a move, had more tricks up his sleeve. His plan was to



Cornelius Vanderbilt. The Library of Congress, part of the Daguerreotype Collection, Mathew B. Brady [1844–1850].

monopolize the market by lowering prices on fares, thereby increasing customers if not revenue. When a new 50-mile railroad line was built between Providence and Stonington, Connecticut, Vanderbilt had even more leverage.

The line began at the far northern end of the Long Island Sound on the Rhode Island border just past Block Island, a small inhabited land mass used by the British during the War of 1812 to dock ships vital to protecting the mouth of the Sound. The newly built Stonington Rail Line, as it came to be called, was a godsend. Not only did it lop off three hours of ocean time from the Sound to Boston, it also offered a far more agreeable commuting experience. Until then, the last part of the journey was around Point Judith and out into an unavoidable, choppy stretch of open water. By the time the boat rocked and rolled its way to the dock in Providence, passengers were green with seasickness. The new railroad line eliminated this by giving riders a choice to exit before Point Judith and take instead a more comfortable trip to Providence in a rail car. One of the first to test the new rail lines, Vanderbilt proclaimed it to be the "fastest route to Boston" and "potentially a key to the entire battle for the Sound," a battle Vanderbilt had seemingly already won.

As was the case with many new rail ventures, the Stonington line was in dire financial straits even before it was built. Millions in stocks and bonds had put it deep in the red, and Vanderbilt knew it would take the startup company years to pay back all the interest. Steamboats were the lifeline for the embattled Stonington, but control over water was just as contentious as on land. The new rail line needed a solid partnership with one of the steamboat lines to ensure a steady flow of fare-paying passengers would be dropped off in Stonington to fill the trains. Vanderbilt had a bargaining chip. If the company did not buy his fastest boat, the *Lexington,* he would keep running it to Providence at a ridiculously low fare of $1, making the complete trip to Boston under $5 per ticket. This was less than Stonington was charging for the privilege of using their rail line alone. It was a shrewd and calculated move by Vanderbilt. The Stonington was too far in debt to stop the line or shut it down. They needed to build capital, not lose it.

Vanderbilt's threat was stifling, and the deal enticing. They needed more than just the one boat, so they balked at first, hoping for a more suitable solution.

As it turned out, the Transportation Company also tried to broker a deal with Stonington. Their tactics, however, were different from Vanderbilt's. They cut off all boats to the Stonington port, hoping to swing the negotiations to their advantage. Their showcase ship, the *J.W. Richmond,* was also earning points for speed. This made for an almost comical rivalry between the *Lexington* and *J.W. Richmond,* which ran schedules to Providence at virtually the same time.

For the Transportation Company, the strike against Stonington proved that time deficiency was costly. Since they weren't offering any cut-rate deals, their customers demanded they return the option of disembarking in Stonington and using the quicker rail line. The Transportation Company was losing the battle. Now they needed the Stonington just as much as Stonington needed the boats. In contrast, Vanderbilt's cheap fare offer was potentially damaging to both companies.

Since it was in everyone's best interest to use the more productive Stonington line, a deal was brokered by the Transportation Company to buy Vanderbilt's *Lexington* for $60,000, with Stonington kicking in another $10,000. It was an outrageous sum for a boat with an original production cost of $75,000 and three years of ocean wear, but they had little choice. In reality, both companies wanted the boat just as much as they wanted Vanderbilt out of the way. They got both—sort of. When the *Lexington* changed hands, the pilot hired to steer her was another Vanderbilt, Jacob or "Jake" as his friends liked to call him, the younger brother of the ship's now former owner.

Even before piloting the *Lexington,* Jacob Vanderbilt was an engaging figure in New York. Together he and his brother owned the *General Jackson,* and Jacob was put in complete charge of the boat's day-to-day operations, like hauling freight and passengers on short jaunts down the Hudson River. Unlike his brother's success, however, the road to his own did not come smoothly. On June