



River of Racing Fools

by James H. Winchester

Competition for passengers and prestige was passionate and fierce among the paddle-wheel steamers that traveled the Hudson River during the 1840s and 1850s. For the sake of a record run between Albany and New York City, Hudson River steamboat cap-

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tains threw every rule of safety and seamanship overboard. Tragedy was the natural outcome of such foolishness, and tragedy aplenty came about because of a senseless race between the steamers *Henry Clay* and *Armenia*.

On July 28, 1852, the *Henry Clay*, only two years old and one of the fastest and most luxuriously appointed vessels on the Hudson, rocked gently at her Albany pier. Hawkers loudly called out the virtues of the ship, boasting that only here in the world could fifty cents buy passage on so distinguished a craft. Nearby, other spielers shouted the attractions of the *Armenia*, moored alongside. Built several years before the *Henry Clay*, the *Armenia* was now the object of taunts by the *Henry Clay*'s crewmen, who urged undecided passengers to ignore the "mud scow" and come aboard a really dependable and fast ship.

As each vessel prepared to cast off, several of the more timid passengers, men and women alike, expressed concern that the skippers of the two big side-wheelers would be goaded into a race. But as the *Henry Clay* steamed downriver, the timorous passengers were reassured by ship's officers. "We have no intention whatsoever of entering into competition with the *Armenia* or any other ship," they repeated.

Several minutes after the *Henry Clay* began the downriver journey, the *Armenia* pulled in its gangplank, and the rumble of its engines mounted as it nosed out into the Hudson. From the stern of the leading vessel, the passengers, settled comfortably in the deck chairs, watched the *Armenia*, no bigger than a child's toy boat in the distance, and enjoyed the cool breezes that would become even

more welcome as the hot July sun mounted high in the sky.

The landing at the town of Hudson—first scheduled stop below Albany for both steamers—was still a few miles away when the strident voice of a *Henry Clay* deckhand cut through the hot July air.

"*Armenia* closing fast," he yelled down a hatchway. "She'll show us her wake if we're not careful. That mud scow hasn't learned her lesson yet."

There was a rush to the aft rail, and sure enough, the *Armenia*, black smoke trailing from her stack, side wheels churning the calm Hudson waters into a fury, was now within hailing distance.

The ship's officers were annoyed and puzzled. It didn't seem possible, yet the *Armenia* appeared to be in a boiler-straining rush to overtake them. Well, whatever was afoot would become clear when the two steamers tied up at Hudson.

The *Henry Clay* was being eased into position at the Hudson dock when angry shouts rang out from the lower deck: "The *Armenia*'s going on ahead. She's not stopping."

In a burst of feverish activity the *Henry Clay* cast off, pouring coal into her furnaces in a straining effort to catch up. The objections of the passengers, alarmed at the unexpected developments, went unheeded by the *Henry Clay*'s officers.

Midway down the river the *Henry Clay* drew alongside the *Armenia*. The two prows were knifing downriver in tandem when the *Henry Clay* pilot recklessly rammed his vessel into the port side of the *Armenia*'s bow.

The screams of the thoroughly frightened passengers on both ships were drowned out by the sounds of splintering rails and planking on the *Armenia*.

With boilers pounding and the signal for full power unchanged, the two vessels clung to each other like two sea monsters locked in grotesque combat. But it was an unequal struggle, and soon the superior engines of the *Henry Clay* began to tell. As the joined ships slowly began to veer toward the west shore, it was obvious that the struggle would end up with the *Armenia* being pushed aground. Bitterly her skipper gave the signal to cut speed. Triumphantlly the *Henry Clay* forged ahead.

As the minutes ticked by and the indicator remained at full speed ahead, it became obvious that the *Henry Clay* wanted to rub salt into the wounds of her rival by arriving in New York far ahead of her.

Then without warning came the first sign of disaster. A puff of smoke belched from one of the *Henry Clay*'s hatchways. An instant later, a pain-maddened fireman, his clothes burned completely from his body, staggered crazily up to the deck. Even as he threw himself overboard, the whole midsection of the vessel burst into flame as a boiler exploded, scattering broken bits of blazing wreckage over the entire ship.

The screams of the terrified passengers rang out across the broad expanse of the Hudson as the pilot spun the wheel hard apart. Trailing black clouds of smoke, the flames leaping high into the air, the once-proud *Henry Clay*, now a floating inferno, headed for the shore and ripped into the bank with

terrific force, digging a twenty-five-foot trench up the slope.

The impact was so great that many of the passengers, huddled at the stern, were catapulted into the water. Others lay stunned on the hot decks, and still others were hurled toward the center of the leaping flames. A few fortunate passengers on the bow of the ship were knocked off the vessel onto dry land, suffering bruises and breaks, but remaining able to crawl away from the terrible heat of the holocaust.

The minutes following the beaching of the *Henry Clay* were filled with horror. Everything was confusion. With most of the ship jutting over deep water, the only hope for survival was swimming to shore. But for many of the men, women, and children trapped on the ship, the waters of the Hudson seemed to hold greater terror than the fire. As the flames crept closer, desperate mothers and fathers threw members of their family over the rail and then jumped themselves. Many of them were drowned.

Several days later, when the last body was gathered from the Hudson shore, the toll of known dead stood at ninety. How many more died was never determined, for no passenger list had been maintained.

The nation was shocked by this latest of a long list of disasters that had sprung solely from the mad whims of ship captains who prized racing laurels higher than the lives of their passengers. Public opinion demanded an end to all racing on the Hudson River, and several months later such a law was enacted. The *Henry Clay* tragedy was the last of its kind.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. According to the author of this story, the race was
 - A clumsy
 - B thrilling
 - C senseless
2. Compared with the *Henry Clay*, the *Armenia* was
 - A larger
 - B older
 - C prettier
3. As the *Henry Clay* departed, her officers assured passengers that the ship would
 - A never enter a race
 - B win any race she entered
 - C Neither A nor B
4. The first person on the *Henry Clay* to notice the *Armenia's* approach was a
 - A passenger
 - B officer
 - C deckhand
5. During the race, the *Henry Clay* was
 - A rammed by the *Armenia*
 - B pushed aground by the *Armenia*
 - C Neither A nor B
6. Just before disaster struck, the *Henry Clay* was
 - A running ahead of the *Armenia*
 - B falling behind the *Armenia*
 - C running even with the *Armenia*
7. The first hint of trouble came when
 - A hissing was heard in the boiler
 - B flames came from the smokestack
 - C smoke poured out of a hatchway
8. The passengers who survived owed their lives to the fact that they
 - A launched lifeboats
 - B remained calm
 - C Neither A nor B
9. The exact number of people who died in the disaster was
 - A less than twenty-five
 - B from twenty-five to fifty
 - C never determined exactly
10. Several months after the disaster a law was passed that
 - A regulated steamboat racing
 - B prohibited steamboat racing
 - C Neither A nor B

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