

Remembering the Old Bay Line

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This month marks the 43rd anniversary of the true ending of an era. On April 13, 1962, the Old Bay Line made its final voyage on the waters of the Chesapeake Bay.

Known officially as the Baltimore Steam Packet Company, which had come to be known as the Old Bay Line, it had been doing its thing since the company's founding in 1840. At the time of its demise, at the age of 122, the Old Bay Line was the oldest steamship company in the country.

At one time, packet ships were commonplace on the Chesapeake Bay. They were, after all, the most efficient means of travel between their many ports of call, prior to the automobile, and even for quite a while following that. The railroads could not truly compete in these environs, as the immense bay and its many tributaries prevented direct routes. Indeed, railroads relied upon packet vessels to offer connections. It's no surprise, then, that many of the packet lines - including this one - were eventually owned substantially by railroads.

Happily, I can remember some of the glory years of the Old Bay Line. I can say, too, that of the Chesapeake Bay, the Old Bay Line was so much a part of the bay itself that many considered it to BE the Chesapeake Bay.

My first exposure to the Old Bay Line was during the second World War. My father was in the Navy, and on a number of occasions I would accompany my mother to Norfolk, when my father would be in port. Back then, the Old Bay Line was the preferred method of choice between Baltimore and Norfolk. I vaguely remember some of those voyages, but recall somewhat more clearly using the line in the early 1950's when my father was then assigned to a net tender assigned to Norfolk.

At that time the Old Bay Line had three vessels: the City of Norfolk, the City of Richmond, and the District of Columbia. The first two of these ships served the route daily between Baltimore and Norfolk - one sailing north each evening, and the other sailing south. The District of Columbia served the route between Washington and Norfolk, alternating one night north and the next night south.



Old Bay Line steamer 'City of Norfolk' from a post card I sent to my parents in 1960. The ship made an overnight run between Baltimore and Norfolk carrying passengers, automobiles and freight.

On one of my northward sailings from Norfolk, I can recall the announcement, "All ashore that's going ashore." To this was added, "No passengers to Old Point." In those days, Old Bay Line steamers also served Old Point Comfort, Virginia, across Hampton Roads from Norfolk, but local passage was not allowed between the two. I asked my dad, "Why not?" (He thought it was a franchise thing.)

One of my fondest memories was a voyage my mother and I made - circa 1952, age 11 - from Baltimore to Norfolk on the very same evening as my grandmother and cousin sailed to the same location from Washington. The plan was for my father to meet all four of us the following morning in Norfolk. I recall the excitement about bedtime as our vessel was approaching Point Lookout, where the Potomac River joins the Chesapeake Bay, pondering whether our respective steamers would get there at the exact moment to be side by side. It didn't happen (and if it ever did, the steamer from Baltimore would have to be late) as the schedules were staggered to allow the ship from Baltimore to be about an hour ahead of the one from Washington. It would have been bedlam having two vessels at Old Point Comfort at the same time. Presumably, the steamer from Washington might be in sight of Old Point Comfort when the one from Baltimore departed, but I did not see it. Nor did I witness the middle of the night passing of the the two Baltimore ships - each sailing in opposite directions - which typically occurred about 12:30 in the morning. True aficionados of life aboard the Old Bay Line would relish that opportunity, but likely I was fast asleep by then.



'District of Columbia' sailed the route between Washington and Norfolk, southbound on odd dates and northbound on even dates. There was no run on the 31st, or on February 29. The ship had 140 staterooms and space for 38 automobiles.

I never had the occasion to sail on the steamer from Washington, but that voyage must have been every bit as thrilling - or more so - than the one from Baltimore. I know my grandmother and cousin enjoyed their adventure, and they filled my receptive ears with the experience once all five of us met up the following morning at the Main Street pier in

Norfolk. I did not commit many of the details they shared with me to memory, but I do have a narrative of a voyage aboard the District of Columbia, as published in the June 1956 issue of the B&O Magazine. Authored by Jacob Hay, it described a visit by a tour group of high school students who had come to Washington on the B&O and then sailed to Norfolk on the Old Bay Line. It is excerpted here:

"After the first flurry of finding staterooms and choosing upper or lower berths, there is a general rush to the decks for a look at Washington's spectacular skyline as the ship steams slowly out of the basin and into the broad Potomac. Off to the starboard flicker the myriad lights of the National Airport, and to the port are the stately homes of naval and military officers assigned to top Pentagon posts. Overhead there is the constant roar of airliners taking off or coming in to land at the airport.

"Then to dinner in the brightly lighted dining saloon, where grinning, marvelously adept waiters serve up traditional Chesapeake Bay dishes, and the inevitable case of incipient sea-sickness turns up - although the Potomac is as steady as if it were still tied to the wharf.

"Dinner over, a sturdy few return to the open decks for a few minutes on watching the blinking channel markers. The majority, though, repair to the main saloon where the ship's social directress, smart in the Line's blue uniform, has arranged a program of 'horse races.' Big dice are shaken, and white-jacketed stewards move gaily colored wooden horses down a long striped canvas 'track,' until the race is won. Afterwards, there is bingo, and often a 'show,' put on by the students themselves, to the intense delight of the other passengers.

"By 11 P.M., though, even the briskest games begin to pall on youngsters who've hiked around Washington all during the day just past, and by 11:30 P.M. - just about the time the big white steamer glides beneath the Potomac River Bridge - nearly every one has gone to bed.

"Breakfast in the dining saloon is a hasty affair, for the students are once more full of beans and impatient to be off on the day's tour. By 8:30 A.M., the 'District of Columbia' has returned to normal, and the last of the sightseeing buses has pulled away from the wharf."

Getting back to my own experience of sailing on the Old Bay Line, evening departures from and morning arrivals into Baltimore were always highlighted by the singular experience of passing Fort McHenry. And it was in this very venue, in 1955, not aboard an Old Bay Line vessel, but aboard the frigate Constellation as it was towed into review for festivities at Fort McHenry, that I got to marvel as the evening Old Bay Line steamer made its way past the frigate. How I got chosen to be among those aboard the Constellation is a story in itself, but while the others who were aboard queued along the

deck of her starboard side, intent upon the festivities taking place at the fort, I stood along the port side waving to the steamer's passengers. What a thrill!

I was once with some friends whose summer home was on the shores of the Chesapeake, and the evening appearance of the steamer passing their site was noted with a remark that she was "right on time!"

I graduated from high school in 1959 and joined the Navy later that year. Beginning in 1960 I was stationed in the Norfolk area myself. The Old Bay Line was still active, at least at the beginning of that assignment, but its schedule was not particularly convenient for trips home on weekends. However, I did get to sail on it once, and that would be my last time. The date was May 16, 1960, southbound aboard the City of Norfolk.

I had a small stateroom on the starboard side of the top deck. The old ship backed out into the Inner Harbor from its berth at Pier 3, and creaked and moaned its way down the Patapsco River and out into the bay with a good complement of passengers - many of them students from a tour group. I thrilled at the experience as we made our way beneath the Chesapeake Bay bridge, and to the tunes of a jukebox near the stern I could see the pall of smoke the vessel left behind above the waters as twilight gave way to darkness. Sleep was sporadic, and I arose well before dawn to take in the marvels of plying the bay, much as the Old Bay Line had obligingly done for so many years. I can recall, too, the distinctive aroma of the oil-burning steamer and the melodious steam whistle, which resonated loudly. Regrettably, I had not dined aboard the previous evening (I had to count my nickels in those days). I missed breakfast, too, because the dining room was crowded with a long line. So I missed the tradition, never to be relived!

However, I do recall dining aboard the Old Bay Line in earlier years. I remember the dining room of the City of Norfolk - situated near the bow - and how its deck sloped noticeably fore to aft. Several dinner entrees were offered - steaks, seafood, etc. I recently examined a menu (from 1960) at the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore. It listed filet mignon as the most expensive item, at \$4.25. (Not cheap, for 1960 - again, I was a poor sailor - but I really regret not getting to enjoy a last meal while I had the chance.)

By the time of my last voyage in 1960, sailings to and from Washington had been discontinued. So, too, had the stop at Old Point Comfort. The writing was on the wall; the days of the Old Bay Line were numbered.

I did get back to the Main Street pier in Norfolk several times to see the steamer off. On a couple of occasions its departure was delayed to accommodate the arrival of charter buses conveying tour groups for a sailing to Baltimore. One could only hope that the company could stay afloat (no pun intended), but such was not to be the case. All service ended in 1962.

There are not very many of us today who can remember sailing on the Old Bay Line, but it was a tradition I fondly cherished. Those were the 'Good Old Days!'

The Old Bay Line had three ships when service ended in 1962.

'City of Richmond' was sold but sank while being towed off North Carolina in 1964.

'City of Norfolk' was scrapped in 1966.

'District of Columbia' was renamed 'Provincetown' with plans to use it as a restaurant,

but it suffered fire damage and sank in the early 1970's.