

PERILS OF THE PERIAUGER

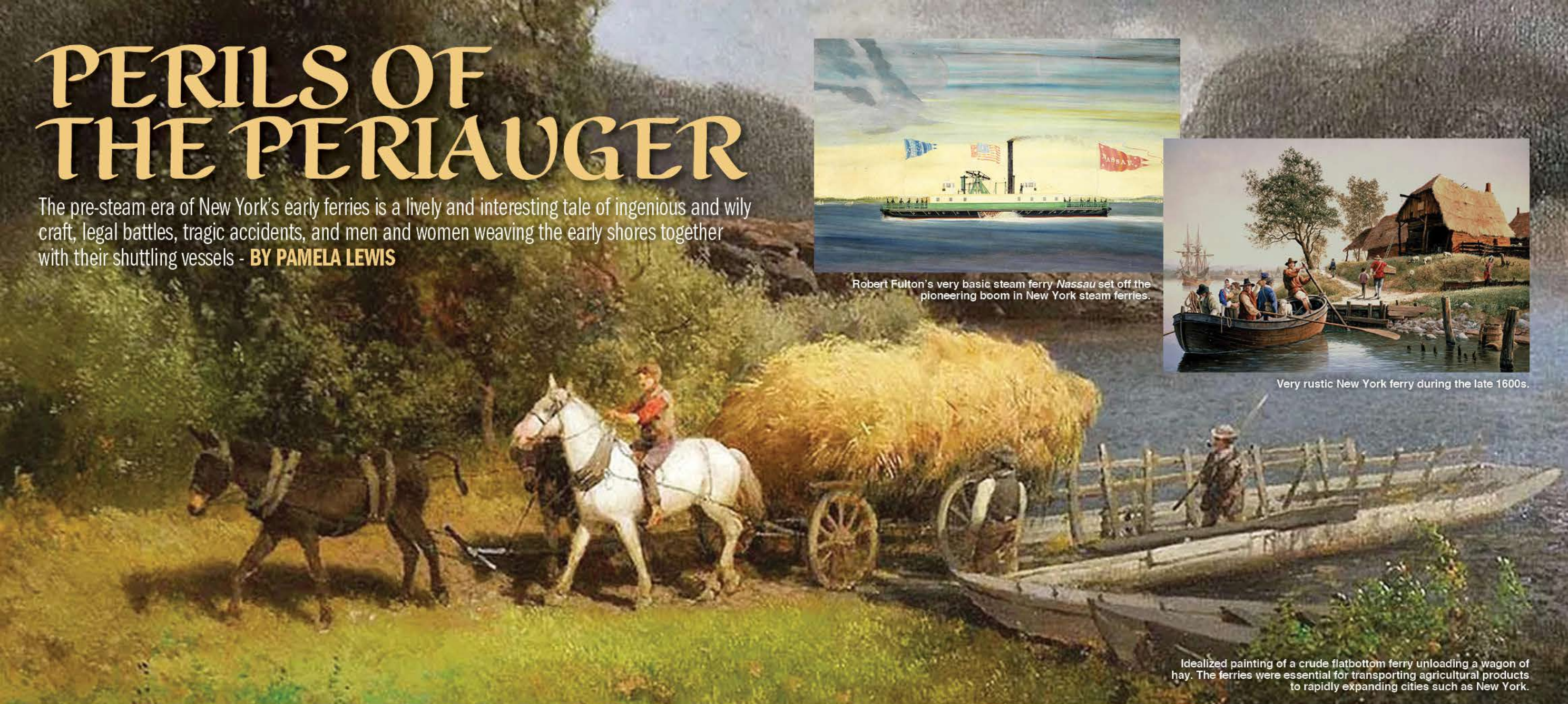
The pre-steam era of New York's early ferries is a lively and interesting tale of ingenious and wily craft, legal battles, tragic accidents, and men and women weaving the early shores together with their shuttling vessels - **BY PAMELA LEWIS**



Robert Fulton's very basic steam ferry *Nassau* set off the pioneering boom in New York steam ferries.



Very rustic New York ferry during the late 1600s.



Idealized painting of a crude flatbottom ferry unloading a wagon of hay. The ferries were essential for transporting agricultural products to rapidly expanding cities such as New York.

In early America, transport by water was often more common than by land. Ferries developed in their own right as the sole route between waterside settlements and also as a natural and necessary complement to the development of overland travel. Ferries have been defined as a “floating section of highway,” and it is difficult to be more precise than that, for a ferry is a function rather than a specific type of vessel.

Manhattan being an island, ferryboats were early an essential aspect of colonial life there, from its settlement by the Dutch in 1623. Ferrymasters were important citizens. The Dutch farmers commuted to their farmlands in outlying areas in Brooklyn, just as today there are still a few ferryboat commuters coming from Staten Island to less-rustic occupations in Manhattan.

Ferryboats were all-pervasive because water was all-important, a fact which we may find difficult to appreciate in today's paved and drained megalopolises. One British traveler describing a trip in 1785, remarked after the third river crossing in 16 miles, “It is astonishing what an immense quantity of water you meet within this country.”

The early colonists settled by the water's edge and moved inland later. Small boats were used to cruise in the area, and it was often easier to go to a neighbor's farm or to church by a water route than by any land route. In the Museum of the City of New York is a model of such a simple vessel used by the Dutch and called a “visiting boat.” It had one small mast and could also be rowed by several men. More elaborate ferryboats did not develop until the need arose: For transporting quantities

of goods, livestock, passengers, and land vehicles. As ferrying increased, some tried it as an occupation.

The first New York ferry operated by colonists rather than Indians, as was not uncommon in early times, linked Manhattan with the Dutch village of Breukelen (Brooklyn). The landing at Brooklyn was at the same place that the Indians used to land when traveling from New Jersey to Long Island. Today, the same spot lies in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge. This was at the narrowest part of the river. This simple, flat-bottomed, rowboat ferry was at first operated as a private speculation by one Cornelius Dirksen, a farmer who had a small inn near Peck Slip, beginning about 1640. It is said that a horn hanging in an apple tree was used by prospective customers to summon the farmer-ferry.

The early colonists began farming in

outlying areas of Staten Island and New Jersey, in addition to Long Island, later settling on the land and coming back to Manhattan markets. Thus, the need for ferries grew.

The ferrying craft used in New York harbor up to about 1800 varied widely in size and nature depending upon the run the ferry was on and the purpose of the run. Rowboats were a common, small, and simple craft for crossing to the closer points, and were well within the capacity of a farmer to make and afford. Vessels suitable for ferrying only people might be a long rowboat with two men rowing and passengers in front and in back of them. Another early vessel used was the previously mentioned Dutch “visiting boat.” Such a vessel could handle the shallows and ignore the vicissitudes of the wind. Pictures of these small people-haulers can be seen in many prints of

early New York.

Early ferryboats did not just carry people. A table of rates on one ferry included a man, a horse and man, a sheep, a firkin of butter, and a quarter of dead beef. For such uses, a flat-bottomed scow could be poled, but rowing such a craft was nearly impossible. However, it was found that these glorified rafts could take a single mast and simple rig and be sailed back and forth. Unfortunately, if the wind was unfavorable, such vessels could be in trouble.

The early ferries were often manned in part by passengers if a squall came up. Sailing and non-sailing ferries alike were sometimes poled at least part way across, especially if becalmed. There is also record of a horse-powered windlass and sweep ferry which probably went from New York to Paulus Hook. Rope or wire ferries, used elsewhere, were

never used around New York, owing to the relatively long distances to be crossed. The really important ferry type of the 18th and early 19th centuries was a sailing ferry, the so-called “Perry-Auger.”

According to Maritime Historian Gene T. Zimmerman, “The Periauger, or Periogue, or New York rig, were all the same vessels, using the basic rig known as the Periagua, though there were some minor variations due to either ferry needs or a captain's whims. This rig apparently evolved from the Dutch two-masted craft of early New York which also had no bowsprit or jib. It was nothing more than a two-masted schooner without a jib, but with the foremast nearly to the bow and with a forward rake to it.

“The Periagua rig had much to say for it. It was, contrary to some