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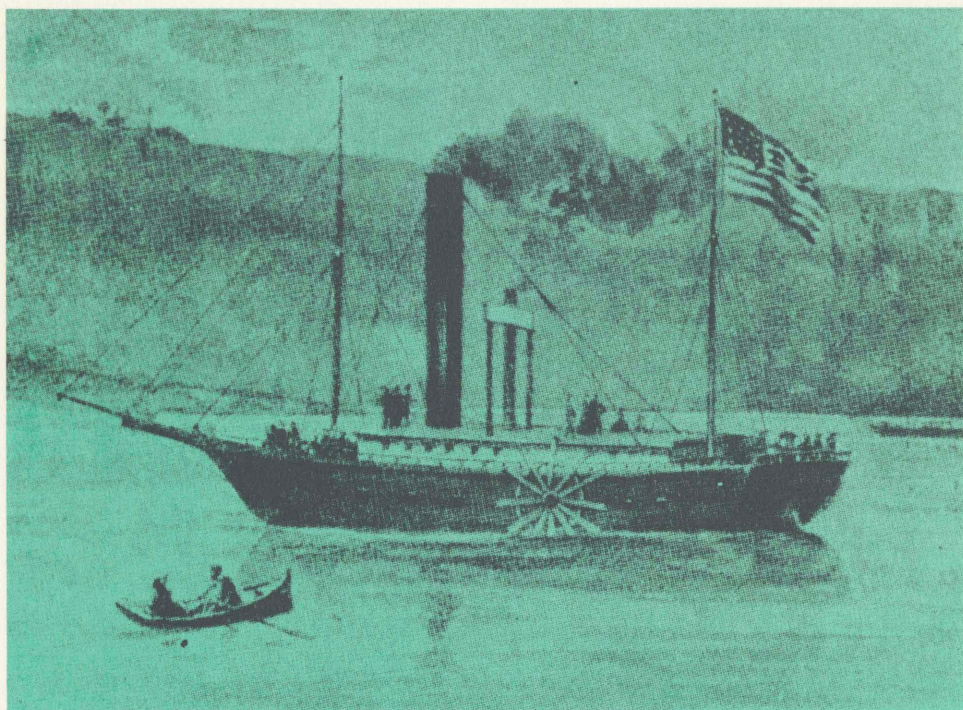


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FULTON'S CLERMONT.
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Barzillai Pease and Mr. Fulton's Steamboat

by Arsinié Schmajonian

Piloting Robert Fulton's steamboat up the North River to Albany was a far cry from hunting seals and whales in Atlantic waters for Nantucket-born Barzillai Pease. But for a little while in 1808 the River was his road and Fulton's captain, Samuel Wiswall, his evil genius.

Born on that seamen's island in 1773 of a sea-going father, Pease moved to Hudson, New York, with his family when he was fourteen years old and soon after shipped out on his first whaling-sealing voyage. With Hudson as home port, the basic pattern of his life between 1789 and 1826 was sailing the Atlantic from Newfoundland to the Falkland Islands in search of sealskins and whale oil, sometimes as seaman, sometimes as captain, and occasionally as master of his own ship.

Nineteen journals written during these years, as diary-logs while aboard ship or as continuous narratives of recall immediately following a voyage, are in the manuscript collection of Syracuse University Libraries and provide a detailed picture of life at sea in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The later period of the journals finds Pease navigating Lake Ontario as he commanded Army transports during the War of 1812, but up to that time, he records only one other experience on fresh water, the infamous summer on the North River in Fulton's "Steam-boat."

The river junket seems to have been a matter of expediency. He needed a job. In 1807 Barzillai had sailed for Martha's Vineyard where he ordered a cargo of oysters and then went on to Nantucket to visit his kin while the catch was made. Before he returned for his load, however, his supplier had found another customer and Pease's oysters had been sold elsewhere. Deciding it was then too late in the season for oyster-selling, he went back to Nantucket and "now being at my native Island," he decided to spend the winter there and "for that purpose hired my board with one of my cousins, Uriah Coffin, who worked at the shoemaking."¹ There he remained until

¹ Vol. III, Journal 10, p. 120

Hereafter all quotation references are cited as Pease Journal. Pease's spelling has been followed as nearly as possible but punctuation has been modified to some extent to make reading easier. Any added material is placed in square brackets.

Spring, using his sloop *Delight* to carry passengers and clams to Nantucket from Martha's Vineyard. Barzillai explains the latter coals-to-Newcastle cargo by saying that he "could make a handsom profit by buying them at the vineyard, and seling at 50 cents at the Island of Nantucket."²

In the Spring of 1808 he "fitted out for fishing and Piloting vessels over Nantucket shoals" but ran into opposition from the Nantucket pilots who objected to new competition. "This displeased the Pil[o]ts or at least some of them. They had a great deal to say on the Subject, and even threatened to take the first vessel away from me that I shoul[d] bring into the Harbor."³ So on April 29, 1808, Barzillai left Nantucket and "touched at New York, where I made an agreement with Captain Samuel Wiswall, to go as his pilot for thirty dollars per month."⁴

Pease went aboard Fulton's "Steam-boat" where he signed articles and met David Mandeval, a carpenter then at work on the boat, who agreed to remain aboard as second pilot for eighteen dollars per month.

On the first trip up the river, before reaching West Point, "Mr. R. Fulton came to me and told me that now I was the Acknoleged pilot, and that I must not give my own reason up to no one, that is if I had confidence in myself. I told him that I had, but suppose the Captain should interfere, said I, what should I do in that case. It is your province to pilot the boat and not give that part of your office up to no one. Not even the Commander."⁵

From the beginning, however, the captain did "interfear" and Pease has recorded in detail the whole story of his continuing struggle with Wiswall.

"The usual hour of our leaving New York was at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. This night proved to be very dark and stormy. When we were nearly Abrest of westpoint, Waswall came on deck, and coming direct from the light always makes the darkness still darker. He came forward to me, where I was looking out and cunning the man at the wheel And enquired of me whereabouts we were, to which I answired. He then observed that he thought I was runing too far into the bay on the opposite [shore]. My answer was as it should be that I was not. He then left me and went to the wheel as it [ap]peared (for I did not untill afterwards no that he did) and took it from him. I soon discovered the boat wheeling round on to the Westpoint shore. I cauled to the man at the wheel to port his helm, but finding the boat did not answer my cun I call'd again, but had for reply, by Wiswall, that the wheel rope was foul. I then ran to him, and before it could be cleared, she had ran on to the shore, a few rods to the north of

² Pease Journal, p. 120

³ Pease Journal, p. 121

⁴ Pease Journal, p. 121

⁵ Pease Journal, pp. 123-124

Westpoint. This rock was smooth and shelving some distance into the water which caused her to run on very far and so that we could have all landed dry.”⁶

The shock of the grounding brought the passengers to the deck in a panic at this point and a description of the scene and of a boiler bursting follows in the Pease narrative. The passengers were gathered together in the stern to apply weight and “this had its desired effect, for she was soon got off” and the boiler was repaired at Albany.

Many of the Pease journals record shipwrecks, some of them of a serious nature involving the loss of lives. After recording the disasters, Pease sometimes wrote at length regarding blame and innocence, proclaiming himself in the latter state. Whether he was a seaman of great competence who was repeatedly buffeted by circumstance or whether he was subject to faults of judgment we have no way of knowing. One characteristic does stand out in the journals, however—Barzillai consistently shows himself on the side of honesty and integrity and deplores, often with religious overtones, any examples of cheating and subterfuge he witnesses. True to form, the account of the accident at West Point continues in this vein.

“Wiswall came to me and begged that I would say nothing about the circumstances relating to our getting on shore, while at the same [time] telling me in what manner it had taken place. He then informed me that he supposed I was getting too far into the east bay, and with that took hold of the wheel with the man there, and in turning the wheel so quickly had crossed the rope which he could not clear, and that for the future he would not interfere with me at all. This acknowledgement was conferred by the man at the wheel, that Wiswall told him I should run the boat on shore, and for the purpose took the wheel and hove it over with all his strength, and when that I had ordered the wheel Aport the second time he became alarmed and endeavoured to obey my order, but finding the rope foul, then told me the same. This would have been a noble time for me to have built up my fame & glory, at the downfall of my very fellow who had procured me the now station I held. This I considered a dishonourable and uncharitable deed, and with abhorrence I detested the idea, and kept Wiswall's request a profound secret from Fulton, who soon after had some difficulty with Wiswall, and had I taken advantage of this misunderstanding, I make no doubt but I should have been the means of his downfall, although I well knew Wiswall was in the right and Fulton &c in the wrong, and was I to build on his fall I should contend for the same as Wiswall

⁶Pease Journal, p. 124

had contended for, and this had the desired effect on my sober reasoning. In this way we ran the whole of the time I was with him opposing me in the course I would steer . . .”⁷

A second time Pease yielded place and judgment to Wiswall, to his own sorrow. He gives his reasons as the avoidance of strife and fear of losing his job but one is tempted to wonder whether perhaps his protestations of virtue are greater than his moral strength.

“At one time we were coming up the river, and abrest Wapinge’s crick with A very strong wind and the tide of ebb, the boat would steer very wild in such cases. And for that reason I kept in the middle of the river. Wiswall came to me while at the wheel and advised me to keep as close in shore as I could with safety to avoid the tide. I told him the boat steered bad. He replied that he knew that but still insisted upon my steering in the eddy, and to avoid a constant quarrel and perhaps being turned out of office, I complied with his request, when coming up with A point and taking the tide strong on our larboard bow, and at the same time, A eddy on our larboard quarter, swept her on so quick that before I could make her mind the helm, she took the tide on her starboard bow, and our being perfectly flat it was impossible to steer small. She drove as it were side ways on to a Sloop, then Laying at a Lime kiln dock, and done us a considerable damage to our wheel house, and without any other ingery we got clear and proceeded up to Albany. The Cause of my being so near in shore I believe was not known to any except Wiswall and myself. Wiswall did not blame me much, however he did some, for keeping so very near. The fact was that she could not be steered steadily any where when under the Sail we then was, and for that reason ought to have kept in the middle of the river.”⁸

Perhaps Barzillai just wasn’t a fresh-water man, or needed the open spaces of the sea for a high, wide and handsome method of navigating, or was not yet oriented to the new world of steam. Whatever the cause, this was not the end of trouble on the river. The next time misfortune struck, Pease, although still stoutly maintaining his own innocence, could not blame Wiswall.

“One morning when we left albany for New York, when we had got down to the dam or nearly, we was coming up with A Lighter Loaded with anchors on deck. I was at the wheel at the time, and was giving him a birth but all on A sudden he put his helm hard A starboard and Lufed direct across me. He was hailed

⁷Pease Journal, p. 125

⁸Pease Journal, p. 125-126

but the fellow did not pay any attention to what was said to him. I then ordered the boat stoped which was done with all speed, but with the headway we had on, took him in the quarter and stove him very badly. I was not blamed in this nor neither did Wiswall interfere at all in this sad accident nor do believe any one on board supposed any blame could be attached to me for how could I know that the sloop would Luff across our bow in such a manner. Once I run the boat aground on A flat just below the Hoghabarrack, but she did no damage and was on but A few minutes. Here I was deceived in A mist and supposed myself not quite so far on. This was in the night and the only time that [it] was not owing to some persuasion from the Captain.”⁹

Pease follows this admission that accidents could happen in spite of Wiswall with his final account of disaster, this time with the Captain again in the villain’s role.

“At another time when we left Redhook and runing up in the east Channel, intending to cross over through the first passage, and while I was in the act of entering the pass the Captain who observed this ran to me, all in a Passion, and wanted to know of me where I was going. I answered him in his question, that I was going to Albany, for I was determined not to be eternally thus abused in the presence of the passengers. With that he sprang up on the platform, [and] renched the wheel from me. Here I had like to put Mr. fultons request into execution, but upon sudden reflection, I thought of two evils it would be best to choose the least, and accordingly I left the [wheel] and resigned it to him, at the same time telling him that he was going on to the flat, Calling aloud to the passengers, which had now gathered to hear what was going on, and requested them to take notice, that Wiswall had taken the wheel from me by force that he would run her A ground. When her head was just entering upon the flat I told him of it. She now began to Loose her speed but the swell cam runing from a storm and lifted her so that she made shift to keep her in motion and so we made out to drag over for it was completely dragging. He kept the wheel untill she was over; and I believe glad enuph he was. I believe had she but stoped it would have ben very serious for him. I was advised by the passengers to protest against him and that they would all sign it with [me]. Although he had violated his word to me, I could not forget the golden rule, to do by others as you would wish other[s] do by you. Wiswall always

⁹ Pease Journal, p. 126

the first passage, and while I was in the act of entering the ship the
 Captain who observed this ran to me, ^{all in a passion} and wanted to know of me what
 I was going. I answered him in his question, that I was going to Al-
 bury, for I was determined not to be eternally thus abused in the
 presence of the passengers, with that he sprang up on the platform
 & reached the wheel from me, here I had like to put Mr. Jettens
 request into execution, but upon sudden reflection, I thought of
 two evils, it would be but to choose the least, and accordingly I left the
 and resigned it to him, at the same time telling him that he was
 going on to the flat, calling aloud to the passengers, which had now
 gathered to hear, what was going on, and requested them to take
 notice, that Wismall had taken the wheel from me by force, &
 that he would run her a ground, when her head was just entering
 upon the flat I told him of it, he now showed marks of alarm
 and when the wheel was on I also told him of it, she now began
 to loose her speed but the swell came running from a stern and
 lifted her, so that she made shift to keep her in motion and so
 we made out to drag over for it was completely dragging, he kept the
 wheel untill she was over: and I believe glad enough he was, I
 believe had she ^{by the passengers} but stopped it would have ben very serious for him
 I was advised to protest against him and that they would all
 sign it with, although he had violated his word to me, I could not
 forget the golden rule, to do by others as you would wish others do
 by you, Wismall always appeared to my friend, as I have said
 before, only on those occasions, previous to this I had ben ap-
 proved this boat the ensuing season, by the Chanselor, for they
 were to build another, the ensuing season, for Wismall, and had
 he not interfered with me in this way I make no doubt but
 it would have ben the case, this came to the knowledge of David
 Mandevell, who ever after this endeavored to insinuate him self into
 the good graces of Wismall and representing me to Wismall as best and
 suited his design to effect a separation between me and the boat
 and I make no doubt, but he made many a false representation.

appeared to [be] my friend, as I have said before, only on those occasions.”¹⁰

As though constant struggles with Wiswall were not enough, now David Mandeval reenters the picture as a minor Mephistopheles, eventually causing Barzillai to pack his chest and leave the boat. The story of their quarrel ends, of course, with the case for Pease’s own vindication, proved to his satisfaction by a letter from Wiswall with which the North River narrative comes to an abrupt close.

“Preveous to this I had been assured this bo[t] the ensuing season, by the Chansalor,¹¹ for they were to build another the ensuing season for Wiswall and had he not interfeared with me in this way I make no doubt that it would have ben the case. This came to the knoledge of David Mandeval, who ever after this endeavor’d to insinuate him self into the good graces of Wiswall as best suited his design to efect a seperation between me and the Captⁿ and I make no doubt but he made many A false representation. The 4th of July was to be celebrated at Albany by the citzens and for that purpose the Steamboat was procured for them for the Occasion, and as I understood the Captain was allowed the proffits after deducting the expenses arising from her being in motion such as wood and provisions. Some few days after this Mandevil handed me three dollars, said it was given him by Wiswall for me, but I was informed afterwards that a much Larger sum had been handed him. I never Said any thing to Wiswall on the subject, for I knew that my time was belonging to the boat and if that the owners had made him this as a complement, he had ben so good as to give a part to me, although I thought it rather singular that he should give it to Mandeval. But every day brought some new thing to my understanding. Mandeval from A ship carpenter at 18 dollars p^r month now began to think himself a Compleat pilot, and that if I could only be put out of the way he was quallified for the command of this boat another season. No[w] to efect this he complaind of his wages being too small, although in the Spring he was content to agree to go all the season for them. At Last he prevailed on the Captain, so far as to try his skill to reduce my wages, and add to his. One evening I was sent for into the Cabben, where was Wiswall and Mr. Edward Livingstone¹² siting. Wiswall commenced

¹⁰ Pease Journal, pp. 126-127

¹¹ Robert Livingston, Chancellor of New York, 1777-1801, and “partner” to Fulton in the steamboat enterprise

¹² Brother of Robert Livingston

his discourse by saying that Mandeval was not Satisfied with his wages, as he had to pilot the boat in turn with me, and that he thought it no more than right I should deduct five dollars and add to his and make each of us 25 dollars. I told him that I had agreed to sail with him for thirty dollars and that I was satisfied and that if mandeval was not, to give him more or compel him to abide by the articles he had signed or Let him Leave the boat. As to my making any deduction I should not. I furthermore told him that if [he] would settle with me and pay me off, I would Leave the boat and then they would be enabled to advance Mandeval's wages. This he refused to do. I said if the owners of the boat was in want of the money and more than I was, they was at liberty to keep it and if that he would give me A passage to New Baltimore and land me I would Leave the boat. O! yes said Wiswall I will land you. I then Left the Cabbin and went on deck, and never after done any duty. The next day at 9 was our hour to sail. When we started Mandeval did not speak to me during the morning, or on our passage down for he took the helm and I left him at it, where he has remained ever since for ought I know. The fact is he has been Wiswall's Pilot ever since, but never has arived to the pinnacle he so fondly anticipated. How he should be so vane as to Even think of it I know not, without any learning fiting or qualifying him for that station, but I suppose I can assign the reason for Wiswalls retaining him. One is that I Learnt him the river, of which he was totally ignorant of when he first Commenced. All he could possibly no was no[t] great, for never acting as either A Commander, or pilot, but only a few times passing as a Carpenter passenger. The other reason is Mandeval has compleatly got Wiswall under his thumb, and I believe [he] dare not discharge him unless [by] his volentary request. It may be supposed by Wiswall that I am totally ignorant of this great mistery but if he will but only recollect the occasion that Led us to keep so strict a Watch over the boat with a Loaded gun &c he cannot remain long in ignorance; but for this rule, if you cannot do any good do no evil, I might have said more on the subject. So for the preasant will only say, that when I came near Newbaltimore I passed my chest on deck and to the gang way, and by Wiswall['s] permission had the boat Lowered down into the water and when the wheels were stoped for the purpose of landing me, the Clerk Mr. Kellogg brought me A Letter from the Captain, which if I had only had time to perused and consulted my interest I Might have remained under my articles, and after securing my self A place in the boat the ensuing summer, I then could got my pay of him, for the Law under such articles would

have compeled him to it, And some think I would do right in bringing him to a Compliance. At any rate I Left her, and Lost all my wages that was due me for some I had receiv'd. Meantime here follows the Letter

Mr. B. Pease, If I may Be permitted to Address a few Lines to you By way of Advice, I think you could Not take A worse Step than to Leave the employ you are Now in, as you well Know the Owners are Building A New Boat, you well know they have No one to take Charge of Her, at Present, and Should you Conduct Your Self In A manner to please it is very Probabal You may have her. Further to Leave the Boat at this time will Have no good Efect to an agreeable Settlement. You must weigh the thing on your mind well, & Not Bee two hastay in main While
Remain yours

Signed

Steamboat Oct 19, 1808

S. Wiswall”¹³

Following the Hudson River experience, Pease’s journals indicate that he went to sea again, recording at least five more voyages during which in addition to the usual whaling-sealing activities he suffered diverse calamities, among them shipwreck, imprisonment aboard an English ship and fire aboard. Even so, he was a seaman, no river man, and one suspects that the ocean dangers he faced were more suited to his temperament than the struggle for power he encountered on “the Steamboat.” The North River provided him a sorry summer. The question of whether he was as blameless in its events as he protests remains unanswered .



¹³Pease Journal, pp. 127-130