THE PITTSBURGH AND CINCINNATI PACKET LINE: MINUTE BOOK, 1851-1853
ELISABETH M. SELLERS

On January 31, 1835, an editorial in the Pittsburgh Gazette informed subscribers that the "sore grievance to travelers, on the western waters, that there was no dependance to be placed upon any assurance that steam boats would start at any particular hour" was about to be corrected by the establishment of a daily line of boats that would "commence running from this city to Louisville, on Monday, the 23d of February next." Although so-called "lines" of boats, "regular or occasional," had been operating for several years from Pittsburgh to Louisville, Nashville, St. Louis, the Illinois River, the upper Mississippi, and the Missouri, the Pittsburgh & Louisville Steam Packet Line, advertised for the first time in this issue of the Gazette, was the inaugurator of daily steamboat service between Pittsburgh and western ports—Wheeling, Cincinnati, and Louisville.¹

Between this year, 1835, and the early 1850's, steamboat traffic on the Ohio was at its height. During this period there was a tendency toward organization in trade, which was reflected in attempts to regulate

¹ William Thaw to Robert P. Nevin, September 8, 1886, Thaw Papers (Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania).
passenger and freight service on the rivers. Individual steamboat owners and mercantile companies became aware of the advantages of combining their interests, and other "lines" of boats, similar to the Pittsburgh and Louisville line, were formed, principally on a basis of coöperative agreement as to running time and cargo regulations. The forwarding and commission merchants of Pittsburgh, who in 1836 agreed to adopt uniform rates for receiving and forwarding merchandise (ten cents per hundred pounds) and heavy articles of produce and flour (five cents per hundred pounds), nearly all had some interest in each boat of the lines by which they shipped.

One of the most important of these loosely coöperative organizations was the Pittsburgh and Cincinnati Packet Line, which provided daily service between those points. From the year 1844, when its boats, although independently operated, were organized as a "company," to 1856, when its packets were finally removed from the trade, this line ran the gamut of experience of steam-packet service on the upper Ohio. In 1846 "big fast and Extravagantly furnished boats began to be built," which, according to William Thaw, partner in the commission house of Clarke & Thaw from 1840 to 1855 and secretary of the Pittsburgh and Cincinnati line in 1851 and 1852, "made that name a marked one all over the Mississippi Valley & formed the main & most conspicuous passenger route between the East & west." These "big fast" boats averaged about 230 feet in length: the "Messenger No. 2," which was brought out in the winter or spring of 1846, was 242 feet long and had chimneys 76½

2 Charles H. Ambler, A History of Transportation in the Ohio Valley, 162 (Glendale, Calif., 1932).
3 Pittsburgh Gazette, April 12, 1836.
6 Thaw to Robert P. Nevin, September 8, 1886, Thaw Papers. Thaw wrote in this letter, "I owned in over 150 different Steamboats between 1840 & 1859, Some not connected with Pg traffic—but most were."
feet high from the water; the "Hibernia No. 2," launched in 1847, was 225 feet in length, with chimneys 72 1/2 feet high; and the "Brilliant," which came out in 1848, was 257 feet long, with chimneys 71 feet high.\(^7\)

A report in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* early in 1850 estimated that "of the trade and travel arriving at and departing from the Pennsylvania public works... one third of the freight and at least one half of the passengers are transported in the regular Cincinnati packets. These packets are seven in number, costing from thirty to forty thousand dollars each, carrying from three hundred to three hundred and fifty passengers... making their trip of five hundred miles and back with great regularity within seven days." In 1852 it was reported that "each packet transports annually thirty thousand nine hundred and sixty tons of freight, and twelve thousand passengers" and that since the establishment of the line it had transported between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati "nearly a million of passengers."\(^8\)

In 1851 this line underwent a reorganization, and the captains and owners of the various packets met together "to prepare a plan of Union & List of wages, and to devise such other regulations for the better management of the Line as may seem neccessary." The "Record of Plan of Union" and "Minute Book of General Meetings of Captains and Owners," together with the "Minute Book of the Executive Committee of Seven," kept from September, 1851, to January, 1853, illustrate the problems confronting the owners of steam packets of the period and their changing rules and methods of operating, adopted to meet rapidly shifting conditions.\(^9\)

The names of the firms represented by the packet line at the time of its reorganization in 1851 are still familiar ones in the Pittsburgh region: W. Bingham & Co., Hays & Black, David Holmes, Clarke & Thaw, James Holmes, and A. & W. K. Nimick. These firms on September 18,

\(^7\) *Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 3, 1852.
\(^8\) *Pittsburgh Gazette*, February 18, 1850; March 3, 1852. For a review of the early history of the line, see Stanton, argument, in *The Wheeling Bridge Case*.

\(^9\) The "Pittsburgh and Cincinnati Packet Line Book," a partially filled notebook containing these records, is in the Thaw Papers. Unless otherwise noted the excerpts quoted here are from this book.
1851, sent out the following invitation: "You are requested to attend a meeting of the Captains and owners of the Pittsburgh and Cincinnati Packets to be held at 3 PM on Thursday the 25th of Sept at The Office of The Western Insurance Co."

On September 25, "in pursuance of the above invitation," the captains of seven boats met with their owners: Captain Dean of the "Buckeye State"; Captain Stone of the "Keystone State"; Captain Batchellor of the "Hibernia No. 2"; Captain Birmingham of the "Cincinnati"; Captain Grace of the "Brilliant"; Captain Kountz of the "Pittsburgh"; and Captain Klinefelter of the "Messenger No. 2." In general, each captain had a part interest in his boat; for example, the "Messenger No. 2" was owned in sixteenths as follows: Captain Klinefelter, one-sixteenth; William Bingham, one-sixteenth; Robert S. Hays, three-sixteenths; George Black, two-sixteenths; Clarke & Thaw, five-sixteenths; A. & W. K. Nimick, two-sixteenths; and Albert Culbertson, two-sixteenths.

At the first meeting it was resolved that a committee be formed to draw up a plan of union and to make recommendations as to captains' salaries and wages of the crews. The plan of union, presented at the following meeting on September 29, called for the formation of an executive committee of seven members, on which one representative from each of the seven boats, chosen by the owners of that boat, would serve. The executive committee would have full authority:

1. To arrange connexions with canal, Steam Boat, Stage, or Rail Lines, by through tickets or otherwise.
2. To provide and secure permanent and convenient [wharf boats] at wharves for the whole Line at the different ports.
3. To contract for an efficient System of Telegraphic Reports.
4. To direct the advertising, printing and publishing.
5. To fix rates of freight or passage, and to change them, on suggestion of any of the Captains.
6. To Establish, and on consultation with the Officers of the Boats, vary, the hours of departure from Cincinnati and Pittsburgh,
7. And generally to manage all matters connected with the affairs and business of the Line....

10 The office of the Western Insurance Company, which was incorporated in 1849, was at 92 Water Street, between Wood and Market. See Pittsburgh business directories for 1850-57.
This Executive Committee shall be appointed and shall have authority until the close of the Packet Season in the year 1852.

The Committee shall have no right, to interfere with the private management in her internal affairs of any separate or individual Boats, nor to change the routes of the trips, the rights, responsibilities and powers of the owners of each Boat to remain unaltered by this plan of Union, so far as they may pertain to matters not affecting the Line as a Line.

The committee appointed to draw up this plan and to devise a list of wages further reported: "That as a majority of the Captains have already agreed with their owners to take One Thousand dollars a year for their services, and in view of the fact that many of the owners were under the impression that the Captain’s Salary was established at $1000.pr year, we do not recommend any specific sum, but would advise that the owners of each boat separately arrange the Salary of their Captains, For the other persons employed on the Boats, we recommend that the following rates ... be not in any way or manner, exceeded." According to these rates, a first clerk would receive nine hundred dollars a year; a second clerk, fifty dollars a month; a first mate, forty dollars a month if his boat were laid up, seventy-five dollars “running”; and a second mate, thirty dollars a month. Twenty dollars a month was the rate fixed for a watchman; one hundred and fifty dollars for a pilot; seventy-five and fifty dollars, respectively, for a first and second engineer; thirty dollars for a third engineer and a blacksmith; forty-five dollars for a carpenter; and fifty and thirty dollars, respectively, for the first and second stewards. First, second, and third cooks were to receive, according to their places on the scale, forty, twenty, and fifteen dollars a month; one pastry cook could make thirty-five dollars, and a second one, presumably an assistant, fifteen. A pantry man could receive twenty dollars; a Texas man” eighteen dollars; and a “chamberman” fifteen “& no washing on the Boat.” Firemen and deck hands were to receive twenty dollars, and cabin boys, “their number to be watched & kept down,” twelve to fifteen dollars.

Lists of “Rates of Freights” and of rates of “through & way Passages  freight on stock, horses, skiffs, Mules, Etc” were then proposed. The list of freight rates to be charged on the packets reads as follows:

11 The pilot house was often known as the “Texas.”
Iron & nails 8 to 10¢  8 to 10
Pittsburgh Country Lots pr 100 12½ to 15
Eastern goods generally pr 100  20
Carriages, Furniture, Looking Glasses \{ pr 100  25
Pianos, when shipped alone \}
Large Lots of
Bales over 10 in number \} pr 100  15
Hardware Queensware or other heavy freight
Single Packages strictly each 1.00
Ditto belonging to regular merchants .75
Oysters refrigerator full 2.00
Ditto up empty 1.00
in Barrels & boxes pr 100 25
Specie or Bank Notes pr 1000$ 1.00

The committee that reported these plans to the meeting of captains and owners on September 29 further recommended "a sacrifice of all feelings of jealousy or rivalry, among the parties interested, and a thorough Union of their Strength under some System of Organization which will present the Line as an unit. In their opinion a continuance of the want of harmonious co-operation, must in the end prove ruinous to the interests of the Line, whereas the adoption of any efficient and enlightened plan of general management will secure certain and continued success, against all competition by land or water." All these recommendations, together with the plan of union, were unanimously adopted, and a resolution was made "that the Packets shall regularly and positively Leave Pittsburgh at 11 oclock AM each day and Cincinnati at 11½ AM each day."

To illustrate the methods of procedure of the executive committee and the type of problem that confronted its members, the following excerpts from the minutes of their meetings are quoted. On Saturday evening, November 8, 1851, David Holmes, James Holmes, and Robert S. Hays "were appointed a committee to contract for advertising Line in Journal & dispatch, and to ascertain cost of 100 large cards & 200 small cards either printed or lithographed ... A proposal for furnishing Coal deliverable into the bin of the Boats 1000 bu pr day from Dec 1 51 to July 1 was directed to be advertised. W Thaw was authorized to get
proposal from Point bakery for all bread & Crackers.” On November 18 various proposals for supplying coal were presented, and it was resolved “that W. H. Brown & Co bid at 3½ pr bushel delivered on board be accepted.” Proposals from newspapers to “advertise the Packets” were read at a meeting on December 20, and among those accepted were the bids of the Louisville Courier and the Louisville Journal, both for six months of daily advertising at thirty dollars; of the Baltimore American for six months at forty-nine dollars; and of the Philadelphia Inquirer for the same period at fifty dollars. At this same meeting it was resolved “that 75 pr 100 shall be the rate of frt pr 100 on all goods believed to be of extraordinary value & $5.00 for the chest... Coin Jewelry & Bank notes to be excepted & if carried at all to be $1.00 pr $1000$ as already determined.”

On January 27, 1852, “an agreement with Adams & Co. Express was authorised, for the packets to carry for them Express goods to Cincinnati at 50 cents pr 100 Express chest... at 100 pr 100 the above not to include coin, notes & Jewelry usual Bills of Lading to be given.” Rates from Cincinnati to Pittsburgh for express goods were to be “25¢ pr 100 Adams & Co engaging to withdraw the Suit began by them against Steamer Keystone State.” Further, “it was ordered that each member Should collect 50$ from his boat for the Committee fund”; and “Mr. Bingham was authorized to Engage Bredenthal to distribute Small boat bills in the Penn Rail Road Cars.”

Another entry in the minutes of January 27 exemplifies the concern of the packet owners in the famous controversy over the bridge then recently constructed across the Ohio at Wheeling. The sum of seventy dollars was appropriated to pay the expenses of two agents, or lobbyists, “to and at Harrisburgh to oppose the attempt making in the Legislature to withdraw the suit against the Wheeling Bridge.” From the beginning, Pittsburgh interests had opposed the building of this bridge because of its alleged interference with navigation and in 1849 had prevailed on the state legislature to take up their cause. Pennsylvania’s efforts on their behalf were unsuccessful, however, and the span across the Ohio was completed in October of that year. Pittsburgh, nevertheless, was deter-
determined to have the bridge declared unlawful, and Pennsylvania took the case to the Supreme Court. During this period, rivermen and packet owners, in an effort to prove the validity of their grievances, indulged in demonstrations such as unloading passengers and leveling smokestacks on approaching the bridge. The boats of the Pittsburgh and Cincinnati line were the largest then in the trade and hence were the chief ones affected by the "obstruction." 12

On November 10, 1849, according to a current report, the "Messenger No. 2" left Pittsburgh "with a large number of passengers"; at Wheeling "she found 20 feet [of] water in the channel. She rounded to above the bridge, and let herself down by ropes, stern foremost, until her chimneys came in contact with the bridge, showing that she could not go under, by seven feet. She hauled back, and cut her chimneys off, so as to permit her passage"; and on the next day "another of the regular packets, the Hibernia, arrived from Cincinnati... could not pass under the bridge by nine feet. The Wheeling people proposed to the captain to imitate the example of the Messenger, and cut off her chimneys," but the captain "indignantly refused to mutilate his boat, to pass an unauthorized obstruction, and discharged his passengers and freight below the bridge, and laid up his boat." 13 In February of the following year a report adopted by the Pennsylvania legislature, recorded in the Gazette, stated that "the largest and best packets require eighty feet from the water... The suspension bridge at Wheeling is built on an inclined plane from the Virginia shore to the island... Ordinary floods leave but fifty feet space for the passage of boats requiring eighty." The report further described the plight of the "Hibernia," when she had been "stopped by the bridge" when the water was at twenty-two feet: "In order to get to Pittsburgh, to take her place in the line... her hold was filled with water by scuttling, and she succeeded with great hazard, in

12 Information on the Wheeling Bridge case is in Stanton, argument, in The Wheeling Bridge Case. See also Pittsburgh and Wheeling newspapers, 1849–53, especially the Pittsburgh Gazette, July 14, August 23, November 13, 1849; February 18, 1850; the Daily Commercial Journal (Pittsburgh), February 4, 1852; and the Pittsburgh Daily American and General Advertiser, February 6, 1852. A discussion of the case is in Ambler, History of Transportation, 218–229.

13 Pittsburgh Gazette, November 13, 1849.
getting through ... one of her chimneys was caught by a projecting spike, and wrenched so as to require to be taken down."¹⁴ One other mention of the part played by the owners of these packets in the litigation against the bridge company is made in the minutes of the executive committee of the line: on April 30, 1852, it was resolved "that Each packet Should advance three Hundred dollars to reimburse Mr Jno Holmes the amount he is now in advance on a/c of the Suit against the Wheeling Bridge—$2049."

At a meeting on March 26, David Holmes was authorized by the committee "to proceed to Cincinnati & effect there the best arrangement in his judgement attainable for the wharfage and wharfboat accomodations of the Packets." On April 30, however, it was decided that "Mr D Holmes being unable to go to Cincti ... Mr J Holmes was authorised to contract with new city wharf boat at foot of Broadway Cincinnati for the use of the Packets."

On September 24, at the second meeting of the owners and captains, all the members of the executive committee were re-elected to serve until July 1, 1853, and were "duly empowered to make all negociations relating to the general business" of the line. The president of the committee, Robert S. Hays, was "authorised to advertise for proposals for Coal at Pittsbg for the year and also to correspond with makers for the legal suply of the Life Boats and Life preservers under the new law."

At a meeting of the committee on October 2, it was decided that "W H Brown & Co having offered as low as any other [four and one-fourth cents per bushel] & having fulfilled his engagements for the previous year Satisfactorily" should again be awarded the contract for furnishing coal.

The minutes of the next meeting reflect the problems of adjustment to the activities of the railroads that confronted steamboat owners of the

¹⁴ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, February 18, 1850. The opinion of the Supreme Court, delivered in March, 1852, was favorable to Pennsylvania, but Wheeling, in August of that year, succeeded in having a law passed in Congress authorizing the bridge as a post-road necessity and requiring the height of smokestacks to be regulated to admit the passage of boats. Nevertheless agitation against the bridge continued in Pittsburgh until interest there shifted to the railroads. Judge McLean's opinion is reported in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 3, 1852, and in the *Daily Commercial Journal* (Pittsburgh), March 3, 1852. See also Ambler, *History of Transportation*, 223-229.
period and also touch upon the beginning of the rivalry between the Pittsburgh and Cincinnati Packet Line and the Union Line of packets, established that year in anticipation of the completion of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to Wheeling. On October 5, 1852, a verbal report of the information gathered by Captain Grace and Captain Stone in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Cincinnati “on matters relative to the interests of the Line” was read:

They reported that in Baltimore they ascertained that Mr Swan Pres of B & O RRCo\(^*\) had engaged to connect with and favor the Wheeling Line of Boats, and the feeling with some of the Directors of that Road, and of many influential citizens of Baltimore was adverse to the course of Mr Swan—No promise of any business for Pitt & Cin Line was obtained—

In Philada Mr Thompson Pres of the Central RailRoad\(^1^6\) assured Capts Grace & Stone of the hearty co-operation of his road with the P & C Line—offering to put the rate of passage to 2½ pr mile (about 7.25) between Phil & Pittsg on through passengers, and further assured them that the rate would be reduced still lower if found necessary in competing with the B. & O. RRCo. and the Wheeling Line

At Cincinnati, the owners of the Cincinnati & Louisville Mail Line & of the Louisville & S* Louis Line, expressed their willingness to enter into arrangements with P & C Line, on favorable terms and agreed that a Committee of their Number would visit Pittsg to Confer with a Committee of the P & C Line, as soon as they were informed that such a committee was ready to meet them.

Other business was then taken up, and a motion was passed to the effect that “the Expenses incurred in an attempt to remove two Snags last Spring at Logstown” \(...\)$81.83 be paid by Committee, and also that \(1^{50}\) paid Squire Steel for taking affidavits of officers of S[team] B[oat] Brilliant about detention by Flood in April last by Wheeling Bridge, be paid by Committee.” Apparently the need of tightening up the organization and keeping a check on money matters was felt at this time, for it was also resolved that “no contracts shall be entered into, involving the Expenditure of money, without the Consent of the Committee, and that no meetings shall be valid unless notices be Sent to the members.”

\(^{15}\) Thomas Swann was president of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad from 1848 to 1853.
\(^{16}\) J. Edgar Thomson, who became president of the Pennsylvania Railroad in February, 1852.
\(^{17}\) On the site of the Indian village of that name, now a part of lower Ambridge.
On October 25, however, the captains' wages were raised to twelve hundred dollars a year, and an additional provision was made to the effect that "each boat shall have two Steersmen employed by the Captain, whose wages shall not exceed twenty five dollars per month." Pilots were to receive twenty-five dollars less per month than during the previous year, but all other wages "shall be conformed to the list furnished the Captains by Committee one year ago," and "the Captains shall be notified that the Committee will rigidly insist upon prompt and faithful Compliance with the foregoing resolutions." By January 19 of the following year, however, it was "agreed informally that wages List should not be required to be conformed to by Captains."

The time of departure of the packets from Pittsburgh was changed by resolution of the committee members on November 2, 1852, to ten o'clock in the morning instead of eleven; but on November 30 it was changed to twelve noon "to meet the new Rail Road time," and the boats were to have the privilege "of waiting ½ hour for passengers from depot." At this meeting also the president of the committee was directed to acquaint the agent "of the Cleaveland & Wellsville RailRoad that we accept his proposition to take from Wellsville to Cincinnati deck Passengers at $1.00 Cabin 5$ & frt on Butter & Cheese at 12½ pr 100 payable cash—provided the Packets get all that business as long as they are running." A letter was sent to Mr. B. Crawford, "Supervising Inspector of steamboats for district," asking for information regarding the new law in relation to carrying life preservers and boats, and one of the members was authorized to go to New York and procure such boats as would comply with the law "& get them out to Pittsg forthwith."

On December 8 it was reported that "Hays & Thaw saw Mr Thompson Pres Pen Rail Road at Monongahela house & arranged with him that Packets should take the through rail tickets to Cincinnati & he would allow the boats 600 for each." The last entry in the minute book is that recording a meeting on January 19, 1853, at which "W Bingham was...

---

18 This famous hotel was built in 1839-40 at the foot of Smithfield Street in Pittsburgh. It was destroyed in the fire of 1845 but was rebuilt in 1847. See John N. Boucher, ed., A Century and a Half of Pittsburg and Her People, 4:168 (New York, 1908). The building was finally razed in the spring of 1935.
authorized to provide for the distribution of Packet bills daily in Cars on Columbia Road. T S Clarke was to do same at Mountain House. G. Black & D Holmes committee to Cincinnati to fix Ticket with Mail Line to Louisville & St Louis."

The downfall of the Pittsburgh and Cincinnati Packet Line in the next decade was due not so much to the direct rivalry of the railroads as to the indulgence of the "company" in a sudden burst of ruinous competition with the Union Line, a competition that was, however, superinduced by the stimulation it received from the railroads. The project for the completion of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which reached Wheeling in 1853, "led to the formation of a line of packets from Wheelg & Cin of new boats as large fine & fast as the Pg ones—They ruined both lines, & altho the rail competition wd have accomplished the Same result a very few Years later the attempt to run two daily lines of Costly passenger boats was death to both—and they died—a lingering and impoverished death—The Allegheny & Pittsburgh built in 1851.2 to Succeed the Hibernia No 2 and the Clipper No 2—were kept on the route until 1856—Had they been grounded on a bar, without insurance in 1853, and totally burned up it would have been thousands of dollars Saved to their owners." 40

It is interesting to speculate on the extent to which the experience and knowledge of coöperative methods gained by packet owners in the late forties and early fifties contributed to the revival of steamboat traffic on the Ohio after the Civil War. Experiments at organization and attempts to provide efficient transportation service, such as are evidenced in the proposals and resolutions recorded at the meetings of the owners of the Pittsburgh and Cincinnati packets, may have been considerable factors in the successful restoration, in the seventies, of regular packet service between these cities, which later resulted in the establishment of another steamboat line somewhat similar in organization to the earlier one. 41 This new line of boats was incorporated in 1893; although entirely unrelated, in so far as ownership was concerned, to the first line of the name, it likewise bore the title "Pittsburgh and Cincinnati Packet Line."

40 A hotel on the Allegheny Portage Railroad, near Hollidaysburg.
41 William Thaw to Robert P. Nevin, September 8, 1886, Thaw Papers.
41 Ambler, History of Transportation, 291–293.