



Windsor Locks Canal & Postmark

W.J. Duffney

It is difficult for us today to imagine the Connecticut River with dozens of steamboats in simultaneous operation — stately and seedy alike, and the noise. This beautiful waterway was called “the long tidal river” by the native Americans. It is flawed only by one set of shallow terraces, sometimes called the Enfield Falls, left by glaciers eons ago. The river cuts right through the middle of New England and was therefore critical to transportation and travel. To make the river completely navigable for its entire length, the imperfection had to be conquered. Because of this a classic pictorial postmark was created.

The northern portion of the Windsor area was known ages before the arrival of Europeans as a fording place for east-west travelers crossing the *Quonehtacut River*, along an ancient Indian pathway. Forging was made possible at this point because of the existence of shallow stream terraces. New settlers from Massachusetts Bay Colony merely followed the old trail to a richly fertile plain with access to the river that cut through the heart of the new colonies in 1663. There they settled the town of Windsor, the northern section of which was called *Pine Meadow* (Windsor Locks). The ford was the only one available on the river within the new Colony of Connecticut.

The terraces presented a significant impediment to shipping and river travel to the north. (Earlier, Adrian Block, the first white man to discover the river, had to turn his boat around when he encountered the obstacle on his first trip in 1614.) Large cargoes destined for northern communities had to be transported around the terraces by teamsters on land and then reloaded on boats to continue; only flatbottomed boats with light loads could be poled through the terraces. The portage cost time and money. On the east bank of the river the town of Warehouse Point was established by William Pynchon, who built storage barns there to accommodate the transfer of goods.

As early as the 17th century ferryboats operated in the Windsor area, notably the one run by various generations

of the Bissell family. A ferry was opened in 1783 between Pine Meadow and Warehouse Point.

Steam

The merchants of Hartford and New Haven were in direct competition from the very beginning. Because of its location Hartford had the edge on up-river trade. The upper river was opened by canals at South Hadley, Bellows Falls, and Turners Falls. Inspired by this, and also by the success of the Erie Canal in New York, a group of New Haven businessmen applied for and received a charter in 1822 to build a canal from New Haven through Farmington to Northampton — the Farmington Canal. Not to be caught napping, a committee of Hartford merchants obtained a similar charter just two years later as the Connecticut River Company. They planned a canal that would circumvent the terraces. With the help of other people in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont (once called ‘New Connecticut’), they proposed to open navigation for almost the entire length of the river.

The Hartford committee sought to prove the feasibility of their proposal, and also promote interest, by sending a light draft steamboat on a trial run up river. The *Barnet* was built drawing only twenty-two inches of water, which helped the vessel traverse the rapids. The seventy-five

foot long, fourteen and a half foot wide, boat reflected the design of the up river canals.

In November 1826 the *Barnet* became the first steamboat to attempt travel above Hartford. As a young boy Jabez H. Hayden, who became a prominent figure and chronicler of local history, was an eyewitness to the event:

...the steamboat, *Barnet*, was on her way up from Hartford, a lad of my own age and myself took our guns and powder horns and hastened to the river to salute the first steamboat to come above Hartford. The boat was in sight a mile below, being saluted by musketry from both sides of the river, and the sound of the exhaust steam from her low pressure engine equaled the report of the musketry. When the boat reached us we opened fire, and the crowd of men and boys cheered themselves hoarse, and we loaded and fired until we exhausted our stock of powder.

The *Barnet* was not successful at conquering the shallows until her second attempt, which took place in late November. The steamboat was aided by two scow-boats with thirty “falls-men” who wielded poles to help the ascent. The success was celebrated at John Morgan’s Coffee House in Hartford with a large crowd that included several people from Springfield. The *Barnet* reached Brattleboro, Vermont, on December 12th and returned a few days later.

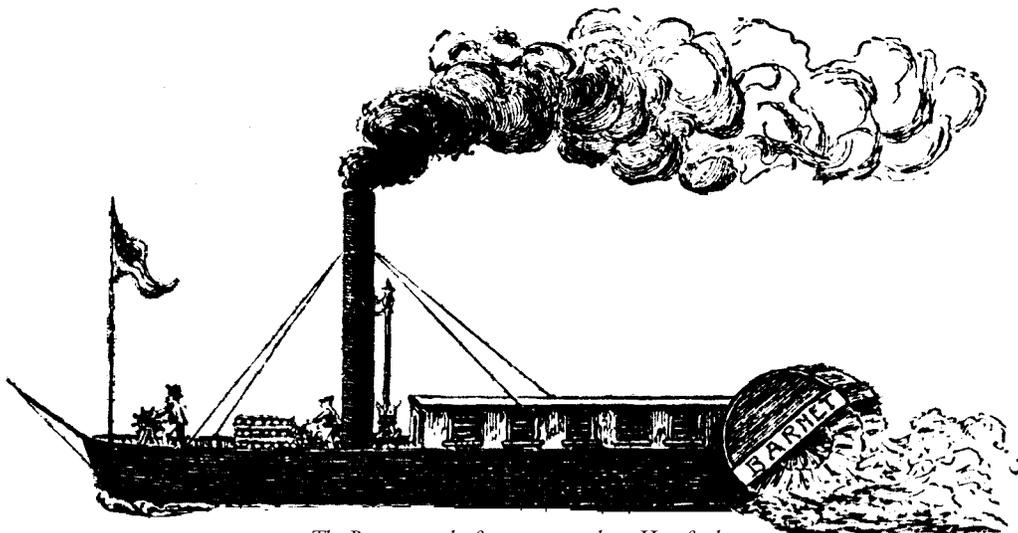
The Canal

Four hundred sturdy Irishmen from Cork and Galway dug the new canal, five and a half miles long by seventy feet wide. The locks, however, were particularly narrow. The upper lock was in Suffield, and the lower lock was in Windsor. Jabez H. Hayden, the eyewitness mentioned before, was actually present and “followed on” the day the engineers came to measure out the area for the dig. He has left us with this description of the work done by the Irish:

They dug and removed the earth with wheelbarrows on plank runs of the width of a single plank, and when near the bottom of the excavation it required a run of steep grade, and strong muscles, to dump the barrow on the tow path... it took good nerves and a steady gait to wheel a load and dump it into the proper place.

The canal opening was celebrated on November 11, 1829. It had eight locks, and overcame a fall of thirty feet. The rival Farmington Canal, which proved to be difficult to maintain, was not fully operational from New Haven to Northampton until 1835. Neither project was a financial success because of competition from the newly developing railroad systems and a major financial panic and depression which started in 1837. In 1845 the canals were plagued by a severe drought.

An odd armada of stern-wheel steamboats gradually appeared on the Connecticut River. Long and narrow, their design was similar to the *Barnet*, allowing them to fit into the locks and get over the stream terraces. (Fulton receives too much credit for the steamboat; John



The Barnet — the first steamer above Hartford.

Fitch, ironically born in South Windsor, was the first to successfully operate one, carrying thirty passengers upstream on the Delaware River in 1787.)

The famous author Charles Dickens, with characteristic sarcasm, described one of these strange crafts in his book *American Notes*. Dickens made a voyage in 1842 from Springfield to Hartford on the Connecticut River in one of the vessels:

It certainly was not called a small steam-boat without reason. I omitted to ask the question, but I should think it must have been about half a pony power. Mr. Papp, the celebrated Dwarf, might have lived and died happily in the cabin, which was fitted with common sash-windows like an ordinary dwelling-house. These windows had bright red curtains, too, hung on slack strings across the lower panes; so that it looked like the parlour of a Lilliputian public-house, which had got afloat in a flood or some other water accident, and was drifting nobody knew where. But even in this chamber there was a rocking-chair. It would be impossible to get anywhere, in America, without a rocking-chair.

I am afraid to tell how many feet short this vessel was, or how many feet narrow; to apply the words length and breadth to such measurement would be a contradiction in terms. But I can state that we all kept to the middle of the deck, lest the boat should unexpectedly tip over. The machinery, by some surprising process of condensation, worked between the deck and the keel, the whole forming a warm sandwich, about three feet thick...

After two hours and a half of this odd traveling (including a stoppage at a small town, where we were saluted by a gun considerably bigger than our own chimney), we reached Hartford...

Post Office

Alfred Smith, president of the Enfield Falls Canal Company, proposed to change the name of *Pine Meadow* to *Windsor Locks*, apparently to promote the use of water-powered manufacturing along the lower part of the canal. One source states that several 999 year leases were issued for property adjacent to the canal.

The Windsor Locks Post Office was opened in 1833 and located in a store near a grist mill owned by Charles Haskell Dexter. (Windsor Locks was not incorporated as a separate town until 1854.) The proprietor was appointed first postmaster. The first quarterly return from the office was less than three dollars, at a time when the rate for a single letter was 18³/₄¢. Dexter's small enterprise

grew from manufacturing wrapping paper from manila rope in a basement into today's very successful Dexter Corporation, the oldest continuously existing company in the state. Adding to the other ironies of this saga, a small stern-wheeler was built in 1866 named the *Charles H. Dexter*. The little boat took many trips on the Connecticut River "as far as a minnow could swim," finally sinking into mud, and becoming part of the foundation of the Hartford Electric Company.

The spring flood of 1854 was the worst since 1639 and was "higher than any of the Indians had ever known." On May 1st the flood level was at its height. Charles Dexter had a note due at a bank in Hartford that day. He chartered the small steamer *G.P. Goodsell*, to get to Hartford. Several other locals joined Dexter in making the best of the opportunity.

The mail was traveling by stage from Boston with the colorful Sam Cooley in charge. When he learned that it was impossible to get the stage by land to Hartford, he happily joined in putting the mail bags on the *Goodsell*.

The water was touching the bottom of the old Hartford bridge — no way to go under. This did not stop the steamer though; there was enough water that year to simply steam around the bridge. The center of the town was underwater also. Captain John Abbe piloted the steamboat up Front Street, moored next to Bowles Drug Store, where Postmaster Dexter got out and met his payment.

Postmarks

In Linn's Stamp News Richard B. Graham wrote that the Windsor Locks 'Boat-in-Canal' pictorial postmark is "possibly the most distinctive early handstamp of them all." It features a stern-wheeler going through a lock. One can conjecture that the design was used to advertise the canal and water power. These postmarks, along with the Collinsville axes, belong to a small genre of pictorial handstamps that combine a pseudo-advertising image with the post office name.

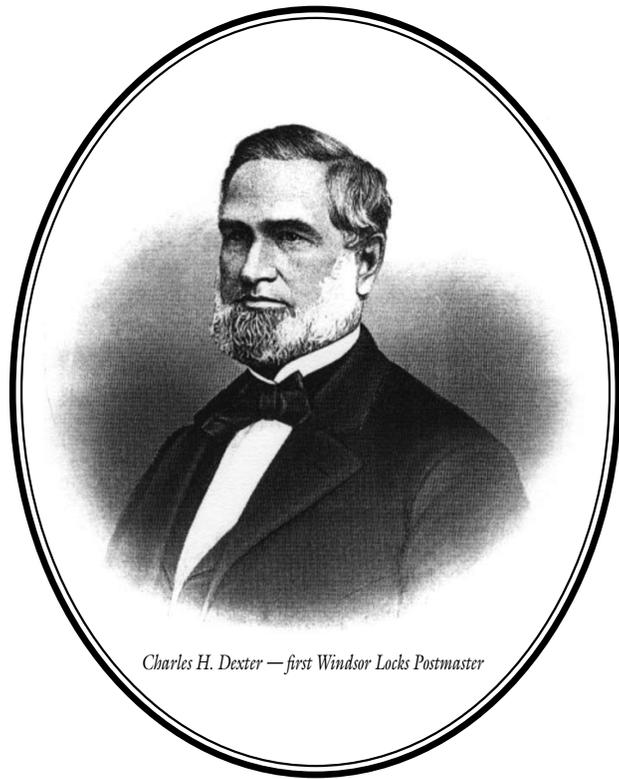
There are two types of Windsor Locks 'Boat-in-Canal' postmarks: *Type I* (earliest) has scrolling under 'CT' and 'KS' and uses large serif letters; *Type II* (later and slightly smaller) uses vertical parallel lines to execute the design. Both types normally have manuscript month and day. There are examples (*Type Ia*) with the month set in type within the mortise after 'CT.' The day is written by hand as usual. Both are found in red ink, however, *Type I* is also found in black. The *Type I* postmark was used throughout the 1830s until 1843, when it was apparently replaced with *Type II*. A census appears at the end.



Windsor Locks — October 22, 1833, FL to New Bedford, MA; 12½¢ rate; Type Ia.
(Schuyler Rumsey Auctions)



Windsor Locks — April 8, 1844 FL; 6¢ rate; finest example of Type II; ex-Haas, Risvold, Robertson.
(RA Siegel Auctions)



Charles H. Dexter — first Windsor Locks Postmaster



The Windsor Locks Canal looking south with the last locks opened before entering the river; I-95 bridge in background.



View of Windsor Locks showing the beginning locks at the lower left continuing parallel with the Connecticut River, O. H. Bailey Publishers, 1877. (Library of Congress)

Windsor Locks Boat-in-Canal Census

Type I = 40x22mm [scrolls under "CT" and "KS"]

Type Ia = Type I with month in type

Type II = 35x24mm [with vertical shading lines]



Windsor Locks — November 21 1837 FL; 12½¢ rate; finest example of Type I with 'PAID.' in scroll hs.
(RA Siegel Auctions)

Date	Type	Destination	Rate	Source
10-22-1833	Type Ia	New Bedford, MA "...we have a new Post Office...	12½¢	SR 39 12/6/2010, Lot 21
01-06-1835	Type I	Maine	18¾¢ 'Paid' in scroll hs	RCF 5/30/87, Lot 71
05-09-1835	Type Ia	Bath, NH	ms rate	RAS 9/17-20/79, Lot 87 [PFC #156203]
10-19-1835	Type I	Bath, NH	18¾¢	RAS 906, 2000, Lot 1334 ex-Judge Fay [PFC # 126 477]
06-06-1836	Type I	New Hampshire	PMFF	RAS 889, Lot 1816
07-07-1837	Type I	Yates, New York	18¾¢	RAS 692, 1988, Lot 18
11-21-1837	Type I	New York	12½¢	RAS 1088, 2014, Lot 42 red 'Paid' in scroll hs, Superb ex-Jarrett, Houser, Kramer
07-17-1839	Type Ia	A.P. Niles & Co Unk	PMFF C.H. Dexter, PM	Conland Collection

Date	Type	Destination	Rate	Source
08-27-1840	Type I	Middletown, CT	10¢	Graphic Only
12-10-1840	Type Ia	Springfield, MA	ms 'Free' PMFF	SR Sale 68, Lot 14 ex-Haas
12-29-1840	Type Ia	Bath, NH	18¾¢ written over 12½¢	RAS 790, Lot 1190
04-18-1841	Type I(?)	Bath, NH	18¾¢	DFK 608 3/6/01, Lot 75
04-22-1841	Type Ia	Bath, NH	18¾¢	RAS 863 2000, Lot 206
07-02-1841	Type I	Salisbury, CT	10¢	eBay - browsehouse
08-03-1841	Type I Over-inked	Amherst, MA	10¢	RAS 9/14-16/83, Lot 119 ex-Judge Fay [PFC #123 861]
01-24-1842	Type I	Bath, NH	18¾¢	DGP 9/25/82, Lot 48
02-28-1842	Type I	Bath, NH	18¾¢ red 'Paid' in scroll hs	DFK 699, Lot 3019
03-07-1842	Type I	Springfield, MA	PMFF Charles Dexter PM	RAS 803, 1998, Lot 1073
03-10-1842	Type ?	To Windsor Locks Forwarding Redirected to Bath, NH	18¾¢	Warmsley Archives Photo
06-20-1842	Type I	Bath, NH	18¾¢	Shrv 1/23-25, 1998, Lot 352 [PFC #323458]
08-10-1842	Type I	Baltimore, MD	18¾¢	RAS 1/30/74, Lot 114
09-05-1842	Type I	Bath, NH	18¾¢	[PFC #178197]
09-?8-1842	Type Ia	Baltimore, MD	18¾¢	Graphic Only
09-30-1842	Type Ia	Springfield, MA	PMFF Charles Dexter PM	RCF 5/30/87, Lot 72
12-21-1842	Type I	Springfield, MA	PMFF Charles Dexter PM	Conland Collection
01-29-1843	Type I	Bath, NH	18¾¢	Graphic Only
01-31-1843	Type I	Bath, NH	18¾¢	RAS 889 , Lot 1817
04-03-1843	Type II	Amherst, MA	10¢	Conland Collection

Date	Type	Destination	Rate	Source
04-22-1843	Type II	Amherst, MA	10¢	DFK 699, Lot 3020
06-16-1843	Type II	Bath, NH	18¾¢	RAS 820, 2000, Lot 405
08-09-1843	Type II	Bath, NH	18¾¢	RCF 1/26/86, Lot 1055
08-14-1843	Type II	Augusta, GA Forwarded to Newbern, NC	25¢	RAS 980 12/11-15/09, Lot 2098
09-19-1843	Type II	Bath, NH	18¾¢	RAS 2/18-20/81, Lot 65
01-08-1844	Type II	Bath, NH	18¾¢ 'Paid' hs	RCF 3/10/90, Lot 2132 ex-Judge Fay
03-04-1844	Type II	Bath, NH	18¾¢	RAS 2/18-20/81, Lot 66
03-12-1844	Type II	Bath, NH	18¾¢	RAS 790, 1997, Lot 1191
04-08-1844	Type II	North Granby, CT	6¢	Spink 121, Lot 693 Phila Mercury Site ex-Haas
05-06-1844	Type II	Augusta, ME	18¾¢	Private Collection
05-21-1844	Type II	Amherst, MA	10¢	DGP 5/15/87, Lot 102
<u>No Year Date Examples</u>				
03-26-NYD	Type II	Bath, NH	18¾¢	DFK 632 10/11/12, Lot 33
05-01-NYD	Type II	Bath, NH	18¾¢	RCF 5/20/95, Lot 98
05-09-NYD	Type Ia	Eben. Carlton PM, Bath, NH	ms 'f' PMFF	[PFC #156203]
05-24-NYD	Type I	North Granby, CT	6¢	[PFC #114 128]
05-25-NYD	Type Ia	Eben. Carlton PM, Bath, NH	ms 'f' PMFF	ETN Covers
06-09-NYD	Type I	Bath, NH	10¢	Meroni Sale, Lot 105
10-22-NYD	Type Ia	New Bedford, MA	12½¢	Meroni Sale, Lot 106

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