

The Steamer Merrimac: Stern Wheeler Excursions for Sunshine or Moonlight

In summers between June 6, 1892 and September 13, 1910, West Newbury's holiday making townsfolk boarded the steamer Merrimac, exchanging daily chores and cares for glorious adventures on the river and at the seaside. The Merrimac sailed between Haverhill and Black Rocks in Salisbury, stopping in Newburyport and sometimes other river towns along the way.

Boat traffic had long traversed the Merrimack River, carrying freight and passengers. As early as 1849, the steamer California served a regular route between Haverhill and Newburyport, stopping at both [Whetstone landing and Cheney's Ferry in West Newbury](#). In 1892 on Ring's Island, [Lemuel Marquand built the Merrimac as a pleasure boat](#): a stern-wheeler about 200 tons register, capable of boarding some [800 passengers](#), who often were entertained with band music during the trip. On May 31, 1892, the [Newburyport Daily News](#) reported that the Merrimac had been inspected and the steamer was "perfectly safe in every respect." In the years following, the [paper announced the Merrimac's first sailing](#) of the year, saluting summer's arrival.

The Merrimac carried day trippers upriver to Haverhill to see such spectacles as [Barnum's Circus](#) and the [cattle show](#) featuring plowing contests and draft oxen trials. Sometimes, the journey alone was worth the 25¢ fare: those leaving Newburyport or Salisbury could sail "[Up River by Moonlight!](#) ... Cadet Band will furnish music." Mostly, however, the Merrimac took excursionists from all over the Merrimack Valley for a day at Salisbury Beach, with twice-daily trips between Haverhill's steamboat landing Chase's Wharf to Salisbury's Black Rocks.

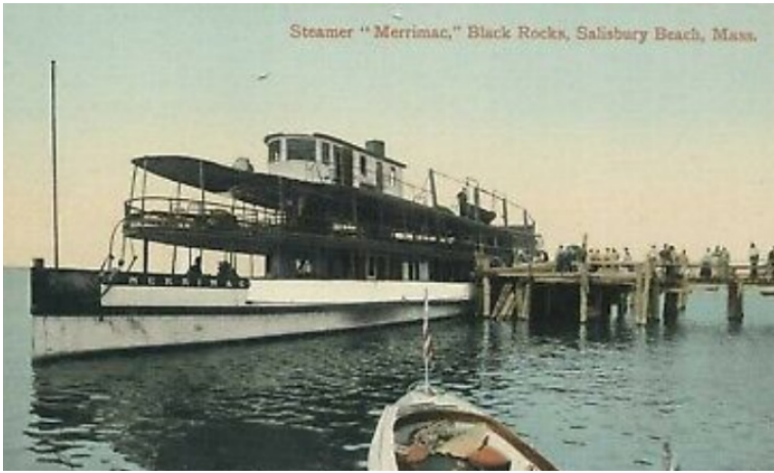
In the late 1800s to early 1900s, [Salisbury Beach](#) "was a wildly popular amusement and vacation destination, populated by several hotels and hundreds of cottages." Attractions included a dance hall, bowling alley, roller skating rink, and the "spiral thriller" roller coaster. Tourists on the Merrimac arrived at Black Rocks' wharf, [near the current boat ramp](#) at the southern end of the state reservation. They then boarded a [small electric trolley](#) to the beachfront's center. Often they [lunched](#) at the elegant 100-room Cushing Hotel, which opened in 1897 and was lost in the [Great Fire of 1913](#), which forever changed Salisbury Beach.

Merrymakers from West Newbury boarded the Merrimac from its primary ports and sometimes from Whetstone landing. Groups such as the [Grand Army of the Republic](#) organized multi-town outings, with stops along the river, including in West Newbury. The West Newbury Cadet Band arranged an annual "[West Newbury day on the steamer Merrimac](#)," traveling from Whetstone landing to Black Rocks and back. The landing, primarily a [coal and freight depot](#) lacking a passenger wharf, was viewed as an embarkation point in want of improvement. Townspeople hoped, in 1893, that "the steamboat company [would] [build a wharf at West Newbury](#) ... and have the steamer Merrimac make regular stops there on its down river trips." In [1896 a temporary wharf was installed](#) at Whetstone Landing for the annual Town excursion to Salisbury Beach, and in succeeding years citizens unsuccessfully petitioned [town meeting](#) for a new wharf and driveway "at a cost of three hundred and fifty dollars."

Disaster struck on the evening of Sunday, September 3, 1899: the [Merrimac was shipwrecked](#) in [West Newbury](#). In the dark on the return trip from Black Rocks the ship struck Currier's Rocks at low tide. At a spot [upriver of Rocks Bridge](#) near where Pentucket High School now stands, it was grounded, broken, and leaking badly. Some 300 passengers safely evacuated in small boats, but the Merrimac's condition was less robust. The [Daily News](#) headlined: "Will Never Float Again: But Little Prospect of Saving the Steamer Merrimac." Yet, on September 25th, "the steamer Merrimac went up river from West Newbury ... to her wharf in Haverhill [under her own steam](#). The boat looked somewhat the worst for her stay under water but nothing but what can be speedily remedied."

It was not the Merrimack River's treacherous rocks and currents, but rather competition from electric trolley cars that put an end to the steamer Merrimac. Its summer season started later in 1910, and in July it [ceased regular stops in Newburyport](#) because the "traffic to Newburyport only has been so light that the time consumed in making the stop was practically wasted." In May of 1911, it was announced that the Merrimac would likely not run that summer. "Since the [advent of electric cars](#)," it had become a money loser, ending the delightful days of the steamer Merrimac's river excursions.

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Source: [Ebay](#)

Source: [6/4/1892 Newburyport Daily News](#)

LIES WITH BROKEN BACK.

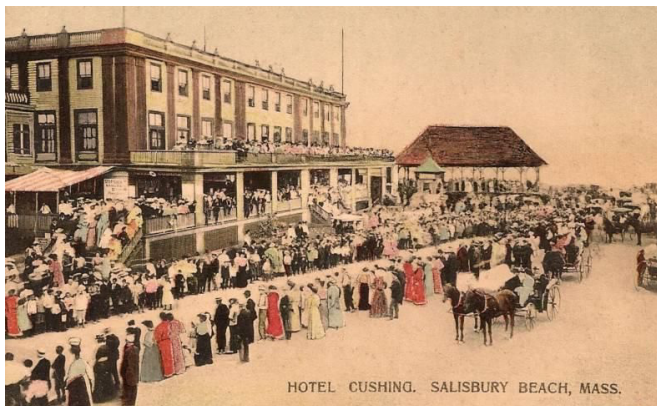
Steamer Merrimac Fast on Rocks Between Groveland and Rocks Bridges.

Went on Sunday Evening When the Tide Was Low—It Was Dark and the Boat Was Proceeding Along Cautiously—The Three Hundred Passengers Taken Off in Safety in Small Boats—Accident Happened on What is Known as Currier's Rocks.

Source: [9/5/1899 Newburyport Daily News](#)



Source: [5/28/2015 Eagle Tribune](#)



Source: [Wikimedia.org](#)



Black Rocks & Salisbury RR Source: [G.A.R. Library](#)