

PILOT LOG 2001

THOMAS CORNELL AND THE CORNELL STEAMBOAT COMPANY

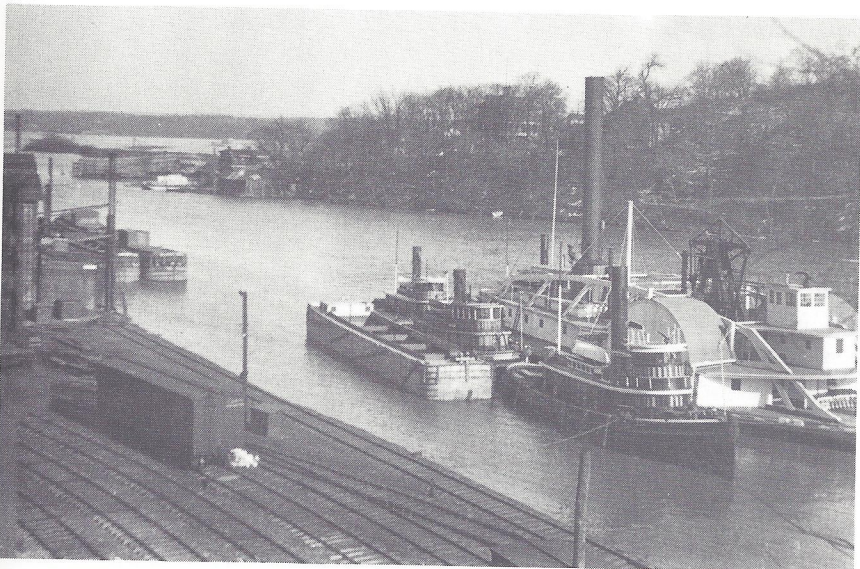
In the mid-1800s, the Hudson River was a busy waterway between the fast-growing New York metropolitan area and the cities, crop lands, timber, and mining regions of the West and North. The Delaware and Hudson Canal linked the Pennsylvania coal fields to the Hudson River at its harbor town of Rondout, about one hundred miles north of New York city.

In the 1830s, Thomas Cornell came with a sailing sloop to Rondout to ship coal from the D & H Canal. A native of White Plains, N. Y., Cornell was just twenty-two years old. Until then, sailboats had done the work of carrying freight and passengers, but Cornell saw that steam-powered vessels were the future. In a few years, he became the owner and operator of steamboats running between Rondout and New York. Cornell settled in Rondout, where he established the Cornell Steamboat Company.

In those booming years of growth and construction, there was plenty of business for steamboats plying the Hudson. New York City's thriving metropolitan area needed coal from the D & H Canal, ice that was harvested in winter from the frozen river, building material produced in the mid-Hudson valley brick, lumber, stone, and cement—and agricultural products grain, livestock, dairy, fruit, and hay—which came from near and far.

Rondout Creek offered the best deep-water port in the Hudson Valley and thus became the center of maritime activity between New York and Albany. The Cornell Steamboat Company made its headquarters in Rondout village, where many boats were berthed and repaired, and some were built. Between 1830 and 1900, few harbors of comparable size anywhere in America were as busy as Rondout Creek.

Mid-19th Century towboat "Oswego" laid up alongside 3 Cornell tugs in the Rondout circa 1918.



By the mid-1800s, the Hudson River had many sidewheel steamboats passing north and south, one grander than the other. They carried both freight and passengers, and speed was of the essence—both for bragging rights and because passengers favored the fastest boats. In the 1860s, Thomas Cornell acquired Mary Powell, the Hudson River's fastest and most beautiful passenger boat.

In this time, Cornell built a magnificent sidewheeler to ply the route from Rondout to New York. She was named in his honor—Thomas Cornell—and was one of the finest vessels operating on the Hudson.

Steamboats not able to compete in speed or luxury often were turned into towboats, hauling loaded barges that were lashed together to be towed up or down the river. Cornell began to develop a fleet of towboats, which in time would be replaced by tugboats, designed and built especially for towing on the river.

After the Civil War, Cornell was joined in the business by Samuel D. Coykendall, who became his son-in-law as well as a partner in the firm. The combination of Thomas Cornell and S.D. Coykendall soon would create the most powerful towing operation on the Hudson River. At its peak in the late 1800s, the Cornell Steamboat Company ran more than sixty towing vessels and was the largest maritime organization of its kind in the nation.

Early in 1890, after contracting pneumonia, Thomas Cornell died at home at the age of 77. In son-in-law S.D. Coykendall, Cornell had a worthy successor.

During a career of more than fifty years, Thomas Cornell built a mighty business empire and became a leading figure in New York and the nation. In addition to running the Cornell Steamboat Company and the Kingston-Rhinecliff ferry, he built and operated railroads on both sides of the Hudson, helped establish two banks, was a principal in a large Catskill Mountain hotel, and served two terms in Congress.

By 1900, the Cornell Steamboat Company had given up the passenger business and turned completely to towing. There were more than sixty steam-powered towing vessels and tugboats in the Cornell fleet. Their boilers were fired by burning coal. Cornell vessels were well-known on the river, with their familiar black and yellow smokestacks clearly recognizable from the northern canals to New York harbor.

As the years passed, S.D. Coykendall gave his six sons positions of authority and management in the Cornell business empire. "S.D.," as he was known, was the leading citizen of Ulster County, heading up banks, developing railroads, operating a hotel and a ferryboat line, and building and operating trolley lines and an amusement park. He invested in many enterprises, including cement works, the ice industry, brickyards, and quarrying operations.

The diverse Cornell-Coykendall business empire faced rapid changes, including the coming of the automobile and the increased use of oil instead of coal as fuel. Further, new construction methods in the cities no longer required the bricks, stone, and cement of the Hudson River valley. So, there was less cargo on the river, and less work for Cornell tugboats.

In January 1913, S.D. Coykendall died suddenly at his home in Kingston at the age of seventy-six.

Frederick Coykendall, who was forty years of age, succeeded his father as president of the Cornell Steamboat Company. Frederick lived in New York and was active in alumni and trustee affairs at Columbia University. He would become

chairman of the university's board of trustees and president of the university press.

Frederick Coykendall and the Cornell Steamboat Company faced adverse economic conditions that in many ways were beyond their control. Around 1930, the Hudson River was deepened to allow ocean-going ships to reach Albany and this ended the towing of grain barges. Railroads and trucks could transport most cargoes faster and more efficiently than shipping them by boat. Also, electric refrigeration ended the demand for natural ice, once a major commodity towed by Cornell — as had been the Hudson Valley brick, cement, and bluestone no longer used in construction.

Assisting Frederick Coykendall was company vice president C.W. "Bill" Spangenberg, who had risen through the ranks since joining Cornell in 1933. When Frederick passed away in 1954, Spangenberg became president. Although company executives worked hard and with considerable success to rebuild Cornell, they were forced to sell out in 1958 when their largest customer, New York Trap Rock Corporation -a producer of crushed stone — offered to buy the company. Trap Rock retained Spangenberg as president of Cornell.

In 1960, the Cornell Steamboat Company built Rockland County, an innovative, push-type towboat—the first of its kind in permanent service on the Hudson River. With Rockland County, a new age of towing began on the Hudson, but there would be no future for Cornell. Trap Rock soon was acquired by a larger corporation, and the towing company was no longer needed.

In 1964, the Cornell Steamboat Company finally closed its doors, after making Hudson River maritime history for an unprecedented one hundred and thirty-seven years.

Diesel tug "Thomas Cornell" at the Rondout shops in the mid-1950s.

