Appendix A—The Cromwell Steamship *Knickerbocker*

The Knickerbocker was a small ship on a relatively unglamorous route through very dangerous seas due to hurricanes and coastal hazards. At least six images of the ship survive: one photograph and five paintings by Antonio Gasparo Jacobsen, “the Audubon” of ship painters.

He is credited with about 6,000 paintings of ships and well enough regarded that authenticated paintings usually sell well in five figure dollar amounts. Several museums feature his works, and the Maritime Museum in Newport News, VA, has many of his paintings and his sketchbooks.

Figure 1 shows The Knickerbocker probably shortly before delivery. Surprisingly, the photograph is the oldest known image of the ship.

*Figure 1.* A photograph of the *Knickerbocker.*
Figures 2 and 3 are Jacobsen paintings available on the Internet.

This picture shows that the _Knickerbocker’s_ masts were functional in that she carried sails to augment her steam power. This combination of power sources was an essential part of Frank Kemble’s ability to deal with the loss of her rudder in 1884, as noted on the watch and in a trial account.

These pictures, especially Figure 3, give an idea of how small this ship was and how it must have been tossed about in a severe storm.

A careful observer will notice that the paintings of the _Knickerbocker_ show a single smoke stack while the photograph shows two. Jacobsen was meticulous; this was not an error.

Both paintings date after 1887 when the ship went missing for four days. The Jacobsen sketch book has two sketches: one before and one after this storm. The earlier one shows two stacks, the later one a single stack.

This small coastal steamship seems to have received a lot of attention, at least in painted images.

**The SS _Knickerbocker_ in Rough Seas**

We found several other examples (in addition to the rudder incident) of Kemble’s remarkable seaman ship on the _Knickerbocker_. The most dramatic was a passage through a severe storm in 1887.

The _Knickerbocker_ had been missing for about four days and presumed lost by the news media but the Commodore of the Cromwell Lines insisted that the ship was in good hands. Figure 8 shows the lead story on the reappearance of Kemble and his ship from _The New York Times_.

Despite a storm so severe that the passengers were tied to their beds and several sailors were washed overboard, Kemble delivered everyone alive.

At that time anyone who went to sea knew the relation between barometric pressure and storm severity.
Here is a passage from Jack London’s short story “The Heathen.”

“It was the end of the week with the whiskey gone and the pearl buyers sober, that I happened to glance at the barometer that hung in the cabin companionway. Its normal register in the Paumautas was 29.90, and it was customary to see it vacillate [sic.] between 29.85 and 30.00 or even to 30.05; but to see it as I saw it, down to 29.62 was enough to sober the most drunker pearl buyer that ever incinerated small pox microbes in scotch whiskey.”

The story of Figure 6 reports that the Knickerbocker barometer got to 28.2 inches of mercury. This is probably an accurate reading. In today’s terminology this reading corresponds to a category three storm with winds up to 130 mph.5

The ship was very badly damaged, so much that it was significantly re-configured in the course of its repairs. The appendix on the Knickerbocker describes these changes and how we know about them.

The monograph, “The Great Storm off the Atlantic Coast March 11-14 1888,” by Everett Haydon describes the worst storm they had measured to that time and mentions the Knickerbocker as having been in it, but there is no further mention so it must have been a lot less eventful than the August 1887 storm less than a year before.

The New York Times reported another severe hurricane in September 1889, during which Kemble again navigated the Knickerbocker.

In addition, Kemble merited his usual feedback from his passengers.

Kemble and the Knickerbocker successfully sailed through at least three documented epic storms.

Probably the 1887 storm was the worst for the Knickerbocker. Being on the ship the size of the Knickerbocker in any storm would have been quite an ordeal, but to go through an active category three storm must have been a very rough, very wet ride.

That the ship was reported missing and eventually arrived at its intended destination shows that Kemble had good navigation. The easiest method was to use time comparisons (i.e., chronometry) to find his position at sea to navigate to their destination. We suggest that it is likely that he used his watch rather than a marine, detent chronometer.

Category 3

Pressure 27.91 inches to 28.49 inches, winds from 111 mph to 130 mph, storm surge 9 to 12 feet, damage extensive.

References
1. (Image courtesy of Heritage Auction Galleries: HA.com)
3. Email from Jeanne Willoz-Eggnor Director of Collections Management, associate curator of Scientific Instruments The Mariners’ Museum, and Newport News, Virginia 23606, who provided copies from Jacobsen’s sketchbooks. These show the change but are not publishable.
4. Published in 1908 readily available on the Internet and in many anthologies and Jack London collections.