The Evolution (and New Revolution) of New York Ferry Service

Citywide Ferry by Hornblower is the most exciting development in New York City’s 200-year history of water mass transit. New Yorkers and visitors can take advantage of this new service starting summer 2017. In the last 30 years ferries have made a comeback in our waterways and become a fixture on the East River. It’s easy for New Yorkers to see them as novel but ferryboats provided the earliest connections to and from Manhattan. In 1814, Robert Fulton introduced steam-powered vessels in New York Harbor, enabling expansion and settlement across the East River. Then, as now, the city sought a way to link emerging neighborhoods to vital job centers. The answer was a robust Brooklyn and Queens ferry system, supplied by private operators. The last 150 years have seen several attempts to preserve, supplant, and revive this network of citywide ferry routes. Citywide Ferry by Hornblower is a culmination of these efforts and development processes that have shaped the New York waterfront.

In the early 1800s, influential Brooklyn businessmen vied for profitable routes to Lower Manhattan. As ridership grew, these small operators sold their rights to the Brooklyn Union Ferry Company. In the 1850s, the Union Ferry Company controlled 7 routes from Fulton Ferry to Hamilton Avenue, with 40,000,000 annual passengers, and Brooklyn was home to the largest ferry company in the world. In the late 19th and early 20th century, New York continued its dramatic growth but was no longer reliant on ferry transit. Massive bridges and subway tunnels, built along old ferry routes, pushed development far into Brooklyn and Queens, diverting density from the waterfront. These new communities and business districts required land-based connections that ferries could not provide. The old ferry network became obsolete and the City began taking over failing services. By the 1920s, New York had an expansive municipal ferry system, backed by public investment in vessels and terminals. Yet the vision proved short-lived; most of the routes lost their ridership and the municipal network succumbed to fragmentation. In the 1960s, ferryboats disappeared from the East River, severing the oldest link between the boroughs.

Now, fifty years later, waterfront revitalization is again driving real estate on the East River, with city agencies guiding development to Lower Manhattan, Long Island City, and Greenpoint-Williamsburg. The transformation of older waterfront communities, coupled with limited transportation options, has renewed public interest in ferries. With reduced capital costs and implementation time, relative to rail infrastructure, ferries have become a nimble and valued mode of transit. In 2011, through a public-private partnership, the East River Ferry joined Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan in an affordable ferry network, giving rise to a new paradigm for water mass transit. New Yorkers exceeded all ridership expectations in the first year, sending a loud and clear signal for more ferry service. Citywide Ferry by Hornblower, will build on the
success of East River Ferry by providing safe and reliable service and supporting riders with complete journey planning, door to door.

So, what lessons can we draw from New York’s recent and historical experience with ferries? First, Citywide Ferry Service by Hornblower in many ways, seeks to reinstate the 19th century network in a 21st century way. As in the past, ferry systems must balance investment, ridership and affordability. However, today this requires a new model: a city-operator arrangement that shares risks and resources for successful ferry expansion. Second, New York ferries work best as unique assets in its larger transportation framework. In the 21st century, ferries no longer compete with subways. Rather, Citywide Ferry will target underserved markets and offer customers new experiences while easing their connections and commutes. By supplementing upland transit, coordinating connections and incorporating best practices, Citywide Ferry by Hornblower will redefine inter-borough transit for more than half a million riders within ½ mile of its 21 landing sites. The future New York ferry network will find success by integrating lessons from the last 200 years in its design, operations and communications, for a fully realized 21st century model of service.