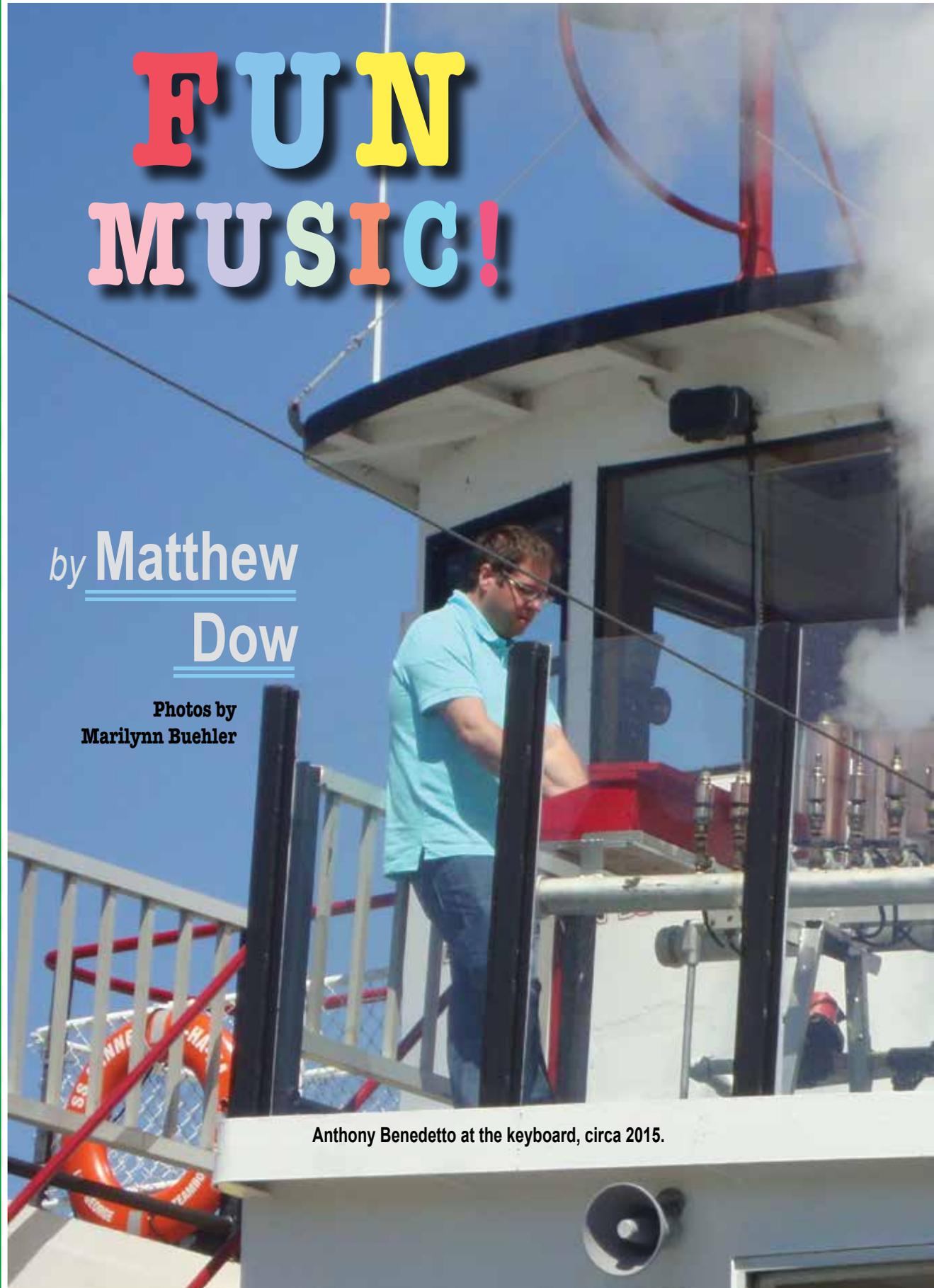


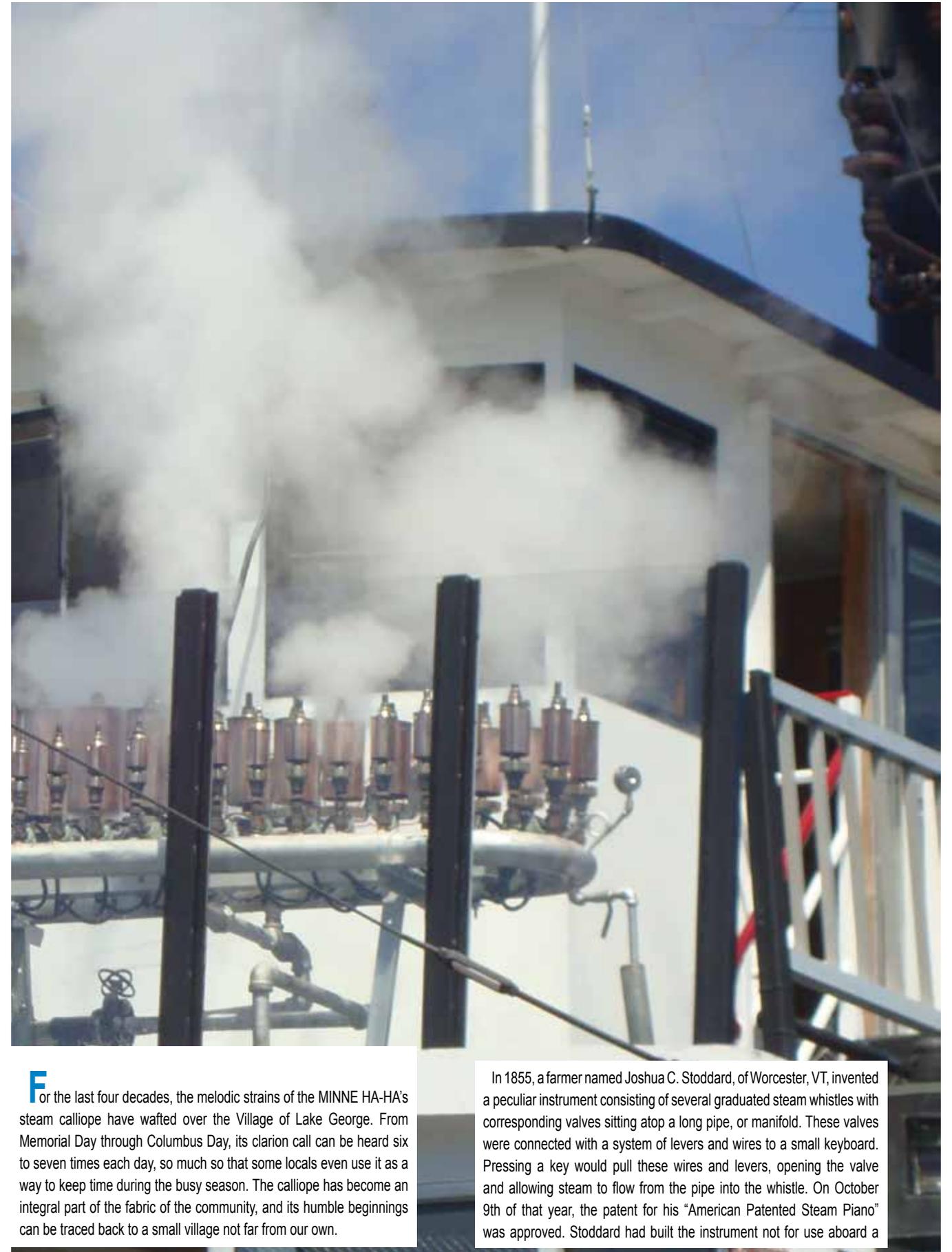
FUN MUSIC!

by Matthew
Dow

Photos by
Marilynn Buehler



Anthony Benedetto at the keyboard, circa 2015.



For the last four decades, the melodic strains of the MINNE HA-HA's steam calliopo have wafted over the Village of Lake George. From Memorial Day through Columbus Day, its clarion call can be heard six to seven times each day, so much so that some locals even use it as a way to keep time during the busy season. The calliopo has become an integral part of the fabric of the community, and its humble beginnings can be traced back to a small village not far from our own.

In 1855, a farmer named Joshua C. Stoddard, of Worcester, VT, invented a peculiar instrument consisting of several graduated steam whistles with corresponding valves sitting atop a long pipe, or manifold. These valves were connected with a system of levers and wires to a small keyboard. Pressing a key would pull these wires and levers, opening the valve and allowing steam to flow from the pipe into the whistle. On October 9th of that year, the patent for his "American Patented Steam Piano" was approved. Stoddard had built the instrument not for use aboard a



Calliope in action.

boat, but rather as a replacement for the bells in the tower of his local church. During that first Vermont winter, his "Steam Piano" had many issues. Not only was the volume too much for the other parishioners, but the pipes were not insulated. Many ended up bursting, rendering the instrument inoperable. A defeated Stoddard removed the instrument from the steeple, and placed it in a barn on his property. While this could have very well been the end of this unique piece of machinery, fate intervened. Stoddard's brother was a steamboat captain on the Hudson River in New York. At that time, companies were pondering ways to attract more business. The story goes that he remembered his brother's invention, and asked Joshua if he could place it aboard the boat he was in command of. He agreed, and rest is history! While the instrument became commonplace on excursion boats and showboats alike, they also had a strong reputation in the circus world. In the late 1850's, circus magnet P.T. Barnum acquired a "patented Steam Piano" to include in his circus parade.

In 1973, the Lake George Steamboat Company founded its southern sister company, the New Orleans Steamboat Company, and embarked on a journey to build a magnificent sternwheel steamboat to run excursion trips in the New Orleans. Since the calliope had strong ties to the Inland Rivers, and especially excursion vessels, it was decided to have an instrument constructed for the new boat. Owners Wilbur E. Dow Jr. and Bill Dow contracted the Frisbie Engine and Machine Company of Cincinnati, OH, to build two calliopes for them. One was to go to the new build in Louisiana,

which would eventually be the Str. NATCHEZ, and the other would go to the MINNE-HA-HA, or the "MINNE" as she is affectionately called. Cincinnati was no stranger to the instrument. Not only had numerous riverboats played their calliopes while visiting the city, but two major calliope builders had been located there! The first was Thomas J. Nichol who, in the early 1900's, built what some believe to be the best sounding steam calliopes ever produced. The second was Ernest J. Wilde, who built several instruments in the 1950's and 1960's. While the Frisbie Company had never built a calliope before, they had been in business since 1874, and were renowned for their steam engines and pumps. Jess Coen, the owner of the company at the time, took drawings and measurements from both Nichol and Wilde calliopes, and fused the two designs together. What he produced was, arguably, one of the finest examples of the instrument ever crafted: 32 graduated brass steam whistles, electronically-operated solenoid valves for ease of use, and corresponding lightbulbs that lit up the steam at night, creating something akin to the Northern Lights and known as the "Aurora Effect". By early summer 1974, the first instrument was completed. It was shipped up to Lake George and installed aboard the "MINNE", where it was played for the first time on July 2nd of that year.

For almost 20 years, the Frisbie instrument was played aboard the "MINNE". The calliope sat directly in front of the pilothouse, and the keyboard was located inside the pilothouse and underneath the forward port-side window. While not much exists in the way of pictures or recordings of this calliope, the boat's calliope player, Marilyn Buehler, had a couple good close-up shots of it in action, one of which is included in this article. By the time 1992 rolled around, the calliope was in need of some TLC. The instrument was sent out to a company in Iowa for refurbishment, and in the meantime, a smaller calliope was placed onboard. Through a series of unfortunate events over the course of



The "American Patented Steam Piano" unique American Steam Age Musical Instrument

the following year, the Frisbie calliope was sold to a gaming boat in Natchez, MS, where it was put on display on the top deck of the boat. After a short time, the whistles were removed, placed in storage, and then lost in time. To this day, they have not been found. The calliope that had been placed on the "MINNE" as a 'temp' became her permanent instrument. This calliope had been built by Ernest J. Wilde in the early 1960's, and had been aboard a party boat in the Cincinnati harbor. Strangely enough, it is believed that this was one of the instruments Jess Coen used for measurements to make his calliopes in the 1970's! The construction of these whistles were different from the Frisbie. Wilde's whistles were long and slender, and looked almost like an assembly of mortar shells. Other instruments of his were placed aboard the ELIZABETH LOUISE of Sacramento, CA and the BELLE OF LOUISVILLE of Louisville, KY. With the change in instrument, the location of it was changed as well. Instead of sitting in front of the pilothouse as the Frisbie had, the Wilde calliope was moved forward of the port smokestack. The manifold was shorter, and could fit in the space better. This also increased the visibility of the instrument, allowing for an unobstructed view of the calliope from the pier below for the first time. In the summer of 2004, yours truly played his first song on the Wilde, igniting a love for the calliope and its operation. It had not been taken care of in some time, and needed some work. I made it my mission to make it a showpiece again. While some brass polish and a fresh coat of paint made it look better, there was only so much that could be done to get it back in prime

operational shape. I had no knowledge about valve maintenance, tuning or electrical work other than what I had plucked from the minds of our engineers. By the end of the 2010 season, the calliope had fallen into an abysmal state. It got to the point where we were getting more complaints about its sound than we were compliments! The time had come to find a new calliope for the boat. Around that time, I became friends with Dave Morecraft, of Peru, IN. Dave's family had been building metal furniture in town for decades, which had given him an immense knowledge of machining and engineering. Peru itself had also long been a famous circus town, known for its immense shows and parades, complete with calliope wagons. He fell in love with the instrument, and got it in his mind to build them. He used measurements off an old Thomas J. Nichol circus calliope in town, which he affectionately referred to as "Grandpa", and had built instruments for a number of steamboats, most notably a replacement calliope for the BELLE OF LOUISVILLE and a new instrument for grand overnight steamboat AMERICAN QUEEN. Like Nichol before him, his whistles were constructed with a mixture of brass and copper, giving his instruments a deep, smooth tonal quality, unlike the brassy shrillness of the Frisbie and Wilde calliopes. I went out to Peru and played his personal instrument in the summer of 2010. From that first chord, I knew a Morecraft calliope is what the MINNE needed. Armed with a sample whistle and several videos, I went back home and convinced my Dad and our engineers to give the green light for a new calliope.

By the spring of 2012, the instrument was ready to go. The "MINNE" usually begins her season Memorial Day weekend, and I was determined to have the new calliope playing by then. The week leading up to Memorial Day was our targeted installation date, and what a busy week it was! With the help of friends and fellow calliopes Anthony Benedetto and Zach Morecraft, and our talented welder Henk Overbeek, we pulled the old instrument off and installed the new calliope just in time, getting steam up and doing final testing just the day before! That first weekend was a fun one, filled with live performances by all of us, each more ecstatic than the last to "pluck the plastics". We got a really special treat on Sunday when Marilyn Buehler, the boat's calliope player when the Frisbie was aboard, came down and played a rousing Patriotic Medley. For a lot of the older crew members onboard, listening to her play again brought back a lot of good memories.

Over the next couple of years, some changes were made to the calliope and its operation. In 2013, we got a new keyboard with the ability to be placed

P.T. Barnum, being the showman he was, figured that a catchier name was needed for it. He decided on the name of the Greek muse of music and epic poetry for his instrument, and from then on, the "American Patented Steam Piano" was known simply as the 'Calliope'.

out on the instrument. For the first time ever on the "MINNE", a person could play outside and been seen playing, rather than being hidden in the pilothouse. A better sounding instrument and this new keyboard allowed us to start playing underway, giving a enjoyable show to those aboard and those on the shoreline as we passed the hotels on the lakefront. Next, a new pressure regulator was installed, helping the pressure and volume issues we had with the slightly larger Morecraft calliope. Dave imparted a lot of knowledge on us about valve maintenance, whistle care, and winter storage, which helped with the overall operation of the instrument. Our good friend and phenomenal calliope player, Travis C. Vasconcelos, recorded several new medleys for the player unit, which is used when there is not a person available to play live. One of the most requested is his "Phantom of the Opera" medley. In September 2013, we recorded the "MINNE's" first Calliope CD, with songs played by Travis, Anthony Benedetto, and your truly. Between 2015 and 2016, Travis and James Hall, his good friend and electrician extraordinaire, came to Lake George to replace long sections of wire and install a new player unit, replacing the 1993-era floppy disk drive that had been used since the Wilde had been installed. At the time of this writing, the "MINNE" and her calliope are being prepared for the 2018 sailing season. Soon, the sweet sounds of steam will again echo through the mountain valley, and the dulcet tones of the calliope will bring joy to thousands in a community that has grown fond of its hometown steamboat and her unique American instrument.

The Battery

1	FR	5:08 am L	11:15 am H	5:07 pm L	11:15 pm H
2	SA	5:47 am L	12:03 pm H	5:44 pm L	11:58 pm H
3	SU	6:28 am L	12:49 pm H	6:21 pm L	
4	MO	12:42 am H	7:11 am L	1:33 pm H	7:06 pm L
5	TU	1:24 am H	7:59 am L	2:15 pm H	8:11 pm L
6	WE	2:07 am H	8:53 am L	2:56 pm H	9:21 pm L
7	TH	2:53 am H	9:47 am L	3:40 pm H	10:22 pm L
8	FR	3:46 am H	10:36 am L	4:28 pm H	11:17 pm L
9	SA	4:44 am H	11:23 am L	5:20 pm H	
10	SU	12:09 am L	5:45 am H	12:11 pm L	6:11 pm H
11	MO	1:00 am L	6:42 am H	12:59 pm L	7:00 pm H
12	TU	1:52 am L	7:35 am H	1:50 pm L	7:48 pm H
13	WE	2:44 am L	8:26 am H	2:42 pm L	8:36 pm H
14	TH	3:35 am L	9:18 am H	3:34 pm L	9:27 pm H
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17	SU	6:08 am L	12:17 pm H	6:15 pm L	
18	MO	12:26 am H	7:03 am L	1:16 pm H	7:16 pm L
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24	SU	12:19 am L	6:18 am H	12:29 pm L	6:46 pm H
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26	TU	1:55 am L	7:56 am H	1:59 pm L	8:12 pm H
27	WE	2:40 am L	8:39 am H	2:43 pm L	8:51 pm H
28	TH	3:23 am L	9:22 am H	3:25 pm L	9:29 pm H
29	FR	4:04 am L	10:04 am H	4:05 pm L	10:08 pm H
30	SA	4:43 am L	10:48 am H	4:43 pm L	10:47 pm H

TIDES June

Spuyten Duyvil

1	FR	5:56 am L	12:07 pm H	5:55 pm L	
2	SA	12:07 am H	6:35 am L	12:55 pm H	6:32 pm L
3	SU	12:50 am H	7:16 am L	1:41 pm H	7:09 pm L
4	MO	1:34 am H	7:59 am L	2:25 pm H	7:54 pm L
5	TU	2:16 am H	8:47 am L	3:07 pm H	8:59 pm L
6	WE	2:59 am H	9:41 am L	3:48 pm H	10:09 pm L
7	TH	3:45 am H	10:35 am L	4:32 pm H	11:10 pm L
8	FR	4:38 am H	11:24 am L	5:20 pm H	
9	SA	12:05 am L	5:36 am H	12:11 pm L	6:12 pm H
10	SU	12:57 am L	6:37 am H	12:59 pm L	7:03 pm H
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14	TH	4:23 am L	10:10 am H	4:22 pm L	10:19 pm H
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17	SU	12:15 am H	6:56 am L	1:09 pm H	7:03 pm L
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19	TU	2:18 am H	8:49 am L	3:05 pm H	9:10 pm L
20	WE	3:15 am H	9:49 am L	4:01 pm H	10:17 pm L
21	TH	4:13 am H	10:47 am L	4:58 pm H	11:18 pm L
22	FR	5:12 am H	11:40 am L	5:54 pm H	
23	SA	12:15 am L	6:12 am H	12:29 pm L	6:48 pm H
24	SU	1:07 am L	7:10 am H	1:17 pm L	7:38 pm H
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27	WE	3:28 am L	9:31 am H	3:31 pm L	9:43 pm H
28	TH	4:11 am L	10:14 am H	4:13 pm L	10:21 pm H
29	FR	4:52 am L	10:56 am H	4:53 pm L	11:00 pm H
30	SA	5:31 am L	11:40 am H	5:31 pm L	11:39 pm H

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1	FR	12:22 am H	7:05 am L	1:04 pm H	7:04 pm L
2	SA	1:04 am H	7:44 am L	1:52 pm H	7:41 pm L
3	SU	1:47 am H	8:25 am L	2:38 pm H	8:18 pm L
4	MO	2:31 am H	9:08 am L	3:22 pm H	9:03 pm L
5	TU	3:13 am H	9:56 am L	4:04 pm H	10:08 pm L
6	WE	3:56 am H	10:50 am L	4:45 pm H	11:18 pm L
7	TH	4:42 am H	11:44 am L	5:29 pm H	
8	FR	12:19 am L	5:35 am H	12:33 pm L	6:17 pm H
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10	SU	2:06 am L	7:34 am H	2:08 pm L	8:00 pm H
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29	FR	6:01 am L	11:53 am H	6:02 pm L	11:57 pm H
30	SA	6:40 am L	12:37 pm H	6:40 pm L	

TIDES June

Haverstraw

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30	SA	12:32 am H	7:35 am L	1:12 pm H	7:17 pm L