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Queen of the Lakes

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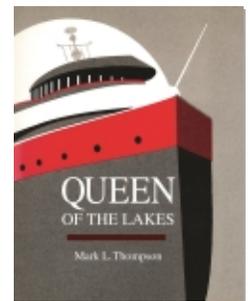
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2

A Railroad Steamer

In some ways, the iron-hulled *Onoko* was the vestige of a bygone era even before her launching in February of 1882. Three years earlier, the first steel ocean vessel had been built in England. It had proved so successful that by 1880 ten percent of all British steamers under construction were being constructed of steel.¹

On the Great Lakes, the first steel-hulled ship was built only after development of the Bessemer process made relatively low cost steel available around 1885. Once again, it was Globe Ship Building that brought the new technology to the lakes. The steel-hulled *Str. Spokane* was launched at Globe on June 6, 1886, for Captain Thomas Wilson and a group of investors. The ship was originally designed to be built of iron, although it had still not found favor with insurance underwriters. When Captain Wilson found out he could have the vessel built of steel without great additional cost, he authorized Globe to go ahead. Not wanting to take the time to redesign the ship, however, she was built to the specifications established for an iron hull, even though steel was considerably stronger. As a result, the *Spokane* was considered to have been about twenty percent stronger than steel-hulled ships built in subsequent years. At just over 264 feet in length and 1,741 gross tons, the *Spokane* was a little smaller than the *Onoko*, but the lines of her hull were much the same.

In 1892, the *Spokane* became the first steel ship on the lakes to be lengthened when a sixty-foot section was added to her cargo hold at Cleveland Ship Building. Placed in a drydock, the rivets in her hull were removed near midships so that the forward half of the hull could be winched ahead on greased ways. Nine-inch hawsers were attached to the bow section and run to winches at the forward end of the drydock, and two teams of horses were used to turn capstans supplying power to the winches. The new section increased the *Spokane's* gross tonnage to 2,356, slightly more than that of the *Onoko*. While the innovative lengthening made the *Spokane* a little longer than the *Onoko*, she was never the Queen of the Lakes. Four years before the *Spokane's* lengthening, the title had already passed to a series of package freighters launched at Buffalo, New York, by the Union Dry Dock Company.

In many ways, the package freighters were a cross between passenger steamers and bulk freighters. Like the passenger steamers, most of the package freighters were owned and operated by railroads as an adjunct to their rail lines that terminated at Great Lakes ports. They were designed for freight service, though a few had limited accommodations for passengers. Like the bulk freighters, the package freighters had hatches on their decks, though not as many. The deck hatches were augmented by gangways in the sides of their hulls, similar to those

found on the passenger steamers, through which cargo could also be loaded. The history of the package freighter is somewhat obscure, but they date to at least 1871, the year the wooden package freighter *William H. Tweed* was launched at the Union Dry Dock Company in Buffalo. By the mid-1880's, most of the major shipyards around the lakes had experience in building wooden or iron package freighters.

It was natural for the Union Dry Dock Company to develop particular expertise in building package freighters. Not only was the shipyard located in Buffalo, the western terminus for many of the early railroads carrying freight and passengers to the Great Lakes region, but the Union Steamboat Company had purchased twenty-five percent of the shipbuilding operation in 1872. The Union Steamboat Company was a subsidiary of the New York and Erie Railroad and operated a number of passenger and freight steamers on the lakes.

Late in 1884, Union Dry Dock had launched the first iron-hulled package freighter on the lakes, the three-hundred-foot *Tioga*. Less than two feet shorter than the *Onoko*, she was built for the Erie Railroad Transit Line. Captain Marcus Drake, the shipyard superintendent, and his staff were justly proud of the *Tioga*, but by the time she was launched they were already involved in an even more significant project. Union had been hired by the Anchor Line, the lake shipping connection of the Pennsylvania Railroad, to design and build a mammoth steel package freighter for their important service between Buffalo and Duluth. George B. Mallory had drawn the lines for the new ship, and when Captain Drake saw them for the first time he was convinced she would be both the most efficient and the most beautiful package freighter on the lakes.

The steel freighter that soon took shape in the yard on the banks of Buffalo Creek was a masterpiece of size and perspective. She had none of the heavy boxiness of bulk freighters like the *Onoko* or *Spokane*, but was, instead, a lean, sleek-looking vessel. Like the bulk freighters, she had a cabin and wheelhouse forward, but they sat on the main deck, rather than being perched atop a forecastle deck. In fact, the ship had no raised forecastle, just a long flat main deck stretching from her gracefully tapered bow to her elliptical stern. The forward cabin was balanced by a cabin of similar size near the ship's stern, while a third, larger cabin occupied the midship area, which was over the engine room. The midship cabin was topped by an extremely tall and slightly raked smokestack. In profile, the vessel had an aesthetic symmetry that both Captain Drake and her designer thought was far superior to that of the bulk freighters.

On September 4, 1886, the new package freighter was ready to be christened and launched. Officials of the railroad had chosen the name *Susquehanna* for their new vessel, honoring the town in northeastern Pennsylvania and the river on

which it was located. With the traditional baptism of champagne, the \$220,000 ship slid into the water with an appropriately large splash and much applause and cheering from what was described as "an immense concourse" of onlookers.²

STR. SUSQUEHANNA

326'6" x 40' x 16'

Queen of the Lakes

September 4, 1886 to July 7, 1887

The *Susquehanna* was worthy of the applause. At 326 feet, 6 inches in overall length, she was the new Queen of the Lakes. With a beam of 40 feet and a depth of 24 feet, the new leviathan was rated at 2,500 gross tons. The *Susquehanna* even looked like a queen. Her sleek, black hull appeared lean and sinewy, like the torso of a panther, and her impressive length was accented by sparkling white cabins and a band of white capping the hull. At bow and stern, white gunwales rose about three feet above the deck level, and they were joined by an attractive metal railing running the length of the deck.

The *Susquehanna* carried two masts, one just aft of the forward cabin and the other just forward of the aft cabin, adding to her symmetry. From her forward mast flew a large Anchor Line pennant, while the stem mast was adorned with a large American flag and a pennant bearing the new vessel's name.

Among the innovations in her design, the *Susquehanna* had anchor wells, or boxes, built into the sides of her hull just back from her bow. The wells allowed her two large wood-stock anchors to be carried inboard, reducing the likelihood that they would foul on dock structures. They also reduced the clutter at the bow, as the anchors were barely visible. Anchor wells eventually became standard on all freighters on the Great Lakes, but not until the 1920s.

To facilitate cargo loading and unloading, the *Susquehanna* had five large hatches spaced along her deck, including one forward of the pilothouse and one between the after cabin and the ship's stern. She also had two gangways built into each side of her hull. Unlike bulk freighters like the *Onoko* that had a single large, open cargo hold, the *Susquehanna* had four holds, two forward of the engine room and two aft of it, and each hold had two decks. A between deck, referred to simply as a 'tween deck, rested on beams halfway between the floor of the cargo holds and the deck. ('Tween decks are still common on package freighters; they allow freight to be stowed more easily, since it doesn't have to be stacked as high.) The after cargo hold

also had a shaft alley running along the floor of the hold, boxing in the long steel shaft that connected the engine and the propeller.

The *Susquehanna* was designed to carry twenty-nine crewmen. The captain and both mates were housed in the forward cabin, which adjoined the wheelhouse. The after cabin included a private room for the chief engineer and double-occupancy rooms for the two assistant engineers, two oilers, two wheelmen, two watchmen, and two lookouts. The cook, six firemen, and eight other crewmembers shared rooms in the midship house, which also contained the galley and dining room.³

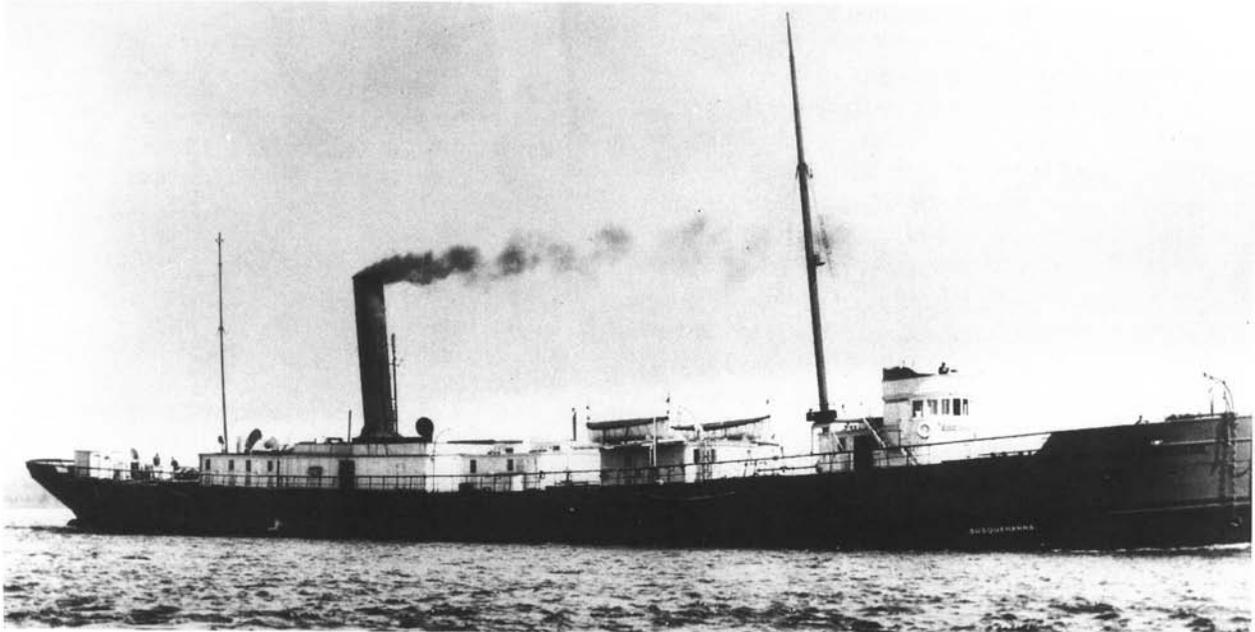
The engineering personnel oversaw the operation and maintenance of the ship's "double expansion, inverted, vertical, direct acting, jet condensing, three-cylinder, compound engine, the first installed on the lakes."⁴ Later referred to simply as a triple expansion engine, the three cylinder "up and downers" became the standard means of propulsion until steam turbines made their debut just before World War II. The powerful steam engine generated 1,050 horsepower and pushed

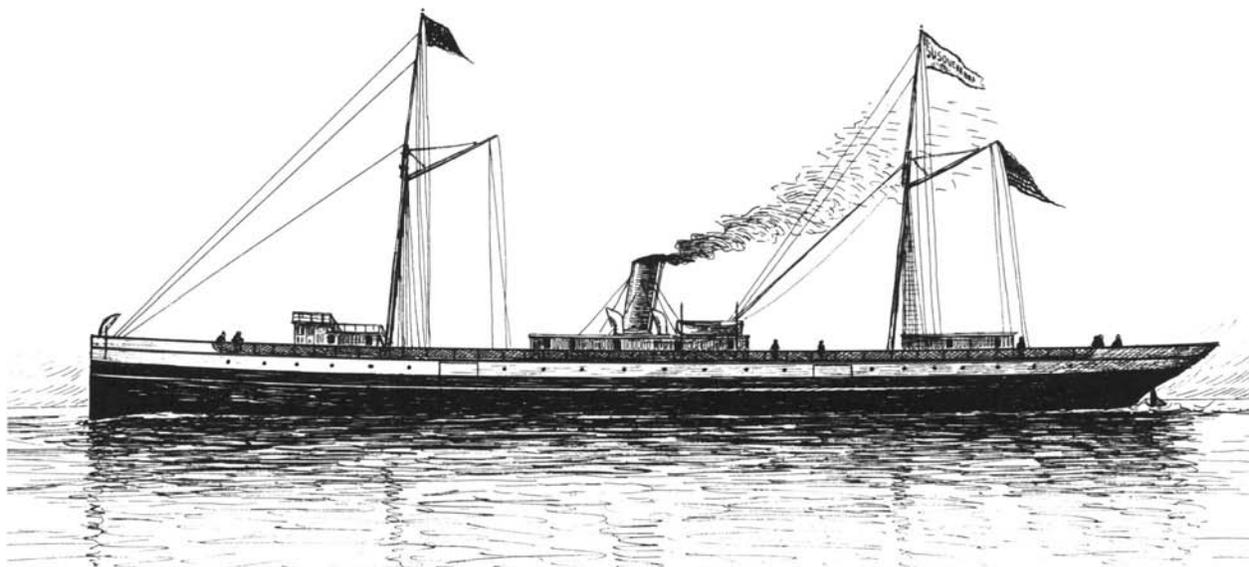
the *Susquehanna* along at a very respectable fifteen miles an hour.

While her title as Queen of the Lakes was passed on to an even larger package freighter in less than a year, the *Susquehanna* was an efficient carrier and a favorite of boatwatchers for over three decades. While bulk freighters like the *Onoko* called at only a limited number of loading and unloading ports, the diverse *Susquehanna* might show up at virtually any port on the lakes, loading or unloading bulk, bagged, or crated cargo. One photo of the ship shows her moored at Houghton, Michigan, preparing to take on a load of copper ingots and barrels of unsmelted copper.⁵ She was an important vessel in the Anchor Line fleet that at the turn of the century included the passenger steamers *India*, *China*, and *Japan* and the steel freight steamers *Alaska*, *Lehigh*, *Clarion*, *Codarus*, *Schuylkill*, and *Mahoning*, in addition to seven smaller, wooden steamers.⁶

In 1917, after the U.S. had entered World War I, the aging *Susquehanna* joined a long line of freighters taken to saltwater to aid in the war effort. Too large to pass through the diminu-

The Str. *Susquehanna*, a package freighter launched in 1886 for the Pennsylvania Railroad's freight service between Buffalo and Duluth. The package freighters were developed by the railroads at a time when most of their rail lines extended no farther west than Buffalo. Large package freighters like the *Susquehanna* first appeared on the lakes about 1884, and most were gone by the end of World War I. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University)





The symmetrical profile of *the Susquehanna* is clearly evident in Stanton's drawing of the ship. While most of the bulk freighters built on the lakes after the 1869 debut of the *Hackett* had their engine rooms at the stern, the Anchor Line package freighter had a midship engine room. Stanton's drawing shows two gangways in the side of the hull that could be opened for use in loading cargo. The ship also had five hatches along her deck. (Author's collection)

tive locks of the Welland Canal, she was cut in half at the same yard where she had been built, then towed through the Welland to Lauzon, Quebec. At Davie Shipbuilding at Lauzon, the *Susquehanna* was rejoined, and she sailed under her own power out the St. Lawrence River to the Atlantic.⁷

After operating on the Atlantic for the American-flag *Susquehanna Steamship Company* for seven years, she was sold to *Sunrise Steamship Company* of London in 1923 and renamed *Papyrus*. While little information is available about her journeys under foreign flag, her new name suggests that she may have operated in the Mediterranean trade. In 1924, she changed hands again, purchased by the *Antiva Shipping Company* of Callao, Peru. Renamed *DeCosta*, she was operated in the South American trade for a year. In 1925, *Antiva Shipping* re-registered her at Halifax, Nova Scotia, and renamed her *Papyrus* for a second time.

In 1926, after serving under five different shipping companies and four flags, the former Queen of the Lakes bore evidence of more than four decades of service. Her diverse career came to an end under the shipbreaker's torch in Italy, far from the familiar waters of the Great Lakes that had first wetted her hull.⁸

Notes

1. Milo M. Quaife, *Lake Michigan* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1944), 167.
2. "Susquehanna Launched," *Marine Record*, September 9, 1886.
3. Details on the design have been derived from the vessel's original plans, now part of the *American Ship Building Collection* at the *Institute for Great Lakes Research*, Bowling Green State University.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Frederick Stonehouse, *Keweenaw Shipwrecks* (AuTrain, MI: Avery Color Studios, 1988), 29.
6. J. B. Mansfield, ed., *History of the Great Lakes*, vol. I (Chicago: J. H. Beers and Co., 1899; reprint, Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1972), 458.
7. She may also have been either shortened sixty feet or lengthened twenty-four feet at Lauzon. Reports differ, but it is more likely that she would have been shortened.
8. *Ship Biography*, *Institute for Great Lakes Research*, Bowling Green State University.