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Queen of the Lakes

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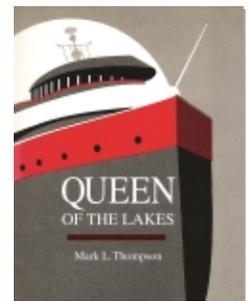
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A World's Fair Whale

The Chicago World's Fair, known officially as the Columbian Exposition, opened its gates on October 23, 1892. Over the next twelve months, millions of visitors would marvel at the diverse exhibitions comprising what came to be known as the "White City," a stunning celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's discovery of the New World.

Many new products were unveiled for exposition-goers, including caramel-coated popcorn, called Cracker Jacks, and Adolph Coor's Golden Select beer. Visitors could choose to eat at a variety of restaurants, including a unique self-service eatery that was being referred to as a "cafeteria."

There were attractions at the World's Fair to delight virtually all of the senses. One of the most popular was a giant Ferris wheel carrying riders 250 feet into the air, higher than most people had ever been off the ground before. More down-to-earth entertainment was provided by "Little Egypt," a dancer purportedly imported to the exposition from Persia. Women in the audience were shocked by her "hoochee-coochee dance," during which she made suggestive, undulating movements while waving a handkerchief in each hand. The reactions of the men in her audience were not recorded.

A centerpiece of the exposition was the display of full-size replicas of the three ships that had brought Columbus to America—the famous *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria*. While

they were viewed as curiosities by those attending the Columbian Exposition, the three surprisingly small sailing ships proved to be less popular than an enormous steamboat built to ferry fair-goers from downtown Chicago to the fairgrounds at Jackson Park. So unusual was the new vessel that it rapidly became one of the highlights of the exposition.

Named, appropriately, the *Christopher Columbus*, the passenger ship was built for the World's Fair Steamship Company by the American Steel Barge Company of Superior, Wisconsin,¹ and reportedly cost \$360,000.² When she was launched on December 3, 1892, the 362-foot steel steamer claimed the title Queen of the Lakes from the *Owego* and *Chemung*.

STR. CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

362'x42'x24'

Queen of the Lakes

December 3, 1892 to April 29, 1893

The American Steel Barge Company had been established in 1890 to build the unusual type of tow barges and steamers designed by Captain Alexander McDougall. McDougall had

begun his sailing career at the age of sixteen as a deckhand aboard the schooner *Edith*. By the time he was twenty-six, the native of Scotland was appointed captain of the Anchor Line package freighter *Thomas A. Scott*, having worked his way up through the hawsepipe over his ten years on the lakes.

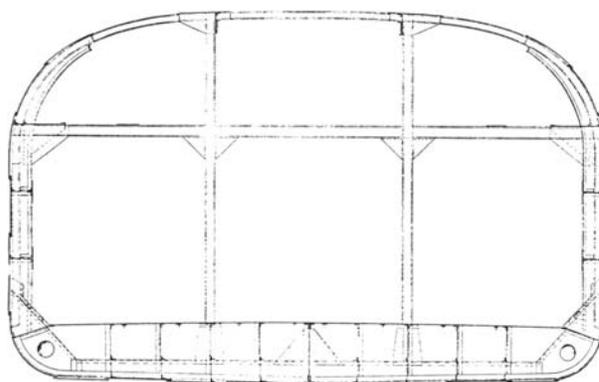
From 1878 to 1881, McDougall served as master on the wooden bulk freighter *Hiawatha*, operated by Captain Thomas Wilson's Wilson Transit Company. The powerful, 236-foot steamer often towed one or two barges behind it, a practice that had emerged first in the lumber trade as a way for shipowners to maximize the return on their investment in an expensive steam engine. The barges were not easy to tow, however. Their boxy hulls would often not follow cleanly in the wake of the ship towing them, tending instead to weave back and forth like an oversized sea serpent. During his service on the *Hiawatha*, McDougall conceived the idea for a new type of barge that would track well behind a steamer and offer little resistance to the sea. On May 24, 1881, he was granted a U.S. patent for a tow boat featuring a rounded deck and a tapered bow and stern.³

The shipping world did not beat a path to his door to take advantage of the new design, so in 1888, with the financial assistance of Captain Wilson, McDougall himself built a prototype barge at a cost of \$40,000.⁴ Launched at Duluth on June 23, 1888, the 191-foot steel barge was simply named *101*. It was the first large ship and the first steel vessel built at Duluth.⁵ The *Duluth Evening Herald* proclaimed it a ship "destined to revolutionize the carrying of heavy lake freight."⁶

The *101* was described as "a great cigar of steel," and it was said that it resembled Captain Nemo's submarine *Nautilus* in Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* more than it did any Great Lakes ship.⁷ Many people commented that the tapered bow of *101* looked like the snout of a pig, and all too often McDougall heard his sleek new barge referred to as a "pigboat." Others likened the curved deck to the back of an immense whale, a description that McDougall did not find altogether displeasing. In time, the term "whaleback" came into general use to describe the new type of vessel.

Below the water, the barge looked like the *Onoko* and other modern freighters of the day. Above the water, however, *101* was a genuinely unique creation. The deck of the barge was rounded, so that it looked like the top of a long steel cylinder. Instead of the normal rectangular deckhouses, McDougall's vessel had turrets near the bow and stern, each eight feet in diameter and seven feet high. The after turret served as the wheelhouse and was topped with a wooden pilothouse.⁸

McDougall hired the tug *Record* to tow the strange looking barge from Duluth to Two Harbors, Minnesota, where it loaded 1,200 tons of iron ore for delivery to Cleveland. Captain



A midship section of one of Captain Alexander McDougall's patented whalebacks, clearly showing the rounded deck. Rounded decks, along with severely tapered bows and sterns, were designed to make the streamlined vessels cut through the water more cleanly. (Author's collection)

McDougall was an enthusiastic passenger on that maiden voyage. While he may have been pleased with the way *101* performed, he was undoubtedly taken aback by the derisive remarks that greeted his new invention all along its route.

With McDougall's last dollar sunk into construction of barge *101*, Captain Wilson arranged for him to travel to New York and present his plans for an even larger barge to Colgate Hoyt, an associate of John D. Rockefeller. In addition to owning Standard Oil Company, Rockefeller had extensive mining interests in the Lake Superior region. Aware that shipping companies on the lakes were having difficulty building enough new vessels to handle the increasing demand for ore, Rockefeller agreed to purchase McDougall's patents for the whaleback and set up the American Steel Barge Company. Captain McDougall received \$25,000 in cash, twenty percent of the stock in the new company, a seat on the board of directors, and free rein to run the shipyard. Two whaleback barges were put into service in 1889, and two more were completed early in 1890. Then, on June 9, 1890, McDougall oversaw the launching of the first self-propelled whaleback, a 277-foot steel steamer named after Colgate Hoyt.

From the launching of *101* in 1888 until 1898, the shipyard flourished, turning out a total of forty whalebacks.⁹ Among them were twenty-two barges that, as McDougall had predicted, were remarkably easy to tow. The *Colgate Hoyt* was one of seventeen steam-powered whaleback freighters built at the West Superior yard. They proved to be extremely seaworthy and seem to have handled better in heavy seas than any other vessels on the lakes.

The most unique ship ever built at the yard, however, was clearly the *Christopher Columbus*. McDougall's shipyard beat out several competitors for the right to build the passenger steamer for the Chicago World's Fair. It was a victory in which many residents of Duluth and Superior took great pride. They had long ago tired of the derisive nicknames attached to the unique whalebacks. "I wonder what the cranks, the kickers, the snarlers, and the new idea haters think of the success of whaleback managers now?" asked one resentful reporter from Superior when word came that McDougall had won the World's Fair contract.¹⁰

McDougall had actually won the competition with a flamboyant proposal to build a massive twin-screw whaleback steamer that would be fully 500 feet long—a mind-boggling 150 feet longer than the *Owego* and *Chemung*. But in the months between winning the right to build the World's Fair steamer and actually signing the contract for the *Christopher Columbus*, McDougall's plans were significantly scaled down, though we don't know why. It may have been the result of McDougall's realization of the enormous risks inherent in attempting to build a ship so large, or he may have bowed to pressure from the conservative financiers who were putting up the money to construct the boat. That syndicate included John D. Rockefeller and experienced shipping officials from Lehigh Valley Transportation Company, Union Steamboat Company, and Western Transit. Regardless of what, or who, changed McDougall's mind, he soon suggested that he might build two 350-foot boats, instead of the 500-foot gargantuan.¹¹

When the contract between American Steel Barge and the World's Fair Steamship Company was finally signed on August 26, 1892, however, it provided for construction of a single 362-foot ship. American Steel Barge's architectural drawings identified the ship as a "World's Fair Passenger Steamer." The keel was laid on September 7, 1892, and with as many as six hundred workers employed in her construction, she was launched just three months later.¹²

The launching of the unusual passenger steamer on the afternoon of Saturday, December 3, 1892, was viewed as a major event in the twin ports of Duluth and Superior. The local newspaper reported that in addition to the hundreds of local residents who turned out to see the new ship slide into the water, eight special railroad cars brought dignitaries from New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Those notables included "capitalists," World's Fair commissioners, and "prominent vessel, railroad, and elevator men."¹³

Winter comes early at the American lakehead, and there was about seven inches of ice in the slip adjacent to the shipyard where the *Christopher Columbus* was to slide into the water. The tug *Record* was hired to break up the ice on the morn-

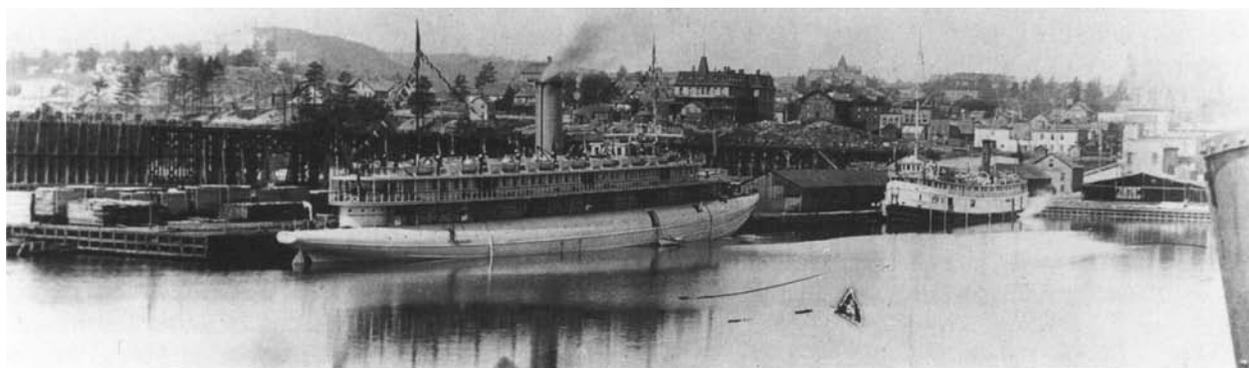
ing of the launching, and the whaleback steamers *A. D. Thomson* and *Colgate Hoyt* used their propellers to churn the shattered ice out of the slip. The two freighters were then tied up bow to stern across the end of the slip to provide a platform from which McDougall and his guests would have an unobstructed view of the spectacular launching.¹⁴

When she went into service, the *Christopher Columbus* had a pristine white hull topped by two decks of cabins that were also painted white. Built with a midship engine room, her top deck was crowned by a massive cream-colored smokestack that belched clouds of coal-black smoke. Rather than sitting directly on top of the forty-two-foot-wide hull, the two decks of cabins were perched atop a series of seven steel turrets spaced down the middle of her main deck, looking like slices of a farmer's silo.¹⁵

Capable of carrying five thousand passengers at a time, the *Christopher Columbus* sported luxurious appointments rivalling the classic Greek architecture that dominated the Columbian Exposition. The *pièce de résistance* of her two passenger decks was a magnificent "Grand Saloon" furnished with velvet Wilton carpets and chairs and lounges covered in russet Turkish leather. Above the saloon deck was a promenade deck 287 feet long. The promenade deck cabin featured a remarkable skylight running down its center that was 151 feet long and 38 feet wide. At the forward end of the promenade deck was the wheelhouse and cabins for the captain and other officers.

Sixteen gleaming white lifeboats hung from davits atop the promenade deck for use in case of an emergency, although they would have been able to accommodate only a small percentage of the big ship's passengers. The *Christopher Columbus*, however, had been designed to be virtually unsinkable. She was built with a double bottom and thirty-two separate watertight compartments that would provide buoyancy and limit flooding if the hull were holed. Safety was a major consideration for her owners. Shipyard plans showing the watertight compartments bear a notation to the effect that the design would make her "practically indestructible by collision or fire."¹⁶ The big steamer was also said to have been built with more frames and heavier steel than any boat in operation on the lakes. It is also reported that she was "a bewildering mass of straps, arches, and braces."¹⁷

At the core of the twenty-four-foot-deep hull of the *Christopher Columbus* were her powerful triple expansion steam engine and six massive Scotch boilers. With a total of 3,040 horsepower she moved through the water at about twenty miles an hour, an astonishing speed for that era. The steam engine also drove a generator that provided electricity for the ship's incandescent lighting system. At that time most ships still used kerosene lamps for lighting, but electric lights had



After the close of the Chicago World's Fair on October 30, 1893, the *Christopher Columbus* toured the lakes. The unique passenger steamer is shown here at Marquette. Tied up ahead of the whaleback is the *India*, a conventionally designed passenger steamer. The Marquette ore dock, the first chute-type loading dock on the lakes, can be seen to the left of the two steamers. (State Archives of Michigan)

been in use aboard a few ships since at least 1887, when they were first installed aboard Captain Wilson's *Yakima*.¹⁸

It is said that the unusual ship carried over two million passengers during her first year of operation. When the Columbian Exposition closed its gates in the fall of 1893, the popular vessel was purchased by the Hurson Line of Chicago to run day-excursions from Chicago to Milwaukee in competition with the Goodrich liner *Virginia*. When her new owners experienced financial difficulties, the *Christopher Columbus* was taken over by a group known as the Columbian Whaleback Steamship Company, and she continued on the Chicago to Milwaukee run.

Captain Charles Moody of Milwaukee commanded the whaleback steamer for an astonishing thirty-six years on the day-long trip up Lake Michigan. He had been sailing since the age of fourteen and had been a master on steamers since 1887. In 1896, Captain Moody went to work for Bessemer Steamship Company, and he soon developed into one of their favorite skippers. It is reported that he had "not cost the company one dollar while in service with them for damages."¹⁹

At nine o'clock each morning Captain Moody would gently maneuver the big ship away from her dock in Chicago and point her nose out onto the lake. She covered the eighty-five-mile trip in about five hours. Promptly at 4 p.m., after a two-hour layover at the dock in Milwaukee, Captain Moody sounded one short blast on the ship's deep-throated steam whistle—the signal to cast off her mooring lines for the trip back to Chicago. The voyages were always festive events for the throngs of passengers who crowded the decks of the *Christo-*

pher Columbus. The ship generally carried a dance band, and there were a variety of deck games available to entertain those aboard. After the advent of motion pictures, films were regularly shown during the early evening passages back to Chicago.²⁰ It was not an expensive day's entertainment, either. Even in 1910, the average fare was only one dollar.²¹

In 1898, the *Christopher Columbus* was sold to Chicago and Milwaukee Transportation, a company set up by A. W. Goodrich of the well-known steamship company that bore his family's name. The famous passenger whaleback was subsequently chartered to the Goodrich Transportation Company.²² During the winter of 1899–1900, Goodrich sent the *Christopher Columbus* to the shipyard at Manitowac, Wisconsin, to be overhauled and rebuilt. A third passenger deck was added, and she was painted in the familiar colors of the Goodrich fleet, with a black hull, white superstructure, and a brilliant red smokestack.²³

In 1917, the career of the *Christopher Columbus* was marred by a tragic accident that occurred at Milwaukee. While departing that port on the afternoon of June 30, 1917, she was caught in the swift current at the junction of the Milwaukee and Menominee rivers and struck the dock on the far side of the river. Her long nose swept down the dock and rammed the steel supports for a hundred-foot-high watertower. The collision sheared off the legs of the tower, and the steel tank, filled with tons of water, crashed down on the deck of the *Christopher Columbus*, just forward of her pilothouse. A gaping twelve-foot hole was torn in the deck, and some passengers who were gathered on the foredeck to watch the departure from

Milwaukee were crushed by the impact. Others were washed overboard by the flood of water spilling from the tank. A total of sixteen persons were killed in the incident, while twenty others were seriously injured. The damaged ship went into drydock for repairs and did not return to service until the following season.²⁴

Passenger service on the lakes dropped off during the Great Depression, and in 1931 the *Christopher Columbus* was laid-up. With the Goodrich fleet financially crippled by the Depression, three of their ships, including the passenger whaleback, were placed in a trustee's sale and auctioned off to a representative of the First Union Trust and Savings Bank of Chicago for the sum of only \$512.90. At the time, the three ships were estimated to be worth two million dollars. In 1936, the results of the auction were set aside by another court, and the *Christopher Columbus* and one other Goodrich passenger vessel were subsequently sold to Manitowac Shipbuilding for the equally trivial sum of \$6,500. Scrapping began almost immediately on the two ships, and the steel salvaged from their hulls was sold to Japan.²⁵

After forty-four years, during which she undoubtedly carried more passengers than any vessel in the history of the Great Lakes, Alexander McDougall's strange-looking ship finally passed from the scene. It's likely that many of the millions of passengers who had ridden on the *Christopher Columbus* over the years remembered her nostalgically, and they no doubt mourned her passing.²⁶ While the giant whaleback steamer had been the longest ship on the lakes for less than five months, for many of those who had made passages on the unique vessel, she had been Queen of the Lakes throughout her many seasons of service.

Notes

1. Fraser Shipbuilding currently occupies the site, just down the shoreline from Barker's Island, where the last surviving whaleback, the *Meteor*, is now a marine museum.
2. John H. Wilterding, *McDougall's Dream: The American Whaleback* (Duluth: Lakeside Publications, 1969), 44.
3. *Ibid.*, 4.
4. "In The Water," *Duluth Evening Herald*, June 23, 1888.
5. According to the *Marine Record*, February 9, 1888, the tapered ends for 101 were actually built in Cleveland by the firm of Pusey and Jones Co. The ends were then disassembled and shipped to Duluth for attachment to the barge's midsection.
6. "The 101," *Duluth Evening Herald*, June 22, 1888.
7. "In The Water:"
8. *Ibid.*
9. Two other whalebacks were built under McDougall's direction at Brooklyn, New York, and one at Everett, Washington.
10. "Talks Authoritatively," *Superior Daily Call*, May 2, 1892.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Duluth Evening Herald*, December 3, 1892.
13. "Launching Tomorrow," *Duluth Evening Herald*, December 2, 1892.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Details on the design of the ship were found in drawings in the American Ship Building Collection, Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University.
16. *Duluth Evening Herald*, December 3, 1892.
17. It should be noted that virtually the same claim would be made for the White Star Line passenger steamer *Titanic*, launched two decades later. She sank on her maiden voyage after striking an iceberg in the North Atlantic, claiming over a thousand lives. Like the *Christopher Columbus*, the *Titanic* did not carry enough lifeboats for all of her passengers and crew.
18. Jewell R. Dean, "The Wilson Fleet, Freight Pioneers," *Inland Seas* 2, no. 3 (July 1946): 163.
19. J. B. Mansfield, ed., *History of the Great Lakes*, vol. I (Chicago: J. H. Beers and Co., 1899; reprint, Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1972), 124.
20. James P. Barry, *Ships of the Great Lakes* (Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1973), 157–58.
21. Wilterding, 44.
22. In 1909, she was sold to Goodrich Transportation.
23. Rev. Peter Van Der Linden, ed., *Great Lakes Ships We Remember* (Cleveland: Freshwater Press, 1979), 141.
24. Barry, 159.
25. Wilterding, 44.
26. Her powerful steam whistle was salvaged during scrapping and donated to the Manitowac County Museum Society. During World War II it was used as the City of Manitowac's air raid siren. Ironically, the scrap steel from the hull of the *Christopher Columbus* may have been used in the building of the aircraft carriers and airplanes that launched the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and drew the U.S. into the war.