



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Queen of the Lakes

Mark L. Thompson

Published by Wayne State University Press

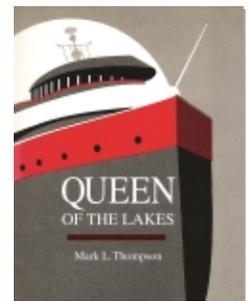
Thompson, Mark L.

Queen of the Lakes.

Wayne State University Press, 2017.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/56556>

---

Access provided at 31 Mar 2020 01:11 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

## 9

# Two Bessemer Queens

When Pickands Mather asked the major shipyards around the lakes to submit bids to build one or two ships for Rockefeller's new Bessemer Steamship Company, Globe wasn't the only shipyard that wanted to construct record-breaking vessels. Detroit Dry Dock proposed to build the two longest of the new ships, longer even than the *Bessemer* and *Siemens*. By the time the contracts were awarded, two ships were already under construction at the Detroit Dry Dock yard at Wyandotte for other customers, so construction of the Bessemer ships did not move ahead as fast as work did at Globe. As a result, both the *Bessemer* and *Siemens* were already in the water before the first of the Detroit-built ships was launched on August 8, 1896.

It's unlikely that Rockefeller or his agent, Sam Mather, was upset by the delays encountered in launching the two boats being built at Detroit. By the end of July 1896, shipping rates plummeted as the industry attempted to adjust to the dramatic growth in carrying capacity that was taking place in the Great Lakes bulk fleet. Iron ore was moving out of Duluth at only sixty cents a ton, well below the normal rate that ranged from ninety-five cents to a dollar and twenty-five cents a ton. Coal could be shipped from Lake Erie ports to Lake Michigan at twenty-five cents a ton, while the average rate during the prior year had ranged from thirty-six to fifty-nine cents a ton. Backhaul cargoes of corn were bringing shipowners only a penny a bushel, instead of the four cents a bushel that was considered

normal. At ports from Buffalo to Duluth crews were being paid off and ships laid up because they were unable to operate profitably at the low rates.<sup>1</sup> Some of the newest and largest vessels on the lakes were idle, including Mutual Transportation's *Coralia*, which had gone into service only a few months earlier. "The *Coralia* made one trip at sixty cents," said Captain George McKay, manager of the vessel, "and she will not make another."<sup>2</sup>

### STR. SIR WILLIAM FAIRBAIRN

445'x45'8"x27'8"

Queen of the Lakes

August 1, 1896 to April 13, 1898

Despite the temporary softness of the shipping market, a large crowd was on hand for the private ceremonies marking the launching of the first of the two Detroit-built ships, the longest vessel ever to enter the waters of the Great Lakes. Christened *Sir William Fairbairn* in honor of the English inventor who had pioneered the construction of iron ships and bridges some sixty years earlier, the \$260,000 freighter was thirteen feet longer than the *Coralia* and the two Bessemer boats built at Globe.<sup>3</sup> Newspaper accounts were quick to point

out, however, that the *Fairbairn* was “still not in the same class with the *Coralia* and *Bessemer*.”<sup>4</sup> While considerably longer than the Globe-built boats, the *Fairbairn* was more than two feet narrower. The reduced beam resulted in lower gross and net tonnage measurements and, even more importantly, less carrying capacity. While the *Coralia* had already set a cargo record by carrying 4,869 net tons of ore on a draft of 14 feet, 6 inches, the *Fairbairn* would be limited to cargoes of only about 4,000 net tons on the same draft.

Nonetheless, the *Fairbairn* was rightly hailed as a “mammoth ship.” Laid out in a straight line, the steel beams and angle iron used in her construction would stretch for more than seventeen miles. Laid end to end, the steel plates that formed her skin would span more than seven miles. Her framing and plates were held together by 415,553 rivets, which would stretch out for more than nine miles if placed in a line.<sup>5</sup>

The *Fairbairn* looked much like the Globe boats, though many observers thought her lines were not quite as refined. She had one hatch in the well formed between her raised forecastle deck and her forward cabin, and a catwalk bridge spanned the well and connected the two structures. Instead of having a long, clean deck, the *Fairbairn* had been built with a midship deck-

house containing cabins for firemen and deckhands. While many observers undoubtedly thought that the deckhouse sullied the appearance of the new freighter, industry insiders magnanimously applauded it as “a feature that will command itself to well-wishers of humanity.” The unique deckhouse was the brainchild of shipbuilder Robert Wallace of Cleveland, a former engineer on the lakes who obviously remembered all too well the many unpleasant hours he had spent cooped up in damp and airless quarters located below deck.<sup>6</sup>

### STR. ROBERT FULTON

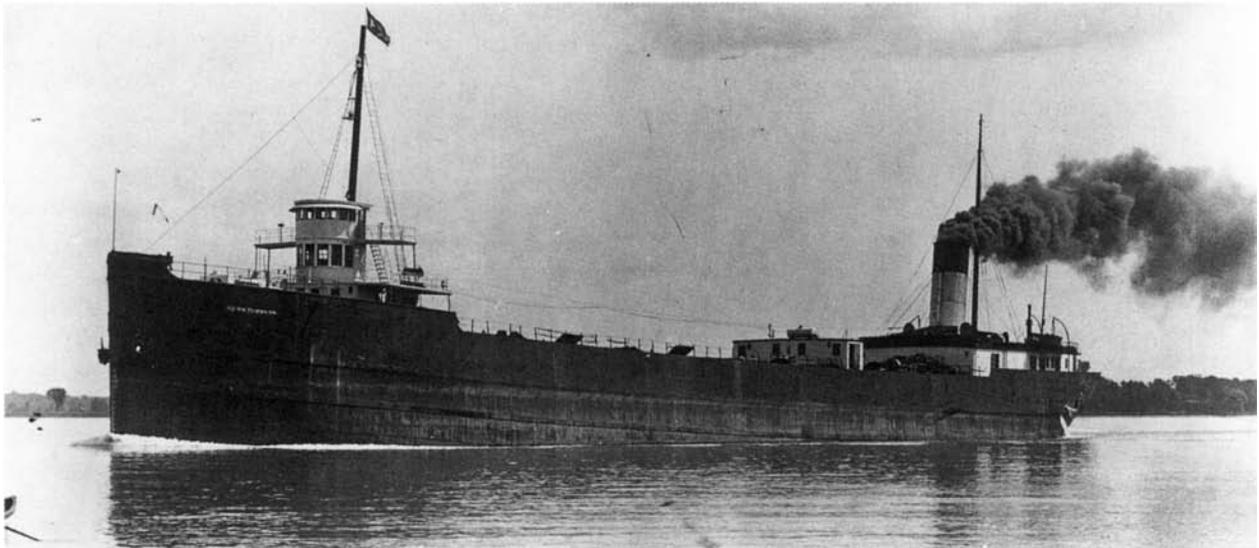
445'x45'8"x27'8"

Queen of the Lakes

September 10, 1896 to April 13, 1898

Just over a month after the launching of the *Fairbairn*, on September 10, 1896, the second of the two identical ships slid into the water. Named the *Robert Fulton*, she honored the man credited with inventing the first successful steamboat. The only

The *Sir William Fairbairn* was one of the original ships built for John D. Rockefeller's Bessemer Steamship Company. This Pasha photo shows the empty ship on the St. Clair River. The doghouse at the after end of her deck was an original feature and housed firemen and deckhands. By the time this photo was taken, the *Fairbairn's* flying bridge had been converted into a pilothouse, with the original wheelhouse still visible below the pilothouse. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University)



difference between the *Fairbairn* and *Fulton* was not obvious to onlookers. While the *Fairbairn* was powered by a 1,800-horsepower triple expansion engine, the *Fulton* engine was rated at only 1,600 horsepower.

Both of the new ships became part of the Pittsburgh Steamship Company when it was formed in 1901. The *Fairbairn* operated in the familiar colors of the steel trust fleet until 1936, when she was sold to the Buckeye Steamship Company. In 1959, she was purchased by Continental Grain's Gamma Lake Shipping Company and operated in the grain trade until 1962. In that year, ownership of the aging *Fairbairn* passed to Marine Salvage of Port Colborne, Ontario, a Canadian ship-breaker, although she remained at Buffalo, New York, as a storage hulk until the summer of 1964. On August 19, 1964, the tugs *America* and *North Carolina* towed the *Fairbairn* from her dock at Buffalo to Hamilton, Ontario, for scrapping.

The *Fulton* was owned by the Pittsburgh fleet until 1943, when she was traded to the U.S. Maritime Commission for new tonnage. She continued to be operated by Pittsburgh Steamship until the end of World War II, at which time she was mothballed at Erie. In 1948, the *Fulton* was scrapped at the Steel Company of Canada dock at Hamilton.

Of the original twelve vessels built for the Bessemer fleet, the *Siemens* was the first to disappear from the lakes, having sunk in 1944. The *Fulton* was the second to go, and the first to be cut up for scrap. The other ten vessels began their individual journeys to the shipbreakers in the 1960's, though one barge had a diesel engine installed in 1978 and avoided scrapping until 1984.<sup>7</sup>

Together, the twelve vessels built for the Bessemer fleet in 1896 operated for a total of 846 years, for a remarkable average lifespan of more than seventy seasons. While the 432-foot *Bessemer* and *Siemens* and the 445-foot *Fairbairn* and *Fulton* held the title of Queen of the Lakes for periods of from two weeks to twenty months in the 1896-98 period, three of the other original Bessemer ships were still operating on the Great Lakes during the 1970s and 1980s, when the industry was dominated by massive 1,000-foot freighters. In retrospect, the Bessemer boats may be better remembered for their staying power than their size.

### Notes

1. "Rapidly Laying Up," *Detroit Free Press*, July 29, 1896.
2. "Nothing to Carry," *Detroit Free Press*, July 30, 1896.
3. "A Mammoth Launch," *Detroit Free Press*, July 31, 1896.
4. *Ibid.*
5. "Fairbairn Launched," *Detroit Free Press*, August 2, 1896.
6. "A Mammoth Launch."
7. Launched at the Wheeler shipyard in West Bay City, Michigan, on August 27, 1896, as the *James Nasmyth*, she was transferred to Canadian ownership in 1936 as the *Merle H.*. In 1949, she was renamed the *Pic River*. Converted to a motorship in 1952, her name was shortened in 1978 to *Pic R.* She served out her long career under the ownership of Ontario Paper Company's Quebec and Ontario Transportation Company and outlived all other consort barges on the lakes.