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Queen of the Lakes

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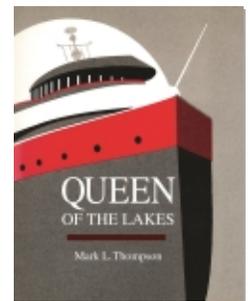
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A Superior Freighter

The *Zenith City* of American Steamship Company's "City Line" had shared the Queen of the Lake title for only a few months at the end of 1895. For three years American Steamship officials had watched as the bragging rights that went with having the longest ship on the lakes passed first to Wilson Transit and then to Mutual Transportation and Bessemer. American Steamship then recaptured the title briefly in early 1898 with the launching of the *Superior City* for their Zenith Transit Company, managed by A. B. Wolvin.

STR. SUPERIOR CITY

450'x50'x24'7"

Queen of the Lakes

April 13, 1898 to July 31, 1898

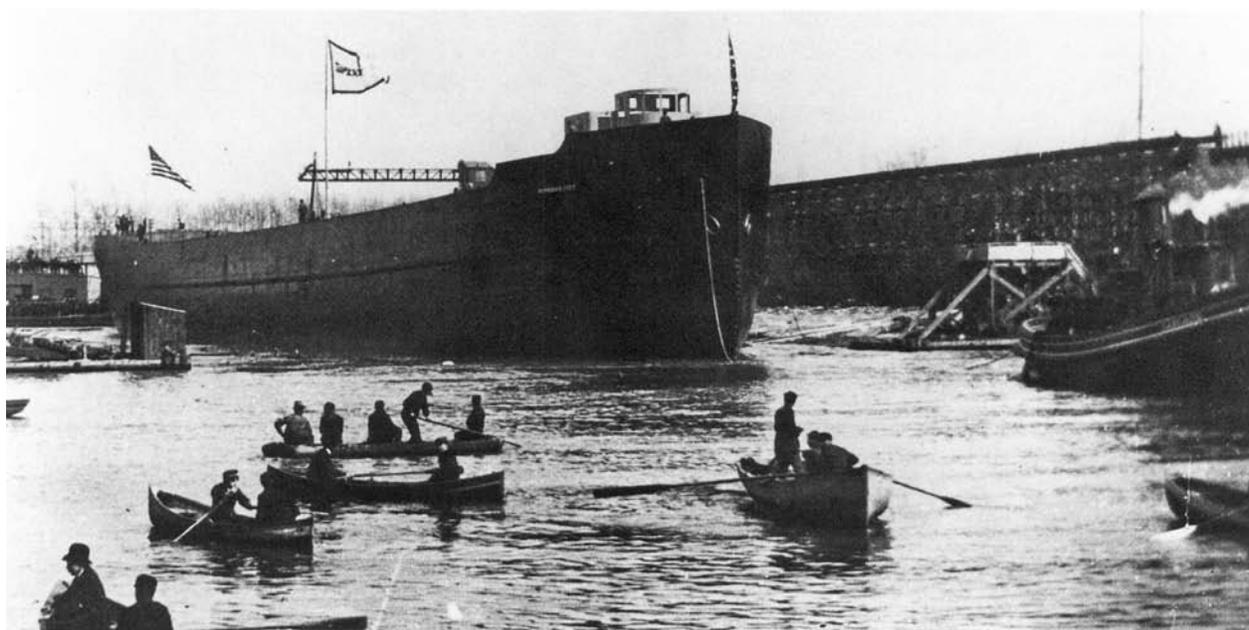
The 450-foot freighter was the first ship built at Cleveland Ship Building's new shipyard near the mouth of the Black River at Lorain, Ohio. The town declared a holiday on April 13, 1898, and thousands crowded the waterfront to watch the giant freighter slide down the ways.¹ Not only was the *Superior City* the longest ship on the lakes, she was the first freighter built with a 50-foot beam. Her gross tonnage was also substan-

tially larger than that of any other freighter then in service, and she had a carrying capacity of about 7,100 tons. The new ship was also among the most powerful bulk freighters. Instead of the common triple expansion steam engine, the new American freighter had a quadruple expansion engine rated at 1,900 horsepower.

While American Steamship officials and the residents of Lorain were delighted with the new ship, her reign as Queen of the Lakes lasted only a little more than three months. By mid-summer, a still larger freighter was completed at the Wheeler shipyard at West Bay City, Michigan, for none other than the growing Bessemer fleet.

In 1901, the ships of the American Steamship fleet, along with those of the Bessemer fleet, passed into the ownership of U.S. Steel's Pittsburgh Steamship Company. Despite the grand ceremonies that attended her launching, if the *Superior City* is remembered at all today, it is most likely as a result of the relative brevity of her career and the tragic circumstances surrounding her unfortunate end.

Just over twenty-two years after she slid into the cold waters of the Black River, the *Superior City* met her end on Lake Superior's Whitefish Bay. She had loaded 7,069 gross tons of iron ore at Two Harbors, Minnesota, the previous day and set off on the long trip down the lakes. At 9:30 on the evening of August 20, 1920, she was on Whitefish Bay, just a few hours



The *Superior City* shortly after its launching on April 13, 1898. It was the first ship built at Cleveland Ship Building's new yard in Lorain, Ohio. A large crowd was on hand to observe the launching of the new Queen of the Lakes, including many who watched from rowboats. Much fitting-out work remained after the big Wolvin freighter was launched; note that it does not have a smokestack or masts yet. On the right is the tug *Cascade*, which towed the *Superior City* to its fitting-out berth. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University)

sailing time from the Soo Locks, when she was involved in a collision with the steamer *Willis L. King* that was upbound light at the time. The *Superior City* was punctured aft of amidships on her port side, and she began to settle in the water immediately as the result of the unrestrained flooding of her cargo hold. Roused by the collision, most of her crew rushed onto deck and began to launch the two lifeboats located on her stern above the engine room. As they strained at the davits, the *Superior City*'s two boilers suddenly exploded and unleashed a shock wave that hurled most of the crewmembers into the water.

The ship sank almost immediately after the explosion, plunging to the bottom in 265 feet of water. Despite the efforts of the crew of the *King*, other ships in the area—including a small yawl named the *Turner*—and personnel from the nearby lifesaving station at Whitefish Point, only four crewmembers were saved. One of those was boatswain Walter Richter, who had gone to his lifeboat station on the stern wearing only his

underwear. The explosion of the boilers tore the underwear from Richter's body and blew him into the water. "I sank deep into the icy water, which evidently brought me to my senses," he recounted later. "I thought I would never reach the surface. I



The *Superior City* sank near the mouth of Whitefish Bay in 1920 after a collision with the *Str. Willis King*. Twenty-nine of the thirty-three persons aboard the freighter at the time went down with the ship. (Author's collection)

swam for about four minutes and up from the depths came a steamer's hatch cover upon which I climbed and hung onto for a half hour until the *Turner* arrived. I would not be surprised if most of the boys were blown to pieces from their places over the boiler house where they had lined up in order to get into the lifeboats."² Crewmembers on the *Turner* later told Richter that "wooden ports in the interior of the steel ship [had been] blown clear through the sides."³

Out of thirty-three persons aboard the *Superior City*, twenty-eight men and one woman died with their ship. In addition to Richter, the captain, second mate, and a wheelsman were pulled from the water. Among the dead was the wife of the second assistant engineer, who was making a summer trip with her husband.⁴ Most of those who died must have been blown to pieces by the boiler explosion or trapped in the suction of the

powerful whirlpool that resulted when the *Superior City* made her dive in two hundred feet of water. No bodies were ever recovered. Lake Superior does not easily give up her dead.

Notes

1. Dana Thomas Bowen, *Lore of the Lakes* (Daytona Beach: Dana Thomas Bowen, 1940), 226.
2. "No Trace Found of Crew of Lake Wreck," *Detroit Free Press*, August 22, 1920.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.