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## Queen of the Lakes

Mark L. Thompson

Published by Wayne State University Press

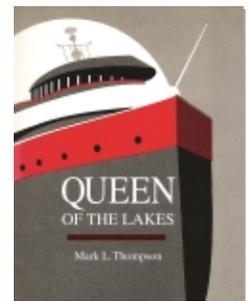
Thompson, Mark L.

Queen of the Lakes.

Wayne State University Press, 2017.

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## 12

# Quad Queens

At the turn of the century, one astute observer of the bulk shipping industry paused to sum up the status of shipbuilding on the Great Lakes:

For ten years past it has been impossible to get a strictly modern boat on the lakes. Size and style changed between laying of the keel and the launching of the ship. Nowhere in the world has the progress in marine architecture been so pronounced as on the Great Lakes, where a greater tonnage was launched in 1896 than in all the rest of the United States. There never has been a time when, nor a waterway where, progress has been so rapid as in the past half dozen years on the Great Lakes.<sup>1</sup>

The record of the previous six years had been genuinely astonishing. At the end of the period, ships were one hundred feet longer, and both beams and depths had grown by about five feet. The increased dimensions translated into gross tonnages that were fifty percent greater than they had been six years before and, even more importantly, they doubled the carrying capacity. Many who had watched the dramatic metamorphosis occur undoubtedly felt that freighters like the *Morse* and *Houghton* represented the culmination of the shipbuilder's art. They firmly believed that ships would change little in coming years, perhaps even decades.

Change is the only thing constant, however. Calendars

had just rolled over to the new century when throngs of Lorain, Ohio, residents crowded into the shipyard just above the Black River bridge to witness the launching of the first 500-foot freighter. Many were disappointed by what they saw. "In appearance, this first of the 500-footers was the antithesis of the high and lordly *Morse*, *Houghton*, and *Poe*."<sup>2</sup> The forecastle of the new ship, the *John W. Gates*, was barely raised above the main deck, and there was no stern deckhouse at all. The pilot-house was diminutive and looked as if it had been built for a much smaller ship. A few of the knowledgeable boatwatchers in the crowd expressed the opinion that the design of the new vessel was a throwback to the *Victory* and *Zenith City* that had been built five years earlier.

### STR. JOHN W. GATES

497'x52'x30'

Queen of the Lakes

January 20, 1900 to April 9, 1904

In fact, the lines of the *Gates* had been drawn by Washington I. Babcock, the same naval architect who had designed the *Victory* and *Zenith City*. It was his belief that structures on

the deck of a freighter should be minimized so as not to interfere with the machinery used to unload it. Like the two earlier vessels, the *Gates* had only three masts and a tall black funnel to break the otherwise clean sweep of her deck astern of her pilothouse.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of what the crowd of onlookers thought, Augustus Wolvin, who managed the American Steamship Company fleet, was not the slightest bit disappointed by the new addition to the fleet. Not only was the *Gates* the longest, widest, and deepest ship on the lakes, but her net tonnage was slightly higher than that of the *Morse* and *Houghton*, which meant she would have an excellent carrying capacity.

In christening the *Gates*, American had departed from the tradition of naming their vessels after important cities around the lakes. Instead, the new ship was named after the president of American Steel and Wire Company, one of American's important customers. John Gates was on hand for the launching of his namesake, and he was very proud that the new steamer had his name boldly emblazoned on her bow. Until his death in 1911, he would maintain an interest in the vessel far exceeding that normally shown by the corporate officials after whom the big freighters are named. It is said that he always demanded

“spit and polish” for her, to the extent that crewmembers on the *Gates* soon dubbed her the “John W. Workhorse.”<sup>4</sup>

### STR. JAMES J. HILL

497'x52'x30'

Queen of the Lakes

January 24, 1900 to April 9, 1904

The *Gates* was the first of four, basically identical ships launched between January 20 and June 20, 1900. While they were, and are, referred to as the first 500-footers, they were actually only 497 feet long. The *James J. Hill* followed the *Gates* down the ways at Lorain on January 24. On May 5, the *Isaac L. Ellwood* was launched at the F. W. Wheeler yard at West Bay City, Michigan, followed on June 20 by the *William Edenborn*.

**The *John W. Gates* waiting for a lock at Sault Ste. Marie. The two doghouses on her deck housed crewmembers who had to be added after the traditional two-watch system was replaced by the current three-watch system. Designed by Washington I. Babcock for the Wolvin-managed American Steamship fleet, the *Gates* and her three sister ships had submarine sterns like the earlier *Victory*, (State Archives of Michigan)**



### STR. ISAAC L. ELLWOOD

497'x52'x25'2"

Queen of the Lakes

May 5, 1900 to April 9, 1904

Originally, all four of the ships were to be built at the Lorain shipyard of Cleveland Ship Building, but in the spring of 1899 the company merged with the other major Great Lakes yards to form American Ship Building Company. Managers of the giant shipbuilding firm decided that it would be more efficient to split the contract for the four boats between the Lorain yard and the idle West Bay City yard that was also part of the new company.<sup>5</sup>

### STR. WILLIAM EDENBORN

497'x52'x25'2"

Queen of the Lakes

June 20, 1900 to April 9, 1904

While all four of the ships had long, and largely uneventful, careers, Wolvin and Gates must have been shocked to hear that the *Gates* had been damaged while on her maiden voyage. On April 30, 1900, while lying to behind Whitefish Point for weather with a number of other ships, the giant *Gates* sagged against the 292-foot steamer *Mariska*, owned by the Minnesota Steamship Company. The collision cracked several plates on the starboard side of the *Gates*, resulting in about \$10,000 in damage to her hull. She went on to the lakehead, where tempo-



The *Gates* and her three sister ships were purchased by steel magnate Andrew Carnegie just after the turn of the century and became part of his famous Pittsburgh Steamship fleet. While the stack on the *Gates* was still little more than a stovepipe, it was considerably shorter than stacks on earlier ships. On vessels with steel hulls and superstructures, like the *Gates*, there was much less chance that a hot ash from the boilers would set the vessel afire, so their stacks did not have to be as tall as they had been on earlier wooden ships. (Author's collection)

rary repairs were made before she set out on her return voyage. More permanent repairs would have to wait until she returned to the lower lakes, as there was no drydock on Lake Superior large enough to accommodate the new ship.

The *Ellwood* and *Edenborn* were involved in an even more serious incident a few years later, after all four of the ships had become part of the Pittsburgh Steamship fleet. On November 28, 1905, the two ships departed Duluth in a convoy with the steamers *R. W. England* and *Mataafa*, and the *Mataafa's* consort, the barge *James Nasmyth*. It had been a bad fall for the shipping industry. Two major storms had already swept across the lakes, and as the small convoy cleared the piers at Duluth, the sky turned black and winds increased as a violent northeasterly gale suddenly roared in off Lake Superior.

As if in unison, the captains of the four steamers brought their ships around to make a dash for the safety of the Duluth harbor. The frigid waters had already become a frenzy of waves and spray was washing over the decks of the five vessels. Buffetted by waves and wind, the *Edenborn* and *England* managed to negotiate the narrow opening between the piers. Once inside the harbor, though, the *England* was almost immediately driven onto the beach by the fierce winds.

As the *Ellwood* struggled toward the relative safety of the harbor, the wind and waves flung the massive ship against the concrete piers. Recovering, she managed to limp into the harbor. But the big freighter was taking on water, and before her crew could get the pumps started she sank to the bottom in shallow water.

As the *Mataafa* approached the piers, her deckhands managed to cast off the towline linking their ship to the *Nasmyth*. With torrents of driven snow making visibility difficult, the captain of the 450-foot freighter tried to get up enough speed to dash between the piers and into the harbor. When she was almost abreast of the piers, a giant swell lifted the big ship and threw her against the end of the north pier with an impact that knocked most of her crewmen to the decks. Before the *Mataafa* could regain headway, her bow swung around, heading back out to sea, and her stern crashed against the south pier, tearing off her rudder. Within seconds, the rudderless vessel was driven broadside into the rocky, shallow water along the shore, and under the relentless pounding of the wind and waves she broke in two.

Duluth is perched on a sprawling hillside that stands above the harbor. From everywhere in town, the residents have a view of the harbor and the west end of Lake Superior. In the waning light of that November afternoon, thousands saw the tragic events taking place at the harbor entrance and many began making their way toward the piers. The Duluth lifesaving crew was already on the scene, and they had used an eprouvette

mortar to fire a light line out to the stranded *Mataafa*. They then attached a heavier hawser to the end of the line and signalled for those aboard the *Mataafa* to pull it out to their ship so a breeches buoy could be rigged to evacuate them from the wreck. As they took up a strain on the small heaving line, it rose out of the water, but the instant the cold wind hit the wet line it turned into a brittle icicle. As the crewmen heaved on the frozen line, it suddenly parted, and they crashed to the wet deck.

As night settled over Duluth, the thousands who had gathered on the beach in the driving snowstorm lit bonfires to keep warm and provide some beacon of hope for the crewmen stranded on the *Mataafa*. Temperatures plummeted to twenty below zero, with wind chills of more than fifty below. There was no source of warmth aboard the stricken freighter, except the little given off by the bodies huddled together at both ends of the ship. In the minutes after the *Mataafa* had broken in half, water flooding into her engine room had extinguished the fires in her boilers, and it wasn't long before the radiators in her cabins had grown as cold as the steel of her hull. At the forward end of the ship, the captain gathered deck crewmembers in his cabin, where they clustered together against the inboard wall to escape the torrents of water pouring through the broken por-

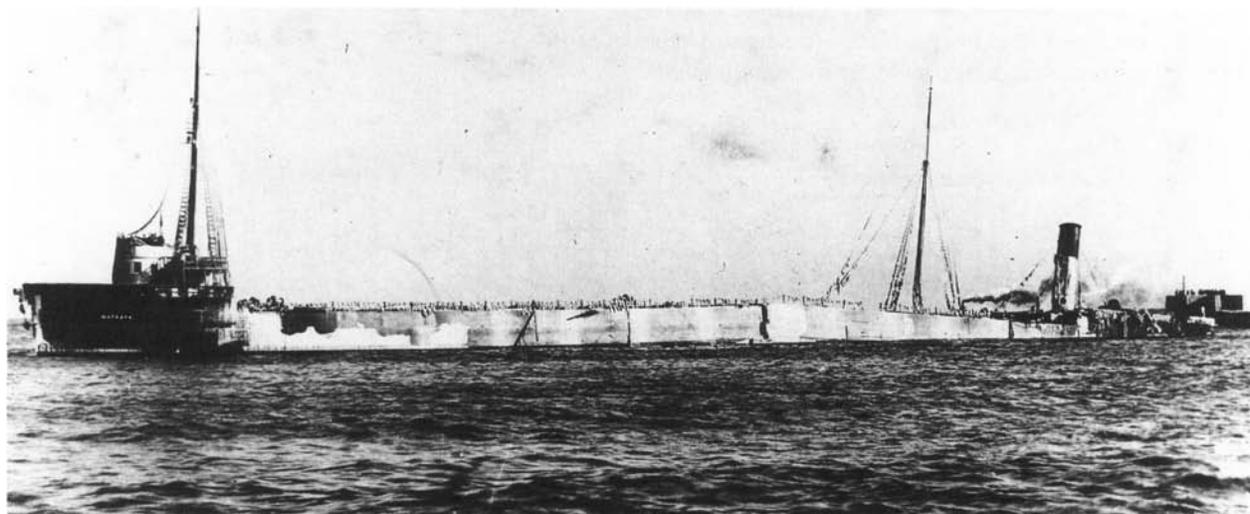
tholes. At the stern, the chief engineer and the engine room and galley personnel weren't as lucky. The stern had settled in the water, and there was no dry place for them to gather.

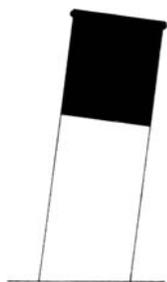
In the morning, the weather abated a little, and a lifeboat was launched from shore to evacuate the crew of the *Mataafa*. They found the captain and other deck crewmembers in the forward cabin, cold, wet, and hungry, but alive. At the stern, the lifesaving crew found only nine dead bodies, including one totally encased in a shroud of ice. What had begun the day before as the last trip of the 1905 season had ended tragically as literally the last voyage for the *Mataafa* and nine of her crew.

The *Mataafa* was the victim of one of the worst storms to ever sweep across the lakes. Thirty vessels were wrecked on Lake Superior alone, including fourteen that had been driven ashore by winds gusting as high as eighty miles an hour at the height of the storm. For years, the killer storm of 1905 and the tragic loss of the *Mataafa* were commemorated in a very unusual way. An enterprising cigar manufacturer profited from the disaster by producing "*Mataafa* Cigars," which bore a picture of the ill-fated ship on their bands.<sup>6</sup>

The *Ellwood* and *Edenborn* lived to sail another day. In fact, the four sister ships that had begun their careers within months of each other were all to end their careers in the same

**The wrecked hull of the *Mataafa* the morning after she was driven onto the beach at Duluth and broken in half by a violent November storm in 1905. Nine crewmembers at the stern of the ship froze to death during the ordeal. The hull of the *Mataafa* was later salvaged and returned to service. Launched in 1899 as the *Str. Pennsylvania*, the ship was finally scrapped in Germany in 1965. (State Archives of Michigan)**





The *John W. Gates* and her three sister ships operated on the lakes until 1961. By that time Andrew Carnegie's Pittsburgh Steamship Company had become part of U.S. Steel's Great Lakes Fleet. Ships in the giant steelmaker's fleet had silver stacks with a black cap and were often referred to as "silverstackers" or "tin stackers." Later, a white U.S. Steel logo was added to the black cap. (Author's collection)

year. The *Edenborn* and *Hill* were both sunk in 1961 to form a breakwater at Gordan Park in Cleveland. The *Gates* and *Ellwood* were scrapped the same year at Conneaut.

The launching of the *Gates* and her three sisters was evidence of the fact that despite the incredible changes in Great Lakes bulk freighters during the last six years of the nineteenth century, the process of evolution had not come to a halt. Those who witnessed the *Gates* slide into the waters on that cold January day in 1900 could not possibly have foreseen the developments that would occur during the first six years of the twentieth century.

Even those few who were bold enough to predict further growth in the size of ships could not, in their wildest imaginations, have envisioned that ships would grow by another hundred feet in the next six years, or that carrying capacities would leap by another fifty percent. The efficiency of bulk freighters on the lakes had already surpassed everyone's wildest expectations. In 1900, for example, a ship like the *Gates* could haul wheat from Chicago to Buffalo for 4.42-cents a bushel. It would cost 9.98-cents—more than twice as much—to move that same bushel by rail, even though the overland trip was much shorter

than the circuitous water route. Shipping iron ore, coal, or stone by water resulted in similar savings.

Shipowners were masters of the principles of economies of scale. They knew that if they built a ship with a larger carrying capacity they could carry more cargo with basically the same crew and operating costs. Larger ships, then, allowed them to attract more cargo by offering shippers better rates. At the same time, not all of the savings were passed on to shippers. The shipowners, too, realized larger profits by operating larger ships. Thus the die was unalterably cast: shipowners would forever seek bigger vessels.

## Notes

1. J. B. Mansfield, ed., *History of the Great Lakes*, vol. I (Chicago: J. H. Beer and Co., 1899; reprint, Cleveland: Freshwater Press, Cleveland, 1972), 357–59.
2. Gordon Pritchard Bugbee, "The Life and Times of the Bessemer Fleet, Part 2," *Telescope* 27, no. 3 (May–June 1978): 78.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. American Ship Building Company was formed by the merger of Cleveland Ship Building, Ship Owners' Dry Dock Company, Globe Iron Works, American Steel Barge Company, Detroit Dry Dock Company, Chicago Ship Building, and Milwaukee Dry Dock Company on March 16, 1899. F. W. Wheeler and Company joined in June of 1899, followed in April of 1900 by the Union Dry Dock Company. A Canadian subsidiary, Western Ship Building of Port Arthur, Ontario, was incorporated in 1909, and the Delta Shipbuilding Company of Toledo, Ohio, was acquired in 1945.
6. Walter Havighurst, *The Long Ships Passing* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), 245–47.