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Queen of the Lakes

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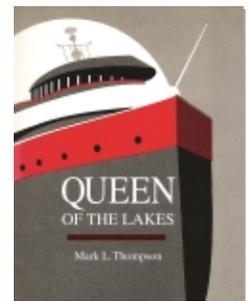
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The Standard 600-Footers

While the four Gary-class boats were being readied to get underway for their second season, workers at Chicago Ship Building were preparing for the launch of their hull number sixty-eight. When it was christened as the *J. Pierpont Morgan* and plunged into the cold waters of the Calumet River on April 26, 1906, it displaced the *Gary* and her sisters as the longest ship on the Great Lakes. The *Morgan*'s reign as Queen of the Lakes would be a relatively short one, however, and she is best remembered today not for her length, but as the prototype for what would become the largest class of ships ever to operate on the inland seas.

STR. J. PIERPONT MORGAN

601'x58'x27'4"

Queen of the Lakes

April 26, 1906 to August 18, 1906

Prior to the launching of the *Morgan*, it was unusual for more than three or four ships to be built from the same set of plans. Particularly since the launching of the first iron and steel vessels in the early 1880s, the size and design of ships had changed so rapidly that by the time three or four ships had been

built from a set of plans they were outdated. Many times, before naval architects completed drawings for a new ship, new developments would force them to go back to their drafting tables and revise the plans they had just finished. There were even instances where significant changes were made after construction had begun.

For the Great Lakes shipbuilding industry, the design of the *Morgan* represented a plateau of perfection in the endless evolution of the bulk freighter. Vessels would continue to grow in length, width, and depth, and designs would be continuously modified, but between 1906 and 1930 the basic plan of the *Morgan* would be followed in the construction of between fifty-six and seventy-six ships. They were the "standard 600-footers," and for thirty years they were the backbone of the world's most efficient bulk shipping industry.

There were three principal reasons for the popularity of the standard 600-footers. The first was their low cost. Shipping companies saved a lot of money by using a standard, off-the-shelf plan, rather than having naval architects custom design a ship. At the same time, major shipyards around the lakes soon became proficient at building the 600-footers and were able to keep their costs to a minimum. Within a few years, shipowners found that the standard 600-footers were the least expensive vessels being built on the lake on a ton-for-ton basis. Whereas shipbuilding costs generally rose each year, in 1909 a shipping



The historic *J. Pierpont Morgan*, the first of the standard 600-footers, as it looked on a trip down the St. Marys River in 1955. The billboard lettering on the side of the ship makes the ownership of the big freighter clear to all onlookers. Once common on the lakes, billboard lettering proved to be difficult to maintain, and most fleets have since abandoned the practice. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University)

company could have a standard 600-footer built for no more than Pittsburgh Steamship had paid for the *Gary* in 1905.¹ In the world of shipbuilding, the standard 600-footer was the first “economy model.”

Second, the ships could be built in an incredibly short period of time. It took three to four months to build the first of the standard 600-footers, but as the yards became more accustomed to building them, that time was cut to as little as six to eight weeks.² The abbreviated construction period allowed fleets to put new ships into service rapidly to meet their changing needs, and they did not have to tie up capital for a long time waiting for a new ship to be delivered and put into service.

Third, the standard 600-footers were highly versatile freighters. Their carrying capacities were among the highest of any ships on the lakes, which translated into higher profits for their owners and reduced costs for shippers. At the same time, with the aid of tugs, they were still small enough to negotiate even the serpentine Cuyahoga River at Cleveland. In fact, until the 621-foot *Cadillac* went up the Cuyahoga in 1961, the 600-footers were considered to be the longest ships capable of servicing steel mills on the river. The standard 600-footers were really the first of what we would refer to today as river-class freighters.³

STR. HENRY H. ROGERS

601'x58'x27'4"

Queen of the Lakes

June 16, 1906 to August 18, 1906

The *J. Pierpont Morgan* was the first of six standard 600-footers built in 1906. The *Morgan* and three sister ships were fabricated at Chicago Ship Building for Pittsburgh Steamship. On June 16, workers at Chicago launched the *Henry H. Rogers*, followed on August 18 by the *Norman B. Ream*. The fourth freighter, christened the *Peter A. B. Widener*, went into the water on October 20, but by that time a new Queen of the Lakes, the *Str. Edward Y. Townsend*, had been launched at Superior Ship Building for Bethlehem Steel's Great Lakes Steamship Division. Interestingly, the new Bethlehem freighter was also a standard 600-footer, one of two they ordered that year, but it had been stretched one foot to make it the longest ship on the lakes. It was launched on August 18, 1906, the same day as the *Ream*. The second Bethlehem 600-footer, the *Daniel J. Morrell*, went into the water at West Bay City Ship Building four days later.⁴

STR. NORMAN B. REAM

601'x58'x27'4"
 Queen of the Lakes
 August 18, 1906

The launch of Bethlehem's *Townsend* underscored an irony about the standard 600-footers: they weren't standard, nor were they necessarily 600 feet long. The standard 600-footer was really the "Ford" of the maritime industry on the lakes. They came in several different models, models changed from year to year, and their owners could customize them by the selection of different options. In the same way that it is often hard to tell one make of car from another, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether a particular ship was a standard 600-footer or not. The *Morgan* and *Townsend* are both considered to be standard 600-footers, yet the *Morgan* had a keel length of 580 feet, while the *Townsend* was 586 feet along her keel. The *Morgan* was 601 feet in overall length, compared to 602 feet for the *Townsend*. The *Morgan* was 27 feet, four inches deep, while the *Townsend* was 32 feet deep. The *Morgan* was measured at 7,161 gross tons and 5,530 net tons, compared to 7,438 gross tons and 5,673 net tons for the *Townsend*. Machinery and cabin arrangements varied even more dramatically. They were both standard 600-footers, having been built from the same basic American Ship Building plans, yet they weren't very standard and they weren't necessarily 600 feet long.

There is general agreement within the maritime community that the *Morgan* was the first standard 600-footer and that the *Rogers*, *Ream*, *Townsend*, *Morrell*, and *Widener* belonged to the same class. Beyond that, there is substantial room for disagreement over which ships were standard 600-footers. The total number of standard 600-footers ranges from a low of fifty-six ships to an upper limit of about seventy-six vessels built between 1906 and 1930.

A total of twenty-five ships built between 1906 and 1916 had the same basic dimensions as the *Morgan*, with keel lengths of 580 feet and beams of 58 feet. While they varied in overall length from 601 to 604 feet, they are probably the purest of the standard 600-footers. Beginning in 1916, all of the ships built with 580-foot keels had their beams increased to 60 feet.⁵ From 1916–30, thirty-five vessels were built to those dimensions, and they are generally also considered to fall within the standard 600-footer-class. The last ship of that size built was Pittsburgh Steamship's *Thomas W. Lamont*. Launched in 1930 at AmShip's Toledo yard, the *Lamont* is widely viewed as the last of the standard 600-footers.

It could easily be argued that the only ships that can rightly be called standard 600-footers were the sixty vessels built with keel lengths of 580 feet. Unfortunately, that list wouldn't include the *Townsend*, which had a keel length of 586 feet, yet we know that the Bethlehem freighter was merely a stretched version of the *Morgan*. The *Townsend* and fifteen other ships built between 1906 and 1927 are often referred to as standard 600-footers, even though their keel lengths ranged from 580 feet, 9 inches to 596 feet. Regardless of whether there were fifty-six or seventy-six standard 600-footers, or some number in between, the *Morgan* and the other ships in her size range had become the backbone of the U.S. fleet on the Great Lakes by the time of World War I, and they continued in that role until World War II.

The *Morgan* had a long and relatively uneventful career as one of the workhorses of the Pittsburgh Steamship fleet. In 1965, she was sold to a Canadian firm. Renamed the *Heron Bay*, she operated from 1965-78 in the colors of Quebec and Ontario Transportation. Retired from service in 1978, the seventy-two-year-old freighter was sold to Union Pipe and Machinery of Montreal, and her name was shortened to *Heron B*. On March 30, 1979, scrapping operations began on the *Heron B*. at Davie Shipbuilding in Lauzon, Quebec.

The *Henry H. Rogers* operated as part of the giant Pittsburgh Steamship fleet for its entire career. By 1974, the *Rogers* was considered to be excess tonnage, and on November 21 the second of the standard 600-footers was towed to the Hyman-Michaels dock in Duluth for scrapping. By the summer of 1975 scrapping was complete.

Of the original 600-footers, the *Norman B. Ream* had the longest career. Like the *Morgan*, the *Ream* left the Pittsburgh Steamship fleet in 1965, sold to the Steinbrenner-owned Kinsman Marine Transit fleet. Renamed the *Kinsman Enterprise* in 1965, the third of the standard 600-footers spent the balance of her active sailing career in Kinsman colors, although the Kins-



When the *Norman B. Ream*, a sister ship to the *Morgan*, was purchased by Kinsman Marine in 1965, its U.S. Steel stack markings were painted over in Kinsman colors. The black stack bears a dark green band with white borders and a block "S"; this signifies that the fleet is owned by the Steinbrenner family, which took over the former Minch fleet in the early 1900s. (Author's collection)

man fleet became S&E Shipping in 1975. The Kinsman/S&E fleet is one of the last independent U.S. vessel operators on the Great Lakes, not owned or controlled by a steel or mining firm. The fleet, which is a successor to the famous Minch fleet that had operated the historic *Onoko* and the ill-fated *Western Reserve*, is primarily involved in transporting grain from the American lakehead at Duluth and Superior to elevators in Buffalo owned by General Mills, Pillsbury, and International Multifoods. The *Enterprise* operated in the grain trade until 1979, when S&E sold the seventy-three-year-old freighter to the Economic Development Corporation of Port Huron, Michigan, for use as a dock face and storage facility on the St. Clair River. From 1979 until 1990, the former *Ream*, with her name and Kinsman stack markings painted out, sat idle at the dock just south of Port Huron. In 1990, the eighty-four-year-old hulk was sold for scrapping in Turkey and was towed out of the lakes. She was the last of the original standard 600-footers that had been launched in 1906.⁶

Notes

1. Herbert C. Sadler, *Some Points in Connection with Shipbuilding on the Great Lakes, U.S.A.* (London: Institute of Naval Architecture, 1909), 9.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Today, ships of up to 635 feet in length regularly make the five-mile trip up the winding Cuyahoga without the aid of tugs. Their increased maneuverability results from the installation of such things as bow and stern thrusters, diesel engines, pilothouse control of engines, and twin screws.
4. The last standard 600-footer to operate on the lakes was launched for the Pittsburgh Steamship fleet in 1910 as the *William B. Dickson*. Purchased by Kinsman Marine and renamed the *Merle M. McCurdy* in 1969, she operated in the grain trade until 1985. In addition to being the last operating standard 600-footer, the *McCurdy* was the first ship on the Great Lakes to be named after an African American. The vessel's namesake was a former Cleveland lawyer who was appointed as a U.S. attorney in 1962.
5. The first ship built with a beam of sixty feet was the *Str. William G. Mather*, launched in 1905 as the flagship of the Cleveland-Cliffs fleet.
6. Ship Biographies, Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University.