Iron ore mining was already an important industry in the Lake Superior region when the *Onoko* was launched in 1882. No one could have foreseen, however, the meteoric expansion the industry would experience over the next decade. In the *Onoko*’s inaugural season, total iron ore shipments from the Marquette and Menominee ranges in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula amounted to just under two million tons. Production began at the Vermilion Range, west of Duluth, Minnesota, and the Gogebic Range, near Ashland, Wisconsin, in 1884, adding to the flow of ore off the northern lakes. In 1892, the first ore was shipped off the Mesabi Range, north of Duluth, which was destined to become the most productive in the world. Total shipments from the Mesabi mines in 1892 amounted to only 4,245 tons, literally a drop in the bucket in a year when total shipments on the Great Lakes approached nine million tons.¹

The flow of iron ore through the St. Marys River became virtually “a river of red,” and Orlando Poe, superintendent of the Soo Locks noted that, “the wildest expectations of one year seem absolutely tame the next.”² In 1888, iron ore tonnages exceeded shipments of grain for the first time. After that, no other type of cargo ever approached the importance of iron ore for the Great Lakes shipping industry. The effect on the bulk fleets was profound. Both the number and size of ships engaged in the ore trade increased geometrically in the decade after the *Onoko* made her debut.

While the *Onoko*’s distinction as Queen of the Lakes passed to a succession of package freighters and then, in 1892, to the *Christopher Columbus*, she was also surpassed by many of the bulk freighters that followed her. Those ships, though smaller than the *Christopher Columbus* and package freighters like the *Owego* and *Chemung*, represent interesting and important chapters in the story of the continuing evolution of the Great Lakes bulk freighter that began in 1869 with the *Hackett*. While they missed, sometimes only by inches, the distinction of being Queen of the Lakes, they set the stage for the launching of bulk freighters that would eventually regain, and tenaciously hold onto, the coveted title.

In 1889, the Cleveland Iron Mining Company’s *Str. Pontiac* succeeded the *Onoko* as the longest and largest bulk freighter on the lakes. Launched at the two-year-old yard of the Cleveland Ship Building Company, the steel-hulled *Pontiac* was 319 feet long, 41 feet wide, and had a depth of just over 12 feet. On her maiden voyage, she carried a record cargo of 2,849 tons of iron ore through the Soo.

Almost exactly a year after the launching of the *Pontiac*, a still-larger bulk freighter was completed at the Detroit Dry
Dock Company yard on the Detroit River at Wyandotte, Michigan. The _Maryland_, built for Inter Ocean Transportation of Milwaukee, was 332 feet long. With a beam of 42 feet and a depth of more than 20 feet, she was registered at 2,419 gross tons.

While the _Pontiac_ had followed the lines of the _Hackett_ and _Onoko_, the _Maryland_ differed considerably. The Detroit Dry Dock Company had begun experimenting with ocean styling as early as 1871, and the _Maryland_ contained elements of both ocean and Great Lakes designs. The most obvious difference between the _Maryland_ and the bulk freighters that preceded her was that her engine room was located almost amidships, rather than at the stern. In a very unusual arrangement, she also had five cabins spaced out along her deck, drastically reducing the amount of open deck area.

The following spring, Detroit Dry Dock launched yet another hybrid bulk freighter, one that was even larger than the _Maryland_. The _E. C. Pope_ appears to have been built on speculation by the shipyard, but in September of 1891 she went into service for Eddy-Shaw Transit of Bay City, Michigan, managed by Lake Transit Company. The _Pope_ was 332 feet long, 42 feet wide, and 24 feet deep, with a gross registered tonnage of 2,637. In her design, the engine room was moved nearer the stern than that of the _Maryland_, but she still had one hatch between her engine room and stern cabin. Relocation of the engine room allowed the center cabin to be eliminated, but she still had four cabins on her deck.

In many ways, the _Maryland_ and _Pope_ seem to be crosses between package freighters and bulk freighters, suggesting that the shipyard may have been attempting to develop a multipurpose vessel that could operate in both trades. In fact, like the _Susquehanna_, _Owego_, and _Chemung_, the _Maryland_ and the _Pope_ were both taken to saltwater during World War I and undoubtedly served there as package freight vessels.

By the early 1890s, more shipyards around the lakes were becoming involved in the construction of steel bulk freighters, but most were content to follow the more traditional styling that had been established with the _Hackett_. Minor design changes were regularly made, however, as the shipyards and shipowners attempted to perfect the bulk freighter, or at least make some modification that would make their vessels superior to those built by their competitors.

Several ships were launched in 1892 embodying one such design modification. The 350-foot _Maritana_, which became the longest bulk freighter on the lakes when she was launched on June 8, 1892, at Chicago Shipbuilding, belongs in this group. Built for the Minnesota Steamship Company of Duluth, the _Maritana_ had the standard raised forecastle deck at her bow. Rather than having a forward cabin that adjoined or sat on top of the forecastle deck, however, her forward cabin was set back slightly from the forecastle, and there was a cargo hatch in the area in between.

The precise logic behind this design innovation is unknown, but it may have represented an attempt to increase the vessel’s carrying capacity by allowing cargo to be stowed in the bow of the ship. Had the forward cabin adjoined the forecastle, the area within the bow would have been inaccessible. It may also have been considered desirable to move the pilothouse back from the bow in order to avoid its being battered by waves when steaming into heavy seas. Ships’ decks were much lower to the water in those days, and a pilothouse perched atop the forecastle would certainly have taken a beating in a seaway. Once the decision had been made to move the pilothouse back from the bow, it would have been logical to place a hatch ahead of the pilothouse.

Regardless of its exact purpose, the forward hatch became quite common on ships built in the decade following the launching of the _Maritana_. The _Maritana’s_ sistership, the _Mariposa_, launched just eight days later at Globe Shipbuilding in Cleveland, followed the same design, which is not unusual given that Globe Iron Works owned both yards. On the same day that the _Mariposa_ was launched, the F. W. Wheeler shipyard in West Bay City, Michigan, completed work on the _W. H. Gilbert_. It was two feet shorter than the _Maritana_ and _Mariposa_, but it also had a hold forward of its wheelhouse cabin.

The _Maritana_, referred to as a “monster boat,” immediately set a new cargo record, loading 4,800 tons of ore at Escanaba for delivery to Chicago—the largest cargo ever carried on the lakes at that time. This feat was made possible in part by the fact that she loaded at Escanaba; sailing from this port she could load to a deeper draft than vessels coming off Lake Superior and having to pass through the Soo Locks.

When the _Maritana_ cleared Escanaba and her captain rang up “full ahead” on the engine order telegraph, the new ship began to shudder and heave. Thinking they might still be in shallow water, the captain cut back on her speed. Ten minutes later, when he was sure they were in deep water, he again signalled “full ahead,” but the _Maritana_ once more began to buckle and jerk. To keep the big ship from shaking itself apart, the long trip down Lake Michigan had to be completed at half speed, a situation that did not please her irascible captain.

Shipyard personnel made some small adjustments in the _Maritana’s_ engine while she was unloading, but after the vessel
departed the dock and got up to full speed it was obvious to all aboard that the annoying problem had not been corrected. Most of the trip to Two Harbors, Minnesota, was made at reduced speed. There she took on a load of ore that would break the record for ships travelling through the Soo. When the ship limped into the Soo on the slow downbound journey to Lake Erie, the Maritana's captain received a telegram ordering him to stop at Port Huron so that the ship could be examined by a team of marine designers.

After a careful inspection, the designers concluded that the Maritana's 1,250-horsepower engine was too large for her light construction. Some corrections were eventually made, but she is reported to have been "jittery" throughout her long career, a source of great irritation for the captains and engineers who crewed her. The Maritana was a testament to the fact that marine designers of the period were continually venturing into unproven territory. Through trial and error they gradually learned how to build bigger and better boats.

Before the shipping season began in 1893, a new bulk freighter had been launched at Detroit Dry Dock Company that was longer than the Maritana and Mariposa. The Schyn Eddy was an addition to the Eddy-Shaw fleet that also included the E. C. Pope. The Eddy was 359 feet, 2 inches in length, more than 9 feet longer than the two Minnesota Steamship boats, but 2 feet shorter than the new Christopher Columbus. With a beam of 42 feet, 2 inches and a depth of almost 22 feet, she was measured at 2,846 gross tons. During the 1893 season she carried a record cargo of 3,686 tons of ore through the Soo, breaking the record set previously by the Maritana. By that time, however, the Eddy was no longer the biggest bulk freighter on the lakes.

On April 29, 1893, a bulk freighter had been launched that regained the crown as Queen of the Lakes, the first such ship to hold it since the Onoko. From that auspicious day in 1893 until the present, that cherished honor has not been bestowed on any other type of vessel on the Great Lakes.

**STR. S. S. CURRY**
377'6"x45'x20'8"
Queen of the Lakes
April 29, 1893 to June 29, 1895

It was a Wheeler-built freighter that snatched the title away from the Christopher Columbus almost before the paint was dry on the passenger steamer's hull. The S.S. Curry was 377 feet, 6 inches long and measured at an almost astronomical 3,260 gross tons.Built for Hawgood-Avery Transit of Cleveland at a reported cost of $260,000, she was one of three sisters of the same length that would be launched at the West Bay City yard in 1893. The new freighter was named in honor of Captain S. S. Curry, president of the Metropolitan Iron and Land Company and head of the Norris Mine, then "the largest iron ore producing property in the world." Like the Maryland and E. C. Pope that were also built at the Wheeler shipyard, the Curry had her engine amidships. She was what saltwater sailors would call a "three-island" ship, with a cabin at her bow, a cabin and her stack amidships over the engine room, and a stern cabin. The forward house included the captain's and owner's cabins, said to have been "as handsome as those of the best passenger boats afloat on fresh water."

The Curry was also one of the first ships on the Great Lakes to be equipped with power steering. Prior to the launching of the Curry, most vessels on the lakes, from small tugs right up to the largest passenger steamers and ore boats, used manual steering systems. Ropes, cables, or chains ran from a drum attached to the ship's wheel down each side of the ship to the rudder through a series of sheaves strung beneath the deck. As the wheel was turned, the drum would pay out cable on one side of the ship while taking up cable on the other, thereby turning the rudder to the desired angle. This manual steering system often involved a lot of manual labor. On a longer ship, the weight of the steering cables or chains, combined with friction occurring at every sheave, made it difficult to turn the heavy rudder. In a following sea, the force of waves against the rudder also required a strenuous effort by the wheelsman to hold the ship on course, and often the big spoked wheels could only be held steady by several seamen.

The Curry, however, was equipped with a Williamson steering engine that controlled the rudder by steam power, rather than by the physical force exerted by the wheelsman. The steam steering engine was connected to the shaft of the rudder by two heavy chains running from a drum on the steering engine through sheaves to each side of the tiller attached to the top of the rudder stock. When the steering system was activated by the wheelsman turning the wheel, the drum on the steam engine would turn one way or the other, paying out chain on one side of the tiller while taking up chain on the other. The brute force necessary to turn the heavy rudder was exerted by the steam engine, not by the wheelsman. This innovation immediately found favor with shipping companies on the lakes, and steam steering systems rapidly became standard equipment.
On May 1, the *Curry* was followed down the ways by the *Merida*, built to the same plans for the account of D. C. Whitney of Detroit. At the end of the summer, on August 31, they were joined by the *Centurion*, which had been built for Mark Hopkins of St. Clair, Michigan, and managed by brothers Mitchell and James Corrigan. The *Merida* was the most powerful of the three, and probably the most powerful bulk freighter on the lakes at that time. Her triple-expansion steam engine generated 1,700 horsepower. The *Curry* was rated at 1,100 horsepower, while the *Centurion* had only 1,000 horsepower. Even with her relatively low power, the *Centurion* was reportedly able to average twelve miles an hour on her maiden trip to Chicago.

The *Centurion* differed slightly from her two sisters in that her engine was at the stern and her stern cabin was slightly

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The *S. S. Curry* was one of a number of giant steamers with midship engine rooms built at the Wheeler shipyard in West Bay City, Michigan, in the early 1890s. In 1904, the *Curry* was lengthened and her engine room moved to the stern. In this early photo, the deck officer navigating the ship—probably the captain—can clearly be seen on the flying bridge above the wheelhouse. (Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University)
larger. Many thought she was somewhat better looking than the *Curry* or *Merida*. She was reported to have had magnificent guest accommodations, “equal to those of any steam yacht on the lakes.”

While shipowners took great pride in putting their colors on ships the size of the *Curry, Merida, and Centurion*, there were times when a big ship was actually a disadvantage. On the *Centurion*’s maiden voyage, for example, she arrived at Chicago on September 20, 1893, to load 155,000 bushels of corn at the Armour “E” elevator on the south branch of the Illinois River. When she was about halfway up the river, however, the ship proved to be too long to negotiate a bend in the narrow channel. Pulled backward down the south branch by tugs, the *Centurion* attempted to take the north branch to the Armour “A” elevator. At the Halstead Street bridge she stuck fast and could go no farther. In frustration, she was finally taken to the Illinois Central “B” elevator, located nearer the mouth of the river. Unfortunately, the elevator was almost empty and the *Centurion* had to wait several days for corn to arrive by rail from Nebraska before she could begin loading. While waiting to load, Captain J. S. Dunham held a reception aboard the *Centurion*. In an address to his guests, he commented that “With every advance in the size of lake boats the cry has gone up that they are too big. Still they keep growing and what was a leviathan today is soon forgotten in the next newcomer.”

As a result of pressure by shipowners, the river channels and harbors around the lakes were gradually deepened and widened. In 1904, the owners of the eleven-year-old *Curry* decided that she needed to be lengthened if she was to compete with the latest generation of freighters. While a new seventy-two-foot section was being added to her midbody, the *Curry*’s engine was moved to the stern and her midship cabin was eliminated. At some point her pilothouse was also moved to the top of her raised forecastle deck, possibly at the time she was being lengthened.

The *Merida* had the shortest career of the three sisters. During the “Black Friday” storm of October 20, 1916, she foundered in heavy seas about forty miles southeast of Long Point on Lake Erie. All twenty-three crewmembers were lost with their ship.

The *Curry* continued in service until 1935, but by then her name had been changed three times. In 1921, Interstate Steamship changed her name to the *Elmore*. When she was sold to the Valley Camp Steamship Company in 1922, they renamed her the *P. W. Sherman* and, in 1926, changed her name again to the *E. G. Mathiott*. In 1935, she was sold to Columbia Transportation, along with the rest of the Valley Camp fleet, but her new owners never operated her. After sitting idle for several years, she was finally scrapped at Fairport, Ohio, during the winter of 1936–37.

The *Centurion* outlived her sisters. Sold in 1917 to the Reiss Steamship Company of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, her name was changed to the *Alex B. Uhrig* in 1923. In 1943, her owners traded her to the U.S. Maritime Commission for new tonnage, but she continued to be operated by Reiss Steamship until the end of the war. When the war ended, the *Uhrig* was laid-up in Erie Bay at Erie, Pennsylvania, along with forty-six other outdated ships. In 1947 she was towed to Hamilton, Ontario, and scrapped by the Steel Company of Canada.

While the careers of the three ships ranged from twenty-three to fifty-three years, they had been surpassed in length after only two years by a newer and larger vessel that became Queen of the Lakes. Over the years, they went from being the largest ships on the lakes to among the smallest. Indeed, while the *Centurion, or Uhrig*, lay rafted with other outdated ships at Erie at the end of World War II, she was passed frequently by ships that were more than two hundred feet longer than she was, with close to three times her carrying capacity.

**Notes**

4. All of the ships in the Minnesota Steamship fleet had names that began with the letter “M” and ended with the letter “A.”
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 135–36.
15. That same year, the *Merida’s* cargo hold was deepened by five feet, raising her gross tonnage to 3,329.