

= SS Christopher Columbus =

The SS Christopher Columbus was an American excursion liner on the Great Lakes , in service between 1893 and 1933 . She was the only whaleback ship ever built for passenger service . The ship was designed by Alexander McDougall , the developer and promoter of the whaleback design .

Columbus was built between 1892 and 1893 at Superior , Wisconsin , by the American Steel Barge Company . Initially , she ferried passengers to and from the World 's Columbian Exposition . Later , she provided general transportation and excursion services to various ports around the lakes .

At 362 feet (110 m) , the ship was the longest whaleback ever built , and reportedly also the largest vessel on the Great Lakes when she was launched . Columbus is said to have carried more passengers during her career than any other vessel on the Great Lakes . After a career lasting four decades , she was retired during the Great Depression and scrapped in 1936 by the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Company at Manitowoc , Wisconsin .

= = Background and proposal = =

The history of the Columbus is linked with that of the whalebacks , an innovative but not widely accepted ship design of the late 1880s , and of their designer , Alexander McDougall . A Scottish immigrant , Great Lakes captain , inventor and entrepreneur , McDougall developed the idea of the whaleback as a way to improve the ability of barges to follow a towing vessel in heavy seas . Whalebacks were characterized by distinctive hull shapes with rounded tops , lacking conventional vertical sides . Waves thus broke across their hulls with considerably less force than when striking a conventional hull . Water could also flow around the rounded turrets which resembled gun turrets on contemporary warships ; the superstructure and deckhouses were mounted on these turrets . The rounded contours of whalebacks gave them an unconventional appearance , and McDougall 's ship and barge designs were received with considerable skepticism , resistance , and derision . As they had porcine @-@ looking snouts for bows , some observers called them " pig boats " .

After McDougall was unable to persuade existing shipbuilders to try his designs , he founded the American Steel Barge Company in Superior , Wisconsin in 1888 , and built them himself . McDougall actively promoted his design and company by sending the SS Charles W. Wetmore to London , and starting another shipyard in Everett , Washington , which built the SS City of Everett . When the 1893 World 's Columbian Exposition , to be held in Chicago , Illinois , was in the planning stages , McDougall recognized another opportunity to publicize his design . The Columbus , conceived as an elaborate ferry , was intended to demonstrate that the whaleback design would work well in passenger service , and would be able to travel at high speed . The ship 's name honored the explorer Christopher Columbus as did the World 's Columbian Exposition itself , timed to coincide with the 400th anniversary of his first voyage to the New World .

= = Construction and Columbian Exposition = =

The World 's Fair Steamship Company ordered the construction of the Columbus at an estimated cost of \$ 360 @,@ 000 . The job was undertaken at McDougall 's American Steel Barge Company works in Superior , Wisconsin , starting in the fall of 1892 .

The hull framing , which included nine bulkheads , was completed on September 13 , 1892 . The ship 's propulsion mechanisms were next installed , consisting of a single four @-@ bladed , 14 @-@ foot (4 m) diameter , 19 @-@ foot (6 m) pitch propeller , the two reciprocating triple @-@ expansion steam engines (with three cylinders of 26 @-@ inch (66 cm) , 42 @-@ inch (107 cm) and 70 @-@ inch (178 cm) diameters in a common frame with a 42 @-@ inch (107 cm) stroke) manufactured by Samuel F. Hodge & Co. of Detroit , Michigan , and six steel tubular return Scotch boilers , (11 @-@ foot (3 m) diameter by 12 @-@ foot (4 m) long) , built by Cleveland Shipbuilding Company . The rounded hull top was then added , followed by the six turrets , which were substantially larger than those employed on freighter whalebacks . The ship was launched on December 3 , 1892 , after which two superstructure decks were mounted on the turrets along the

centerline of her hull to afford access to her two internal decks , one in the turrets and one in the hull below .

She was fitted out over the remainder of late 1892 and early 1893 . Electric lighting was used , and she was elegantly furnished . Her grand saloon and skylighted promenade deck contained several fountains and a large aquarium filled with trout and other fish of the lakes . The cabins and public spaces were fitted out with oak paneling , velvet carpets , etched glass windows , leather furniture and marble . Shops and restaurants were provided for the passengers .

McDougall 's American Steel Barge Company had committed in the contract that the Columbus would be built and delivered in three months , making her one of the fastest @-@ built large ships of her time . The builders further promised rapid loading and unloading , predicting that the vessel would be able to embark 5 @,@ 000 passengers in five minutes , and disembark the same passengers in even less time . The Columbus was specified to be able run the 6 miles (10 km) from the dock downtown to the fairgrounds at Jackson Park and 64th Street in 20 minutes .

McDougall set up another holding company , the Columbian Whaleback Steamship Company of Duluth , Minnesota , to own and operate the Columbus . She was commissioned on May 13 , 1893 . Her first captain was John McArthur , who had captained other whalebacks for McDougall 's firms , starting with the first powered whaleback , the Colgate Hoyt , built in 1890 . McDougall was quoted as having said to McArthur , " There is your steamboat ; take her down to Chicago and make a success of her . "

McArthur did just that . Painted in all white livery , the Columbus made multiple round trips per day , sailing along the Lake Michigan shoreline from the Randolph Street / Van Buren Street dock to the Jackson Park site of the World 's Columbian Exposition 's Beaux arts " White City " exposition fairgrounds . A contemporary souvenir booklet called her " the greatest marine wonder of its time " , and another publication dubbed her the " Queen of the Lakes . " She had an estimated capacity of 4 @,@ 000 ? 5 @,@ 000 passengers on her four decks , but it was reported that she carried 7 @,@ 000 on her maiden voyage . The Goodrich Transit Line steamer Virginia (later the USS Blue Ridge) is said to have raced against her .

The Columbus carried between 1 @.@ 7 and 2 @.@ 0 million passengers (sources differ) during the exposition , with only one fatality , a crew member . In recognition of that success , the commissioners of the exposition presented Captain McArthur with a gold watch engraved with a representation of the ship . McArthur went on to captain other whalebacks including the Frank Rockefeller , which became the SS Meteor , the only whaleback surviving today .

= = Regular service = =

After the exposition ended the Columbus entered passenger service , and an additional deck (third superstructure , fifth total) was added during the 1899 ? 1900 winter season . Despite the Columbus ' success at the exposition , and McDougall 's promotional efforts , the whaleback design never caught on . By 1900 , the last whalebacks had been built in Superior : the Alexander McDougall in 1899 (the last powered ship) , and the John Smeaton , the last whaleback barge . The American Steel Barge Company was sold to the American Ship Building Company , becoming their Superior Works , and switched to more conventional laker designs .

In 1899 the Columbus was leased to and operated by the Goodrich Transit Line , whose steamer Virginia had been a perennial racing rival . She changed hands in 1905 to the Milwaukee & Chicago Transportation company ? possibly a Goodrich holding company ? and again in 1909 to Goodrich Transit Line . Her livery was at some point between 1906 and 1909 changed to a black hull with yellow accents , and she was placed in service on the route between Chicago and Milwaukee , Wisconsin . The Columbus remained with the Goodrich line for several years . Although she was used for excursions elsewhere around the Great Lakes , her regular schedule was a daily trip to Milwaukee , leaving Chicago mid @-@ morning , sailing to Milwaukee for a two @-@ hour stopover , and then returning (see advertisement right) . She made daily round @-@ trip excursions from the Goodrich docks at the Rush Street Bridge .

Columbus had at least three accidents . In June 1895 she suffered an explosion caused by a steam

pipe becoming disconnected while she was underway . Accounts differ , but some claim that this happened during a race with her rival , Virginia . In July 1905 , she collided with the schooner Ralph Campbell in the Chicago River . On June 30 , 1917 , she was involved in her most serious accident , a collision with a water tower . The collision happened in Milwaukee while she was being maneuvered by tugs away from her dock . The Milwaukee River current caught her , spinning her sideways , and her bow sheared off two legs of the Yahr & Lang Drug Company 's water tower , toppling it and flooding Columbus ' decks with about 25 @, @ 000 US gallons (95 @, @ 000 l) . The collision killed 16 passengers and severely damaged her pilot house , putting her out of service for the rest of the year .

The Columbus was one of the first ships to be fitted with an on @-@ board radio , installed by 1909 , when she was allocated the call letters " KC " . Columbus and the SS Chicago used radio to help coordinate the rescue of over 200 passengers from the Goodrich liner City of Racine when the Racine was disabled off Waukegan , Illinois , in Lake Michigan .

In 1915 , the SS Eastland capsized while docked in the Chicago River , with the loss of over 800 lives . Officials subsequently ordered many passenger ships to undergo stability testing , which the Columbus passed easily . Even with 7 @, @ 500 sandbags (simulating passengers) piled on one side , and tugboats pulling in that direction , she listed only 12 degrees . Columbus was featured at the Century of Progress exhibition in Chicago in 1932 ? 33 .

= = Disposition = =

The Columbus was taken out of service in 1933 , and changed hands twice during the Great Depression , in 1933 and again in 1934 . She was scrapped in 1936 at the Manitowoc Shipbuilding Company in Manitowoc , Wisconsin .

SS Christopher Columbus carried 1 @. @ 7 ? 2 million passengers in her first year alone , and is estimated to have carried more passengers than any other vessel on the Great Lakes . She was one of the most photographed passenger ships on the lakes , and souvenir postcards of her are still widely available . One of her anchors , the design of which was patented by McDougall on February 3 , 1891 , is displayed at the Mariners ' Museum in Newport News , Virginia .