

Introduction

Steam Navigation on the Great Lakes

On an anxious afternoon in mid-autumn 1967, a sonorous, three-toned chime echoed mournfully off the skyscrapers of downtown Detroit. The throaty blast of a steam whistle had become rare in this gritty home of internal combustion capitalism. Along the river, a crowd gathered to bid farewell to the Great Lakes excursion steamship *South American*. On board were “more than 125 sentimentalists” headed for Montreal and the Expo ’67 World Exhibition.¹

Similar scenes of departure, in some manner or another, had been played out on this stretch of the Detroit River for a century and a half, less a year. On an August afternoon in 1818, the steamer *Walk-in-the-Water* arrived at Detroit from Buffalo on her inaugural voyage, signaling the beginning of the age of steamship travel on the upper lakes. Since then—and until this moment in 1967—the movement of people around the Great Lakes on boats had been a major industry and a defining cultural element of the region.

In the words of *Detroit Free Press* marine reporter Curtis Haseltine, “[I]t was a trip like the *South American* had never taken before.” Throughout the five-day voyage, wherever the ship went, its guests were serenaded by passing boat traffic. Whistle salutes blossomed from the stacks of slender Great Lakes bulk freighters. Smaller tugboats and appreciative mahogany runabouts provided an escort along the route. Everyone knew that the lily-white “Sweetheart of the Lakes” was making its last run.

At a stop in Cleveland, the farewell scene was played out again. After passing through the tranquil waters and locks of the Welland Canal,



The *South American* boarding its final complement of passengers in Detroit. (Photograph by William Hoey, 1967, courtesy of the Detroit Historical Society Collection.)

the ship crossed Lake Ontario, traversed the upper St. Lawrence River, and pulled into its last freshwater berth in Montreal. Passengers reluctantly disembarked, and an era in Great Lakes history was concluded with appropriate ceremony.

A simple schedule for October 23, printed on company letterhead, declared that the decommissioning ceremony would begin at 1530 hours, or 3:30 p.m., with a muster of personnel. With everyone seated, Mr. E. J. Goebel, president of the Chicago, Duluth and Georgian Bay Transit Company—for decades known as the Georgian Bay Line—presented for delivery the formal documents completing the sale of the vessel. Clifton Weston of the Seafarers Union's Harry Lundeborg School of Seamanship accepted them. Located in Piney Point, Maryland, this academy for maritime cadets had been established that same year, and the *South American* was to serve as a student dormitory.²

The ship's last skipper, Captain Joseph A. Testyon, efficiently proceeded through a series of official protocols and then called on "Officer

Thomas Joyce to haul down the colors.” He presented the ship’s flag to Mr. Goebel, who in turn presented the flag and a key to Mr. Weston of the Lundeberg School.

At 1620 hours, or 4:20 p.m., Captain Testyon dismissed his crew. The era of passenger travel aboard fleets of elegant steamships on the Great Lakes was over. Sadly, the vessel’s new saltwater assignment was never realized. The Lundeberg School was unable to convert the ship into a habitable craft that would pass Coast Guard certification. The *South American* survived in a steadily deteriorating state until 1992, when the cutting torch closed the book.

At this writing, there are still a number of boats carrying passengers across the magnificent lakes of North America. Most are ferries designed for short-haul excursions or utility players that also carry autos, trucks, and freight. Only the ferries SS *Badger* and RMS *Segwun* are powered by steam. A handful of the retired vessels survive under the care of loving and inevitably underfunded entities. Such valiant efforts attempt to preserve and relive one of the grandest eras in our binational experience.

The era of “steamboating” in the Great Lakes region has been gone for almost half a century. Those who study North America’s history must not forget the incredible impact that passenger vessels and freshwater maritime culture had on the development of the region and, in turn, the continent. Steamboating was a way of life for both passengers and crews, involved hundreds of the sleekest and fastest ships in the country, and took guests to nearly every picturesque port around the lakes. For a period in the middle of the nineteenth century, the ships elicited the moniker “palace steamers.” In fact, throughout their history, nearly all of the premier passenger vessels sailing the inland seas were palatial in the eyes of customers and competitors. Cabin class guests generally traveled in the elegance and style typically reserved for the very wealthy. Throughout the age, the steamship companies catered to passengers of every type, from immigrants to tourists. Everyone benefited from a comfortable voyage and standards of speed and luxury that only improved over a hundred years.

Steamboats across the country shared a similar glorious history and a similar fate. On the Mississippi River, the Hudson River, Long Island Sound, and all along the East, West, and Gulf coasts of North America, the public and historians alike lamented the passing of an industry that fostered and established a continent. Each region had its favorite boats and celebrated shipping lines. Each enjoyed a rich nautical history that shared technologies and business practices and went through

similar aesthetic styles and trends. And each region infused passenger steamships into its history, its people, and their culture. The resulting nostalgia and affection seem universal, as aficionados and casual boat watchers can be found wherever a steamboat line used to run, anywhere in the world.

Predictably, factors such as geography, culture, commerce, and politics combined to give each area unique characteristics, and the Great Lakes region exemplifies that rule. The inland seas dictated how hulls were shaped and engines designed. Those living on the lands around them, all immigrants in one form or another, brought traditions of nautical management, construction, and decoration to the vessels. And the natural resources, available markets, capital, and seasonal nature of the trade determined what freight—including passengers—was viable and how profits were made.

Despite the beauty and romance associated with steamboats, in the final analysis, they were financial assets intended to generate returns for their investors. Throughout this era, creative captains and owners continuously adapted to changing business conditions, taking advantage of opportunities within and without the maritime community. But, no matter their inventiveness, a number of elements conspired to gradually, and then quickly, drive the beautiful floating palaces from freshwater.

In the following chapters, an examination will be presented that has never been offered in this comprehensive form. Surprising as that is, based on the rich trove of extant literature related to the Great Lakes, the following text will describe an industry that began to decline almost from its inception and can be easily separated into three distinct eras. The business enjoyed an era of absolute transportation monopoly in which competition between ships drove the industry to maintain high standards. There followed an era of consolidation in which the ships benefited from an increased population base but were faced with intense external competition, primarily from railroads. And, finally, as the rising standard of living of average North Americans allowed more leisure time, the steamboat enjoyed the final phase of its career as an excursion carrier and tourist attraction. This phase especially allowed the iconic arks to enter the fond memories of millions of passengers and to become ingrained in the social and economic legacy of this massive watershed.

Unique to the Great Lakes is the fact that it is possible to identify within minutes the beginning and end of the fleets. As it ended with the *South American* heading east on Lake Ontario, it began with the *Ontario* heading west on Lake Ontario. The popularity of steamboat

travel over coach, buggy, or wagon grew quickly. The migrant wave moved rapidly westward to the “upper lakes”—those west and north of Niagara Falls in the great chain of lakes.

This volume is not intended as a complete and exhaustive exploration of the Great Lakes passenger steamship industry. It will not explore every nuance of the quadruple expansion steam engine, describe each ship in detail, or outline the history of each steamship line operating on the freshwater seas. Instead, it offers the reader a comprehensive overview of the businesses, leaders, and vessels, and the political, economic, and social factors, that allowed them to succeed or caused them to fail. With analysis, it is hoped that students of maritime history will perceive patterns and draw conclusions that facilitate further discussions about this topic.

An examination of steamboats on the Great Lakes necessarily requires background. Steam propulsion had a fascinating, century-long nascent period that, even then, brought the technology to the lakes in a fairly early form. European and North American experiments had not developed so significantly that Great Lakes pioneers were simply following prior efforts. With this in mind, an examination of the origin of steamboats and their pioneering role on the lakes will provide context.

This first era began on Lake Ontario and spread rapidly to neighboring shores, as did industry, population, and touring. Steamboats allowed the Old Northwest to grow and managed the task with elegance. Despite the high-profile catastrophes associated with early steamboat travel, the industry had a good safety record and leveraged passenger accommodations and service to improve the experience. Particularly in this first period, technology issues shared front page headlines with the grandeur and opulence of the Great Lakes palace steamers. Notably, both contemporary and modern literature on this era is narrowly focused on personalities, individual vessels, or notable events such as races or disasters. In the process of collating these accounts, original manuscripts, memoirs, and news accounts were revisited to draw in fresh details and perspectives.

The second era began with events that greatly affected the Great Lakes. To the south, the Civil War in the United States ripped the nation apart, slowing commercial development for a decade. Northern victory brought the vanquished back into the Union, but the experience created sectional animosities that lasted for generations. To the north, Canadian colonies were binding together in confederation. As the Dominion of Canada after 1867, the northland was an independent

"Kingdom" within the British Empire. These two experiments in democratic federalism gradually created the most comfortable and profitable international neighbors in the world.

The closing era saw the steamship business adapting to inexorable changes in travel habits. This included a blossoming continental fascination with automobile transportation, the growth of a trucking industry that carved large portions of profit from the steamship business, and the development of and dependence on a tourist trade that revered ships the way one loves a favorite old hotel. Literature for this period is the most prevalent and is available in numerous media. The spectrum of material includes abundant primary resources, as well as analysis that runs the gamut from scholarly publications to oral histories and personal memoirs. This era is likely the most familiar to the public by virtue of its extensive documentation.

With this in mind, the following narrative necessarily places more emphasis on the earliest development of the industry to put the familiar into a more complete context. This editorial focus also has been adopted to reflect the relative importance of each era: the beginning was the industry's birth and adolescence, and what came afterward was a healthy maturation followed by a graceful, inevitable decline. Extending the life metaphor, the final chapter is the golden age—the steamship's most fondly remembered period.