

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Over the years, much attention has been attracted by, and much money spent on creating "World's Fairs" or Expositions. Some have been successful while others have not. The first such fair was the Centennial Exposition which was held at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1876. The sixth fair, in 1893, was planned to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the landing of Christopher Columbus in the New World, and hence it was officially named the World's Columbian Exposition. Although several U.S. cities submitted bids to host this event, the winner was the city of Chicago, Illinois. This was remarkable, because only 22 years previously, in October of 1871, over 2,000 acres in the heart of the city had been ravaged by a great fire. But Chicago was largely rebuilt by the time of the fair, and the resurgence of Chicago was symbolized by the holding of the exposition and the grand buildings that were constructed for it.

The main portion of the fair grounds were located in Jackson Park, with smaller buildings and concessions located on a narrow strip of land which connected Jackson Park with Washington Park; all told, the exposition occupied 633 acres. The fair was opened officially on May 1, 1893, by U.S. president Grover Cleveland, and it closed on October 26th of that year. Its largest single-day attendance was in excess of 700,000 persons. The Columbian Exposition featured the world's very first ferris wheel, and some now-familiar products first introduced at the fair were Aunt Jemima Syrup, Cream of Wheat, Shredded Wheat, Cracker Jacks, Juicy Fruit Gum, Pabst beer, diet carbonated soda and the hamburger.

One of the largest problems facing promoters of the fair was how to move huge multitudes of fair-goers a distance of about seven miles from downtown Chicago to the fair site, this in an age when mass public transit simply did not exist. The solution was to transport people by water, and it was considered that one very large excursion steamer could handle much of the trade, assisted by such other vessels that might be available. Captain Alexander McDougall, whose American Steel Barge Company was building whaleback steamers and barges at its shipyard at West Superior, Wisconsin, received a suggestion from some of its financial backers that a whaleback steamer fitted out as a day-boat could fill the bill, so he drew up plans for such a vessel that could run 20 miles per hour, could carry 5,000 passengers per trip, and could either load or unload them in the space of some five minutes.

McDougall's plans were accepted, and the contract to build the ship was signed on August 26, 1892, with the principals of what was to be known as the Columbian Whaleback Steamship Company, of which McDougall himself would be general manager. The contract was for \$365,000 and in it, McDougall agreed to construct the ship as per the plans, with all her machinery in place, and to have her launched within three months. McDougall wrote: "The first plate for her construction came into our shipyard warm from the rolling mill, accompanied by a brass band and all Superior behind it. We had no cranes for hoisting parts, no air, no electric drills and no hammers - nearly all hand work." Despite this, the vessel that was to be named CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS was the grandest ship McDougall would ever build, and she was to be the only whaleback ever built for the passenger trade.

The COLUMBUS was whaleback hull number 128. Work on her construction was begun on September 7, 1892, and she was side-launched on December 3rd. Photos of the launch show that the hull was complete and that the deck turrets were in place. McDougall wrote that when the ship was launched, she had her engines, boilers and machinery all in place and set up, and that ten Pullman cars full of "World's Fair boomers" came up from Chicago to see the launch.

The COLUMBUS was completed in the American Steel Barge shipyard over the winter months, and she was ready to sail by spring. Early photos of the steamer's stern show that painted on it was the home port of Superior, but the United States shipping register showed that the vessel was enrolled at