

SAMUEL F. B. MORSE

How do we pick ships to feature in these pages? Sometimes it is because they had interesting histories, or were involved in unusual incidents. And sometimes it is just because they pique our personal interest. When Your Editor was still a young boy, he was fascinated by ships that had a triple-deck bridge structure. This ship was one of them, although she left service only a year after Ye Future Ed. took his very first ship photograph. In fact, this young boatwatcher never actually saw this ship, although she lived for him in the photos that his father took of her. And a very near sistership did live on and frequently was seen by the boy.

Back in the 1880s, there was much expansion of the iron mining properties along the Vermillion Range of Minnesota, with much of the raw hematite ore being shipped down the Great Lakes from Two Harbors, Minnesota, on Lake Superior. The Merritt Brothers, poor "lumber cruisers", worked a number of mines in the Mesabi Range, west of the Vermillion, but the expansion of their operations required financial assistance. John W. ("Bet A Million") Gates, who was associated with Isaac L. Ellwood in producing steel and wire products, persuaded the great financier and industrialist John D. Rockefeller to pony up funds to keep the Merritts operating, and he did so, including much investment in ore shipping facilities at Duluth. Rockefeller's investment of millions in the operation created the Lake Superior Consolidated Iron Mines Company.

However, business conditions became depressed and, in the panic of 1893, the Merritt Brothers lost control of the company to Rockefeller. The latter soon realized that if he were to make the operation successful, he also had to control the shipment of his iron ore down the lakes to the mills of the lower lakes and the Ohio River valley. Accordingly, in 1895, he created the Bessemer Steamship Company and, needing lake shipping expertise, he enlisted Samuel Mather (best known for his association with Colonel James Pickands in ore mining and lake transportation) to put together a fleet of ships to haul the Rockefeller ore. With Rockefeller's money, Mather arranged to have built for Bessemer a whole fleet of modern steamers and consort barges for the ore trade. Twelve new vessels were built within a very short period of time, with more being added via acquisition or later construction.

One of these new ships was SAMUEL F. B. MORSE (U.S.116841) which was ordered from F. W. Wheeler & Company, of West Bay City, Michigan, and was built as that yard's Hull 124. At the time of her launch, she was the largest ship on the Great Lakes. We have two reports of her launch; one says that she was put into the water on July 31, 1898, while the other says that she got wet on August 1 of that year. But July 31, 1898, was a Sunday, and it would have been very unusual back then for any such event to have taken place on a Sunday, when people were "supposed" to be observing the Sabbath. We think it far more likely that the launch actually occurred on Monday, August 1, 1898.

It was Rockefeller's practice to name Bessemer Steamship vessels, whether steamers or barges, for inventors from the period known as The Industrial Revolution, an era generally considered to have ended at 2:20 a.m., April 15, 1912, when the waters of the North Atlantic closed over the fantail of the foundering TITANIC. Samuel Finley Breese Morse had been born on April 27, 1791, in Charlestown, Massachusetts, just outside Boston. His father, Jedidiah Morse, was a pastor who was well-known as a geographer and who was a friend of lexicographer Noah Webster. The young Samuel Morse, educated at Yale, painted miniature portraits but was fascinated by the subject of electricity. Settling in New York City, he pursued an interest in developing an electric telegraph, for which he applied for a patent in 1837. By the following year, he had developed a code of dots and dashes to represent letters and numbers, something that later would be known as the Morse Code.

In 1843, Samuel Morse obtained funds from Congress to build the first telegraph line in the United States, and it stretched from Baltimore to Washington, later being extended to Boston and Buffalo with the help of private companies using Morse's patent. Morse, who became a wealthy man, was known for his philanthropy in his later years. He died of pneumonia at New York on April 2, 1872, and is buried in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn. Interestingly, the use of his telegraph, developed into a wireless network by Guglielmo Marconi (1874 - 1937, and winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1909), was what managed to save the relative few who survived the sinking of TITANIC in 1912, summoning Cunard's CARPATHIA to the disaster scene, albeit too late to save the huge number of victims. It was during this event that the usual distress code of CQD was supplanted by the more recognizable and more easily-sent signal of SOS.