

THE SAGA OF THE WILSON LINE



Last of the Steamboats

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EXCERPTS ONLY



ISBN 0-87033-149-3

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 70-124312

Printed in the United States of America.

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Hudson Belle at Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, in the summer of 1961, her last season at New York Harbor. John C. Mills



Continuing Wilson's pioneering tradition, the hydrofoil *Albatross*, America's first hydrofoil licensed to carry passengers, skims across New York Harbor in 1962. American Hydrofoil Lines

out its happy crowds, roaring whistles and music wafting from the ballrooms. "What fun we used to have on the old Wilson Line," people would say.

It hadn't mattered that these forlorn vessels were just riverboats. Each of them had been a personality in her day and had provided countless happy times for millions of people. That mattered.

Wilson tradition, pioneering was again evidenced in 1962. That year Wilson Shipyard completed a 34-foot, 40-knot hydrofoil which was christened *Albatross*. She was America's first hydrofoil licensed by the Coast Guard to carry passengers.

Wilson Line's operations in Washington continued successfully into the 1960s. *Mount Vernon*



A sight that saddened many Washingtonians: *Mount Vernon* after she foundered at her Washington pier during the winter of 1963. Peter T. Eisele

Yet, the pressures of America's supercivilization had completely overtaken the riverboats from coast to coast. Progress had won, but people had lost, especially the youngsters, who would never enjoy river and bay trips on a big steamer. A river trip was one less activity available for people's enjoyment in the "new leisure time."

As City Investing Company phased out of actual boat operations it gradually built up Wilson Shipyard and placed it under the able direction of J. S. Merchant Marine Academy graduate John Bravdahl, previously mentioned. While City Investing Company was not very familiar with the

was still Washington's leading hostess to children and foreign dignitaries and the fleet continued to carry well over half a million passengers yearly. However, tragedy struck *Mount Vernon* when she foundered at Pier 4 on January 5, 1963 during winter lay-up. No one was on board in the 14 hours during which water seeped into her hull via a cracked valve. The steamer sat upright on the bottom of the Potomac.

News of *Mount Vernon's* misfortune spread quickly and local newspapers headlined the story on page one, displacing what might have been considered more important events. After 22 years

of virtually flawless performance, *Mount Vernon* was a local institution unto herself. As one Washingtonian phrased it: "Some of us even wept over her loss. She was, after all, one of Washington's 'personalities' and she symbolized our youth . . . Washington loved that boat." She was subsequently raised and laid up on the Potomac but plans for her reconstruction failed to materialize.

As her replacement, Wilson Line of Washington reacquired *Hudson Belle* in time to open the 1963 season. In a gala ceremony at Mount Vernon, she was renamed *George Washington* on April 5, the 231st anniversary of President George Washington's own christening in 1732. The honors went to Mrs. Frances F. Beirne, regent of the Mount

Vernon Ladies Association of the Union, the organization which has maintained the First President's plantation home since 1853.

Wilson Line of Washington continued to provide river trips but, without *Mount Vernon*, this last of the Wilson Lines ceased to be a steamboat operator. In 1965, it acquired two hydrofoils, *Wilson I* and *Victory I*. A third, *Wilson II*, was added in 1966. However, while the hydrofoils operated well, they proved too fast for comfortable sightseeing, and were subsequently placed on sale.

Throughout its history Wilson Line was known for its "firsts" but its scattered fleet also left its mark for memorable "lasts" of American steamboating. In 1960, *State of Pennsylvania* was the last



Mrs. Frances F. Beirne, regent of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, christened *George Washington*, ex-*Hudson Belle*, on April 5, 1963. Looking on (l. to r.) are: Douglas Smith, president, National Savings and Trust Company, Senator Glenn Beall of Maryland, Joseph I. Goldstein, president, Wilson Steamship Corporation and George Thomas Washington, Circuit Judge, U. S. Court of Appeals, D. C. District, a direct descendant of Colonel Samuel Washington, younger brother of the nation's first president. Wilson Line of Washington, Inc.

Her long mournful blasts symbolized an end to the era of short sea voyages across the Chesapeake. Progress had eliminated another pleasant and irretrievable phase of American life. Thereafter most of the fleet found employment on the new Cape May, New Jersey-Lewes, Delaware, crossing begun by the Delaware River and Bay Authority.

In the late 1960s former Wilson liners were to be found throughout the Western Hemisphere. Besides the former Virginia Ferry Corporation's vessels on Delaware Bay, two former Delaware-New Jersey Ferry Company ferryboats, *Florida* and *New York*, renamed *Jamestown* and *Newport*, had found employment maintaining ferry service between Newport and Jamestown, Rhode Island. They were the last of steam on Narragansett Bay, just as the Virginia Ferry steamers will be the last on Delaware Bay.

The former Wilson liner *State of Delaware* lay abandoned at a "ship's graveyard" on the south side of Rio de Janeiro's Guanabara Bay. During a trip to Rio in 1967 the writer investigated her whereabouts and found that she had sunk in a deep channel. Local residents, however, smilingly recalled her name. Ironically, a political poster nearby promoted votes for a Brazilian with the unlikely name of Wilson.

Boston Belle could be found at Rosario, Argentina and the former Virginia Ferry Corporation tanker *Kiptopeke*, now *Sandra*, operates on the coast of Ecuador. *Northampton* operates from Mexican ports. In the Caribbean, *Liberty Belle (II)* is working out of Cuba with a smaller vessel named *Pinero*, none other than Wilmington Steamboat Company's *City of Trenton* of 1901. *Deepwater*, last renamed *Provincetown*, operated out of the Virgin Islands.

Most remarkable, however, is the fate of "Little *Wilmington*" which revived the Wilmington Steamboat Company in 1882. Displaced from ferry service by a bridge across Tampa Bay, she had been advertised in 1961 as "the largest fishing boat in Florida." In 1966, as *Pinellas*, she was reportedly sold for use on Brazil's Amazon River. In 1970, 88 years after her emergence from Cramp's shipyard at Philadelphia, she remains in service.

Wilmington Steamboat Company's twin *Cities* of 1910, *City of Wilmington* and *City of Philadelphia*, launched in a gala ceremony in 1909, were still active in the late 1960s. Rebuilt and renamed *Bay Belle* and *S.S. Potomac*, and operated by Sound Steamship Lines and B. B. Wills, respectively, they were found competing in the New

York Harbor excursion trade in 1966, often moored bow to bow at local resorts. As one of *Bay Belle's* men commented: "If the two old sisters could talk, what notes they could exchange about their lives since 1909!"

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