

**MARITIME HERITAGE OF THE UNITED STATES NHL THEME STUDY--LARGE VESSELS**

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

**Columbia** (Steamer)

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**1. NAME OF PROPERTY**

Historic Name: *Columbia*

Other Name/Site Number: Steamer *Columbia*

**2. LOCATION**

Street & Number: Nicholson Terminal and Dock Company's South Slip

City/Town: Ecorse

Vicinity: \_\_\_\_\_

State: MI

County: \_\_\_\_\_

Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Zip Code: 48229

**3. CLASSIFICATION**

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-local: \_\_\_\_\_

Public-State: \_\_\_\_\_

Public-Federal: \_\_\_\_\_

Category of Property

Building(s): \_\_\_\_\_

District: \_\_\_\_\_

Site: \_\_\_\_\_

Structure: X

Object: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

\_\_\_\_\_

1

\_\_\_\_\_

1

Noncontributing

\_\_\_\_\_ buildings

\_\_\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_\_\_ objects

0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

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**4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this \_\_\_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Certifying Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_\_\_ meets \_\_\_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Commenting or Other Official

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I, hereby certify that this property is:

\_\_\_\_\_ Entered in the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Determined eligible for the \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ National Register

\_\_\_\_\_ Determined not eligible for the \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ National Register

\_\_\_\_\_ Removed from the National Register \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

Historic: Transportation                      Sub: Water-related  
 Current: Transportation                      Sub: Water-related

**7. DESCRIPTION**

Architectural Classification:	Materials:	
N/A	Foundation:	Steel
	Walls:	Wood/Steel
	Roof:	Wood
	Other Description:	

**Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

The steamer *Columbia* represents the typical propeller-driven excursion steamer of the turn of the century, a type once found in many parts of the country. Excursion steamers are steamships built primarily for passengers for day trips. *Columbia* and her running mate *Ste. Claire* (subject of a separate nomination) represent the "ocean-going" type of excursion vessel although they were used on lakes. Riverboat excursion vessels exist such as the National Historic Landmarks *Belle of Louisville*, *Delta Queen*, and *President*; however these vessels use a different form of propulsion. Modern excursion vessels are motorized tourboats. *Columbia* and *Ste. Claire* are the last representatives of their type to have integrity. Two smaller steamers currently used for excursions, *Sabino* and *Virginia V*, will be subjects of future National Historic Landmark studies.

*Columbia* has a steel hull surmounted by a wooden superstructure strengthened with steel members. Her machinery, a triple expansion reciprocating steam engine powered with scotch boilers, are original and becoming extremely rare. The combination of her steel hull with her original wooden superstructure and original machinery make her unique save for her running mate *Ste. Claire*, which is more altered in appearance.

The hull, finely molded, is of riveted steel, 207.67 feet long, 45 feet wide, and 17.79 feet in molded depth. The draft is 12.5 feet; gross tonnage is 968, and net tonnage 549. The steel main deck overhangs the hull on either side, a common practice of the time which provides additional deck space for passengers and clearly derives from the "guards" of sidewheel steamers. Above the main deck, the superstructure is of wood, with steel members for strengthening, notably in the dance floor where a large steel beam runs down the centerline of the vessel to provide plenty of open space for dancing.

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The external appearance of the vessel is largely determined by the overhang at the main deck level, the rounded bluff bows of the superstructure decks (a characteristic of this fleet, and not typical of excursion steamers generally), the open decks surrounded by stanchions and railings, and the pilot house and stack on the top deck. Cabin spaces are prominent in the appearance only on the main deck, where spaces amidships are bulkheaded at the outer edge of the deck. These bulkheads and the windows in them have been replaced in recent years as part of ongoing maintenance, but the appearance has not been radically altered except on close inspection. The cabin on the second deck is recessed within the open decks, and is a secondary element.

*Columbia* has been altered somewhat over the years, notable are the addition to the top deck both fore and aft early in her career, which made this deck like that originally built on *Ste. Claire* in 1910; the alteration to the smokestack about 1940, a modernization which is itself now old-fashioned; and the removal of the cabin on the third deck forward, made necessary by structural repairs required to the decking on which the cabin bulkheads rested. The removal of this cabin did not effect the exterior appearance from a distance, as the cabin was so recessed under the added forward deck above that it was in shade and nearly invisible. *Columbia* has always been painted white, trim colors have varied. The stack railings, and stanchions are now painted in combinations of blue and bluff.

The arrangement of the steamer presumes loading at gangplanks on the main deck forward. A main staircase located on the centerline well forward has a glassed-in landing at its base and leads to the main cabin above. Under this stairway is another running down to crew's quarters in the hull spaces below. A cross passage is behind the stair enclosure, and aft of that is the stack casing. A former check room space stands between the stack casing and the engine room, which has a large well opening into the main deck, placing the engine in public view. A stairs aft of the engine room area leads down to a dining room and galley in the hull, once open to the public. Aft of that stair enclosure is a large area for food service counters. On either side of all these elements, which are centered in the vessel, run two wide companionways leading forward and aft. Outboard of these amidships are the cabin spaces mentioned above, which are given over to crew's quarters and public rest rooms; extensions on both sides were added at the after end of these cabins sometime after *Columbia* was built, reflecting the larger crews required. The main deck has large open spaces fore and aft; in the after end, the food counters are flanked by two staircases at either side leading to decks above.

On the second deck, the main stairs leads to a "U" shaped main cabin, panelled in mahogany. The stack casing stands within the arms of the "U" and has a large plate glass mirror built into the panelling facing the top of the staircase; the original blueprint for this room shows elaborate composition ornament--now missing--above the cornice line, with a segmental arch sheltering a clock

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framed in a wreath flanked by cornucopias. At center forward and either side are doors leading to the open deck; the rest of the outer bulkheads are filled with windows. Above the stairs, another flight leads to the deck above. A modern souvenir stand has been installed against the windows on the starboard side forward. The clerestory of the main cabin is sheathed in later plywood, and the overhead, originally decoratively treated and now sheathed in plywood, was likely lost in the replacement of the deck structure above. Aft of the main cabin is the dance floor, with a bandstand backing up to the stack casing. Divided from the main cabin by folding mahogany and glass doors, the dance floor is now covered with hardwood, not installed until 1925 for fear of warpage. Both the main cabin and dance area stand under a higher deck in the center above, the sort of thing known as a "monitor" roof to some. This provides ribbon windows--known as clerestory windows in steamboat parlance--which provide additional light to the interior, and look out over the outer portions of the deck above. In the dance area, the glass in these windows has been replaced with panels. The sides of the dance floor are open to the open deck areas flanking; there is a small food service counter aft between the two stairs leading up and down from this deck. In the open deck area forward on this deck is a stair leading to the decks above.

The main staircase originally led from the main cabin up to an oak-panelled cabin on the third deck. This cabin has been removed, as noted above, though some oak elements remain around the stairs and on the aft bulkhead. Like the cabin below, this cabin was "U" shaped with windows looking forward and to the sides. The deck of this cabin and the "beer garden" aft of it are raised from the outer deck level surrounding them, due to the higher overhead in the cabin and dance floor below. Forward and at the side the former cabin area has steps leading down to the open deck; the beer garden can be entered from the forward cabin area or by steps in the center aft. The cabin area and beer garden also have taller ceilings than the surrounding deck, resulting once again is a raised central area on the deck above, with clerestory windows in the third deck spaces. The main stairs and the pair of stairs aft terminate at the third deck; the outside stair forward continues up to the public deck area above.

The top deck originally extended from just forward of the pilothouse to the aft end of the beer garden below. Both for shade and shelter for passengers on the deck below, and also to provide additional passenger space, additions were made to the top deck both fore and aft. The alterations paralleled exactly the original state of *Ste. Claire*, although *Brittania* of 1906, built for the Belle Isle service, had top deck arrangements like *Columbia's*. The raised central portion of the top deck has the pilot house forward, a classic steamer pilothouse with large sash windows in the "U" shape curve. The stack is forward of amidships, and was altered about 1940, when it was cut down in height and given a "teardrop" section casing. There is a mast aft of the stack. This raised central section is closed to the

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public, and most of the space aft of the stack is occupied by life rafts.

The "U" shaped area added forward is open to the public as far aft as the bridge wings. Lifeboats occupy the edge of the deck on both sides aft of the bridge wings; originally there were boats on either side with classic "fish-hook" shaped davits. There are now two on each side with the later Wellin automatic type davits.

The machinery of *Columbia* is of great interest and increasing rarity, even on the Great Lakes, where such installations have generally lasted longer than elsewhere. The main engine is a triple-expansion reciprocating steam engine built by the Detroit Shipbuilding Company in 1902, as was the vessel itself. The cylinder dimensions are 21.5, 34, and 54 inches; stroke is 36 inches. Steam is supplied by scotch marine (fire-tube) boilers, also built by the Detroit Shipbuilding Company. Coal was the original fuel, but *Columbia* has been oil fired for many years. The engine and boiler spaces retain much original equipment, including pumps, electrical generators, and the like. The original steam anchor capstan, with its brass "head" giving the vessel's name and date, is located on the main deck forward.

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Nationally: X Statewide:      Locally:     

Applicable National Register Criteria:       A X   B        C X   D     

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):       A        B        C        D        E        F        G     

NHL Criteria:   4

- NHL Theme(s):   XIVB.       Transportation: Ships, Boats, Lighthouses & Other Structures
- XVIIIIB.   Technology (Engineering and Invention):  
                                  Transportation
- XXXIVC:   Recreation: General Recreation/Other

Areas of Significance:	Period(s) of Significance	Significant Dates
Architecture (Naval)	1902-1941	1902
Maritime History	1902-1941	1902
Transportation	1902-1941	1902

Significant Person(s):   N/A

Cultural Affiliation:    N/A

Architect/Builder:   Frank E. Kirby, designer/Detroit Shipbuilding Company, builder

**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

The steamer *Columbia* is significant as one of the last pair of classic excursion steamers in the country; as one of the two last essentially unaltered ships designed by Frank E. Kirby; as one of the two last vessels of the Detroit and Windsor Ferry Co.; as one of the few surviving vessels built by the Detroit Dry Dock Company, and for its unaltered propulsion machinery, which is of a rare type. *Columbia* is the oldest passenger steamer in the United States, excepting vessels properly classed as ferries.

The preceding statement of significance is based on the more detailed statements that follow.

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROPELLER PASSENGER STEAMER**

The propeller began to supplant the sidewheel for passenger steamers in the late 19th century. The structural evolution from

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sidewheel to screw propulsion was gentle. The broad overhanging decks of the American sidewheeler which were intended to protect the sidewheels from damage, were retained, though in a narrower form. The overhanging superstructure provided space for more passengers. Sometimes, the overhangs were simply supported on brackets under the main deck, as on *Columbia* and *Ste. Claire*, or were plated over to protect them from the seas, as on the Fall River liners. The difference appears to have been more regional than navigational; the big D & C sidewheelers on the lakes had open brackets in contrast to the Fall River steamers, although similar sea conditions existed in both places.

The propeller steamer with overhang was extremely pervasive. It was the accepted type all up and down the East Coast, the West Coast, and in the lower Great Lakes. These steamers could be found in the Chesapeake Bay, Long Island Sound, and the St. Lawrence, Hudson, Delaware, and Potomac rivers.

**HISTORY OF FERRY SERVICE IN THE DETROIT AREA**

Ferry service between the Detroit and Windsor sides of the Detroit River has existed since the settlements were founded in the early 18th century. The first recorded ferry operated in 1802, and the first steam ferry, *Argo*, entered ferry service in 1832. Service was provided by a number of entrepreneurs over the years, among them William Campbell, whose *Gem* entered service in 1864. Ultimately, the Campbell family were to become the controlling influence over the ferry service. In 1878, the various owners and operators formed a pool arrangement to offer ferry service on a more rational basis, and in 1881, the Detroit, Belle Isle, & Windsor Ferry Co. was incorporated. This firm, controlled by the Campbells until the late 1940s, provided ferry service not only to Windsor but also to Belle Isle, an island north of the city in the river which was initially a private picnic and amusement park, and later became Detroit's most distinguished city park. In 1898, the company leased Bois Blanc Island, located near the mouth of the Detroit River in Canadian water adjacent to Amherstberg, Ontario. On June 18 of that year, service to Bois Blanc opened with the ferry *Promise*, built in 1892. Bois Blanc quickly developed into a popular spot for a day's outing, with picnic grounds, a small amusement area, dancing and other amusements of the period. In 1901, the company purchased the major part of the island, and service was maintained with *Pleasure* of 1894. By this time, the popularity of the island had become such that it was necessary to plan for a larger steamer. Hence *Columbia* was designed specifically for service to the island. During the period in which *Columbia* and *Ste. Claire* were built, Detroit had the highest volume for boarding passengers on water transportation of any port on the Great Lakes.

**CAREER OF THE STEAMER COLUMBIA**

*Columbia* entered service on July 8, 1902. Clearly derived from the design evolved for the river ferries, with her rounded, bluff

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superstructure bows, her major departure in design was the ballroom on the second deck aft, a feature which larger and more elaborate sidewheelers even of later date could not offer. She was also the company's first metal-hulled steamer. The company added other vessels later, notably the similar *Ste. Claire* in 1910, but *Columbia* remained the firm's largest vessel.

In 1911, the company was required to reorganize because its charter was for a limited term, and the company became the Detroit and Windsor Ferry Company. The building of the Belle Island Bridge, the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, and the Ambassador Bridge, all in the 1920s, spelled the end for the company's other services. Ferry service from Woodward Avenue ended on July 18, 1938, the Belle Isle service having terminated some years earlier. By the early 1940s, the company was known as the "Bob-Lo Excursion Company." Late in the 1940s, ownership passed to the Browning Family of Detroit, who operated the steamers and amusement park until 1979, when the operation was sold to a group of investors. The steamers were sold in 1983 to AAA of Michigan, who, in turn sold it to International Broadcasting Corporation of Minneapolis in 1988. In November 1991, *Columbia* and *Ste. Claire*, after serving together on their original run for 81 years, were sold at auction to Lansdowne Nightclub, Inc., a commercial firm, whose plans for the vessels are uncertain.

**CAREER OF NAVAL ARCHITECT FRANK E. KIRBY**

*Columbia* was designed by Frank Kirby, one of the leading naval architects of the time. Kirby was responsible for the development of several lines of characteristic Great Lakes steamers, as well as the 20th-century development of the world-famous Hudson River Day Line. His achievements of design for the Detroit and Cleveland Navigation Company, which extended from 1878, culminated in *Greater Detroit* and *Greater Buffalo* of 1925, the largest sidewheel vessels ever built. He is credited with the invention of the bow propeller for icebreaking, and is said to have designed icebreakers for the Imperial Russian government. From his start in Detroit and with the Detroit Shipbuilding Company he came to be a world-famous figure in vessel design, particularly of moderate draft passenger steamers for the Great Lakes, Hudson River, and coastal areas. The Wyandotte, Michigan, shipyards of the Detroit Dry Dock Company, later Detroit Shipbuilding, were established to be close to the iron and steel being produced at Wyandotte by Eber Brock Ward, one of his early mentors. It is particularly appropriate that *Columbia*, apparently the last of his passenger vessels, is a product of that shipyard, which is now defunct, and has spent her entire career in Detroit, which was his home. *Columbia* set the standard for Kirby's propeller excursion steamers, being followed by *Brittania*, *Americana*, *Wauketa*, *Canadiana*, *Ste. Claire*, and *Put-in-Bay*.

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**HISTORIC EXCURSION STEAMERS TODAY**

While some vessels of a type similar to *Columbia* and *Ste. Claire* existed until recently, the two Bob-Lo steamers are now the only excursion steamers left which possess integrity. For example, their near-sister *Canadiana*, also designed by Frank E. Kirby, still exists without her original wooden superstructure. *City of Keansburg*, inactive and unmaintained for over 20 years, is seriously deteriorated and her superstructure is partially removed. *Peter Stuyvesant*, designed by J. W. Millard for the Hudson River service in 1928, was a near-copy of Kirby's earlier *Put-in-Bay*, designed for Detroit-Lake Erie service. *Stuyvesant* was retired as part of a restaurant complex on the Boston waterfront and later sank in a windstorm at her dock and was scrapped. Former Wilson Line steamer *The Duchess*, originally *City of Wilmington* of 1910, was rebuilt with a streamlined steel superstructure in the 1940s and renamed *Bay Belle*. During 1991, she sank at her dock and was scrapped. Although some preserved American steamers--like *Virginia V*--do operate today as excursion vessels, they were not built for that purpose, but adopted that function later in their careers.

*Columbia* and *Ste. Claire* constitute an amazing survival. They are unique in that they are still operable and have received minimal alteration. *Columbia* is apparently the oldest American flag passenger steamer in operating condition, and *Ste. Claire* may well be next in age to her running mate.

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

American Bureau of Ships, *Record*, New York, annual, various years.

G. P. Bugbee, *The Boats That Stayed Home*, privately printed pamphlet, Detroit, 1977

G. P. Bugbee, *The Lake Erie Sidewheel Steamers of Frank E. Kirby*, Detroit: Great Lakes Model Shipbuilders Guild, 1955.

*Marine Review*, Vol. 40, No. 5., Cleveland, Ohio: Penton Publishing Co., May 1910.

*Telescope*, Journal of the Great Lakes Maritime Institute, Detroit, various issues.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register, Ref. #79001177
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: # \_\_\_\_\_
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other: Specify Repository: Kirby Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library

Plans for both steamers are on microfilm at the Institute for Great Lakes Research, Bowling Green State University, Perrysburg, Ohio.

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreage of Property: Less than one (1) acre.

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing

A 17/324760/4680320

## Verbal Boundary Description:

All that area encompassed within the extreme length and breadth of the vessel.

## Boundary Justification:

The boundary incorporates all that area of the vessel as she lays at her berth.

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

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Date: November 1, 1991