

NAVIGATING THE RE THE SHIP DETROIT



BELLIIOUS WATERS:

by Leslie
S. Edwards



The only known
photo of the
Detroit, 1864.

COURTESY THE C.
PATRICK LABADIE
COLLECTION,
THUNDER BAY
NATIONAL MARINE
SANCTUARY.

IF A SHIP COULD TALK, this is what the steamer *Detroit* might have said: “I drowned at the young age of seven years old. I had a full, exciting, yet short life (1861–1868). Prior to the Civil War, I transported goods and people across the Great Lakes and during the war, all the way from New York to Texas. I underwent two surgeries to alter my physical appearance and usefulness, had several different owners, and even had my birth name changed! I witnessed a near mutiny and an alleged Fenian raid, and I experimented with an innovation in transportation power. Sadly, I was not always ‘steady of my feet’ and had several accidents, including the one that caused my demise. My final resting place is on the bottom of Thunder Bay.”

In March 1861, John T. Whitney of Detroit commissioned a Cleveland ship building firm, Peck & Masters, to build a wooden propeller ship for trade on the Great Lakes. Powered by a coal-fueled steam engine, the *Detroit* measured 140 feet x 26 feet, had a single mast, and weighed nearly 400 tons. She embarked on her maiden voyage from Cleveland to her home port of Detroit on September 3, 1861, with Captain Frederick P. Pratt at the helm.

For most of her first year, the *Detroit* carried lumber from Port Huron, Bay City and Saginaw to Buffalo, New York. In November 1862, Captain Richard F. Loper of Philadelphia purchased the *Detroit* for use as a transport vessel for the Third Division of the U.S. Quartermaster’s Department, headquartered in New York City. The Third Division managed all aspects of vessels used in transporting troops, prisoners of war and supplies on inland and oceanic routes along the eastern seaboard.

In the mid-nineteenth century, ships had to cross the Great Lakes and take the inland waterways

through Canada to get to New York via the Atlantic Ocean. On December 19, 1862, the *Detroit* began its trip through the Welland Canal, across Lake Ontario and up the St. Lawrence River into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. She stopped at Pictou, Nova Scotia, for ten days to repair her boiler before heading to New York, where Loper readied her for work.

As an authorized agent of the Quartermaster’s Department, Loper inspected the steamers and procured government charters for them. His wealth came from commissions from both the vessel owners and the government. He gave charters to boats of the transportation company in which he was a stockholder, and to vessels, including the *Detroit*, that he owned himself. He reportedly “had extraordinary facilities for making the charters to suit himself.”

Many vessels acquired by the U.S. government at the onset of the Civil War later proved unsuitable. Consequently, the Quartermaster General enacted stringent construction requirements. Additional masts and sails were added to steam propelled ships, including the *Detroit*, in case of the loss of the vessel’s motive power. Steamers used for transporting troops were outfitted with washrooms and segregated spaces to confine any sick crew. By 1864, the Quartermaster’s Department owned 39 ocean steamers and 45 river and bay steamers in addition to tugboats, barges, schooners, barks, and brigs.

After the *Detroit*’s decks were rebuilt and she received two additional masts, she transported one ton of cotton seed to Fortress Monroe, Virginia, to be planted on the old plantations at Hampton, Virginia, arriving on March 2, 1863. Ten days later, she transported the Second New Hampshire Volunteers back to New York. For the next several months, the *Detroit* made numerous trips up and

down the coast from New York to Washington, D.C. and Fortress Monroe. One of her more notable trips occurred in July 1863. In her cargo hold were 100 rebellious prisoners threatening mutiny. The U.S. Navy commanded the *U.S.S. Primrose* to escort the *Detroit* in the dark of night up the Potomac River to dispatch the prisoners to the Union-held Aquia Creek Landing.

During summer 1864, the Quartermaster General purchased the *Detroit* for \$40,000—a whopping sum at that time—and she continued her role as a wartime transport. In January 1865, as Union troops rebuilt the City Point and Petersburg Railroad, the *Detroit* was one of three steamers used to transport carpenters, trackmen and supplies from City Point, Virginia, to Beaufort, North Carolina.

In June, the *Detroit* took part in the “Texas Expedition,” the last expedition of the war. Under the command of Major General Weitzel, a fleet of nearly 60 transport vessels gathered at Hampton Roads. After two weeks of preparation, most of the fleet was used to transport troops; however, the *Detroit*, *Neptune* and *Savannah* were loaded with horses, 500 rounds of ammunition for each soldier, 40 days rations and all the water they could stow. On June 8, they sailed for Brazos Santiago, Texas.

After the war ended, the government sold the vessels at auction. Amasa C. Hall of Baltimore purchased the *Detroit* for a mere \$6,000. He renamed her the *Congress* and outfitted her with anchors, chains, tools, boats and life preservers, and a “full complement of bedding, furniture, crockery and cooking utensils for 24 persons.” Hall then sold her to Owen Thorn of Baltimore, who sold a partial interest to Frederick Hentig of Detroit. Hentig would acquire full ownership in Buffalo.



In August 1866, the *Congress* sailed from New York, procured provisions, coal and repairs to her machinery at Quebec, then continued on to Montreal to proceed through the Canadian canals. The British Consul at Buffalo, worried about recent Fenian raids into the Canadian provinces, advised the authorities in Canada West (now Ontario) to refuse passage. The Canadians required Thorn to provide evidence of the bill of sale and legal transfers, to prove the *Congress* was not a Fenian privateer. Meanwhile, provincial customhouse officials searched the steamer on several occasions for alleged contraband. After a three-week detention, they released the *Congress*.

In February 1867, Hentig took ownership of the *Congress* and returned her to transporting goods in the Great Lakes. However, under Hentig’s command she did not experience smooth sailing. She collided with other boats and on one voyage even ran into the Welland Canal’s Lock 2 gates and carried them away. It took several days before navigation could be resumed.

In May 1868, the *Congress*, laden with scrap iron, rye flour, wheat, eggs, and potatoes, headed from Port



GENERAL WEITZEL'S TEXAS EXPEDITION—THE FLEET AT HAMPTON ROADS.—[SKETCHED BY FREDERICK DIELMAN.]

Illustration of the Texas Expedition by Frederick Dielman, June 1865. Under the command of Major General Weitzel, a fleet of nearly 60 transport vessels, including the *Detroit*, gathered at Hampton Roads, Virginia. COURTESY HARPER'S WEEKLY, VOLUME IX, 1865



Magazine wharf, City Point, Virginia, January 1865. Andrew J. Russell, photographer. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Washington, Wisconsin to Buffalo. In Lake Michigan, she “encountered a violent gale accompanied with seas of a mountainous character. For several hours, the steamer was at intervals submerged, and labored very heavily and finally sprung a leak, which was, with difficulty overcome until she could reach a point where

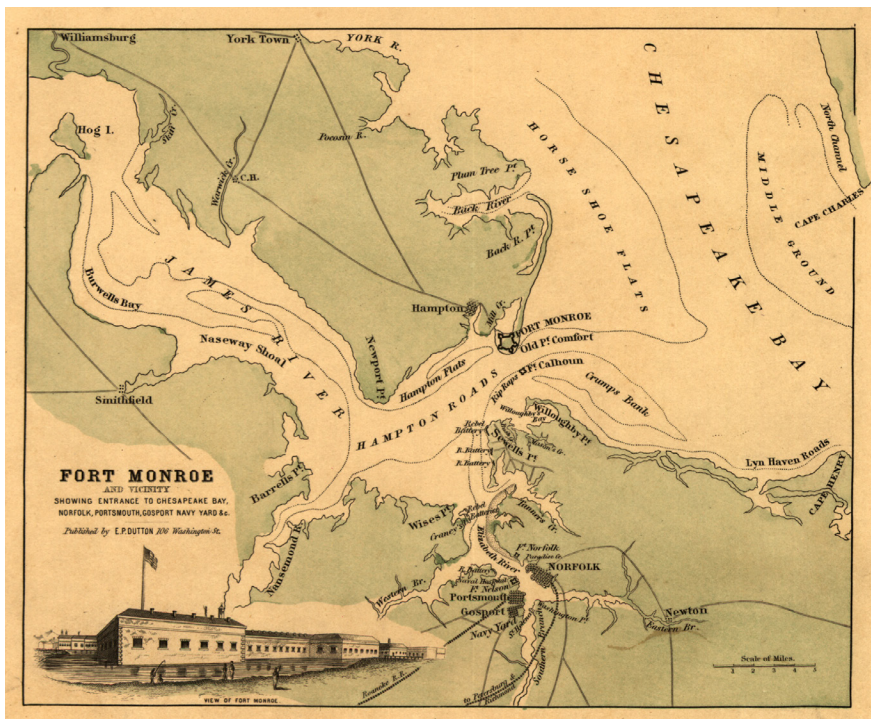
temporary repairs or a stoppage to the leak could be effected” (*The Buffalo Commercial*, May 22, 1868). Somehow, the *Congress* survived.

During summer 1868, the *Congress* experimented with the new “revolution in steam” and converted to petroleum oil. Oil-burning engines were more cost effective, cleaner than coal, and left more room for cargo. Fitted with the necessary machinery, the *Congress* made a successful trial voyage up and down the Detroit River, driven by 50 pounds of steam.

The *Congress* did not benefit from the use of oil for long. In September, laden with grain, she broke her rudder and had to stop for repairs at the Manitou Islands. The following month proved disastrous. Bound from Buffalo to Chicago, she carried 700 barrels of salt, 490 barrels of apples and a large quantity of railroad iron and staves. Despite fair weather, she ran ashore on the reef near Harrisville. After 12 hours, the tug *Bemis*, which happened to be nearby, pulled her off the reef. She proceeded to Alpena, where she took on more freight. On the afternoon of October 25, in heavy seas, the *Congress* struck the North Point Reef at Thunder Bay. It was immediately clear that the crew could not lighten her load in time to prevent sinking. Captain Hentig and the ten crew members headed for shore in the lifeboat. By 9:00 that night, the *Congress* was on fire and burned to the water’s edge. The pounding waves continued to break her apart. Three days later, Hentig found the wreckage of the *Congress*, broken in two. She eventually sank to the bottom of the bay.

Wayne Lusardi, the Michigan History Center maritime archaeologist who works at the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary in Alpena, researches and helps document the nearly 1,500 shipwrecks located in Michigan waters. He explained the difficulty of identifying the approximately 60

shipwrecks in Thunder Bay. Even though it is a Michigan Underwater Preserve and National Marine Sanctuary, and is now protected from salvage and looting by state law, the area has been heavily pillaged for more than a century. However, the only wreck from that era known to have transported rail iron is the *Congress*. Based on the presence of steam components, overall dimensions, and the rail iron, as well as the location noted in historic accounts, Lusardi tentatively identified the *Congress* in 2005. The ship’s life on the Great Lakes and the eastern seaboard, albeit short-lived, is another fascinating story of Michigan’s contributions to the Civil War.



Fort[ress] Monroe and vicinity. Published by E. P. Dutton. The *Detroit* made numerous voyages to and from Fort Monroe and Hampton Roads, and traveled west up the James River to City Point.